Professional Model of Social Work: Developing a common conceptual framework for the social work profession

By

David Rivers

For

Richard Ramsay

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Faculty Social Work, University of Calgary

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Introduction

The need to develop a common conceptual framework for the social work profession has been a concern for a number of authors (Bartlett, 1970; Meyer, 1970; Pincus and Minahan, 1973; Ramsay, 1989, 1990). Specifically, social work needs a model that will integrate various presuppositions, values, and concepts in order to provide practitioners with a systemic framework for practice that allows for the systematic use of a wide range of interventive methodologies. According to Ramsay (1993), systems based conceptual models of social work have fallen short of representing the reality of a dynamic whole system because they have not been based on experiential evidence of what the structure of a whole system looks like or how the interrelatedness of parts combine to form a system. Ramsay's (1990) use of a tetrahedron structure overcomes these limitations and provides the profession with a configuration for constructing a common conceptual model of practice. The discussion in this paper will focus on my developing understanding of Ramsay's comprehensive model of social work.

Since my developing understanding of a professional model of social work practice will be exemplified throughout this paper by references to a practice assignment, it may be useful to briefly outline my practicum placement and the case example at this point. Working within the Family Support Unit of Alberta Family and Social Services, my practicum involves working with children and families in order to address protection issues. The Family Support Unit generally works with families and children on the basis of a Support or Custody Agreement and less often on the basis of a Supervision or Temporary Guardianship Order. The Unit does not work with families or children if a Permanent Guardianship Order *exists*. The Family Support Unit is directed toward accomplishing purposes such as protecting and promoting the welfare of all children, preventing or assisting in the solution of problems which may result in protection issues, and preventing the unnecessary separation of children from their families.

The case example chosen to demonstrate my developing understanding of a professional model of social work involves a family of 8 who live in a small three-bedroom duplex. The Calgary City Police referred the family to Child Welfare because the fifteen year-old brother, Dan, was alleged to have physically assaulted his sister. The initial Child Welfare investigation undertaken by a worker from the Plaza 14 office indicated that there was extreme parent-child and teen-to-teen conflict within the home. The case analysis however, focused on Dan as an individual and indicated that protection issues existed because his behaviour prevented his mother from providing him with adequate care (C.W.A. Sec. 1(2) i). A Support Agreement was signed and the service plan focused solely on reducing Dan's aggressive behaviour by having him work with a Youth Services worker on anger management skills.

When meeting with Dan and his mother Cheryl they stated that although the newly learned skills were helpful, stressors within and without the home continued to impede family functioning. Dan stated that he was bored as he was not attending school and frustrated because there were too many people living in the house. His mother said that she felt

powerless and complained that the children were unmotivated and did little other than sleep, watch television and fight. She also stated it was financially difficult to support eight people when she was receiving income support for only four. Overall, the family was fairly isolated with few links to external support systems such as extended family, friends, schools, or other community resources. After discussing these concerns, we decided to schedule a family meeting at their home in order to address family issues in a more holistic manner.

Family members responded to the family meeting favourably as they were genuinely interested in improving the family situation. During the meeting I helped family members identify what actions they could take and what resources they could use, in order to reach personal and family goals. These tasks were recorded and a meeting was scheduled for 3 weeks later.

By the next meeting, all but two of the tasks had been accomplished. Family members reported less verbal conflicts and no physical conflicts during this time period. The family meeting focused on the barriers to the unaccomplished goals and decisions were made regarding further actions to be taken. Another meeting was set for one month later.

Developing a Professional Model of Social Work Practice

The need to develop a common conceptual framework for the social work profession has been a concern for a number of authors (Bartlett, 1970; Meyer, 1970; Pincus and Minahan, 1973; Ramsay, 1990). One question that needs to be addressed at the onset of this paper, though, is "Why does the social work profession need to work from a common model of practice?" The answer is that social work like other sciences or professions needs a common conceptual framework in order to minimize disagreements among practitioners as to how to proceed. Specifically, social work needs a model that will integrate various presuppositions, values, and concepts in order to provide practitioners with a <u>systemic</u> framework for practice within which statements or claims can be questioned, verified, refuted and so on.

A professional model of social work practice needs to be founded upon a broad systemic or person-in-environment perspective, as well as, humanitarian and egalitarian values in order to be consistent with the philosophy, purpose, focus and function of social work as stated in the Code of Ethics (1983). The Code of Ethics (1983) clearly states that the profession is committed to the purpose of effecting social change and the healthy development of individuals within society for the benefit of both. In order to make advances toward this purpose, the practice of social work is suppose to have a primary focus on the patterns of psychosocial relationships between people and their environments. The social work profession therefore, not only needs a common conceptual model, it needs a model that is systems based.

Various models or conceptual frameworks, based on systems theories, have been developed for the profession over the years (Pincus & Minahan, 1973; Germaine & Gitterman, 1980; Bartlett, 1970). However, one of the purposes of a model is to represent "reality" as it is understood by a particular discipline and these models have fallen short of adequately

representing the reality of a dynamic, holistic and interrelated whole system. According to Ramsay (1993), systems based conceptual models of social work have fallen short of representing this reality because they have not been based on experiential evidence of what the structure of a system looks like or how the interrelatedness of parts combine to form a system. Ramsay's (1990) conceptual model of practice overcomes these limitations as it is constructed on the basis of a known structural form in nature, which explains how the interacting parts of a system are held together.

According to Ramsay (1990, 1993), scientific discoveries in chemistry and biology indicate that the simplest structural system in Nature is configured in the geometric form known as a tetrahedron: 4 points, 4 faces and 6 connecting lines. The tetrahedron is a structural form that represents the minimum number of interacting parts (4) and connecting relationships (6) needed to form a system. A tetrahedron structure can also be subdivided or unfolded thus providing a way to understand how the complex network of "larger" and "smaller" four part systems connect in an undivided whole. A tetrahedron structure therefore, provides the profession with a configuration for constructing a common conceptual model of social work that is experientially or "reality" based and accounts for how interacting parts combine to form a system.

By perceiving social work as an undivided whole system on the basis of a tetrahedron structure, the profession can be conceptually unfolded into a simple four-part foundation. As Ramsay (1990) suggests, these four general components can be unfolded into various levels of detail and can represent whatever consensus is reached regarding the common foundation of the profession. Like Ramsay (1991), I believe that these four components should reflect the accumulation of views about social work and about what constitutes a science. For this reason, I understand the components of a professional model of social work to include the domain of practice, the use of methods in practice, the professional elements of practice and the practitioner domain. These four general components constitute a tetrahedron systems based model of practice that addresses the person-in-environment context of the people social workers serve; allows for the systematic use of a wide range of intervention methods; provides a basis for a systemic understanding of social work practice systems; and addresses the various dimensions within the practitioner's person-in-environment context.

Domain of Social Work

The first component of a professional model of social work practice that will be discussed is the domain of social work practice. The inclusion of domain as one of the components of a professional model entails that social work can be defined as a science since it has a defined subject area of study and it has applied methods of inquiry, which are experientially verifiable. The person-in-environment perspective and the focus on the interactions between people and their environments (Code of Ethics, 1983), delineates a domain that distinguishes social work from other professions. In order to develop an understanding of the social work practice domain however, it is important to address the issue of the relationship between social work and the traditional scientific worldview.

It is my belief that there is a division between the essential beliefs of social work and the

belief system engendered by "traditional science". Core social work beliefs such as the complexity and interdependence of human relationships and social processes, the importance of focusing on patterns of interactions, and so on, are deeply divided from the values of knowledge building that stem from empiricism: linear causality, determinism, the focus on phenomenon that can be quantified, and the reductionism assumption that there is a single reality "out there" that can be analyzed, broken-down and studied independent of its context. The disparity between these belief systems needs to be acknowledged in order to develop a conceptual framework for practice that facilitates more than merely the rhetorical use of systemic concepts.

Scientific inquiry is not to be rejected, but its place in social work should be determined once social work conceptualizes its philosophical foundation in light of social work values, rather than in accordance with scientific empiricism. Major postulates within the traditional scientific paradigm such, as determinism and reductionism, need to be discarded in favour of scientific concepts that are more compatible with a systemic perspective. Fundamental systemic concepts that are part of the social work practice domain and which are relevant to the case with the case study family include the following:

1. interactionism, which assumes that human behaviour is not merely a function of personality or of environmental influences, but rather the complex interaction between both;

2. equifinality, which assumes that with human systems the same final end state can be reached from different initial conditions and through different paths; (also the companion concept of multifinality);

3. a health/growth orientation, which focuses on peoples' strengths and adaptive striving, rather than solely on weaknesses;

4. unpredictability, which assumes that a strict deterministic understanding of phenomena like human behaviour is not possible;

5. final causality, which identifies the role of goals and purposes in causation;

6. the political in the person, which leads to an understanding of how the interrelated structures of society may define the conditions of particular individuals; (For instance in this case, the socio-economic conditions that lead 8 people to live together in a small house and the societal barriers that block the successful integration of undereducated young adults into society, are significant factors that directly affect the functioning of this family);

7. complementariness of opposites, which encourages dialectical thinking; (For instance, it facilitates an understanding of why social work is and is not a tool of capitalism: social work is not able to stand outside of its capitalist epoch, but social workers can foster client self—determination and help to identify and target societally induced constraints to human development).

As previously mentioned, all of these concepts are relevant to a holistic understanding of the case with the case study family, and yet few, if any, are compatible with the traditional scientific worldview. The influence of the traditional scientific paradigm, however, is often latent and this is why it is important to come to terms with it at the onset of developing a model of practice. For example, the worker from Plaza 14 who was initially involved with this family probably received the same sort of systemic grounding as we have in our education and yet, in this case, appears to be practising on the basis of an analytical and client-centred approach. No offence to the worker is intended, but the service plan focused almost exclusively on changing Dan's aggressive behaviours through the use of anger management training. The relationships between Dan, his behaviour, his family and society were not addressed and this is not consistent with the person-in- environment perspective that constitutes our domain of practice.

All of this suggests that social work needs to be grounded to a scientific tradition if it wants to be a scientific profession, but that the discipline needs to be clear about the scientific foundation that it is anchored to. According to Ramsay (1991), the changing scientific worldviews that have occurred in the 20th century offer a more suitable scientific base for social work than does traditional science. Quantum mechanics for example, has shown that strict classical determinism, which requires the prediction of future states from current observables is not possible at a subatomic level. In brief, the uncertainty principle (and the related participant-observer effect) states that it is impossible to know a particle's position and speed at a particular moment and that the attempt to measure it effects the particle's position (Zimmerman, 1989). These and other scientific revolutions have led to the development of new systemic and holistic worldviews, which provide social work with a scientific foundation that facilitates synthesis and connectionism, rather than just analytical reductionism.

Methods of Practice

Anchoring our profession to the newly developing scientific paradigms will have an effect upon another component of a professional model of practice: the use of methods in practice. The method component of a professional model of social work needs to be grounded to a systemic perspective, but it also needs to incorporate a systematic dimension. As previously mentioned, uniting systemic and systematic dimensions has been difficult given the strict traditional scientific understanding of a systematic approach. However, fields of science that are based on a more holistic perspective such as quantum physics, have eliminated certain postulates of traditional scientific inquiry and still manage to proceed in a rational and organized manner that is open to evaluation.

Based on the new scientific worldviews, the method component of a professional model of social work can allow for systemic and systematic elements without subordinating either element to the level of rhetoric. The person-in-environment perspective that grounds our profession serves as a framework for the repertoire of available practice methods. A systemic perspective facilitates the consideration of the complex variables of any given case and helps workers to avoid the premature delimiting in assessment that occurs by viewing the case in relation to any particular practice method – i.e. "anger management. The systematic aspect of

the method component entails that methods are chosen in order to steer the process in a chosen direction and that their use is open to question, verification, refutation and so on.

As in the case with the case study family, practice begins on the basis of a general problem-solving process that is facilitated by basic social work skills and values, and the development of a working partnership. As the partnership moves through the general problem- solving process, mutually acceptable theory-based practice methods are chosen in accordance with the goals and purposes of the client, the worker, the worker's agency and the mandate of the profession. In the case of this family, the use of anger management in conjunction with relationship-centred methodologies such as a type of task-centred approach and the provision of a family support worker, met the family's goal of improving family functioning, as well as, Child Welfare's goal of resolving Dan's protection issues.

In my opinion, one of the distinctive features of the method component within a systemically based model of practice relates to the rationale for choosing from among various practice methods. Within a systemic model, methods of practice are not chosen solely on the basis of linear causal reasoning: what a method will cause to happen, because such an approach is too narrow and mechanistic. The role of theories in guiding our practice is not so much to enable us to predict exact outcomes as it is to catalyze movement in certain directions that may result in unpredictable, and yet "positive" outcomes.

Such an understanding of the role of theories in guiding social work practice is supported by scientific concepts such as final causality and equifinality. The concept of final causality encourages an understanding of causality, which takes into account the goals to which humans aspire and the options available to them in their environments. The concept of equifinality de-emphasizes the importance of any particular practice method since the same end point can be achieved through a variety of paths. When combined, these concepts suggest that practice methods should be chosen in relation to the goals of work and with a view towards establishing an overall interventive package that is systemically based. This also implies that social workers can work with action and target systems without the necessity for any client system work of a treatment nature. Overall, working in partnership with clients, understanding their situation and goals from their perspective and choosing methods in order to remove the personal and environmental barriers that impede the fulfillment of these goals, are integral parts of social work practice.

The systematic aspect of the method component also requires that the use of various interventive methodologies be monitored and evaluated. However, the de-emphasis on deterministic and reductionism thinking frees the profession to use scientific procedures which involve both analyzing and synthesizing strategies of inquiry. Experimental and control group studies based on the goal of eliminating intervening variables are de-emphasized as they are ultimately grounded on the belief in a deterministic world. Scientific methods of evaluation that are needed emphasize detailed descriptions of the person-in-environment context of the people social workers serve: the goals to which they aspire, the options available to them in their environments, their cognitions and beliefs, the unpredictable paths their behaviours take and so on. According to Zimmerman (1989), the accumulation of such descriptive data could lead to a form of probabilistic generalization

whereby, given an understanding of the complex variables of a particular case, the most and least probable <u>directions</u> that could be triggered by the use of various methods could be mapped. However, a linear causal relationship between method and outcome would not be presumed and generalization in the traditional sense is not the goal.

Paradigm of Social Work

Another component that needs to be included in a professional model of practice regards a systemic understanding of the professional elements of practice. As a practitioner within a Child Welfare agency, I am involved with children, their families, school systems, medical services, courts, police, lawyers, foster parents and so on. Much of my work therefore, entails working1with systems other than those traditionally viewed as clients. In Ramsay's (1990) model of practice, parts of this paradigm component are adapted from Pincus and Minahan (1973) who have developed a useful framework for understanding the four types of practice systems that social workers may interact with: the change-agent system, the client system, the target system and the action system. This framework is useful because it provides a broad picture of social work practice that accommodates for the interconnectedness of work with various practice systems. At a general level, the paradigm framework accounts for the interconnectedness of generalist and specialist practice or the direct and indirect approaches of social work, and at an individual level it enables me to understand how my work with various practice systems interconnects.

In the case with this family, the change agent system is Child Welfare, which heavily influences my behaviour through various policies, sanctions, constraints and so on. The client system, in accordance with Child welfare policy, is Dan. To be honest though, after I worked with the family as a target system and they entered into agreements with me aimed at improving family functioning, I struggled over the idea of considering them to be the client system. However, since the purpose of the change effort from Child Welfare's standpoint is to resolve Dan's protection issues, the family, after "coming on board", may be better understood as part of the action system. Other action systems in this case include the Family Support Worker, Income Support, Youth Unlimited and so on.

The final component of a professional model of social work practice is the practitioner domain. Social workers, like the people they serve, have a person-in-environment context that has an impact upon their work. For this reason, it is just as important for social workers to understand their own person-in-environment domains as it is to understand a client's. The 'professional obligations, functions and roles of a social worker will affect their practice, but these in turn, are affected by their personal dimensions.

Domain of Practitioner

Personal dimensions include elements such as a person's values, beliefs, customs, and ideals. It also includes their personal support systems, which for me include my wife, my family (who are all in Saskatchewan), my friends, fellow students, coworkers, my field instructor, and so on. The personal dimensions of social workers also include other resources which enhance or impede their state of being which for me include my poor finances, my

involvement in recreational activities like golf, racquetball, listening to music, going to the movies and so on. If as social workers we are to be "instruments of change", then it is critical that we remain aware of these various elements of our personal state of being.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social work like other sciences or professions needs a common conceptual framework in order to minimize disagreements among practitioners as to how to proceed. Ramsay's (1990) professional model of social work provides the profession with a systems based model that accounts for how the interrelatedness of parts combines to form a system. The model also accommodates the integration of various presuppositions, values, and concepts of social work. Components of this model can be labeled in various ways, but in this paper they were presented as the domain of practice, the use of methods in practice, the paradigm elements of professional practice and the practitioner domain. The general foundation of this model consists of a broad systemic or person-in-environment perspective that allows for the, systematic use of a wide range of interventive methodologies, leads to a broader understanding of the professional elements of practice and provides a basis for understanding the importance of the practitioner's state of being.

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