

Common Social Work Framework

By

Darren L Bunnell

For

Richard F. Ramsay

SOWK 479

Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

October 26, 2001

Note: The hardcopy of this paper scanned and digitalized. Hopefully, all related errors have been corrected. Minor editing was carried out.

Common Social Work Framework

For the last year and a half I have been enrolled as a student in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary. This enlightening experience has exposed me to a wide array of theories regarding general dynamics of the social work profession, as well as, established and contemporary methods of practice. Throughout this passage of time I have come to better identify, understand, acknowledge, and appreciate the holistic nature of social work and the need for a common conceptual framework for holistic social work theory and practice. With the benefit of a final year practicum placement the opportunity exists to explore and actively apply such a framework with an accompanied complementary assessment system to facilitate a greater understanding of the respective field placement itself and the social work profession in general.

An 'ecosystem framework' suggests that a social worker should attempt to be, primarily, comprehensive in their philosophies and approaches to understanding and practicing the social work profession; a philosophy which applies to micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Much of this paradigm dates back to the work of social work theoretician and practitioner William Gordon. Gordon was instrumental in conceptualizing the framework that the understanding and practice social work involved not only internal matters of the respective minds and environments but of their interactions and relationships as well (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). The 'ecosystems framework' is complemented by concepts supported in 'systems theory' and 'ecology'. 'Systems theory' stresses the effects of interacting elements where multiple elements are themselves whole, interact and combine to form a whole, and have relationships with other wholes (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). An open, interactive, system may receive nourishment and sustainability from within itself and from its relationships with others (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). A system that is closed, or isolated, may become increasingly vulnerable and experience entropy. Such a system manifests itself as problems for a client. 'Ecology' also emphasizes the correlation between the dynamics of permeation and health with a context of person-interaction-environment; in this case possible harmful issues with a client, their respective environment, and/or the interactions (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). The 'ecosystems framework' could then be combined with other frameworks of the social work profession and its respective practices.

These frameworks concern the conceptual theories of 'specialized' and 'generalist practice methods'. Specialist concentration often provides significant knowledge regarding a certain aspect of life and social functioning but may neglect the importance of other systems and their relationships. 'Generalist practice' attempts to approach issues, or problems, from many perspectives, possibilities, and choices, which is linked to an understanding that systems are comprised of sets of interacting elements. A wide range of conceptual and practical productive approaches can be simultaneously and mutually considered and applied. Such a framework could be described as eclectic in nature as it not only draws on different areas of social work but also incorporates external complementary, as well as, divergent perspectives, disciplines, practices, and paradoxes. The 'ecosystems framework' emphasizes the relevance of specialized and, particularly, generalized practice.

An orientation that is sometimes associated with a generalist practice framework is that of 'empowerment'. A social worker working with others can be considered as working in concert with others, sharing ideas and forming often mutually beneficial goals. It is important that individuals and groups share and acquire sustainable social capital and this can arise through the transfer of knowledge and the development of skills. 'Empowerment' is the process and outcome of a mutual recognition of ability to understand, participate, and influence conditions within and around a

situation. An empowerment orientation attempts to encourage such a context through a constructive method of social work practice conceived within three simultaneous phases: ‘dialogue’, ‘discovery’, and ‘development’ (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2001). Each phase can be defined through considering their associated practice processes.

From the process of ‘dialogue’ practitioners and clients engage in transactions, develop roles and sustain cooperative partnerships defined by acceptance, respect, and trust. They also share information including the validation of experiences, motivations and possible resources. Finally in the dialogue phase practitioners and clients clarify the purposes of the work such as set directions, challenges and goals (Miley, et al., 2001). The ‘discovery’ phase involves the assessment of potential and actual resources including identifying strengths, analysing resource capabilities, record keeping, and the employment of assessment systems such as the ‘person-in-environment’ classification system. During ‘discovery’, social workers and clients identify resources to consider when constructing plans for change (Miley, et al., 2001). Through ‘development’, practitioners and clients utilize resources, create and strengthen partnerships with others, and establish new opportunities (Miley, et al., 2001). The ‘development phase’ also includes recognizing successes, and integrating gains. Together the three processes attempt to empower a client. The empowerment orientation is often most effective when associated with an ‘ecosystems framework’.

Two proposals have been suggested in which one may understand and practice the social work profession from an ‘ecosystems framework’. One, a ‘comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work’ as developed by Ramsay (2000), is a framework of comprehensively understanding of the dynamics that comprise the social work profession—a common conceptual model. The other, the ‘person-interaction- environment’ classification system, is an attempt to utilize a common and comprehensive practice method for client assessment and planning. Such models are informed by whole systems theory. A holistic perspective of social work suggests that the professionals should be comprehensive in their theoretical frameworks and ways of practice. However understanding the definitions of, and practices of, the profession varies depending upon many factors, such as time, context, culture, available information, experience, personal biases, and their interactions. Reactions to these have created difficulties in communication between workers in the profession and, to some extent, fragmented the profession within itself and from other disciplines. In an attempt to create a social work model that could be common to all of those in the profession Ramsay (2000) has proposed what is described as a ‘comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work’. Complementary to this comprehensive understanding of the dynamics that comprise the social work profession is a common and comprehensive classification system for client assessment and planning known as ‘Person-in-environment’ (Karls & Wandrei, 1994). It is this model, and the associated classification system, which I have come to prefer as a common social work framework and dominant practice method.

To best understand the nature of a comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work and social work practice it is best to examine some of the reasoning behind such a model. The ‘comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work’ model is based on, and complemented by, ‘whole systems theory’ and generalist social work practice. Defining qualities of ‘whole systems theory’ states that a whole system is comprised of everything inside and outside of a system, as well as, a system itself. Furthermore, all of the components of such a system are interconnected to each other. A whole system, in a minimum but complete state, consists of four components; therefore a geometric tetrahedron has been utilized as a concrete representation of the structure of a minimum whole system. Each of the four components of a minimum whole system can be unfolded and multiplied to display the complexity of ever increasing patterns of interconnecting parts. A whole systems perspective includes all of the factors involved, considers every factor as relevant, and examines how such factors are interrelated and correspond as a whole. Whole systems are dynamic

and the boundary of such a system is in a relationship and, along with personal and environmental, are the points in which social work is involved. This information considered, the complementary between 'whole systems theory' to generalist social work practice becomes more apparent.

A 'comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work', as based on a minimum whole system, is comprised of four core components: 'domain of practice', 'paradigm of the profession', 'domain of the practitioner', and 'method(s) of practice' (Appendix Ib) (Ramsay, 2000). All four components can be unfolded and multiplied into progressively more complex detail and presented as a comprehensive whole systems model (Appendix Ia).

In the comprehensive perspective of the social work profession, as proposed by Ramsay (2000), 'domain of practice' is the phrase used to describe the region of work, or service area, in which the practice of social work unifies its focus or concern. Bartlett (1970) suggested that 'person', 'interaction', and 'environment' as the defining characteristics of the 'domain of social work'. In practice it is a systemic person-in-environment assessment of a clients' 'biopsychosocialspiritual' state. With the inclusion of an 'interaction', or 'in', component into the traditionally dualistic 'person-environment' domain the concept of 'relationship' is risen to the stature of the other two factors which defines the significance of 'relationship' in the social work profession.

The 'domain of practice' component can be multiplied into a minimum four factor system consisting of 'persons', 'personal otherness', 'resource otherness', and 'validator otherness'. The three 'otherness' factors are considered to be environmental as opposed to psyche or 'self'. They acknowledge the contextual and relationship nature of social functioning and the interpersonal nature of the social work profession (Ramsay & Karls, 1999).

The 'persons' factor identifies an individual or group of people, including a family or community, accounting for their various sizes and social configurations. Three of the four factors— 'social role and relationship functioning', and 'mental', and 'physical health functioning'— of the 'person-in-environment' domain provide information which describes various characteristics of a 'person' (Ramsay & Karls, 1999). 'Personal otherness' can be defined as an individual's or group's personal social supports. Supports can include individuals, such as a friend or a family member, to groups such as family and communities. The 'resource otherness' factor are informal and intimate social, political, economic, spiritual, and geographic resources, opportunities, and goods and services that may facilitate or restrict the social role functioning with a client's relationship with others. 'Validator otherness' is defined by absolute and relative norms in the forms of values, beliefs, policies, ideals, customs, traditions, and laws; a collection comprising of some of what composes 'culture'. Individuals and groups use validators to guide relationships with others in culture-specific ways. The nature and quality of relationships of all factors in a system are directly are affected by the influence, and interactions, of the respective validators.

The 'paradigm of the profession' is a phrase employed to describe the nature and philosophical foundations of the social work profession including its values, norms, code of ethics, knowledge base, as well as, the research and practice options and interventions of the social work profession. A 'common' paradigm of values and ethics formally originated in 1928, by the International Federation of Social Workers, and henceforth social work practice has been recognized by a set of values, purpose, sanctions, knowledge, and methods (Brieland, 1977). This structure has since been further revised and developed in the last seventy years by other federations and associations, such as the Canadian Association of Social Workers, and has spawned the creation of regulatory systems (Ramsay, 2000). The "Alberta Association of Registered Social Workers Social Work Standards of Practice" guides social workers who practice in Alberta.

In 1999 Witkin summarized a well defined outline of the core features of the social work profession, including 'guiding vision', 'values and core beliefs', 'interpretative framework', and 'primary constituencies', which attempts to encompass 'common' and 'holistic' dynamics of the nature of the profession. The 'guiding vision' is proposed as being the belief in and contribution towards a just and civil society (Witkin, 1999). The 'missions' propose the fulfillment of basic needs, the egalitarian distribution of resources, and equal opportunity for all people as required conditions (Witkin, 1999). The 'values and core beliefs' are suggestions for the fulfillment of the 'missions' and 'guiding vision' and are applicable to individuals, families, and communities. Issues such as that all people are entitled to basic human rights and well-being, are to be treated with dignity and respect, have strengths, resilience, and capacity for change and that diversity and differences in all people are enriching and valuable are considered to be of utmost honour (Witkin, 1999). Furthermore the promotion or restoration of mutually beneficial interactions and transactions has been emphasized as a purpose of social work and a focus on person-in-environment and the facilitation of constructive interactions as central objectives. The guidelines set forth for an 'interpretative framework' are that 'reality' is contextual and relational and that people cannot be understood without consideration of contexts, or contexts from people to whom they refer (Witkin, 1999). This includes the knowledge base in which social workers incorporate in their practice. Furthermore contexts depend upon cultural and linguistic factors and also include history, physical surroundings, language, conditions, social institutions, policies and laws, and cultural values and practices (Witkin, 1999). Finally, contexts can alter through with the passage of time and across cultures and situations (Witkin, 1999). The 'primary constituencies' include working with or on behalf of marginalized groups who are likely to be people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (Witkin, 1999).

Although such core features of the profession of social work has provided some framework to base one's understanding and practices emphasis remains that the profession is lacking in the formation of a universal, or standardized, and structured paradigm to work within. The establishment of such a paradigm has proven difficult, and is debatable in theory and practice, but attempts could further assist social workers in the selection of appropriate practice options that are congruent with respective 'person-in-environment' assessments.

The 'paradigm of the profession', when defined in the context of the respective comprehensive framework of the social work profession, is itself comprised of four possible, interconnected, practice options that a social worker may choose to focus upon: a 'client system', a 'target system', an 'action system', and a 'change agent system'. Each of these options may be addressed by a social worker with the use of their own knowledge and experience, as well as, that available from other informed sources. Focusing on a 'client system' is a practice option that involves working directly with an individual or group that has requested some interest in addressing a social functioning need (Ramsay & Karls, 1999). The social work service could include crisis intervention, connecting to social support services, or counseling with an individual, group, or family. It could also be conducted on a community scale in a form of community development as requested by a community group. Engaging with a 'target system' is a practice option that involves working with part of the 'person-in-environment' domain that needs to be influenced, or persuaded, to be helpful toward a client system; It is who, or what, it is that is to change (Ramsay & Karls, 1999). The practice action could be directed towards affecting an individual, group, or institution. Focusing on an 'action system' is the practice option that involves working with part of the 'person-in-environment' domain that has agreed to cooperate or act as a facilitator to the forces that are working with 'client systems' or in conjunction with 'target systems' (Ramsay & Karls, 1999). A practice action could be in the form of providing training and support services to social workers or various forms of community development. Engagement with a 'change agent system' is the practice option that involves the employer or agency that a social worker may be working within, in cooperation with, or on behalf of (Ramsay & Karls, 1999). The 'change agent system' can be the subject of one of the other practice

options, such as a 'client system', when development of a program is required.

'Domain of the practitioner' is the term used to describe a social worker's own personal and professional 'person-in-environment' system - their 'domain of practice' - including 'practitioner', 'personal otherness', 'resource otherness', and 'validator otherness'. Such a domain is important to acknowledge in a comprehensive and holistic perspective of the nature of social work as it recognizes the qualities that exist within and around a social worker which may affect their understanding, practice, and relationships. These qualities include a social worker's biases, values, as well as, practical issues. A social worker, and those affected by them, should attempt to be conscious of such factors as they often have significant effects on how a social worker may perceive the social work profession, their client's 'person-in-environment' situation, as well as, the 'methods of practice' that are selected and how they may be applied. In the discipline of social work a practitioner needs to be flexible, diverse, and balanced in their consideration of different theoretical approaches and the various practice options and intervention methods that are available. Addressing this issue and critiquing such personal qualities recognizes the link between personal and professional self and could be mutually beneficial to a respective social worker, the individuals they may work with, the clients they serve, and even the profession itself.

'Method(s) of practice' is the phrase used to describe the systematic stages of practice options and intervention methods a social worker may include when involved in a change process with a client--- be it on a micro, mezzo, or macro level. A number of knowledge based practice methods exist in the social work profession including 'problem-solving approach', 'structural approach', 'strengths perspective', 'Aboriginal perspectives', and 'feminist perspective'. These alternatives are not exclusive from the aforementioned 'ecosystem framework'--- nor from each other for that matter. In fact multiple aspects of their theoretical and practical principles could be thought of as common to one another.

The 'problem-solving approach' is one of the oldest forms of 'Western' social work practice. This process was originally based loosely on the medical model and consisted of the stages of 'study', 'diagnosis', and 'treatment' (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). Such a method began an emphasis on the importance of conducting an assessment of some respect and the relationship between a client and a social worker. Stages in the more contemporary version of the 'problem-solving approach' include: 'Initiation', 'engagement', 'assessment', 'planning', 'implementation', 'evaluation', and 'termination'. It is suggested that a contract be formed when employing the 'problem solving approach'. The approach is typically linear in nature and provides options for review, feedback, and readdress (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). However issues, or problems, do not always arise and continue in such a simple manner therefore sometimes making this model not as comprehensive and effective an approach as that which may be required. The 'problem solving approach' is complimented and furthered by these other four perspectives and approach.

'Strengths perspective' emphasize a client's capacities, abilities, and powers in order to grow as a person or group, improvement in the quality of life, and consequently acquire greater problem-solving capabilities and other gains (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). Such a perspective also embodies notions of wholeness and 'empowerment' (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). The 'strengths perspective' and the 'ecosystem framework' both stress the importance of, and connection to, environmental factors when understanding and practicing the social work profession itself and a client's respective situation.

Similarly, 'Aboriginal perspectives' focus on the significance of strengths, wholeness, and interconnection as central to understanding and working through challenges, healing, and achieving 'the good life' --- or 'mino-pimatasiwin' (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). Another, sometimes

overlooked, manner in which this process can also occur is through the relationships that can exist within the practice of social work. With such a perspective, healing is a life-long developmental process that involves the responsibility and betterment of not only a particular client or group but with others around and the environment. As with the 'strengths perspective' 'Aboriginal perspectives' claim that improvements to ones' capacities and quality of life in turn enriches problem-solving abilities and 'empowerment' (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). It is with 'Aboriginal perspectives' that the concept of interconnection is absolutely pivotal.

'Structural approach' is based on a conflict perspective and states that many of a client's problems arise from social inequalities and injustices -- their environment. These include social factors such as economy and institutions relating to justice and social systems as examples (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). The ambition of 'structural approach' is to assist a client in overcoming challenges between themselves and their external environment.

Similar to the 'structural approach' the 'feminist perspective' focuses on social inequalities and injustices. Emphasis is on reducing, or eliminating, domination, subordination, exploitation, and oppression while promoting, acknowledging, and, validating developments of empowerment, strengths, capacities and health (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). The belief that personal and political issues cannot be separated is central and stress is placed upon a concept of equality between client and social worker (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001).

The 'person-in-environment' classification system is a 'method of practice', or practice tool based upon an 'ecosystems framework', and is utilized in the 'assessment'/'discovery' stage of the practice options. Similar in intention to Ramsay's (2000) 'comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work' the 'person-in-environment' classification system was designed to be comprehensive and holistic and can incorporate the previously mentioned approaches and perspectives. This formal tool, or method of practice, can be a common assessment process for social workers to universally understand, assess with, and work from (Karls & Wandrei, 1994). It is an alternative to the traditional 'person and/or environment' dualistic framework that has often been the structure of assessment. The 'person-in-environment' classification system can assist in the selection of appropriate practice options and intervention methods that may be, for example, implemented in the 'intervention' phase when incorporated into a traditional 'problem-solving approach'. Such a decision is based on the characteristics of a respective client, their needs, environments, and relationships and can be understood through the results of a 'person-in-environment' assessment.

The 'person-interaction-environment' model attempts to provide a holistic classification system common to all social workers and also enable a comprehensive assessment of social functioning problems. These goals are facilitated through the systems ability to produce informative needs assessment information that is broad in scope, create a universal, or common, description of social work assessment, and utilize a common language to the profession of social work. The social functioning assessment addresses the social relationship of problems and strengths as well as systemic societal problems that directly affect social functioning and well being. A holistic assessment has potential benefit for, not only the client or group but, the user as it provides an opportunity to learn and practice a holistic way of conducting a social functioning assessment and perhaps a better sense of what the next practical step could be in providing appropriate social work assistance (Ramsay & Karls, 1999). The person-in-environment system might also assist in clearer communication within and outside of the profession and it can be used independently or with information from other studies or disciplines.

The basic structure of the 'person-in-environment' classification system is of four factors. The first is described as 'social role and relationship functioning' and describes the social roles that an individual

fulfills, or is associated with, according to recognized positions in society (Ramsay & Karls, 1999). These include a client's familial roles, other interpersonal roles, occupational roles and special life situations. This factor also takes relationship types into account that occur with others in similar or different roles (Ramsay & Karls, 1999). Examples are ambivalence, dependence, isolation, and of mixed type. Both roles and relationship types are subject to indicators such as severity, duration, and ability to cope. The second factor, 'social institution' involves the respective, often systemic, barriers and supports in an environmental context including economic and basic needs, education and training, as well as, legal, health, and social services. These elements are also subject to indicators of severity and duration. The final two factors describe 'mental health functioning' and 'physical health functioning'.

As with Ramsay's (2000) 'comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work' the 'person-in-environment' classification system can be best expressed in a four dimensional manner. This provides a more comprehensive understanding of person, environment, context, and their relationships. The tetrahedron, in abstract or physical form, is considered an accurate geometric representation of the structure of 'person-in-environment'; a concept based in the geometric ideas of Buckminster Fuller and the application of a minimum whole system design (Fuller & Kuromiya, 1992). The 'person-in-environment' assessment system also incorporates the holistic systems principle that 'the whole is greater than the sum of the separated parts' because of the identification of unique, non-entity based, characteristics that are formed when all elements are considered and interconnected. A tetrahedron shape can accurately represent this principle. Such interconnections, or relationships, are preconditions for life and social work practice and provide support for the conceptualization of the nature of social work as being a profession centred on interactions. The 'person-in-environment' assessment system is based on social work's unique relationship-centred perspective.

In keeping with the philosophies which comprise a 'person-in-environment' classification system and 'ecological framework' it would only be proper to include all five --- the 'problem-solving approach', 'structural approach', 'strengths perspective', 'Aboriginal perspectives', and 'feminist perspective'--- in a 'method(s) of practice' component of a 'comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work'. To perform so is not only congruent with basic philosophies of an 'ecological framework' and 'person-in-environment' classification system --- inclusion and interaction --- it would, in theory and practice, potentially provide a more comprehensive understanding and practice of the social work profession itself.

Employing all of the selected methods of practice --- the 'problem-solving approach', 'structural approach', 'strengths perspective', 'Aboriginal perspectives', and 'feminist perspective'---when considering a common conceptual framework and practice assignment could be considered a daunting task due to the quantity and depth of information that could arise. However one must remember that some methods may be more relevant than others depending upon factors such as context, culture, available information, time, experiences, perspectives, and their interactions. With different situations, select approaches, perspectives, and the resulting information may present varying degrees of pertinence. Regardless, effort should be made in the attempt to acquire knowledge of the concepts and processes. This strategy can, and will, be attempted with future work concerning final year practicum experiences and the results will be made available in the near future for subsequent review.

The construction, development, and application of a 'comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work' and a comprehensive and holistic classification system for client assessment and planning, is grandiose and potentially toilsome work. However this should not discourage individuals from examining, developing, and utilizing eclectic perspectives. Ramsay's (2000) 'comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work' and its complementary 'person-in-environment'

classification system are two of the choices that a social worker may employ as their theoretical and practice social work frameworks. A comprehensive, and holistic, understanding of the nature of social work, accompanied with a comprehensive assessment tool, further emphasizes the interconnectedness of the various dimensions surrounding clients and the social work profession. A holistic framework and assessment tool can help to guide research and practices, as well as, possibly further unite the profession within itself and with other disciplines. This would provide greater opportunity and structure to identify and address social work, and ontological, issues on personal and systemic levels. The respective comprehensive framework and the 'person-in-environment' classification system enable a social worker to identify abstract or typically omitted concepts, patterns, processes, and relationships that may exist and prove relevant. With such models acknowledged and accepted as foundations with which to conceive and practice by, a greater appreciation of the significant interconnectedness of elements in life can be made by those within and outside of the social work profession. The resulting perspectives and skills developed from a 'comprehensive conceptual framework of holistic social work', as that proposed by Ramsay (2000), accompanied with a 'person-in-environment' classification system of similar nature should hopefully prove supportive towards a final year practicum placement, as well as, the guiding vision of social work.

References

- Brieland (1977). Working definition of social work practice. *Social Work*, (2), 344-345.
- Fuller RB & Kuromiya K (adjuvant). (1982). *Cosmography: A Posthumous Scenario of the Future of Humanity*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Heinonen T & Spearman L (2001). *Social Work Practice: Problem Solving and Beyond*. Vancouver: Irwin.
- Karls J & Wandrei K (1994). P.I.E.: A system for describing and classifying problems of social functioning. In J Karis & K Wandrei (eds.). *Person-in-Environment System: The P.I.E. Classification System for Social Functioning Problems* (3-21). Washington D.C.: N.A.S.W. Press.
- Miley KK, O'Melia M, & DuBois B (2001). *Generalist Social Work Practice: An Empowering Approach* (3rd Edition). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Ramsay R & Karls J (1999). Person in environment classification system: Adding CD-Rom options to the social work learning menu. *New Technologies in the Human Services*, 12 (3/4), 17-28.
- Ramsay RF (2000). *Revisiting the Working Definition: The time is right to identify a common conceptual framework for social work*. Paper presented to the Kentucky Conference: Reworking the Working Definition, College of Social Work, University of Kentucky, February 2001.
- Witkin S (1999). Editorial: Identities and contexts. *Social Work*, 44 (4), 293-297.