

Identifying Essential Techniques for Social Work Community Practice

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ABSTRACT. Community practice techniques have been neglected by social work educators and authors, reflecting a lack of fit with real world practice needs. Community practice is defined as including community organizing, community development, and social planning. To sharpen the debate, the authors identify five techniques that are helpful, if not essential for community practice: (1) Force Field Analysis; (2) Program Evaluation Review Technique; (3) Nominal Group Technique; (4) Delphi; and (5) Q-Sort. It is anticipated that this proposal could spark a dialogue leading ultimately to a universally accepted set of community practice techniques in social work curricula. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

Social work educators who interact with practitioners will confirm what practitioners demand from educators or what students demand from their practicum instructor: to place greater emphasis on teaching what so-

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cial workers *do* to affect change. The real world of practice demands competencies in what social workers actually do, rather than how much theory they know. Competent community practice necessitates a repertoire of skills and techniques to effect change along a continuum of systems from individuals through family, groups, organizations, to community. However, classroom textbooks and journal articles are dominated by discussions of theories, value dilemmas, and case studies, creating a disconnect between what students and practitioners want and need, and what they get.

In community practice, the lack of fit is very evident and warrants serious examination. To address this need, at least in part, the authors have identified five techniques or tools for practitioners that are most helpful, if not essential, for community practice. The lack of attention by authors of community-oriented literature in the professional journals to techniques of community practice is noteworthy. After an extensive review of professional social work journals with a macro focus, one must conclude that during the past decade attention to community practice techniques has been overlooked. A review of *Social Service Review*, *Child Welfare*, *Journal of Social Work Education*, *Journal of Community Practice*, and *The Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work* from 1995 to present indicates a complete absence of articles devoted to identifying and discussing techniques for community practice. A review of macro practice course syllabi from both public and private CSWE-accredited schools of social work in the pacific northwest indicates there is little mention of community practice techniques, and some programs do not reference them at all.

With few notable exceptions, the attention to community practice techniques in textbooks is almost as bleak. Hardcastle, Wenocur, and Powers (1997), authors of a prominent book on community practice, present both theory and skills with some techniques, whereas Sheafor, Horejsi, and Horejsi's (1988) undergraduate text does an excellent job of presenting and explaining how to use (community) practice techniques. Beyond this, the landscape changes rapidly. Classic community practice texts like Rubin and Rubin (2001) and Delgado's (2000) urban oriented text have no techniques. The premier book on community practice by Rivera and Erlich (1995) with people of color has no techniques, and—surprisingly—neither does the manual by Bobo, Kendall, and Max (1991), found as often in agencies as in higher education.

Defining Terms

For the purpose of this article, a technique is viewed as a “circumscribed, goal-oriented behavior performed in a practice situation by the

social worker. It is a planned action deliberately taken by the practitioner” (Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi, 1988; p. xviii). The application of a simple technique could be very brief, whereas more complex techniques may require several hours (Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi, 1988).

Community (social work) practice, as used in this article reflects the three models of community intervention identified in Rothman’s historic typology (Rothman, Erlich, & Tropman, 2001). Initially referred to as locality development, social planning, and social action, the authors prefer the more contemporary terminology of community development, social planning, and community organizing (Hardcastle, Wenocur, & Powers, 1997).

WHAT IS A TECHNIQUE AND HOW IS IT USED?

Techniques are used to assist in the implementation of intervention models. Without techniques, implementation of any theory or model is awkward, at best, and wholly impossible, at worst. Techniques are where the rubber meets the road, where theory is translated into practice. The utilization of tools and techniques are the beginning of a practice continuum, leading to a greater and greater degree of competence. Is that not what we mean when we think of or describe a practitioner, one whose skills and techniques are honed to a high degree?

Techniques are specific, repeatable, demonstrable, and measurable actions to be applied in appropriate contexts. Practitioners either know a technique and know how to apply it, or they don’t. One has either developed a level of competence in utilizing the specific technique, or one has not. Either the practitioner has learned the necessary techniques and how to effectively implement them in practice, or they have not. Theory is essential, but it is not enough. One must be able to operationalize the theory and operationalizing a theory requires a technique—or, better yet, a set of techniques. A broad, vaguely defined piece of knowledge cannot be measured, displayed, or applied without employing a technique. Techniques must be learned, and professional education is the place to learn the basic core techniques.

While there is general agreement of a set of techniques for micro practice (individual and small group), it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to find the same agreement on an operational concept of a set of community social work techniques. This is, in part, due to the lack of a fundamental dialogue among academic members of the community on a desired set of techniques. Clearly, identifying applicable techniques

for a world where real practice occurs is a fundamental part of social work education.

Techniques are used to implement theory and to intervene and produce change in situations that range in difficulty from simple to complex. The more techniques a practitioner has to draw upon, the greater the options available to address a growing variety of clients' situations. Therefore, the level of competence of a practitioner would, in part, depend upon the number of techniques known and used appropriately in a wide variety of situations.

IDENTIFYING ESSENTIAL COMMUNITY PRACTICE TECHNIQUES

Hardcastle, Wenocur, and Powers (1997, p. 1) defines community practice as the "application of practice skills to alter the behavioral patterns of community groups, organizations, and institutions or people's relationships and interactions with these entities." Further, community practice, as part of macro-practice, includes the techniques associated with community organization and development, social planning and social action, and social administration (Hardcastle, Wenocur, & Powers, 1997). Whereas community organization and community development work with parts of a community, such as a neighborhood or a group of people, social planners address the needs of people through agencies and delivery systems to best meet the larger scale community functions and responsibilities. Common to the three parts of community practice (organizing, development, and planning) is the desire of community practitioners to assist the community to function as efficiently and as responsively as possible to its member constituents.

With such a common purpose and a common core of knowledge, it equally follows there should be a common, or core, technique base. In other words, if community practitioners essentially do the same task, then they should have the same techniques. Community practice begins with finding out what people want as individuals, determining which of those desires are shared and then helping them find collective ways of achieving it. The foundation and common purpose of community organizing is based upon relationships and self-interest. The same could be said for *all* community practice.

According to Rothman, Erlich, and Tropman (2001), there are two basic elements of community practice requiring a corresponding technique base: problem solving and understanding, and using influ-

ence. If they are correct, then the identification of essential techniques for problem solving and understanding and using influence is appropriate and necessary. The trick is to link essential elements of community practice with essential techniques for community practice (see Figure 1). The authors propose the following five essential or fundamental techniques in the conduct of community practice:

- *Force Field Analysis (FFA)*, for assisting in problem solving and understanding planned change.
- *Program Evaluation Review Techniques (PERT)*, for scheduling activities to assure successful and timely completion of a community or planning project (or in foreseeing and preventing problems).
- *Nominal Group Technique (NGT)*, for facilitating structured group decision-making, assuring full and equal access participation by all members.
- *Delphi*, for forecasting/future planning or to obtain a reliable consensus of opinion.
- *Q-Sort*, for assisting small or large groups to identify and prioritize common concerns.

These practice techniques reflect essential techniques that correspond to the essential elements or tasks useful in all phases of community practice encompassing organizing, planning, and development. These techniques have been chosen in the context of the authors' recent attempts to incorporate a set of essential techniques in their own curricula. The authors were unable to find any empirical research identifying essential techniques for community practice after an exhaustive review of the literature. As a result, the techniques proposed by the authors came directly out of discussions with practitioners working as planners, developers, and organizers who cited these techniques as being most relevant to their field of practice. The authors utilized several focus groups with multiple one-on-one interviews and a series of "breakfast meetings" with agency practicum supervisors in consultation with the School of Social Work field practicum office. The above findings were reinforced by Lauffer (1981) who wrote of the relevancy and usefulness of several techniques—specifically, the Delphi, Nominal Group, and Force Field Analysis—for community practice.

FIGURE 1. Proposed Community Techniques

COMMUNITY TECHNIQUES	ELEMENTS OF PRACTICE		COMMUNITY INTERVENTION APPROACHES	PURPOSE OF TECHNIQUES
	<i>Problem-Solving</i>	<i>Influence</i>		
F.F.A.		X	X	Analyzing for change
P.E.R.T.	X		X	Scheduling technology
N.G.T.	X		X	Medium-large group decision making
Delphi		X	X	Forecasting/future planning
Q-Sort	X	X	X	Prioritizing & focusing issues

Force Field Analysis

Force field analysis (FFA), developed by Lewin (1969), assists in solving problems and planning change. Social workers in community practice utilize FFA to identify and assess forces affecting a decision regarding a social problem or issue. This technique organizes data concerning the forces that could impact the outcome of change efforts and enables social workers to identify the forces that may foster or impede a particular change. A plan of action can be developed based upon that analysis.

A Force Field Inventory is constructed, which indicates the individuals, groups, and coalitions relevant to the issue. The group then identifies driving and restraining forces most likely to effect the change effort. The strength of each force is assessed and ranked. The amenability to change of each force is ranked as high, low, or uncertain. Both are recorded on the Force Field Inventory. A strategy for change is then devised based on the inventory.

Advantages

- Can be used with small or large groups
- Easy to grasp and simple to use
- Requires good facilitation skills
- Open format encourages creativity
- An assessment tool that shapes a plan of action

Disadvantages

- Tendency to focus on forces against change at expense of forces for change (i.e., tends to elicit negatives)
- “Forces” usually described in generalities and requires more facilitation for specificity
- Lack of structure allows discussion to be dominated by a minority

Program Evaluation Review Technique

The Program Evaluation Review Technique (PERT), developed by the U.S. Department of Defense as a management tool (Heyel, 1982), is now used extensively in social planning as a scheduling tool. PERT charting, standard fare in all social planning texts, was given prominence by Armand Lauffer’s (1978) landmark text and is now identified as a technique for social workers in everyday practice. PERT provides a visual representation of a project, assisting in a clear understanding of the organization of the time, resources, events, and activities necessary for the project’s completion. In short, PERT is a flow or time chart allowing for the monitoring of activities and anticipation of problems so changes or improvements can be made as the project progresses.

The first task is to define the goal. Once a goal is defined, a sequence of tasks or activities is depicted in the order they must be accomplished. A specific time frame is assigned, estimating how long each task will take and, ultimately the time it will take to reach the primary goal. PERT charts utilize time lines with specific deadlines to achieve each task so it is incumbent upon the group through the facilitator to set a realistic goal and corresponding time frames in which to achieve the desired result. The chart also identifies the people or groups responsible for each part and any resources to be obtained or provided.

Advantages

- Outcome is very precise for sequencing and time requirements of events
- PERT chart itself assists in monitoring and oversight
- Reduces vagueness and ensures accountability

Disadvantages

- Initially can appear too complex
- Requires major time allocation
- Typically viewed as a “professionals only” tool, although it can be used by citizens with equal success
- Requires sophisticated facilitation skills
- Skills in task analysis helpful

Nominal Group Technique

The nominal group technique (NGT), first reported by Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson (1975), is used within a structured group and is focused upon group decision making regarding a central topic through the identification and generation of multiple ideas by individual group members. Participation by all group members is the desired goal, and each member is given an equal voice, minimizing the potential for a select few to dominate the group.

The group gathers in one location, and the leader presents the issue and asks members to work silently and reflectively to identify ideas. The group is subdivided into small groups of five to seven members. After a “round robin” of presentation and clarification of ideas, the small group selects two to three best ideas. The “round robin” presentation approach allows questioning only to clarify an individual’s ideas but never to challenge them. Each group merges with another group, and the process is repeated until eventually one large group is formed and the best ideas emerge from the multilevel process. The group then ranks the ideas, and a group decision is made based upon the statistical results of the aggregated individual ideas.

A facilitator is required to guide the group and allow members to generate multiple ideas focused on solving the question or concern presented. NGT provides a forum for people to generate ideas in a face-to-face format, but these ideas are initially developed independent of other members.

Advantages

- Process assures full and equal participation of all persons (very inclusive)
- Requires a moderate level of facilitation by the leader
- Process almost assures a successful outcome

- Can be used with groups of any size from 15-20 plus
- Excellent process that fosters creativity
- Both the process and facilitator can encourage critical thinking
- Encourages facilitating innovations (i.e., voting by stickers instead of hands)

Disadvantages

- Can feel too restrictive to some people
- Best if several people facilitate
- Requires some preplanning

Delphi

The Delphi, named after the Greek priestess from Delphos who forecast future events, is a technique to harness expert opinion for critical decision-making (Faherty, 1997). Planners currently consider the Delphi an effective forecasting tool. The Delphi Technique is one alternative to face-to-face meetings where reaching a consensus is more important than having people vote by majority rule just to have a decision. Although completing the steps of the Delphi takes a longer period of time than holding a one or two-shot “majority wins” meeting, the likelihood of greater and faster implementation far outweigh the additional time needed to reach a decision (Stahl & Stahl, 1991).

Idea generation by a panel of experts who are individual, independent, isolated and anonymous occurs by a series of questions posed in writing. In order to generate even more creativity, a summary of the responses from the first round are given back during the subsequent rounds, and additional responses are elicited. The answers, or summary statements, move toward agreement or consensus (Brooks, 1979). Typically, three rounds are sufficient to reach the desired level of consensus.

Advantages

- Excellent to generate creative and free association of ideas
- Low cost and efficient process to synthesize quantitative data
- “Expert” input can be by mail or e-mail and requires no oral facilitation skills
- Does not rely on a single expert, a one-shot group, average, or a round-table discussion

Disadvantages

- Participation can drop off
- Rather lengthy process and not to be used if quick results are desired
- The quality of the results entirely dependent upon the high caliber of the “experts”

Q-Sort

Q-Sort, originally from psychological research, is a technique that is employed in community practice to assist groups (small or large) to sort through options and develop priorities. Q-Sort allows a meeting facilitator to reduce dozens of suggestions or issues to three to five items by group priority.

The group identifies multiple issues through brainstorming. The group then weights or sorts each item depending upon its importance. The leader records the issues in two columns: most important and least important. The group takes the items in the “most” column and sorts again into most important and least important categories. Typically, a group needs to do the sorting exercise a minimum of three times to achieve the desired outcome. Q-Sort assures an open decision-making process. All data sheets should be retained from the initial random listing of items as well as each Sort, for if the outcome is questioned, the facilitator can review the process and how the outcome was achieved. A facilitator can typically conduct a Q-sort with a large group using three sorts in under an hour. In about an hour and a half, a facilitator can brainstorm ideas, conduct a complete Q-sort process, and identify the group’s priorities for the agenda at the next meeting. Unlike the nominal group technique, which assures equal participation of everyone, the Q-Sort is more responsive to verbal participants.

Advantages

- Process almost assures satisfactory outcome
- Can be used with any size group
- Audience participation is usually high since all ideas are at least initially valued
- Simple process to facilitate consensus

Disadvantages

- Process can be dominated by a few persons
- Requires excellent facilitation skills
- Best if two facilitators used

The following example illustrates the use and effectiveness of a technique for best practice in community social work.

USE OF A TECHNIQUE TO ENHANCE PRACTICE
EFFECTIVENESS:
AN EXAMPLE FROM COMMUNITY PRACTICE

Technique: Q-Sort

Purpose: To assist in the weighting of alternatives or as a method to rank order items.

Setting: The room is full of people who came to the meeting called by the social worker regarding neighborhood conditions. During previous ad hoc meetings called over the past two years, people expressed concerns, but nothing happened. People drifted away from the previous meetings when it became evident there would not be a satisfactory outcome.

Social Worker: Calls meeting to order and asks for agenda input. Begins by facilitating and generating a list of alternative solutions.

Setting: After 20-30 minutes of input, the group becomes restless. This is not the first time ideas have been generated without moving to a new level.

Social Worker: Acknowledges to self s/he needs to move the agenda forward towards some specificity so the group can feel some accomplishment. Social worker suggests facilitating a process of trimming the 30 ideas and prioritizing to three to five ideas that have general support. The social worker suggests that prioritizing ideas would allow the group to focus and set the agenda for the next one or two meetings.

Setting: The group readily agrees. "Anything at this point would help us out of this impasse," as one person phrased it.

Social Worker: Facilitates the Q-Sort from beginning to end in 40 minutes and reduces 30 items to three to five items reflecting group priorities.

Setting: The crowd feels they accomplished something. Everyone arrived with ideas but did not know how to move forward in focusing on a specific agenda. People leave relatively pleased, and participants had an opportunity to talk. Further, this was a democratic process, and nearly all agreed the social worker "ran a pretty darn good meeting." Nearly everyone agrees to come to a second meeting.

In the preceding example, the social worker found herself in a typical situation of facilitating a group that had a prior unsatisfactory experience. Like all groups, they did not want to waste time, and desired structure to facilitate a movement toward a positive outcome and provide some direction for future action. The social worker sensed this and, in effect, said to herself that a technique was needed and then drew upon the appropriate technique (this time the Q-Sort) to facilitate the desired outcome.

In the community intervention example, the social worker drew upon knowledge of human behavior, had an intervention theory base to draw upon, and utilized a technique to help facilitate the process. More precisely, the social worker came to a point in the intervention that called for some new capability to move the agenda forward to a new level. It pushed them past an impasse. That capability is a learned technique and without the use of the technique, it is likely the intervention would have faltered if not failed altogether. The appropriate use of the technique increased the chances of success.

INCORPORATING COMMUNITY PRACTICE TECHNIQUES IN SOCIAL WORK CURRICULA

The teaching of essential community practice techniques must be preceded by a general agreement amongst practitioners and faculty as to what, if any, techniques can be considered core. Faculty members teaching the spectrum of MSW classes need to be able to define and de-

scribe core techniques and, further, to demonstrate competence in the techniques. Without this, we are faced with a situation whereby core knowledge is not understood by faculty who are educating social workers to engage in advanced social work practice. We are faced with a situation in which social workers are not being prepared to effect change along the continuum of systems through community.

Bisno and Cox (1997) assess the current state of social work education and conclude that the “demand on social work education to include an ever-increasing array of subjects is becoming unrealistic . . . [and] the result of this demand is superficiality of preparation and training” (p. 383). The authors acknowledge the demand dilemma and, at the same time recognize the need for greater emphasis on technique development. MSW graduates come out with a wide theoretical base but lack a specific skills and techniques base, directly applicable to their chosen field of practice. In an exhaustive literature review, the authors discovered a dearth of articles studying community practice techniques, with the exception of a few commentaries and exploratory articles calling attention to this issue among social work educators (Ahearn, Bolan, & Burke, 1975; Bisno & Cox, 1997; Franklin, 1994; Sanfort, 2000; Thyer, 1994).

But the issue is not whether or not we teach techniques in the social work curriculum, for we do. The issue is whether we will teach techniques for community practice and, specifically, whether we can agree on the essential community practice techniques that MSW students should be taught. Is there or is there not a very basic need for standard or base techniques in community practice? If there is, then essential community practice techniques must be integrated in the curriculum.

The lack of specific community practice content in curricula arises from a vaguely depersonalized concept of community and the idea that one does not engage a community in face-to-face interactions. On the contrary, community practice *is* all about working with individuals and groups and often in very intimate settings. Community practitioners need excellent relationship-building capabilities. Community practice techniques are tools for the practitioner to connect with individuals in groups to effect a positive outcome. If we conceptualize community as a broad, nonspecific entity, then it is understandable that educators would not be committed to teach specific practice techniques. If, as suggested earlier, community practice texts seldom (and sometimes never) identify techniques for community practice, one need only look at how the term community and community practice has been conceptualized. If one thinks of building community as a vague concept, then it follows

that practice techniques would not be part of the discussion and, in fact, community-specific knowledge would also be vague. If, however, one conceives of building community as a process with specific goals and objectives, then one should teach specific techniques in order to carry out the goals and objectives.

The implications for social work curricula are clear. How community is conceptualized and what a practitioner does should lead educators to teach a very specific set of community practice techniques for planning, organizing, and community development. Central to this paper is the proposal that all MSW curricula should have foundation community theory content with advanced community techniques content based upon a set of essential community practice techniques.

Ethical mandates (NASW, 1999) require the continued development of techniques and provide the impetus for social work practitioners to increase professional knowledge, skills, and techniques in their field of practice. This issue is reflected in the NASW Professional Standards that guide professional competence. While a range of professional standards are included such as clinical social work, case management, and personnel practices (NASW, 2001), the NASW Professional Standards do not include standards for community practice. This may be a call for a dialogue. Creating a standard for community practice within the NASW Professional Standards would be a step toward correcting this deficit.

The techniques proposed by the authors represent those suggested by practitioners who are planners, developers, and organizers. Empirical studies need to be conducted to move beyond the conceptual framework proposed by the authors. Further technique identification needs to occur through research on what community practitioners do, linked to what technique(s) they employ or implement.

Finally, the field of community practice needs to resolve definitional issues. Agreement must be reached on what is a skill, or a technique, or a tool. Students of community practice look to the journals and textbooks for consistency, yet it is not there.

CONCLUSION

This article should be considered a first step toward sharpening our terms and becoming more precise about what comprises competency at the community practice level. The authors have attempted to expand the dialogue started by a handful of social work educators by first identify-

ing and operationalizing five essential techniques that can be universally applied by social workers in any community practice setting. Rather than viewing technique identification as a reductionist task, the assignment, should social work education step up to the plate, is to expand a base that we are only now beginning to identify. The conceptual framework offered by the authors should enable social work educators to move to constructive dialogues about adopting a commonly accepted set of community practice techniques and how these can be incorporated into social work curricula.

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