

**Social Work's Common Conceptual Framework:
A Student's Journey to Comprehension**

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For

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

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1. INTRODUCTION

The topic I have chosen is to critically discuss “Social Work’s Common Conceptual Framework” (Ramsay 1988). My choice of topic was dictated by a strong desire to pursue a comprehensive understanding of this framework. Fuller states: “Life is antientropic. It is spontaneously inquisitive. It sorts out and endeavors to understand” (1975, p. xxx). This was my goal.

Social Work 333 is a newly offered course that has yet to be evaluated by students. In particular, this is the first year that the “Common Conceptual Framework”, developed by Ramsay (1988), has systematically been integrated into the undergraduate students’ curriculum. I therefore thought it would be useful to chronicle my struggle to comprehend what, at times, has appeared to be my “tetrahedral nemesis”. My journey of understanding led me to awareness of the underlying complexity of the framework, which itself is characterized by simplicity, and to a greater synergetic understanding of the profession of social work.

The structure of this paper will systematically follow the process I used to achieve my goal. First, in order to critique this framework, I needed to learn more about its purpose and the problems it was attempting to remedy. Second, while I greatly appreciated Fuller as “a scientist, humanist, inventor, and engineer” (Hatch, 1974, cover), I found the connection between natural systems theory and social work to be tangential. I needed to better understand Fuller’s contribution to the Common Conceptual Framework. Finally, preceding the conclusion, I will more specifically address the strengths and limitations of this framework in “describing and explaining the complexities and variations of social work...” (SOWK 333 Term Paper Topics 1988).

2. The Purpose of the Common Conceptual Framework

A synergetic view of the purpose of Social Work’s Common Conceptual Framework may best be described by Fuller (1975): “Only a comprehensive switch from the narrowing specialization and toward an even more inclusive and refining comprehension by all humanity - regarding all the factors governing omnicontinuing life aboard our spaceship Earth - can bring about reorientation from the self-extinction-bound human trending, and do so within the critical time remaining before we have passed the point of chemical process irretrievability” (p. xxvii). More simply stated, unity is the key word. The apparent dichotomous conflicts between focusing on the causes of social problems versus treating the victims and between generalist versus specialist concerns, has created “negativism, fragmentation, and an embarrassing lack of unity” (Ramsay, 1988, p. 1) and therefore social work’s lack of influence in decision-making systems.

Leighninger (1980) asserts the perilous consequences of not resolving the generalist-specialist debate: “For without the promotion of a core professional identity--perhaps best based on a combination of 1) a common approach to problem analysis, 2) a recognized heritage, and 3) a shared repertoire of very basic skills--social work will be unable to achieve or maintain a unique position in today’s society” (p. 10). The Common Conceptual Framework was designed to provide a common base to describe the four, major interconnected components of social work: domain, paradigm, method and instrument (Ramsay 1988). While Minahan (in Pople, 1985) identified “searching for unity” of major importance for social work, Ramsay (1984) clarifies that unity, traditionally, is incorrectly viewed as singular. He advocates that we “remove the blinders that have historically prevented practitioners from seeing social work in its entirety” (Ramsay, 1988, p. 79). Ramsay further points out that “with a

sound knowledge and understanding of a common organizing framework, every social worker, whether they chose to be a generalist or specialist, would have the ability to see dependency problems from similar systemic and systematic perspectives” (p. 79) and thus would provide social work with a unified identity.

Each of the models within the framework will be described according to the purpose of the model and the problem each addresses.

a) Societal Model

This model defines the domain or social assignment of social work, that is, the person-in-environment (PIE). Ramsay states: “The structure of the Societal Model provides a systemic way for a social worker to focus on, understand, and assess the interdependent transactional patterns of any PIE life system both before and after a particular method of intervention is selected” (1988, p. 59).

Popple (1985) argues that in its attempts to define a unique domain, social work has wrongly pursued status as a profession according to sociological definitions. In applying a “trait model,” Flexner found that social work lacked a specific enough domain (Austin 1983). Popple (1985) points out that social workers responded by narrowing their focus and adopting the technique of casework. “They began to organize and structure their work not according to societal need but according to an abstract definition of what a profession is” (p. 564). Similarly, social workers later adopted both the “process model” and “power model” to argue professional status (Popple 1985).

Although traditional concepts of models of professions argue that because of cognitive exclusivity a profession “is seen as basically wrestling professional status from society” (Popple, 1985, p. 569), Popple sees professionalization as a mutual process. He claims “Professions are assigned a domain not necessarily because of a demonstrated expertise in dealing with a problem, but because assigning a problem area to an organized occupation is perceived as a rational way of dealing with the problem” (p.571). Popple (1985) views social work as being primarily defined by its social assignment, that of managing dependency. He states that social work is “a federated profession - a group of different occupational specialties unified into one profession by a common social assignment” (p. 574). Due to this broad mission, Popple asserts that cognitive exclusivity, a traditional criterion for profession status, is inapplicable for social work.

Popple (1986) later elaborates on his definition of “dependency” to include “problems in performing any essential social role” (p. 645). Social work is, therefore, both preventive and remedial, and dependency is managed “through the promotion of interdependence between people and society” (p. 645).

Morell (1987), in discussing the dual focus of the social work domain, states: “The prospect for the profession, however, lies precisely with its ability to affirm the fact that both individual and structural changes are required to deal effectively with the problems we confront” (p. 145). Morell refers to Porter Lee who distinguished between “cause” and “function”. He viewed “cause” as “a movement directed toward the elimination of an entrenched evil” (p. 145). Porter further stated: “At the movement of its success, the cause tends to transfer its interest and its responsibility to an administrative unit whose responsibility becomes a function of well-organized community life” (p. 145) The feminist approach states that: “Cause is function” (Morell, 1987, p. 150), and that both personal and social change require political activity, Similarly, another feminist, Wetzel (1986) states: “Social work’s vision should be local, regional, national, and international, span dyadic encounters and telecommunications”(p. 170).

The purpose of Ramsay’s societal model is, therefore, not simply to integrate the concept of domain

into the framework, but also to resolve what has been a longstanding, fractious debate.

b) Professional Model

This model conceptualizes the “broadbased generalist-specialist paradigm” of social work (Ramsay, 1988, p. 53). All four models are somewhat interrelated and the previous discussion of domain necessarily has implications for the generalist-specialist issue. Popple’s (1985) recognition of the broad mission of social work led him to conclude that one body of skill and knowledge for the “federated profession” of social work was an unrealistic expectation.

The professional model provides “a paradigm for different specialty and occupational interests in social work to be interconnected as a unified whole for the purpose of meeting the social assignment responsibilities of the profession” (Ramsay, 1988, p. 62). Ramsay further states “the primary focus of the social worker can be changed or rotated depending on the person-in-environment experiences to be worked with and the change agent roles adopted and the practice approaches selected by the social worker (Ramsay, 1988, p. 67).

Leighninger (1980) argues that comprehensive knowledge is required to cope with broad problems. Internal unity among subgroups, however, is essential for cohesiveness (Leighninger 1980). The Milford Conferences, from 1923-1928, identified the generic foundation of casework in order to “counter a trend toward fragmentation of practice” unfortunately, a specialty method model, that of casework, was reinforced as “the core professional technique in social work” (Ramsay, 1988, p. 25).

Leighninger (1980) comments that the integration of the fields and methods specialties of social work remains unfulfilled. Penman (in Leighninger 1980) looked for commonality in agency settings while Boehm’s 1959 curriculum study emphasized “an integrated body of knowledge stressing common theory, concepts and ethics” (in Leighninger 1980). Creating unity on the basis of social work values is futile in that statements are general and not distinguishable from the “American” democratic system (Leighninger 1980). Weick (1987) argues, however, “social work beliefs have far greater capacity to inform and guide the profession than they are typically thought to have” (p. 221). Weick views trends toward empiricism as minimizing any emphasis on the beliefs and convictions behind social work values.

Leighninger (1980) identifies two models aimed at balancing generic and specific practice elements: a skills-generalist approach and a knowledge-generalist approach. The former creates a basic core of “methods skill”, however, this approach is not able to guide concrete action due to the generality of procedures and skills common across methods (Leighninger 1980). The author defines a knowledge-generalist approach as focusing on “delineation of a comprehensive intellectual framework and/or a body of “core content knowledge” for social work practice. Leighninger further notes that: “Each move toward unity has been counterbalanced by the development of specialist groups; conversely, increases in specialization have mobilized forces toward cohesion” (p. 10).

In arguing the merits of a generalist perspective, particularly in an educational context, Meyerson (1974, in Yessian 1978) states “we are creating a breed of specialists who have been so rewarded for specializing that they have become overspecialized, unable to humanize (and thus perfect) their own speciality because they receive no stimulus from outside it” (p. 848). Yessian adds “the overspecialized faculty and students find themselves ill—equipped to deal with changes that do not fall neatly within the boundaries of their particular specialisms” (p. 848). Fuller (1979) would concur. He blames specialization for the general lack of comprehensive thinking and further points out that in nature, overspecialization leads to extinction (Fuller 1975).

As with the societal model, Ramsay’s professional model strongly adopts a stance, that of

comprehensiveness, in order to positively resolve the conflicting views.

c) Method Model

The method model provides “a systematic structure for the multiple methods used in our practice activities” (Ramsay, 1988, p. 3). Ramsay (1988) refers to this model as “social work’s scientific method.” The method model accounts “for both the physical and metaphysical work that social workers do with separate person—environment entities, between linear interrelationships, and amongst holistic patterns of interrelationships” (p. 72).

The task for Ramsay was to create a model that incorporated a “skills-generalist” approach that will accommodate “a pluralistic knowledge base, a variety of scientific methodologies, and a range of intuitive and empirically grounded intervention skills.

d) Practitioner Model

Ramsay (1988, p. 3) states that the practitioner model provides us with a domain of self-understanding for honing our development as effective “instruments of change.” This model is the “framework for developing and understanding the disciplined use of self as a professional tool” (p. 53). Ramsay notes that: “By using a practitioner model version of the societal model, the social worker is quickly able to identify self issues, validator others, personal other and resource other interrelationships that can strengthen or inhibit his/her ability to work with the domain of clients and others, and to be able to work through the method processes in a mutually respective interchange” (p. 70).

Rather than resolving an issue, the practitioner model appears to exist as explicit recognition of the importance of the disciplined use of self in a helping relationship.

3. NATURAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND BUCKMINSTER FULLER

Although I deem Fuller to be a creative and brilliant thinker, his work and his regular 60 word sentences can be difficult to comprehend. Without a thorough understanding of both the complexity of the issues addressed by the common conceptual framework, and the points of similarity between Fuller’s work and social work, I tended to view Fuller as somewhat arbitrarily applied. In addition, perhaps due to the educational specialist approach, many social work students immediately balk at mention of mathematical equations, physics, and scientific and unfamiliar terminology. The significance of “micro twilight relevancy” continues to elude me.

I now recognize, however, why Fuller’s work and social work are so compatible. First, there seems to be a good general philosophical ‘fit’. For example, Fuller (in Brenneman, 1984) had a systemic vision whereby “each of us must take more care to think about how our actions affect other beings, human and non-human” (p. 14). Fuller would have heartily supported the position adopted by Ramsay (1988) regarding the ‘domain debate’ and ‘generalist-specialist debate’. Fuller’s emphasis on the world as a single entity or “unfragmented whole” expresses a belief in unity and Fuller continually touts the merits of comprehensiveness over specialism. Fuller’s goal of “livingry” -- the solving of humanity’s life problems (Wagsschal & Kahn 1979), and his focus on the betterment of others are certainly comparable with goals espoused by social workers. Ramsay (1988) refers to the collective effort of social workers “to discover and maintain regenerative processes around the world” (p. 3), a process articulated and explained by Fuller as the function of man (Wagsschal & Kahn 1979).

The tetrahedron, the simplest system in nature, was adopted by Ramsay (1988) as “a way for us to objectively ‘see’ the interacting parts of a whole system” (p. viii). Perhaps the tetrahedron and the

common conceptual framework can be viewed as a “device”. Fuller states: “The comprehensive designer translates thoughts and experiences into patterns which may be realized in various physical projections - by which we can alter the physical environment itself and thereby induce other people to subconsciously alter their ecological patterning” (Wagsschal & Kahn, 1979, p. 18). Gabel (in Ramsay, 1988) states “design science sees the environment and the human condition as being ever improvable... [which] involves understanding the critical interrelated nature of our problems and their global scope; the inability of present, locally focused planning methods to deal effectively with these problems; and new systematic alternative approaches for recognizing, resolving, and preventing our present and anticipated problems through the development of artifacts” (p. 46). Ramsay’s common conceptual framework is, at least partially, an artifact that facilitates the application of design science for social workers.

Ramsay (1988) states: “Fuller empirically discovered the simplest whole system experience of the universe to be geometrically tetrahedral; a unique system-defining set of interdependent and related parts consisting of four (4) elements, four (4) faces, and six (6) connecting linear interrelationships.” (p. 48). Nature’s universal coordinate system, “synergetics”, “is a triangular and tetrahedral system that employs 60 degree coordination, which is nature’s way of physically packing elements together” (p. 42). Fuller further defines synergy as “the behavior of whole systems that cannot be predicted by the behavior of any parts taken separately” (in Wagsschal & Kahn, 1979, p. 10). Ramsay has used this system “as a unifying framework to conceptually ground the scientific domain of social work, its broad base professional paradigm and multiple methods of practice” (Ramsay, 1988, p. 35). The interactional relationships of this natural whole system have structural integrity and pattern stability (Ramsay 1987). Rowan (1984) points out “there is a link, I believe, between external spatial relations and internal/mental ones, in the dynamics of geometrically organized forms that exist (as the tetrahedron does) outside our bodies as well as within” (p. 258).

4. FURTHER CRITIQUE

Ramsay (1988) defines social work as “the conscientious attempt to set the facts of experience in the most economical socialization order” (p. 45) By unifying “the collection of partial explanations” (p. i) of social work into the common conceptual framework, Ramsay certainly has established both a common base to do social work from, and a common process. The framework improves on other system theories in that it is concrete and may be objectively employed. It is both systemic and systematic. The language, however, while not mechanistic could be simpler. For example, in the Societal and Practitioner models, “resource otherness” and “validator otherness” could more simply be phrased as “resources” and “values.”

The tetrahedral system provided “a topologically-systemic way of thinking; a geometric way of thinking in which basic properties of the system were invariant (did not change) when undergoing transformation” (Ramsay, 1988, p. 48). Ramsay further notes that: “Users of this system could be taught to recognize, quantify, qualify and evaluate any topological discrepancies, in the elements and interrelationships of a system” (p. 48). This thought system could be programmed into a computer, although fortunately (?) professional judgment is beyond its scope (Ramsay 1988).

The common conceptual framework is essentially summarized by the following description: foundational, flexible, procedurally systematic, holistic, and systemic (Ramsay 1988).

As Fuller notes (in Wagsschal & Kahn, 1979, p. 39) the trend from “a Newtonian static norm to an Einsteinian all-motion norm”, I questioned how this framework adapts to change. In both the domain and paradigm debates social workers have tended to sway toward one direction or the other over time

(Johnson 1986). My perception is that Ramsay is attempting to entrench a stance on these debates, albeit one which may unify and provide direction to the profession. Ramsay (1987) notes: "A natural system may be structurally stable but it is not static; information and problem-solving exchanges are active at all times in order to regenerate different functional relations in the system or, to stabilize the functional quality of system relations" (p. 52). This framework may embody a paradox: to unify the profession, fluctuating positions are made non-movable, yet within the framework, flexibility is essential. Perhaps this is simply indicative of the need for a common conceptual framework to be both foundational and flexible.

5. CONCLUSION

Despite initial skepticism and reluctance, this framework has somewhat insidiously incorporated itself in my thinking. An examination of the reason why such a common conceptual framework was necessary led me to recognize the impact of the background of fraction and disunity characterizing the profession of social work. Without unification our ability to comprehensively deal with our assigned mission is impaired.

I discovered that the appearance of simplicity is deceiving; the common conceptual framework contains the historical roots of social work; it incorporates a compatible perspective, that of natural systems theory; and it charts a course toward unification of the profession. In addition, it is concrete and functional in providing "how to do it" guidance for social workers. I have been using Social Work's Common Conceptual Framework at my practicum and have found it highly useful to structure my thinking. My nemesis has become my ally.

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