

There's a Place for "Us"--How Community Fits Into Social Work

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As a student who chose to concentrate on the community organizational aspect of the social work profession, I constantly struggled to understand the difference between the methods of a clinical practitioner and those of the community worker. Despite the different demands between the micro (individual and group) and the macro (organizational) spheres, the fact that they are studied under the social work umbrella indicates that certain core professional skills pervade the entire field of the social work milieu. {mosgoogle right}

General Definition of Social Work

The basic role of all social workers is to assist in the interactions between the individual and his or her social environment. According to Pray (1947), the basic objective of the social worker is to "facilitate the process of social adjustment of individual people through the development and constructive use of social relationships with which they can find their own fulfillment and can discharge adequately their social responsibilities" (p. 4).

Within this general definition lie the three specializations of the social work profession--casework, group work, and community organization. Within each of these realms, the social worker's role is to help an individual or group realize their strengths and abilities, to help them utilize these assets to engage society, and mediate this process of interaction throughout (Schwartz, 1969). It is the practitioner's sensitivity to the "person-in-environment" situation and the interaction between the two arenas that truly guides the profession.

Defining the Community

Before describing the specific roles and responsibilities of the community worker within the social work profession, it is necessary to define the term community and its relationship to the individual. Warren (1978) defines a community as "that combination of social units and systems that perform the major social functions relevant to the meeting of people's needs" (p. 9). Freud (1930), in describing the individual's role within a community, states that living in a community "appears as a scarcely avoidable condition which must be fulfilled before happiness can be achieved" (p. 140). This inevitable relationship between an individual and his/her surroundings creates a desire to feel a sense of belonging that stimulates the individual's quest for identity within the context of the larger community (Weil, 1996). Thus, an overall sense of community is gradually created by organizing social resources and affording people with the necessities of everyday living.

A Community is Formed

A community is established when groups of people with a common interest, culture, or identity join together and create a distinct entity that serves a positive need in society (Weil, 1996). According to Fellin (2001), communities distinguish themselves in three primary spheres: "1) place or geographic locale in which one's needs for sustenance are met, 2) a pattern of social interactions, and 3) a symbolic identification that gives meaning to one's identity" (p. 118). Ironically, while these three aspects are the building blocks of a community, the co-existence of such factors creates a tension whose resolution often demands professional intervention. It is the role of the community worker to serve as a liaison among the individual, the group, and the surrounding social structure (Brager & Specht, 1972). According to Smalley (1967), the role of the community worker is to facilitate "the process by which people of communities, as individual citizens or as representatives of groups, join together to determine social welfare needs and mobilize their resources" (p. 35). Although this definition identifies a need for an inter-group facilitation and creates the opportunity to join together to determine the community's needs, two interrelated processes, planning and organizing, are also necessary to achieve cooperation and support from all interested parties (Brager & Specht, 1972).

Whereas planning and organizing describe one major aspect of community practice, other critical aspects of community work include interagency planning, resource development, and coordination of services offered to a specific community (Weil, 1996). The worker, while involved in developing the appropriate support to implement change, must achieve many technical and task-oriented details. By focusing on the specific task, rather than on the change-oriented goal, however, the worker moves away from the direct interaction with the individual.

Maintaining the equilibrium of these two aspects of the community worker's responsibilities is a very difficult and daunting task. For the community worker to remain focused, he or she must view all aspects, both technical and interactional, as part of the larger community helping process.

Models of Community Involvement

Macro practice, like all other aspects of social work practice, recognizes the strengths of the interaction between individuals living in a social environment and the ability of community-wide influence toward solving problems and implementation of change (Kretzman and McKnight, 1993). Approaching change on a community-wide level is better understood when considering Rothman's (1999) three basic models of community intervention. Whereas these three models offer suggestions on how to stage community intervention, the mobile and unstable nature of today's community affairs often requires that more dynamic approach. In fact, Rothman (1999) concludes that these idealistic models only serve as aids for conceptualization, and in actual practice the "intervention approaches overlap and are used in mixed form," and creating a composite of these paradigmatic models ensures that the most effective method of community-oriented change will be selected (p. 47). Thus, blending the positive practice

variables from the basic models to form sub-models allows for a myriad of possible permutations, creates room for many social service or service-based agencies to exist, and increases the selection of community-wide interventions that are available to future practitioners.

Specific Definition of Intervention

The practitioner, in order to ensure successful change, must provide the client with a specific definition of the intended form of community work (Brager and Specht, 1973). To effectively implement any of the models of community involvement, the community practitioner must utilize the skills from all three aspects of the social work profession. The uniqueness of the community worker is that he or she constantly juggles all three levels of the profession on a regular basis. A brief description of how each of the three components of the social work profession is employed by the community worker will help to elucidate and clarify the unique nature of the community worker.

Working with Individuals

The community practitioner's work with individuals, be it staff or lay leadership, parallels the process of any social worker's therapeutic intervention. The client transmits ideas to the worker, and the worker, in turn, needs to decipher and decode the client's verbal and nonverbal communication. The worker then must acknowledge the message through providing feedback to the client (Schulman, 1999). By constantly assessing, evaluating and concentrating on the client's strengths, rather than the deficits, the worker develops a sense of trust with the client and creates an opportunity to empower the client to take action (Gutierrez, GlenMaye, and Delois, 1995).

By actively listening to the client's interests and by identifying the lay person's strengths and frame of reference, the worker, as a representative of a social agency, is able to discover the client's motivations and interests as they pertain to the agency. The worker's ability to isolate these strengths and translate them into areas of involvement fosters a stronger commitment by the lay leadership (Hubbel, 1993).

Effective managing of the relationship with various individuals both within and outside the organization, the worker's awareness of the self and competency to work with others by engaging in interpersonal dialogue and empowering others to develop their strengths, may best describe how the community practitioner regularly executes the skills of working with individuals (Edwards, Yankey and Alpeter, 1998).

As professionals, we will have many opportunities to engage various staff members in conversations that far surpass the proverbial small talk. The empathic nature of these interactions indicate that a critical component of the community worker's field includes working with individuals, be they staff or lay leaders. In fact, a community worker's role could not be successfully achieved without recognizing that the practitioner's primary relationship is always with the individual.

Groupwork

Most of the community practitioner's time is consumed by meetings with various groups, including staff meetings, board meetings, and steering committee meetings. Those unfamiliar with the unique environment of collective decision-making believe that decisions can only be made by an individual, in the privacy of their own office. This flawed opinion not only devalues the omnipresent setting where almost all of today's nonprofit agency decisions are made, but it also minimizes the process of the collective as a distinctive unit that provides the worker with a plethora of opinions and competing values. For the community worker, the group meeting is the most productive organizational process, the results of which testify to the success of the worker.

A primary assumption in group dynamics is that the group satisfies certain social functions for each member. The community social worker develops the relationship with the constituents through finding areas of common interest and shared attitudes. Similar to working with individuals, forming a constituent group is predicated on the worker's ability to actively listen and his or her willingness to explore the inferences of the participants' ideas.

There are four basic groups that are associated with community organization. They are generally categorized as: "socialization groups, primary groups, organizational development groups, and institutional relations groups" (Brager and Specht, 1973, p. 71). Each of these groups serves a unique purpose within the organization. The group's level of involvement in the organization along the continuum is based on the worker's ability to identify areas of individual interest, motivate, and engage the participants to become more committed to the cause.

Regardless of the type of group, however, goal setting is a critical part of the client-worker relationship. The goals that the community worker aims to achieve as he or she decides how and when to influence the group, include: "socialization, developing effective relationships, organizational building, and finally, the achievement of institutional change" (Brager and Specht, 1973, p. 69). These essential goals resonate with the stages of the therapeutic group process in that the five-stage model, suggested by Garland, Jones, and Kolodny (1965) are renamed to better suit the needs of the macro practitioner.

By building a positive association with the agency, the individuals develop identification with the group, which translates into positive results and strengthened commitment to the purpose of the group. The worker's responsibility in the group process is to assist the participants to cultivate social ties and facilitate group cohesiveness. Whereas the worker is ultimately accountable for the unity of the group, he or she is also responsible for the concrete development of attainable goals with the underlying agency mission.

For example, when I worked for a leading university's alumni association, one of my original assignments was to engage the alumni through various educational programs, help them establish or reestablish a connection with their alma mater, and extend our available resources to these constituents. In my work, I was assigned to work with two different kinds of constituent groups. In either case, the role of the group was to establish and maintain a relationship with the

alumni to foster support—financial or service based.

Strategic Planning

In addition to the community practitioner's work with individuals and groups, the organizational social worker also serves the role of an administrator or manager. As mentioned earlier, the community worker is often torn between task-oriented and change-oriented goals. To ensure that the worker does not divert attention from either set of goals, the worker must define a clear plan and vision for the organization in which the source of the worker's information and role of the worker within the plan will shape the outcome. Because of its dynamic nature and ability to adapt to the shifting nature of the client's environment, the strategic planning process has become exceedingly common in today's nonprofit agencies.

The strategic plan's flexible and adaptable nature focuses primarily on the management and facilitation of the change process, rather than on an assumption of environmental stability. This process resembles the client assessment that a clinical worker may perform on an individual client or group. As the client-worker relationship develops, the worker develops a better understanding of the client's needs in relation to the environment and, rather than attempt to change the environment of the client, the worker serves to manage and facilitate the client's issues (person-in-environment practice).

A strategic plan requires a balance among many competing values and focuses almost exclusively on harmonizing the internal and external organizational environments. This equilibrium is maintained by the worker's ability to ensure that the organization's limited resources are strategically maximized to take full advantage of new opportunities and to practically, yet effectively, account for potential organizational challenges that may occur (Eadie, 1998).

As important as the external organizational analysis may be, the basis for isolating strategic issues can only take place when the organization looks inward and assesses the strengths and weaknesses in terms of its "human, financial, technological, and political resources, and organizational performance in its major programs and businesses" (Eadie, 1998, p. 458). The internal strategic evaluation will bring to the forefront a set of major challenges that need to be tackled for the organization to effectively maintain a balance between its internal and external environments.

This method of continuous assessment on an organizational level enables the community worker to ensure that the agency remains loyal to its constituency by providing it with services that are current and commensurate with its needs.

Core Issues and Commonalities

An initial glance at each of the various spheres across the social work continuum results in identifying theoretically different practice skill sets for each realm. While workers within each realm are required to know the proven theories and techniques that are associated with their level of practice, these specialized actions only serve to complement the broad skills that are characteristic of all social workers. Perlman (1957) defines social work as a process of problem solving, regardless of whether the practitioner is involved in direct service or organizational work.

Beyond the universal methods of problem-solving in social work, there are several other central principles that form the foundation for generic professional practice. One of the main principles of social work practice is to empower the client to change and to try to prevent the client problems from reappearing in the future. The term empowerment itself is ambiguous, because it could either identify a goal, part of the change process, or a form of intervention. Regardless of how the term is viewed, empowerment describes a method of "developing personal and interpersonal power through a process of self-awareness" (Gutierrez, GlenMaye, and DeLois, 1995, p. 250). Effectively encouraging clients to realize and employ their strengths to reach a certain level of self-sufficiency is critical to the empowerment model.

Integration of Generic Skills

While the opportunities for social work practitioners are constantly expanding, the underlying principles of social work intervention remain stable. The social work profession cuts across three diverse fields, including work with individuals, groups, and communities. The generic practitioner has the unique opportunity to utilize and draw from an expansive knowledge base that transcends all three modalities and can be applied to an infinitely broad spectrum of clients.

The systematic problem-solving process is brought about by the practitioner's client-centered approach and his or her competence to choose a proper course of action that respects the dignity of the client while recognizing the interdependence of a myriad of systems that affect the client.

Regardless of the practitioner's choice of concentration, the core skills remain the same. The generalist approach to the profession stresses that there are several fundamental skills that serve as the foundation for all of the concentrations of the profession. These fundamental principles of intervention are applicable at all levels of social work, despite the unstated divide between the micro and macro practice.

Conclusion

When I began my journey as a social work student, I assumed that as a community worker my role, interventions, and interpersonal skills would be vastly different from those of my peers who chose to concentrate on the clinical level of the profession. Constant questioning inspired me to search the topic further and understand why community organization is categorized within the social work framework. The investigation caused me to identify an apparent break between macro and micro practice. The terms micro and macro create a false separation in the mindsets of all social workers and support an artificial segregation and classification. This division prevents social workers from recognizing that the entire profession stands on several basic, underlying precepts that remain invariable throughout the continuum of the social work profession.

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