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Foundations of Social Work Practice

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Although social workers perform many tasks in an expanding number of settings, the essential work of social work is to realize a progressive vision of a just and caring society. This mission requires integrated practice that challenges oppression and structural violence, offers care and accompaniment for casualties of that oppression, and co-constructs a society of individual and collective well-being and liberation. Guided by an organizing value of social justice (Marsh, 2005), social work is holistically concerned with the person-in-situation and intervening in that social reality to achieve these goals. This focus is fundamentally different from the foci of allied professions, although certain skills, knowledge, and functions overlap.

Given the central function of the social work field, social workers need to understand individuals, collectives, environments, and how they interrelate; this is perhaps the most complex assignment of any profession. Issues that contemporary social workers and their clients grapple with every day (for example, HIV/AIDS in the United States and around the world; family breakdown and violence associated with deep, intergenerational poverty; the failure of education for an enormous number of children in urban centers) illustrate this complexity, but it has been present since the beginning of social work. One has only to read the work of Charles Loring Brace (1872/1973) or Mary Richmond (1917) to see that problems and solutions to the most serious human challenges have never been simple to understand and have always been challenging to address.

Although many social work practice functions can be performed effectively by paraprofessional and bachelor's-level staff, the primary function of the graduate-level social worker is not so much to simply act as to think—to understand the perplexing intricacies of each client's unique dilemma and partner with the client in developing intervention strategies that are based on that understanding. (We use the term "client," standard in the field, to discuss the general case; in specific settings other terms including "participant," "member," "survivor," or simply "person" may be more respectful. Examples are found in later chapters.) Professional practice cannot be based on simple formulas or uniform step-by-step prescriptions, although practice guidelines may be of significant use. As the social worker and client face the full complexity of practice situations, comprehensive understanding becomes elusive, and one can never know enough. Although recognizing this reality, the professional social worker, with the client, must still decide what is to be done, even when the limits of what is possible are distressingly evident. More can often be done than is immediately evident; it is the social worker's responsibility to pursue the possibilities.

COMPLEXITY OF SOCIAL WORK

Adequate assessment in social work often requires "thinking big"—seeing the full transactional situation all at once (Meyer, 1993)—while often "doing small"—providing a highly focused intervention. For example, it is usually not possible to examine and deal separately with a client's emotional state, the possible effects of family dynamics, and the effects of racial and cultural factors. All of these are likely to be interconnected. The practice setting; the realities of the issues being addressed; and the impact of oppression, domination, disadvantage, and other sociocultural factors are all part of the social work case.

The scope of social work reaches from attention to the individual, family, group, and community to the arenas of social policy and structural violence, increasingly at an international level. Social workers work with adults and children of all economic classes, racial and ethnic groups, cultures, gender identifications, and sexual orientations in hospitals, clinics, social agencies, homes, schools, institutions, and community centers and on the street. Their interventions span prevention and protection, rehabilitation, and capacity building. Given all of this variation, however, social work as a profession is bound by its mission to a "preferential option for the poor" (Farmer, 2013; see also Farmer, 2003), which means preferentially focusing one's best service on those most in need, those who find themselves in "entrapping niches" (Sullivan & Rapp, 2006), and those whose human rights are commonly ignored. Poverty and structural violence, racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and other injustices form a matrix of challenges that requires the work of the field's best-prepared minds and hearts, acting in solidarity with those most affected. These challenges necessitate not only caring for the victims of these oppressive structures, but also the ambitious, yet essential, work of acting to create the social,

economic, and political changes required to eliminate them. Social workers must see their "individual work as an integral element of the larger movement of social transformation" (Mullaly, 2007, p. 296). Social work, to a substantial degree, carries the responsibilities of society for social and economic justice for and support and accompaniment of the casualties of an often dehumanizing society. It is mission-driven, liberating work within the deep and complex fabric of humanity. Practice that recognizes this reality is not an ideal; it is an ethical responsibility.

The postindustrial, globalized society has engendered a new level of social isolation. It values systems that, more than ever, privilege the individual over the collective and heighten tensions and misunderstandings among cultures and generations. People (and groups) have responded differentially with depression, violence, or withdrawal. At the same time, changing realities bring new opportunities for society and for social work practice that range from increased access to information and tools important for empowerment to new possibilities for forging social connections—even globally.

Historically, the social work profession has been organizationally based. This is partly because of the early commitment of social workers to serving those who are poor and dispossessed and partly because the breadth and complexity of social services require organizational support. Because the resources controlled by the poor are often severely limited, publicly supported and organizationally based services are often the only possible route to needed assistance. At the same time, such services may seriously limit choice and options. Over time, much has been learned by social workers and others about humanizing bureaucracies, both for employees and for service consumers. Social workers have long recognized the need for organizations to "work for people" (Meyer, 1979). This is only possible if those organizations are deeply grounded in a dynamic of shared power, which for structural reasons remains uncommon in social and human services. In an interlocking organizational culture of shared power, all participants have strong voices, all make contributions from their strengths and gifts, and all share responsibility for outcomes (see chapter 2).

Professional social work skills are differentially applied on the basis of the collaborative understanding of the case developed by practitioner and client. Actions taken respond to the complexities and social context of the case. In every practice event, all dimensions shown in the conceptual map depicted in Figure 1-1 are simultaneously active; in the realities of moment-by-moment practice, the social worker needs to be prepared to work comfortably with complexity.

Social Justice and Power

Although social workers perform many different tasks and take on many different roles in a wide variety of social institutions, fulfilling social work's historic purpose requires a commitment to social justice and human rights that emerges from an authentic recognition of the connections among all people (and peoples) and their world. Social workers carry a solemn responsibility to use their personal

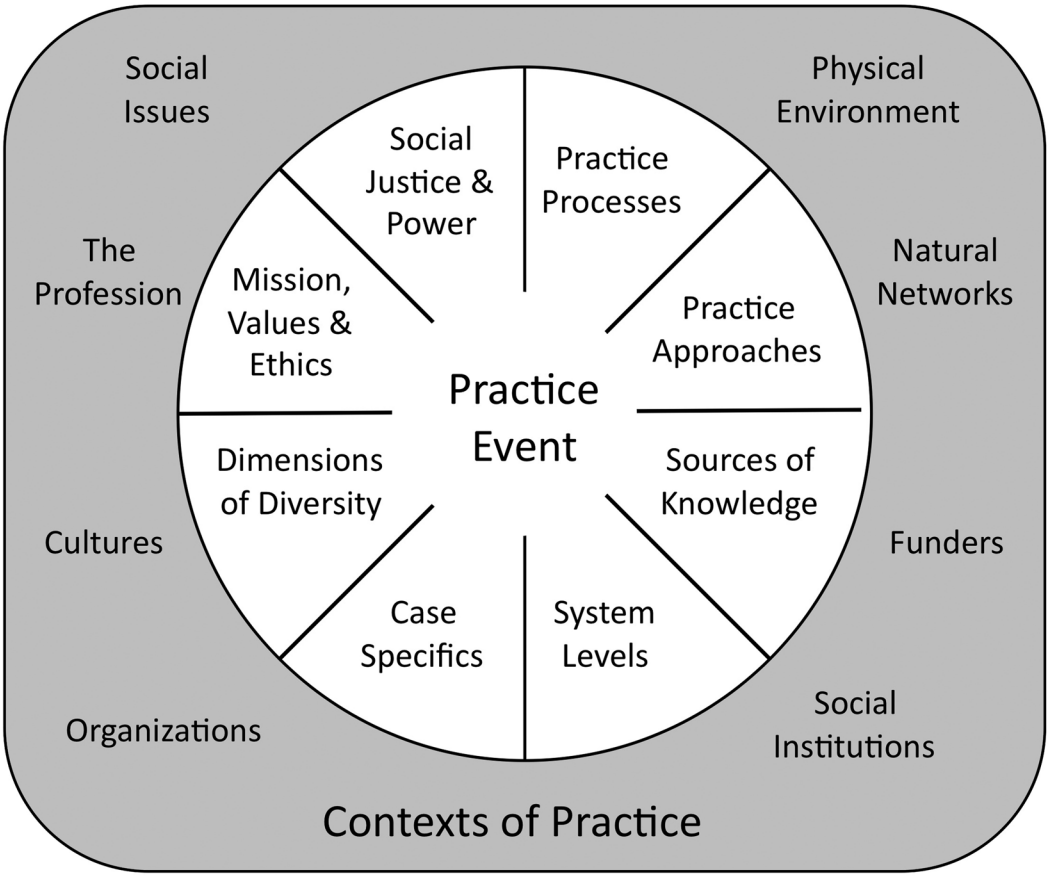

Figure 1-1 Dimensions of Social Work Practice in Context

and collective power to strengthen the human and natural web within which they and their clients are inextricably embedded. Historically, "justice" has often been defined to systematically exclude entire groups, some of whom then come to understand the word "justice" as a synonym for "oppression" (see chapter 3). A contemporary view of social justice can be defined by transactions that genuinely value all people, all peoples, and all life; foster inclusion while deeply respecting diversity of values and cultures; support the human rights of individuals and the collective rights of groups; and reduce reliance on adversarial power operating through coercion, oppression, and violence. Most of the injustice found in the contemporary world is at its roots structural, grounded in interlocking social, economic, and political institutions and established practices that marginalize and exploit some while benefiting others. Justice and injustice are not static states; they are realized (made real) in action. Social justice is one of the core perspectives guiding social work practice that is sketched in chapter 2, discussed in human rights terms in chapter 4, and woven into the remaining chapters of this book.

Professional Mission, Values, and Ethics

The core mission of social work is to take action to realize a progressive vision of a just and caring society. There are many ways to do this. In some cases, social workers provide support to assist those who are struggling, often as casualties of serious injustice, to construct a life that works for them. This support may include assisting the client (individual, family, group, community) to recognize the sociopolitical barriers that have made life so difficult, thus reducing a sense of personal failure (and sometimes encouraging even small acts of resistance to oppression). Such practice may include teaching coping skills or ways to address emotional struggles, advocacy, or political action. In some cases, social workers work in communities to support physical, social, economic, environmental, and spiritual health while challenging the institutional barriers they face. In some cases, the core of the work may simply be accompanying clients through painful struggles for which no full resolution is possible. Social work has always involved both *case* (organized efforts to advocate for oppressed populations) and *function* (professional activities to assist specific clients) (P. R. Lee, 1929). The distinction and balance between the two has ebbed and flowed and has been an ongoing tension in social work since its beginnings. Many contemporary social workers now believe that the two cannot be separated.

In addition to mission, common values and professional ethics are essential characteristics of the social work profession. Neither values nor ethics are easy to enact in practice, although they may seem straightforward in the abstract. For example, residual homophobia and heteronormativity (the attitude that regards heterosexual relationships and cisgender expression as norms against which all others are measured) are often challenges for people entering the social work field despite abstract commitments to the value of respect for all, the ethical mandate not to condone discrimination of any kind, and the central place of social justice as the organizing value of the profession. Practice consistent with professional values and ethics requires constant questioning, self-awareness, and growth. Chapter 12 explores those issues in detail.

Client Diversity

Social workers' clients, as would be expected in the contemporary world, are extremely diverse along many interwoven dimensions. In fact, most social workers will spend a large proportion of their time working with people who are quite different from themselves. Understanding this diversity is a crucial area of professional knowledge that has critical implications for practice. Clients differ in age, gender identification, health and physical ability, race, education, occupation, sexual orientation, physical attractiveness (as culturally defined), intellectual and verbal abilities, behavior, and numerous other ways. In addition, individuals play out their lives as members (central or peripheral) of multiple cultural entities and

identities, from families to social classes to ethnic and religious groups. Social workers commonly need to learn to be effective across deep, historically rooted rifts in credibility and trust. In a multicultural society, differences need to be understood and valued as sources of potentially useful variations that could enrich the lives of members of all cultures.

Celebrating diversity, however, is not enough. As a result of many groups' long history of oppression and disrespect in the United States, divisions are often bitter. Bridging those gaps is a critical professional—and cultural—challenge that cannot be done without taking oppression seriously. In contemporary U.S. culture, and in many of the European cultures from which it emerged, major institutions and those receiving primary benefit from them have consistently relied on the exercise of coercive and adversarial power through exploitation, violence, threat, punishment, and individualistic competition (Sidman, 2001). This power has been and often continues to be exercised within a context of privilege. For example, coercive oppression is a common characteristic of the judicial system, educational institutions, major economic institutions, government agencies, international relations—and, in many cases, even families (for example, in battering, child abuse, or sexual coercion). These coercive and adversarial arrangements are maintained by the results they produce for those in power (Sidman, 2001) but ultimately have profoundly negative results for individuals and the collective.

A good deal is known about sensitivity to differences and, to some extent, about specific approaches that tend to be valuable in practice with members of particular groups (for example, Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008; McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005; Thyer, Wodarski, Myers, & Harrison, 2010). Every client is an individual, however, not an accumulation of descriptive categories; levels of biculturalism and acculturation differ widely, and personal life experiences are unique. Although deep awareness of difference sensitizes the worker, the essence of culturally sensitive practice is to be able to individualize a case without being blinded by categorical labels.

Culturally sensitive or culturally competent practice is not enough. The very design of social work services and entire service systems needs to emerge from the diverse voices of those served, resulting in genuinely ethnoconscious services (St. Onge, 2013). The social worker must recognize that clients, program participants, and community collaborators often see the world in ways that are genuinely different from those of the social worker because of their cultural experiences. People who are deeply grounded in traditional African values, for example, are likely to see issues and evaluate solutions in ways that are dramatically different from many European Americans; they are more likely to emphasize connectedness and spirituality, for example (Waites, 2009). Such cultural values should be explicitly incorporated into planning and implementation of social work practice and services through direct and intensive involvement of the clients and communities served.

Case Specifics

Every case is unique, and the client (whether an individual, family, or other system) and the environmental context in which the client is embedded provide a good deal of particularized information that can guide collaborative assessment and intervention. Data-based practice guidelines for particular issues, often advocated in managed care settings, may be useful, but they need to be flexibly adapted to fit case realities. Because client experiences and knowledge must be part of the shared worker–client knowledge base for intervention to be effective, the social worker usually asks a number of questions and gives clients real opportunities to share their stories during the initial engagement and throughout the intervention process.

The client may not know or understand everything that is relevant, but it is a mistake to dismiss information—even partial and relatively subjective information—that the client provides; the social worker's own view is likely to include just as much distortion (Saleebey, 2013). Except when a clear reason exists not to, it is far better to begin by believing the client. It is therefore always important to understand the client's perceptions as important case data. Providing opportunities for clients to tell their stories in their own way, in their own voices, is more likely to produce meaningful information than interrogating them with a barrage of questions.

Systems Thinking

Social workers are professionally concerned with individuals, groups, couples, families, neighborhoods, formal and informal organizations, communities, and societies. Each system is made up of subsystems and in itself constitutes a subsystem of higher order systems. System levels are organized hierarchically, so a particular system (for example, an individual) may at one moment be viewed as the focal system and at the next moment as a subsystem of another system (a family). General systems theory and recent advances in systems thinking (see chapter 2) have proven helpful in identifying common systemic characteristics (for example, an exchange of resources and energy with environments across boundaries) that can guide practice thinking.

Each systemic level (individuals as systems, family systems, community systems, and so forth) has its own integrity. What emerges in families, for example, is more than the aggregate of what individuals do: Families establish and maintain regular patterns, their own cultural practices. Those practices tend to continue over time, even when they may be emotionally, physically, or otherwise costly to the individuals involved. For example, as discovered by Patterson (1976; Reid, Patterson, & Snyder, 2002), parent–child dyads often become trapped in a chronic pattern of escalating coercive exchanges that can be understood only if one looks at the pattern through a transactional lens. The best predictor of satisfaction and

stability within a couple is the pattern of positive and aversive exchanges present in their relationship, and the most effective approaches to working with entire families focus on the dynamics of interpersonal transactions (Crisp & Knox, 2009; Mattaini, 1999). Groups, organizations, and communities similarly have their own systemic integrity, and intervention needs to emerge from an understanding of transactional dynamics.

Knowledge

An organized knowledge base is crucial to any profession. The social work professional is expected to act deliberately, taking the steps that are most likely to be helpful, parsimonious, and consistent with the client's welfare. Deciding on those steps requires an extensive knowledge base. Practice that is based entirely on intuition or common sense is not only unprofessional, but also likely to be ineffective. Effectiveness, when it can be achieved, is an ethical mandate.

Practice Wisdom

Practice wisdom—one form of knowledge for practice—is a slippery concept, yet there can be little doubt that much of what happens in practice is rooted in it. In this discussion, "practice wisdom" refers to two separate but related phenomena: (1) explicit rules, handed down to others by experienced practitioners, that appear to work—heuristic rules viewed as good enough to guide much of practice—and (2) patterns of professional behavior, articulated or not, that have been shaped and refined through years of practice and often serve as models for other workers. These two forms of knowledge are passed on from generation to generation of social workers, sometimes as a form of oral tradition. Experienced social workers have often learned a tremendous amount that can be of value to others, and the importance of this type of knowledge should not be minimized.

Reliance on such rules has associated risks, however. The rules may be inaccurate but passed on persuasively by practitioners who strongly believe them to be true; their application may then result in less-than-adequate services to clients. For example, social workers in the field of substance abuse often rely on codependency theory, which "assert(s) that a woman married to an alcoholic contribute(s) to her husband's addiction because of her own disturbed personality needs" (Collins, 1993, p. 471)—an assertion for which there is no persuasive evidence (Collins, 1993; Peele, 1995). "Codependency" is perhaps a useful narrative for some situations, but it carries clear risks; in some of its common forms, codependency theory defines most families as dysfunctional, characterizes shared responsibility for collective outcomes as bad, and suggests that attention should be directed primarily to dysfunction rather than strengths and personal power (Collins, 1993). It has also resulted in unjustifiably blaming women and labeling them as pathological. The term "codependence" is not found in most evidence-based work related to the

families of those addicted to substances, who often prove to be among the most powerful resources for treatment of the person with addiction (Miller, Forcehimes, Zweben, & McLellan, 2011).

The second type of practice wisdom—patterns of professional behavior shaped by practice experience—is also essential, although it is more difficult to capture. Sometimes social workers know what they are doing and why, and they can accurately explain it verbally. At other times, effective practitioners cannot explain exactly what they do or why, but by observing their timing or the inflection of their voice during clinical sessions, for example, others can learn to do much the same thing. For this reason, among others, videotaped and audiotaped sample sessions and real or simulated clinical presentations are valuable. Observers can notice the principles that are the particular focus of a session or demonstration, and they may be able to learn, consciously or not, from the many subtle behavioral events that occur simultaneously.

In response to the limitations of practice wisdom, contemporary social workers have increasingly come to value *evidence-guided practice*—practice that relies on neither intuition nor authority but on critical examination of the best available evidence, particularly evidence that has been tested in rigorous, scientific ways (Gambrill, 2006). Certainly, practice involves much more than this (Gitterman & Knight, 2013), but the importance of testing what one does and of seeking the best-validated information on which to base decisions can hardly be overemphasized. Evidence-guided practice is discussed in depth in chapter 2 and in subsequent chapters.

Biological, Behavioral, and Sociocultural Sciences

Moving beyond practice wisdom, much of the foundational knowledge for social work practice has scientific roots. Social workers work with people (who are biological, emotional, behavioral, and social beings); with families, groups, communities, and organizations (which are sociocultural entities); and with the relationships among and between people, social entities, and the physical world. Because these are the raw materials of practice, it is important to understand as much as possible about them. Thus, social workers must know not only about practice and social issues, but also about the basic sciences that undergird them, including biology and genetics, ecological science, and behavioral science and the disciplines that examine large systems, including sociology, anthropology, and cultural analysis.

Some conditions that social workers deal with have clear physiological dimensions; for instance, although the effects of the environment appear to be important determinants of the course and severity of schizophrenia, the underlying processes involved are usually biological in nature. The extent and nature of the biological basis of the disorder is not yet entirely clear, however, and serious issues exist regarding the diagnosis (Bola & Pitts, 2005; Wong, 2006). In another example, serious depression is associated with changes in the level and actions of

certain neurotransmitters in the brain (Sadock & Sadock, 2007). That psychological interventions are nonetheless effective for many cases of depression (Nathan & Gorman, 2007) demonstrates the essential unity of the human organism. Many psychophysiological connections exist in substance abuse (Miller & Carroll, 2006; Sadock & Sadock, 2007). For example, children of people with severe addiction to alcohol are at substantially increased risk for alcohol problems themselves. Therefore, knowledge of biological and medical information in whatever area the social worker is practicing is essential.

Famed biologist and naturalist E. O. Wilson (1992) noted that

> humanity is part of nature, a species that evolved among other species. The more closely we identify ourselves with the rest of life, the more quickly we will be able to discover the sources of human sensibility and acquire the knowledge on which an enduring ethic, a sense of preferred direction, can be built. (p. 348)

Since the 1960s, social workers have recognized that ecological science has much to offer them for understanding practice in a complex, interconnected world. First, human beings are literally part of the natural world and, like other animals, need to be able to obtain certain resources, including food, shelter, and social interaction, from their environments to survive. (Those basic needs are missing or at continuous risk for many homeless and poor people.) The connectedness among people and other parts of the natural world is an essential underpinning of shared power in social work practice, which requires recognizing that service is not about doing something for someone else but rather about contributing to the interconnected web within which each person is simply a nexus. Ecofeminists have emphasized that ecological connectedness is not just a metaphor but the reality of the human species (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Datar, 2011). An ecological perspective profoundly changes the definition of practice and clarifies the importance of exploring the interlocking environmental events, human actions, and cultural practice within which client struggles occur. Ecological science is one of the theoretical roots of the ecosystems perspective that has proven important for conceptualizing practice.

Social workers draw on a tremendous wealth of information from the behavioral and social sciences; most graduate programs include substantial coursework focused on human behavior in the social environment. Knowledge from psychology, behavior analysis, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, demography, epidemiology, and political science, as well as from professions such as medicine, psychiatry, and family therapy, is critical for effective practice. For example, work in the analysis of cultural practices can be useful for determining what needs to change in an ecological field to reduce the incidence of social problems such as youth and collective violence (Mattaini, 2001, 2013) and to increase

the rates of prosocial acts such as effective parenting at a community level (Irvine, Biglan, Smolkowski, Metzler, & Ary, 1999).

Practice Approaches

It is essential to be forthright in representing social work to graduate students. The profession is currently fragmented on several dimensions; one of the most potentially divisive has to do with practice approaches (or practice models), which reflect different and often conflicting worldviews. Although individual cases, and, therefore, specific interventions, are unique, the social worker seldom must, or should, develop intervention strategies *de novo.* Practice approaches are organized systems of intervention designed to be applied in relatively consistent ways across multiple cases (including groups and communities). Practice approaches not only permit social workers to apply what has been learned from other cases to the current one, but also are valuable in making explicit how the worker understands the case situation and what is to be done about it. In other words, when using a practice approach, the worker does not depend primarily on amorphous, unarticulated intuition—which is no doubt always present—but engages in critical analysis consistent with a coherent conceptual framework.

Social work practice, like that of other helping professions, is grounded in the practitioner's understanding of the phenomena involved, including individual experiences and action, social phenomena, and the environmental context within which they occur. In the roughly 100 years during which the profession has evolved, many different practice approaches have emerged. A few key clusters, however, encompass most practice approaches. Each of these foundational approaches has contributed something to professional practice, and the graduate social worker should certainly have some exposure to each, if for no other reason than to be able to communicate with colleagues.

At the same time, it is critical to avoid an eclectic stew that randomly mixes concepts from multiple approaches. Different approaches often see the multiple causes of human action in different and, to some extent, incompatible ways. A moral model for understanding addictions, for example, would indicate the need for an act of will on the part of the person with alcoholism while denying much of what has been learned about substance abuse in recent decades. A disease model would suggest the need to acknowledge powerlessness as an early step toward recovery. Viewing addiction as a "complex self-organizing system" (a science-based model by Bickel & Potenza, 2006) opens a range of new and promising alternatives. A social worker's basic cognitive framework for understanding human action is unlikely to change from moment to moment and person to person, although much can be said for taking a fresh perspective at times. Given the crucial importance of practice approaches for providing effective service, those grounded in the most adequate and well-established underlying conceptual understandings should be privileged.

Psychosocial Practice

The oldest professional practice framework in social work is the psychosocial approach, which has continually evolved since Richmond's (1917) *Social Diagnosis.* This approach has, for at least seven decades, relied primarily on psychodynamic theory (including modern developments in ego psychology, self psychology, object relations, and relational work). The key to understanding human behavior and emotion in this approach is the developmental process over the life course, much of which is seen as outside of the client's conscious awareness. Because development occurs primarily through experience, this approach has a place for the social and physical environment, but that place has usually been primarily historical. Current environmental forces are certainly recognized by psychosocial social workers but often receive limited attention because they can be difficult to work into the underlying framework.

In recent years, the emphasis in psychosocial social work has shifted toward relational models that emphasize the mutuality of interaction between client and social worker. There has been considerable reluctance to evaluate the outcomes of psychosocial practice until recently, but emerging research has generally been supportive (Borden & Clark, 2012), at least for use in psychotherapeutic practice. Among the best contemporary statements of this approach, both of which have attempted to address the historical limitations of the model, are those of Goldstein, Miehls, and Ringel (2009) and Borden and Clark (2012).

Ecological Practice

Partly in response to the bias that is often found in psychosocial work toward identifying individual dysfunction rather than transactional issues, the ecological approach, particularly the life model (Gitterman & Germain, 2008), emphasizes mutual adaptation between person and environment. The life model applies ecological constructs such as habitat, niche, parasitism, and stress and coping directly to the social world. (Note the overlap with the ecosystems perspective. It is possible, however, to practice ecosystemically from any practice approach.) This approach is also grounded in process, including human development over the life course and the process of helping over time. The model focuses particularly on certain classes of problems, including life transitions, traumas, dysfunctional relationship patterns, and coping with environmental stressors.

Early versions of the approach were often criticized for being too optimistic about the potential to achieve balance in an often oppressive and exploitative environment. Recent statements of the life model, however, have directly addressed structural injustice and oppression and emphasized the need for political action. Related approaches include person–environment practice (Kemp, Whittaker, & Tracy, 1997), which heavily emphasizes assessing and enriching social support networks and is based on both well-explicated theory and emerging research.

Ecobehavioral Practice

A third major cluster of practice approaches is the ecobehavioral approach, which encompasses traditional behavioral, cognitive, and cognitive–behavioral approaches. In most contemporary social work variants, ecobehavioral practice pays extensive attention to the social, cultural, and physical contexts of practice rather than focusing mostly on client behavior (whether overt or cognitive). Early behavioral models initially focused on direct work with overt client behavior; similarly, early cognitive–behavioral approaches tended to focus narrowly on client self-talk without adequately addressing environmental transactions. Both approaches emphasized the importance of well-supported theory and research, however, which led to their expansion.

There are now ecobehavioral approaches to work with individual, group, family, organizational, and community levels of practice (many are discussed later in this volume). Modern ecobehavioral practice encompasses both overt action and private experiences (cognitive and emotional), recognizes historical origins of human challenges (as does the psychosocial model), and typically works intensively with current environmental influences (as does the ecological model) that shape human experience, including the dynamics of oppression and exploitation. In its contemporary manifestations, ecobehavioral practice places a heavy focus on shared power and on the co-construction of an improved reality (in contrast to treating problems) (Mattaini & Moore, 2004), but also on the exercise of strategic nonviolent power to challenge injustice when necessary (Mattaini, 2013). Berlin's (2002) cognitive–integrative approach, one ecobehavioral variation, attends not only to cognitive factors, but also to environmental events and conditions and overt behavioral work. Ecobehavioral practice is deeply grounded in behavioral, cognitive, and cultural analytic science and in recent years has incorporated significant elements from structural practice (discussed next).

Structural Practice

Rooted in critical theory, structural social work focuses on the socioeconomic and political organization of society (Mullaly, 2007). Social problems are understood as the direct result of the inherent inequality and oppression created by unconstrained capitalism, and their solutions, therefore, must be found in working toward the transformation of the current social order. Evolving from a socialist ideology, the structural approach to social work practice emerged in the 1970s in response to concern that traditional models of practice pathologized clients whose circumstances were not the result of their own deficiencies but rather were directly caused by inadequate and unjust social structures (Middleman & Goldberg, 1974; Moreau, 1979). At the core of a structural approach is the belief that society is currently organized to marginalize and exploit people along the lines of class, gender, race, sexual identity, religion, ability, and so forth, and it is the duty of social workers to

reject the status quo and work to eliminate power and resource disparities (Mullaly, 2007; Weinberg, 2008).

Structural social work is concerned with both "liberating persons and liberating structures" (Carniol, 1992). It calls for the transformation of current social, economic, and political institutions as well as care for those victimized by them (Mullaly, 2007). Structural social work is part of a larger collection of antioppressive approaches (for example, feminist and antiracist frameworks) that seek to intervene at the levels at which the privilege, domination, and exploitation at the root of social problems exist (Dominelli, 2002; Robbins, 2011). Practice methods are centered on consciousness raising and finding resilience in the context of dialogic relationships as well as empowering collective challenges to systemic inequalities to achieve structural change.

Indigenous and Ethnically Specific Practice

Social work has struggled with cultural competence ever since the recognition of diversity among client groups. Even the phrase "cultural competence" has repeatedly been contested. A continuing dialectic between professionalization and recognition of the depths of cultural differences is now creating new and valuable conflicts and struggles. In the context of globalization, contemporary efforts to establish standards for social work around the globe have been viewed by many indigenous groups, both in the United States and globally, and by theorists of indigenous practice as a new form of colonialism and professional territoriality that may in fact cause further damage. The extent to which conceptual and practice approaches (and research) developed in Western countries ("from the West to the rest") can be helpful in entirely different cultural settings is therefore being challenged (Gray et al., 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

As a result, a movement toward indigenous practice and research models as forms of political resistance is emerging (Gray et al., 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). These approaches emphasize decolonization and rely on identifying and integrating traditional values and traditional modes of helping into practice from the ground up, rather than on adapting what are basically Western practices. Such approaches often focus more on collective and spiritual practices than on psychological theory. For example, Western social workers seldom turn to shamanistic practices, bringing private troubles into the public square in the context of mutual aid, the use of drumming and sweats, or referral to the extended family in cases of intimate partner violence, but each of these occurs in indigenous practices in some cultures. Simply training local social workers in Western practices does not produce indigenous practice; rather, the practice itself emerges from local cultures.

Ethnically specific approaches in the United States are related. For example, Afrocentric models structure practice according to traditional African values and cultural practices (Gilbert, Harvey, & Belgrave, 2009; O'Donnell & Karanja, 2000).

Other models are specific to a single indigenous nation (for example, a Lakota-specific approach as described by Voss, Douville, Little Soldier, & Twiss, 1999). Many such approaches incorporate a heavy focus on family and community context and de-emphasize individual, pathology-focused diagnosis. A single indigenous approach that becomes foundational will not emerge, because indigenous approaches are by definition local. Given an emphasis on empowerment and recognition of the new colonialism and structural injustice, it is likely that a highly diverse set of indigenous approaches will be developed around the world—and this will be progress for social work.

Given the diversity present, how is a practitioner to decide what practice approach or approaches to rely on? Up to a point, a disciplined eclecticism in which techniques and strategies drawn from multiple approaches are selected on the basis of their empirical support can be useful. Random eclecticism, however, in which practice is not shaped by any coherent understanding but simply emerges from momentary preference, intuition, or personal belief, is neither professional nor likely to be effective—and therefore poses serious ethical problems. When social workers engage, for example, in reparative therapies that claim to change sexual orientation despite overwhelming scientific evidence that such treatment is not only ineffective but can cause serious harm, the importance of critical thinking and accurate knowledge is clear.

Established knowledge and research certainly can help. The evidence-guided practice process can guide the social work practitioner toward locating and relying on intervention strategies that have withstood rigorous, critical evaluation, to the extent that such strategies are known. If what works is at least partially known, the social worker has an ethical imperative to attend to that knowledge. Some authors (for example, Thyer, 2012) involved in the movement toward evidence-guided practice believe that it could eventually replace concern with models and approaches and that social workers will then simply do what has been shown to be most effective. Unique problems and situations will always require comprehensive theoretical frameworks to decode and understand them, however, and those frameworks must be broad enough to take the crucial dimensions of oppression and justice into account.

Practice Processes

Practice is nonlinear, but it is not random or chaotic. Certain processes must occur if social workers are to be helpful. Those processes tend to occur in a systematic but not invariant order. They are also recursive, and social workers will often find themselves cycling back to move ahead.

First, the social worker must be able to engage the client in a genuine human relationship of shared power—not as a separate process, but organically throughout the work. A good deal of research supports what every skilled social worker knows:

The facilitating conditions of empathic communication, warmth and respect, and authenticity are crucial. Those principles were first elaborated by Carl Rogers and were subsequently explicitly adopted and adapted by social workers (for example, Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, & Strom-Gottfried, 2013), who had for many years recognized the centrality of the helping relationship (Perlman, 1979). The worker who cannot achieve those necessary (but not sufficient) conditions will fail with most clients. A complication is that people are often not the best judges of their own interpersonal skills, so supervised practice, including feedback, is essential to ensuring competence.

Social work practice in many situations calls not just for maintaining a relationship with a client, but instead building one together that is transformational. Roca, a community-based youth organization near Boston, describes the transformational relationships among its community of staff and young people as long-term, trusting relationships characterized by high accountability and unconditional love and support (Boyes-Watson, 2008). They are relationships defined by accompaniment rather than simply by aid that for many of the young people who are a part of Roca "function as a catalyst for change" (Boyes-Watson, 2008, p. 48).

Finally, a social worker must know how to intervene to help. Intervention is always rooted in data about a particular case that are uncovered during exploration and organized in a coherent way in an individualized assessment. Because not everything tried works, an integrated process of monitoring and evaluation is also core to practice. These processes, which are central to effective practice, are emphasized in subsequent chapters, particularly chapter 11.

CONTEXTS OF PRACTICE

All practice occurs in a context that shapes the practice. "Context" as used here refers to the systems and conditions that constitute the environment of the case, sometimes at a substantial distance. The results of welfare reform and the changing economy, for example, have had major effects on the way in which social workers work with clients and communities. In health and, increasingly, in other fields of practice, managed care networks have become the norm, and there is much less emphasis on a private entrepreneurial model of care. Therefore, the importance of focused, short-term work—which has been growing for some time—continues to grow.

In child welfare, heterosexist laws that in some states prohibit same-sex couples from adopting not only violate fundamental human rights, but also further restrict the already limited options for social workers seeking permanent homes for children. The work of community building in resource-deprived neighborhoods is too frequently interrupted by a criminal justice system that continues to incarcerate young black men at rates astronomically disproportionate to those of their white peers. These are examples of some of the contexts of social work practice.

They include policy and funding mechanisms, the physical environment, natural networks, institutions, cultures, and the profession itself. They are the social, economic, physical, and political conditions and structures in which clients, workers, agencies, and service systems are embedded.

Social work's mission draws attention to the severe social problems with which people, families, and communities grapple, from ameliorating (or preventing) difficulties to intervening in crises. Issues such as violence (domestic and nondomestic), the maltreatment of children, addictions, homelessness, poverty, racism, natural and manmade disasters, effects of war and terrorism (and their complex roots), isolation, and mental and physical illnesses constitute both the content and the context of social work practice. Many of these issues are at root structural. Many natural disasters are at root manmade, in that the damage people experience is often highly correlated with race and class, with inadequate protections in place for the poor.

A FINAL WORD

This book recognizes that social work is a complex professional field and deals with that complexity. The central purpose of this book is to support courses focused on the foundations of practice by (a) introducing graduate students to the core knowledge and values of professional practice and (b) encouraging the development of practical skills consistent with that knowledge and those values while (c) viewing the work of social work as supporting social justice within the web of human and wider environmental connectedness. Specialized knowledge and experience accumulated beyond this course will then strike a familiar note, because the broad contours of practice have been sketched here.

SAMPLE LAB ACTIVITY

Using a simplified talking circle format, pose a series of serious questions to the class, such as "What do you believe are the most important ideas from this chapter? What had the greatest impact on you while you were reading?" "What do you think will be the most challenging thing about working in your field placement?" and "What are you most excited about?"

To begin the circle, students and instructor should be seated in a single circle, and the process should be introduced, including the use of a talking piece (which may be something meaningful or a card stating the first question). While holding the talking piece, the instructor (or a student, once students have experience with circles) asks the first question, provides an answer, and passes the talking piece to the person on the left. That person answers the question and passes the talking piece on. Participants may pass but must then wait until the talking piece comes

around again to speak. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak. Each time the talking piece travels around the circle, a new question can be introduced. The instructor should model speaking from the heart and going progressively deeper throughout the exercise. (See content on circle processes in chapter 8 for further information.)

Note to instructors: All exercises in this book should be adapted or replaced to fit instructor style and class readiness.

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