

## **WHY GENERALIST SOCIAL WORK? A RESPONSE THROUGH THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL WORK**

**Key words:** Social Work, Generalist Social Work, Generalist Model of Social Work Practice.

### **Introduction**

The Milford Conference which was held in 1925 was an important ground of discussion for the generalist and specialist approaches. Social casework, an intervention method at the very beginning of the development of social work, was the basis of social work practice. Together with this, specialization has become prevalent as well. Fields of practice were family welfare, child welfare, psychiatric social work, and school social work. Within social work education, in parallel with such developments, curriculums have been organized within the frame of existing fields of practice. Thus, the concept of specialization has been connected with social workers who work in specific fields<sup>1</sup>.

During 1940s and 1950s focalizing in the fields of practice developed in the framework of the practicing methods of the profession. In parallel with the development of methodic approach, the following have been made use of as the bases in social work education and practice: social casework, social group work, community organization, methodology and research. Since the methods of practice have emerged as the point which created the differentiation in professional intervention, specialization according to methods needed a common philosophy, an exclusive knowledge base, and shared ethics<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> H. A. Johnson, L. C. Kuder & K. Wellons, Specialization Within a Generalist Social Work Curriculum. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 18(3/4), 1992, 85-98; Connoy, R.S., & Gentry M. E., *Social Work Practice*, Englewood Cliffs, 1988, Prentice-Hall; Sheafor, W. B., & Landon, P. S., Generalist Perspective, In A. Minahan (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (pp. 660-669), 18th ed., Silver Spring, 1987, MD: National Associations of Social Workers.

<sup>2</sup> L. Leighninger, The Generalist-Specialist Debate in Social Work. *Social Service Review*, 54(1), 1980, 1-12.

In 1960s and 1970s, in which consciousness on social needs and individual-environment interaction rose, social work education and practice was dominated by the “system approach”<sup>3</sup>. Social problems have begun to be seen as not originating from the psychological characteristics of the client, but the bio-psycho-social interaction of the client and her/his environment<sup>4</sup>.

The term generalist indicates the commonality of all social work practices without any regard to the field or method. The Council for Social Work Education adopted the generalist approach for social work programs, and encouraged the graduate students to seek an advanced generalist approach. It is crucial to grasp why generalist approach, which constitutes a vast amount in the literature, is important for social work. Therefore, in order to examine the generalist social work practice model, first, it is necessary to study social work in terms of its basic characteristics, which constitutes the model’s frame.

### **Basic Characteristics of Social Work**

Woody Allen<sup>5</sup>, states what is taught in a social work course as follows:

A course designed to instruct the social worker who is interested in going out in the field. Topics include: how to organize street gangs into basketball teams and vice versa; playgrounds as the means of preventing young juvenile crime; and how to get potentially homicidal cases to try sliding pond; discrimination; the broken home; what to do if you are hit with a bicycle chain.

Woody Allen’s ironic description is very interesting in terms of its ability to show both how wide the subjects of social work are, and how easily it may be deviated from its bases due to its abstruse nature.

Pincus and Minahan<sup>6</sup> claim that the foci of social work practice are the interaction and connections between people and resource systems, and the problems encountered in the functioning of individuals and systems. According to Pincus and Minahan, social work is about:

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<sup>3</sup> A. Pincus & A. Minahan, *Social Work Practice: Model and Method*. Itasca, 1973, IL: F.E. Peacock.

<sup>4</sup> A. Hartman, Concentrations, Specializations and Curriculum Design in MSW and BSW Programs. *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 19(2), 1983, 16-25.

<sup>5</sup> M. W. Macht & J. K. Quam, *Social Work: An Introduction*. Columbus: Ohio, 1986, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> A. Pincus & A. Minahan, *Social Work Practice: Model and Method*. Itasca, 1973, IL: F.E. Peacock, p. 9.

“the interaction between human beings and their environment, which affects their life goals, endeavor of coping with distress, and ability to realize desires and values. The goal of social work thus could be stated as the following: 1. developing people’s capacities of problem solving and coping, 2. building bridges between human beings and the systems which give them resource, service, and opportunities, 3. improving these systems so that they can work efficiently and humane, and 4. contributing to development and advancement of social policies.”

Bartlett<sup>7</sup>, on the other hand, sees the focus of social work as social functioning which he defines as the relationship between people’s coping capacities and the demands from outside. Thus, individual-situation and individual-environment transform into the concepts that must be taken together. Having the same mind as Bartlett, Gordon sees the focus of social work as the individuals within complex life conditions, which could be conceptualized as again individual and her/his environment.

Having examined all these descriptions, it appears out that the goal of social work is to improve people’s abilities to fulfill their social roles in life and cope with the problems they face; and increase the environmental opportunities that allow human needs to be met adequately. The focus of social work’s professional activity is its role as the change agent within the frame of the individual’s social functioning and her/his interaction with the environment. Basically social work deals both with individual and/or social problems and needs, which upset social functioning, and problems and needs, which stem from the interaction of individual and social qualities. In this sense, the discussion on whether the goal of social work is individual treatment or social reform goes back to its initial development.

Before a discussion on why generalist approach has emerged as a practice model in social work, it will be of great use to discuss generalist social work within its basic characteristics.

### **Basic Characteristics of Generalist Social Work**

The basic purpose of practice models is to realize the whole they represent within life in the best way. Generalist model of social work practice, like all other models, serves this end. Lives of client systems are surrounded by very complex variables. Coming together, so many variables in human life may cause interruptions and defects in social functioning. This has set up the relationship between client systems, which have various problems

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<sup>7</sup> H. Bartlett, *The Common Base of Social Work Practice*, New York, 1970 National Association of Social Workers.

and needs in life, and social work at a professional ground. An examination of the history of social work reveals that social work practitioners have been trained in any one specific field or method. Indeed, this does not comply with the very essence of social work which is a profession which deals with problems and needs of the people in complex life conditions. Nevertheless, this was the case in a certain time frame throughout the development of the profession. In this sense, it appears to be very important to analyze why models other than the generalist one have existed, and what have caused them within the framework of the basic characteristics of generalist social work.

Generalist social work is an integrated and multilevel approach which serves the purpose of meeting the *basic goals* of social work. The generalist practitioner is aware of an interaction between individual and social factors necessary to create the changes that are supposed to increase the functionality of client systems. So, s/he encourages working with communities, complex organizations, families, and individuals that all represent such an interaction. Therefore, the generalist practitioner works directly with all client systems at every level; links clients to proper resources; interferes with the organizations in order for resource systems to produce efficient responses; advocates just policies which provide equitable distribution of resources; and researches all dimensions of social work practice.

There are four bases of generalist approach in social work practice. Firstly, human behavior is inevitably related with social and physical environment. Based on this link between human being and her/his environment, the endeavors to improve functionality of client systems include changing the system (human being) itself; making changes in the interaction of it with its environment; and causing changes in other systems which surround it. Secondly, the generalist practitioner makes multilevel assessments and multimethods interventions for change. Thirdly, using the similar social work intervention process, the generalist practitioner works with client systems of all the levels from individual to society. Social work intervention with all client systems necessitates mutual transformation of a kind of dialog and knowledge; the process of exploring necessary resources for change; and the development step for realizing the goal of the work. Fourthly, the generalist practitioner is responsible for doing research and inclining towards just social policies<sup>8</sup>.

Kirst-Ashman and Hull (1997) define generalist practice as using eclectic knowledge base, professional values, and vast skills towards the target system of every length within four basic process contents for change. First of

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<sup>8</sup> K. K. Miley, M. Q'Melia & B. DuBois, *Generalist Social Work Practice: An Empowering Approach*, 1996, Allyn and Bacon.

these four basic processes is the fact that generalist practice necessitates working effectively under supervision and within an organizational structure. Secondly, generalist practice necessitates assuming vast professional roles. Thirdly, generalist practice necessitates implication of critical thinking abilities over planned change. Finally, generalist practice puts emphasis on the empowerment of clients. Wolk and Wertheimer (1999) state that generalist social work practice views problems as holistic and it is required that the planned change strategies turn towards all the systems which are responsible for the problems of clients. In this sense, generalist practice becomes the initiator of planned change with its vast repertoire of skills from micro to macro. Generalist practice includes work with all client systems. Clients may be individuals, families, small groups, organizations, and/or communities. This approach views client in its own ecosystem (person in his/her environment). Generalist social work is discussed as a practice perspective which seeks for a conceptual framework<sup>9</sup>. Generalist social worker can be considered as a professional who is skilled with the ability of how to decide on what to do in a certain case. Such a practitioner should focus on the whole individual-environment interaction without limiting her/his vision with any one preferred system of relation or methodic engagements. In the process of deciding what to do in a case, the practitioner is free to examine the variables related with individual, case, and the interaction between the two. With regard to what to do, it is crucial that the practitioner have the abilities of data collecting and assessment in terms of reaching a practical and workable point.

As it is clearly understood, two basic characteristics of generalist model appear out to be in the fore. First, generalist social work model is focused on problem solving rather than methods . As it is known, problem solving includes the steps of identification of the problem, assessment, contract, intervention, termination, and evaluation<sup>10</sup> . Second, generalist social work practice model uses the approach of person in environment as assessing the intervention throughout the problem solving process by attributing it a holistic focus.

Generalist perspective not only emphasizes individual social functioning, which includes individual and environmental factors, but also changes and interactions between individual and environment<sup>11</sup>. In other words, genera-

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<sup>9</sup> M. S. Schatz, L. Jenkins & B. Sherafor, Milford Redefined: A Model of Initial and Advanced Generalist Social Work. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 26(3), 1990, p. 217.

<sup>10</sup> A. M. Mumm, L. J. Olsen & D. Allen, Families Affected by Substance Abuse: Implications for Generalist Social Work Practice. *Families in Society*, 79(4), 1998, p. 385.

<sup>11</sup> P. Gibbs, B. Locke & R. Lohmann, Paradigm for the Generalist-Advanced Generalist Continuum. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 26(3), 1990, p. 234.

list approach is concerned with both individual problems and social problems that affect the individual ones . Therefore, individual social functioning is a result of the interaction between the individual's persona qualities (biological such as religion, class, or sex, and psychological or socio-cultural) and all the components surrounding that individual (other people, institutions, groups, or organizations). Such interactions may cause risks (present difficulties) or opportunities for individuals. Each one of these affects the opportunities and changes in life, and is important for establishing an effective framework for the intervention plan. It is the paradigm that generalist approach focuses on, which takes place within this. The focus of the problem or need, which generalist social worker is concerned with, is hidden behind the sum of all experiences of individual-case and environment; therefore, problems and needs should be responded within this context. While generalist social worker works with individuals to meet individual needs, s/he works both with other institutions, organizations, agencies and communities to change the conditions which create barriers for that individual. Such a work is essentially in favor of so many people for whom there is no identification of any kind of intervention. As it is obvious, generalist perspective directs social work towards multilevel interventions that also include individual, family, organization, and policy.

As a result, basic characteristics of generalist approach can be summed up with the headings: its view of the nature of individual-case interaction, the importance it attributes to holistic assessments rather than methods, and the importance it attributes to the value of social conditions in individuals' social functioning.

What is the significance of all these characteristics for social work? Why did social work assume generalist social work model which is described with the above basic characteristics? It will be helpful to answer these questions in terms of generalist social work whose basic characteristics are examined above.

### **Why Generalist Social Work?**

By its very representation, social work is both a profession and discipline which is concerned with the problems and needs of individuals and society. Among other helping professions, social work comes to the fore by the fact that it is an non-reductionist profession in literature.

Being non-reductionist is a basic quality lying within the nature of social work, because social work sets its domain of professional activity on the basis of an interaction between the individual's social functioning and her/his environment. Indeed, this domain of activity directs social work

towards both individual problems and the social issues contributing these problems, and the interaction between individual and society. Moreover, it is possible to see the bases of what Woody Allen says in relation to the topics in a social work course in that the profession is a non-reductionist one.

In fact, it seems very difficult to count another profession whose representation's spectrum is such wide. Likewise social work was born into a field in which other professions are also present with a notion which is unique and *sui generis*. Essentially, all professions are in some manner related with people's social welfare and functioning. However, social work is concerned with both individual and society, and the problems and needs in the interaction between individual and society. This is the basic reason behind the uniqueness of social work in comparison to other helping professions. In this sense, social work turns towards both the focus of individual treatment and social reform at the same time. Such a loaded conception of mission might be thought as an extremely loaded one. There is rightfulness on this evaluation but to a certain extent. Such a loaded conception of mission is a necessity of being non-reductionist.

Having such an exclusive mission, how will social work fulfill such loaded goals? What kind of conditions/barriers have influenced it and departed from its very essence through its historical development during the endeavor of fulfilling this mission. What is the direction of those effects? The answers to these questions also constitute the answer to the question of "why generalist social work."

First of all, it should be noted that as a profession and discipline which came to the scene in liberal democracies, social work was heavily influenced by the basic characteristics of the system it was born into. The value of "freedom" alone, which is the basic characteristic of liberal democracies, could not provide happiness for people, because that understanding and value of "freedom" has been deviated from its essence with a strict notion of individualism, and caused an unequal distribution of resources among individuals and groups in society. At this point, it has been necessary to add the value of "social justice" to the system. It is this quality of the liberal system that is the most important of all the reasons that caused the birth of social work both as a profession and discipline. Because as a profession that has developed within social welfare parameters, social work defines its goals with value terms in harmony with Rawls' theory. The two basic values of social work are "social justice" and "self-determination." Therefore, works to be done on roles and interventions of social work have revealed to classifications:

1) Taking a primary responsibility in distributing the basic social benefits such as healthcare, nutrition, income, education, and employment to the deprived populations,

2) Commitment to the client's right to self-determination relying on the belief of honor of human being.

As it is obvious, one of the basic paradigms of social work is about how to integrate "self-determination" and "social justice." In fact, acceptance of the right to self-determination in social work practice as a basic value takes the profession to the concept of freedom in philosophical level. Nevertheless, freedom or self-determination alone is not enough for each individual or all society to enrich their social functioning and interaction. It is generally accepted as a basic assumption that individuals and societies develop through their free will and in a democratic process. Moreover, self-determination, in its real sense, can come true only when equal opportunities emerge in terms of reaching basic sources of social assistance. And this takes us the second basic component which defines the uniqueness of social work: social justice. But, how would self-determination and social justice within social work's own terminology, and freedom and equality within Rawls' usage be integrated? Again, it may be thought that there is no difficulty in integrating the two principles, and self-determination and social justice supports each other. However, in a level of professional practice, ignoring any one of the two would cause professional practice get barren, and even let the professional activity become something nothing to do, but familiar with social work. Therefore, many authors in literature emphasize the fact that profession of social work inclines less towards social justice than self-determination, and so comes to have less in common with its basic mission .

Why was social work in its historical development less inclined towards "social justice" that is amongst the basic values defining it? The answer to this question should be sought within the basis of the relationship between social work and society which vests it with the authority of practice. As a fundamental dimension, society gives social work the right to change every component constituting it (individual, group, community). Such a relationship between social work and society may be understood by analogy with an employer-employee relationship. Essentially, society, which gives social work the right to practice, expects an entity, which is less powerful and inferior in quality, to change it. Despite the fact that such an authorization is legally acknowledged, it may well be limited and sometimes forbidden by society and its extension, namely the state, because as all other systems, society is prone to maintain the present rather than change. However, based on its nature, social work is explicitly against the status quo,



and responsible for transforming it in favor of client systems. In this sense, each social work activity both makes people conscience of the systems restricting their social functioning, and struggles for changing the distribution of social welfare resources in favor of the deprived groups. Thus, these basic values of social work make it confront with the social structures and values, which do not want to be changed.

From a social constructivist stance, in such a case, either society would seek to remove social work from its mission of social justice and so the focus of social reform, or since they are part of the society they live in, having grasped how difficult the situation is, social work theorists and practitioners consciously or unconsciously would refrain from the mission of changing it. It is also possible to see the concrete proofs of such a proposition within the theoretical approaches social work has assumed in its historical development. Although these approaches differ to a greatest extent in terms of their assumptions and techniques of implementation, they all focus on problem, pathologies, and inadequacies<sup>12</sup>. Examples are diagnostic social work, psycho-social approach, problem solving approach, family therapy approach, etc. In spite of significant differences in their foci, all these approaches basically attract attention with their characteristic that individual is the major element in the process of becoming what s/he is at the present moment, and change is taken as individually based. Indeed, such a stance labels the individual itself as the guilty of what interrupts her/his social functioning. As a necessity of the theoretical approach used the individual comes to the scene as the target of the endeavor for change; but, social work traditionally puts great emphasis on social environment in the emergence of human problems and needs, and the interruption of social functioning. Therefore, assessments and interventions remain individually based, and social work does not/could not concern with the systems contributing the emergence of problems and needs.

As long as the theoretical frameworks used in defining client problems tend to approach problems as individual pathologies and inadequacies, designed professional solutions will be individually based as well. Indeed, this point may be discussed as the deviation of a profession, which is by nature non-reductionist, from its mission through the practice approach it assumes. Thus, diagnostic model of social work was adopted from medicine as a result of the modeling of psychiatrists in the very initial period of the profession. Having adopted a model which had been constructed for another profession according to its qualities, social work has experienced difficulties in realizing its own basic characteristics. In fact, while this

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<sup>12</sup> T. J. Early & L. F. GlenMaye, (2000). Valuing Families: Social Work Practice with Families from a Strengths Perspective. *Social Work*, 45(2), 2000, p. 121.

discussion is also valid for other professions that do not/could not constitute their own practice models from the very knowledge they produce in their own fields, it also provokes a vast discussion reaching over to the quality of social work knowledge. With diagnostic approaches, social work also takes away from its original status amongst other helping professions.

Effective working of social work, which attributes great significance to the concept of social justice, is essentially in favor of all society. Moreover, it is very normal for individuals and groups, who see a great use in maintaining the status quo, to consciously or unconsciously try to restrict and/or barrier social justice based professional works. In fact, social work exists just in this point and for this reason.

In this framework, it is possible to turn the social work training models based on specialization in a specific field or method to the quality of something else which may give harm social justice based social work practices, because human life is a whole and social work looks at this whole as a whole in the real sense of the word. Yet, looking at the social work whole as role specializations to be fulfilled in particular fields or as a way of specialization with a method appropriate for the problem is always open to the danger of not being able to approach client systems with a holistic perspective. In more manifest words, social work is a whole which is bigger than the sum of all social work fields, methods, and techniques. In this sense, the differentiation of micro, mezzo, and macro social work practices is an artificial one. Each one of these practice forms exists for both itself and others, and social work can be put into practice as long as each contributes to others. Considering methods independent of each other may depart social work from its own identity.

In such a point, the endeavors for specialization may take social work away from its function of change agent, and drag it to a position to cure the problems the existing system poses, but not direct towards prevention (residual social work). At the same time, this is a process in which a profession, which assumes a mission of changing individuals and society, departs from this mission and becomes a profession whose main purpose is to maintain the status quo. Field or method based specialization is always open to such a danger unless it establishes a very strong relationship with the social work whole.

### **Conclusion**

What this paper tries to show is clear and manifest: social work is exceedingly open to deviate from its focus. It should be seen natural to

consciously or unconsciously try to depart a profession, which has extremely loaded and great goals, from its mission.

Social powers that are in favor of the status quo will always try to take social work away from the concepts of “social reform” and so “social justice.” In this framework, especially with the contribution of diagnostic practice models, the basic source of client problems will be seen as themselves, and at the same time some scientific knowledge contributing such a perspective will be consciously or unconsciously produced/made produced.

This paper suggests that the generalist model of social work is the challenge of a profession which has got stuck in a position of departing from its essence. In the last analysis, some characteristics of generalist social work such as the opposition to diagnostic models, focus of both individual and society, multilevel interventions, significance attributed to social justice, perspective of individual in environment may be evaluated as the transfer of the essence of social work into practice.

It is worth noting again that the origin of the basic characteristics of generalist social work is immanent in social work itself. In this sense, another practice model may well be produced other than the generalist one within the historical progress, which includes variables we cannot think as a practice model today. Having based on the empowerment perspective of our age, social work seems to have found the way of empowering itself virtually in generalist social work. Nevertheless, generalist social work is not a key which solves every difficulty in social work; but a theoretical framework which consolidates our fundamental conception social work. Challenges of social work within life go on as before and will keep going on. However, generalist social work shows students, practitioners, and theoreticians the limitations stemming from either society or themselves explicitly. Grasping what generalist social work is and resisting the deviation of social work seems impossible in theoretical grounds.

Thus, maybe having gained vitality just as a necessity of this point and as a challenging profession and discipline, social work has found the way to empower itself on both theoretical and practical grounds within generalist social work model. In this sense, generalist social work is social work itself.

### **Summary**

The goal of this paper is to discuss why generalist understanding has emerged as a model of social work practice. In order to achieve this, the emergence of generalist approach, and fundamentals of both social work and generalist social work have been examined. Practitioners and theorists

of social work as a part of society consciously or unconsciously may try to distort essential mission of social work for various reasons. The authors suggest that generalist social work is an answer to such an endeavor.

## **DLACZEGO OGÓLNE PODEJŚCIE DO PRACY SOCJALNEJ? ODPOWIEDŹ Z PERSPEKTYWY ISTOTOWYCH CECH CHARAKTERYZUJĄCYCH PRACĘ SOCJALNĄ**

### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł stawia sobie za cel podjęcie i poddanie pod dyskusję dwojakich podejść do problemu pracy socjalnej, które może być bardziej ogólne, a nawet czasami wręcz ogólnikowe, ale z drugiej strony mogą być też bardziej szczegółowym i drobiazgowym podejściem i wypracowywaniem modelu praktyki pracy socjalnej. Z zamiarem zrealizowania swojego zamierzenia, autor poddaje analizie sam proces pracy socjalnej i analizuje podstawowe jej cechy. W wyniku swoich analiz wypracowuje i uwzględnia ogólne podejście i ogólne ujęcia pracy socjalnej oraz szczegółowe aspekty i podejścia do pracy socjalnej wraz ze szczegółowymi jej zasadami. Praktycy i teoretycy pracy socjalnej, często bardzo istotowo wpisani w życie społeczne, nie są zdolni objąć swoją uwagą całokształtu problemów pracy socjalnej, co sprawia, że świadomie bądź też nieświadomie zniekształcają istotę misji oraz podstawowych zadań pracy socjalnej, a jednym z powodów jest właśnie brak ogólnego spojrzenia i odniesienia się do podstaw pracy socjalnej i bardziej odpowiedzialnego podejścia do niej. Autor sugeruje, że właśnie uwzględnienie ogólnego podejścia do pracy socjalnej, stanowi szczególną gwarancję i pomoc w zachowaniu istoty pracy socjalnej i zrealizowania podstawowych jej celów.

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