

META-FRAMEWORKS FOR PRACTICING SOCIAL WORK

Our earliest concern in social work practice was to understand the person in the context of his or her environment. However, initially this understanding of person in relation to his or her environment was limited to including important members of the client's family in the initial assessment. For example, it was common to gather information from family members, employers, and even neighbors, but the full understanding of the physical, economic, religious, social, and cultural impacts of the environment on clients' lives had not yet evolved. The importance of the role these factors had on influencing clients' lives emerged in the 1970s as new concepts were borrowed from general systems theory and ecology that would eventually lead the profession into the development of ecological systems theory or ecosystems theory (Beckett & Johnson, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Germain, 1973; Germain & Gitterman, 2011; Miller, 1978).

Ecological perspective provides a broad theory base to social work practice and is used as a context for applying more practice-specific theories. Other overarching frameworks common to social work practice today include the life model (drawn from ecological perspective), the strengths perspective, and empowerment-based practice theory. This chapter provides an overview of these meta-frameworks or general theories for social work practice.

Systems Theory

People's environments extend beyond their immediate families and encompass the entirety of their lived experiences, including interactions with extended families, friends, neighborhoods, schools, religious centers, public laws, cultural norms, and the economic system. To understand the complex interactions among individuals and all the components of their environment, social work draws on general systems theory as a framework for understanding people's problems and for intervening in the lives of their clients. General systems theory was developed in the physical sciences and later expanded for application to the applied professions as a conceptual framework within which diverse theories could be organized. It was also seen as a framework that could bring a common language to practitioners, thus facilitating communications and cooperation (Beckett & Johnson, 1997).

A system is defined as a whole made up of many interacting parts or subsystems. For example, a person represents an individual subsystem within a larger family system, a family is seen as a subsystem within a larger community system, and a community is a subsystem within a larger societal system. Systems and subsystems have a structural relationship to each other and are separated by boundaries. Boundaries can be either impermeable, creating closed systems that are self-contained and allow few influences from the outside, or permeable, creating open systems that actively exchange with other subsystems and as such are constantly changing. The interactions or exchanges among subsystems are dynamic processes that keep open systems constantly in flux. As long as systems can readily adapt to change, the system will remain in balance or maintain a state of equilibrium. When major changes occur to a system where adaptation will occur over time, systems may be in a state of disequilibrium until the system can adapt and compensate for the change that has affected the system. For example, when 9/11

occurred in New York City, the change to the city system was so immense that it could not adapt to the massive destruction that occurred. With the response of many subsystems (communities, organizations, and individuals) and suprasystems (state, federal, and international responses), New York was slowly able to come back into balance or equilibrium and function again. However, this took a long period of time, and many businesses, families, and aspects of the economy were long in recovering. These enormous shocks to the subsystem of New York occurred in the context of a nation (suprasystem) that was struggling with the shattering of a long-held belief that in America individuals can count on feeling a sense of safety and security.

In response to insults and disruption to systems, whether they be families, communities, or nations, social workers direct their attention to the interactions among individuals and the sum of all social forces or systems (Miley, O'Melia, & Dubois, 2013) so that they may "promote or restore a mutually beneficial interaction between individuals and society in order to improve the quality of life for everyone" (Minahan, 1981, p. 6). In the case of 9/11, this was an ongoing effort for many years on all levels of practice for the profession, as families continued to grieve their losses and cities confronted their vulnerability to threats of terrorist attacks. Professional systems of care can also be disrupted in trying to respond to massive needs that occur following man-made and natural disasters, such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. For example, social work practitioners in New York City endured secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue as a result of witnessing the 9/11 disaster and then caring for so many traumatized individuals, families, and communities (Boccardo, Figley, & Adams, 2004), indicating a need for the New York City social work system of care to also restore equilibrium to itself.

Optimal functioning of an individual in the environment, whether it is the client or the professional social worker, requires subsystems that are functioning at an optimal level and that promote individual development toward self-actualization. System dysfunction is understood as functioning that limits or deters individuals from reaching innate potentials. System dysfunctions can occur at the individual, family, community, organizational, or societal level. Regardless of where the dysfunction originates within a system, it can create chaos that can be perpetuated throughout the associated subsystems. Our client Sarah disrupted many systems in her crisis around her pregnancy and interacted with many subsystems in an effort to bring balance back into her life. See Box 3.2 for a description of interactions between Sarah and the multiple subsystems in her environment. Justin, the young homeless client depicted in Box 3.A, is another example of how systems can dramatically impact an individual's life. See if you can identify the systems that are at work in shaping Justin's reality and future possibilities.

The primary goal of direct practice is to assess and improve the interaction of subsystems (the individual, family, group, community, and organization) within the context of a larger societal system. The social work profession recognizes the importance of addressing systems at three levels. The micro system is the individual and encompasses the individual's past history, experiences, unique personality, and accessibility to

Assessment

Behavior: Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the analysis of assessment data from clients and communities

Critical Thinking Question: Take a moment and explore your own life—what systems can you identify as immediately affecting your life? What are the problem-supporting features of these systems? Do you see any problems in any of the systems in your life?

