

When is Community Organization Social Work Practice?

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This subject touches issues far broader and deeper than those concerned only with the technical nature and content of community organization. It throws open to question and to serious re-examination some of the most venerable and universal assumptions underlying the whole development of social work. In the accumulated professional lore and literature of the last twenty-five years, all social work, like all of ancient Gaul, has by general consent been divided into three parts—three basic areas or types of practice—social casework, social group work, and community organization. By the same token, practitioners in all three of these basic areas, it appears, are members of a single inclusive profession of social work. This assumes that this whole profession, like every profession, is united by certain common responsibilities—by a common concern for the treatment of certain defined needs and problems; by a common body of special knowledge applicable to these problems; by certain common specific and defined objectives in relation to them; by a common core of basic processes, methods, and skills appropriate to the attainment of these objectives; and by a common philosophy binding all these professional ingredients together into a single consistent whole.

The question really asks, therefore, not merely when, but whether, at all, community organization practice is integrally related to the common content of problem, philosophy, knowledge, objective, and method which characterizes social work practice as a generic whole—whether, in fact, we are really one profession or, perhaps, two or more related professions. The

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answer to that question clearly depends upon what we mean by generic social work practice, in the first place, and by community organization practice, in the second. Since there is no generally accepted definition of either social work or community organization—despite all the ardent and able efforts, past and present, that have gone into the search for such definitions—I am under the painful necessity of formulating at the beginning the concepts upon which my own discussion will be based. I am keenly aware that this is a matter of strictly personal choice but we must start somewhere and this is where I begin.

What, then, are the essentials of social work practice as a generic whole? What are the kinds of problem with which it deals? What are the specific objectives it seeks? What are its basic methods and skills? What is the philosophy on which it operates?

One of the difficulties we face in defining the area of general social work practice in terms of the kinds of problem with which it deals, is our use of the broad and general term “social” as the only qualifying adjective to designate our specific area of service. The word social has none of the precision of such words as “medical” or “legal” for instance, by which other areas of professional practice are defined. It is obviously not enough to say that social work treats social problems. For practically every life problem of every individual in this modern world is in reality, a “social” problem, in one sense or another and practically every organized undertaking in the world is a “social” enterprise, in the sense that it involves and affects the social life and relationships of people. It is clear that not all these “social” interests and involvements of human beings can lie within the province of a single profession.

Nor does the addition of the word “welfare” to the word “social” do much to clarify or to bound the area of our professional effort. For, in the ordinary and logical use of language, the term “welfare” in this connection denotes only a general purpose of action which we as a profession share with many other professions and groups in the community, but which we certainly do not monopolize. For, whenever, in the course of daily living, people feel the need and the impulse to apply some sort of deliberate direction to otherwise intuitive social developments, with the conscious purpose of making them serve more fully or more directly the needs of human beings in their social relationships, “social welfare” enterprises come into being. They may take any form they may be concerned with any aspect of social experience, they may seek to deal with any one or many of the social problems people face. By this reasonable test, the church, the school, the court, the hospital, the labor union, and even industry itself—when motivated and managed with a view to the

fuller satisfaction of human social interests—are “social welfare” enterprises. But they are not in themselves “social work” enterprises.

Social work can and does appear, however, in any of these institutions or in any other part of the social setting—and this is the crux of the definition I propose—whenever, in pursuit of a “social welfare” purpose, effort is applied specifically and directly to facilitating the actual process by which people are enabled and assisted to use these instrumentalities or any of the other social relations open to them, for the more effectual fulfillment of their own social well-being, within the framework of a stable society. The problems, then, with which social work deals are not problems of social structure, as such, nor of individual personality, as such. They are not definable in terms of particular sets of circumstances or of particular forces or qualities, either in the social environment or in people themselves, that may obstruct or frustrate satisfying and fruitful social living. They are the problems which people find in the actual process of adjustment to each other or to any part or aspect of their social environment. That is to say, they are problems of relationships.

The common, specific objectives of social work practice must, of course, be related to these focal problems. Its central objective, then, is to facilitate the actual process of social adjustment of individual people, through the development and constructive use of social relationships within which these human beings can find their own fulfillment and can discharge adequately their social responsibilities. This objective may be sought through helping individuals and groups of individuals to find satisfying and fruitful relations to and within the social realities in which they are at the time involved. On the other hand, it may be sought through facilitating the adaptation and modification of the larger environmental arrangements and relationships upon which satisfying social adjustment of all human beings depends. Commonly, both these avenues to the ultimate objective may be used at one and the same time. In any case, the objective always remains the same—not in any particular product or form of adjustment, but in the process of adjustment itself. The objective is not to make over either the environment or the people involved in it, but rather to introduce and sustain a process of dealing with the problems of social relationship and social adjustment, which will enable and assist those involved in the problems to find solutions satisfying to themselves and acceptable to the society of which they are a part.

The philosophy of social work shines forth in these objectives. It rests upon a profound faith in human beings, in their inherent and invio-

lable right to choose and to achieve their own destiny, through social relations of their own making, within the essential framework of a stable and progressive society. It rests upon a deep appreciation of the validity and the value to society as a whole, of these individual differences in human beings. In [sic] conceives of social unity and progress as the outcome of the integration, not the suppression or conquest, of these differences. Accordingly, it tests all social arrangements and institutions by their impact upon individual lives, by their capacity to utilize for the common good the unique potentialities of individual human beings, through relationships that enlist their active and productive participation. It is, in short, a genuinely and consistently democratic philosophy.

Social work methods and skills exemplify this philosophy in action. Social work, always and everywhere, is, in the first place, a helping, not a controlling, function. It applies always the methods of coöperation, not of manipulation. It offers a service, to be used by others if they need and want to use it; it does not use others, or treat others, for the attainment of its own ends. Because its objectives are always focused in the creation and maintenance of constructive relationships, its own methods and skills are focused in its own capacity for, and use of, a coöperative and helping relationship. Because its service is focused in facilitating a process of adjustment, rather than in the attainment of a specific product or end, its own methods and skills and disciplines are focused in the management of its own process, in the maintenance of a sensitive awareness of what is happening to everybody in that process and of how the worker's own participation is affecting the feeling and interest of all the rest and their expression in participative action. Because of the democratic philosophy on which the whole operation rests—because of the worker's awareness that responsibility for the outcome rests with others, not with himself—his method and skill are consistently addressed to freeing and enlisting the honest, voluntary, responsible contribution of feeling, understanding, experience, and purpose of each and every person involved in the relationship, and the honest, objective, appreciative use of these contributions in a process of integration. Always mindful of the decisive responsibility of others for ultimate choice and decision, the social worker, nevertheless, contributes his own professional difference—in the clarification of alternatives and their potential consequences, in the analysis of the factors that enter into the choice, and in the evaluation of those elements, in relation to the ultimate objective, in terms of available resources, and in the light of a broader specialized experience in dealing with similar problems.

The core of these processes, methods, and skills of generic social work practice is obviously in the disciplined use of one's self in direct relations with people, both individually and in groups. All else is secondary and incidental and assumes significance only as it eventuates in the more effectual performance of the worker in that direct relationship.

There is, however, one unique and decisive factor in the setting within which the social worker operates, which profoundly affects his use of himself in the helping relationship. That is the fact that he is the representative of a social agency, which determines, by its own choice of purpose and service and policy, the limits within which the worker serves. The agency, in relation to our present subject, has two vital effects upon method and process. In the first place, it introduces into the development of individual and group relationships and purposes the stake of time larger community in the outcome, the basic social structure within which these lesser relationships must find their place. The agency represents that stable social whole with which individuals and groups must find their own adjustment, with which they must come to terms, if they are to avail themselves of its help. In the second place, it sustains and protects the worker in the helpful, noncontrolling use of himself in relation with others, exacting from him disciplined restraint upon the undue exercise of his own will and power, either in understanding or feeling, and upon the undue expression of his own interest, judgment and purpose, in the choice of ends or means. Thus, the agency conserves the basic democratic quality of the helping relationship, while at the same time sustaining the essential framework of a stable democratic society.

This, then, at long last, is generic social work practice as I conceive it. In summary: It deals with problems not of the social environment; as such, nor of human personalities as such, but with the problems of relationship between them. Its objective is not changes social structure or of personality but in improvement and facilitation of the actual process by which people are enabled to find, sustain, and use constructive social relationships. Its methods and skills are encompassed in a disciplined capacity to initiate, sustain, and use a direct helping relationship with people based upon a sensitive, alert awareness of the meaning and effect of one's own feeling thought and action and that of other persons, in the development of the cooperative process that is going on between them and based also upon a clear acceptance of the limits of his own role and responsibility as determined by the function of the agency he represents. Finally, social work is guided and enlivened by a democratic philosophy which recognizes the right and the responsibility of individuals

to manage their own lives but always within the framework of a democratically organized and democratically controlled social whole.

Now, what is the relation of community organization practice to this generic social work as we have defined it? Do the problems, the objectives, the methods and skills, the dominating philosophy of community organization fall within these general boundaries?

If we define community organization in its broadest sense, as a recent writer has done, as "deliberately directed effort to assist groups in attaining unity of purpose and action . . . in behalf of either general or special objectives,"¹ it is clear that a substantial part of community organization falls even outside the broader field of "social welfare," of which the whole of social work is an integral part. But it is also clear that another substantial part, whose function has been described in a recent report as that of creating and maintaining "a progressively more effective adjustment between social welfare resources and social welfare needs,"² certainly belongs within the "social welfare" field. But does this practice of community organization for a "social welfare" purpose conform to our criteria of generic social work practice?

So far as its scope has been defined in terms of the focal problems with which its practice is concerned, it seems to me clear that there is a steadily advancing agreement among its practitioners and leaders that those problems, like the basic subject matter of social work as a whole, center definitely in social relationships such as distinct from any particular set of circumstances or any particular forces or sources of difficulty, either in the social environment or in the human personality. One cannot conceive of "social needs" without thinking of people in social relationships; one cannot conceive of "adjusting social resources to social needs" without recognizing that the basic problem with which one is dealing is that of relationships between people. If one chooses to accept Wilber Newstetter's original conception community organization as "intergroup work," the case for identifying its basic problems with those of generic social work is even more convincing.

But what are its specific objectives in dealing with these problems? Is community organization practice concerned specifically with facilitating the process of social adjustment, or is it directed to the attainment of more tangible and specific ends? It is clear, I think, that we approach more debatable ground when we face this question. Despite the growth of articulated theory which identifies the objective of community organization with the characteristic objectives we have ascribed to generic social work, there remain two obstacles to the realization of this theory in actual practice. In the first place, community organization is often

dissociated from actual service of specific individuals or groups; that is, the needs to which it is addressed are frequently outside the immediate experience or sphere of responsibility of those who are involved in the community organizing process and relationship. It is easy, therefore, for both promoters and participants in the process to find their satisfaction and sense of achievement in the creation of a well-articulated, symmetrical, deftly organized structure and mechanism rather than in the process of helping individual people fulfill their own social needs, to which that structure and mechanism are ostensibly and truly dedicated. There is nothing discreditable in this kind of satisfaction. We all share it in some measure. But it does dissociate the activity which it dominates from what we have called the province of social work. For social work, if we are right about it, is expressly and exclusively concerned with helping people find satisfying social adjustment to and through their social institutions and relationships. Its true objective is in facilitating this process of adjustment. Its only concern with social organization, as such, is to introduce and sustain through that organization the relationships and processes which actually do facilitate that adjustment.

The second source of possible doubt about the identification of the specific objectives of community organization with those of generic social work is in the fact that the process of organization often follows rather than precedes the choice of goals. In the planning stage, before organization itself really begins, not only is the problem likely to be identified and defined, but a diagram of the specific outcome to be achieved is likely to emerge, and the achievement of this outcome, then, can easily become the criterion of the success of the whole undertaking. From this point forward, organization can center in the objective of obtaining acceptance and realization of the particular plan—that is, the attainment of a preconceived product of organization—rather than in the process of helping the community to identify and appreciate the need, to choose a suitable means of filling the need, and to muster its strength to achieve this self-determined goal.

In this respect, community organization faces precisely the same hazards that have beset social casework and social group work from the beginning, and which they have only recently and only partially mastered. The old formula, for instance, of “investigation, diagnosis and treatment,” so long revered in social casework, as the basis of a presumably scientific and systematic professional process, carries with it the same threat to make a preconceived plan or end—chosen, it is true, prayerfully and sincerely out of superior professional vision and understanding—the decisive objective and ultimate criterion of achievement

in the life of the client rather than the freeing and helping of the client to choose and achieve his own end. The same threat pursues the social group worker, whose effort can easily be diverted from facilitating the process of group development and growth, to the operation of a particular program of group activity which seems to the professional leader the most suitable and satisfying for a particular group in a particular setting. Community organizers, if they are to achieve the fruits of their service within the framework of social work, have to guard themselves against this same insidious temptation to choose for the community a plan which the organizer then proceeds to carry through.

It is obvious, I think, that here, as elsewhere in social work, the choice of objectives reflects the acceptance of a basic philosophy, which in turn comes to expression in process, method, and skill. The philosophy underlying social work practice, we have declared, is definitely and wholly a democratic philosophy. On that principle it cannot compromise. It may grope and fumble in its quest for insight and strength to realize all its implications. And it faces, always, the basic problem of democratic life—the integration of the knowledge and skill of the expert with the broad and varied experience of the mass of men, in the process of democratic decision and action—but holds firmly to the fundamental concept that in the making of such decisions the “expert must always be on tap, never-almost-never on top.” The community organizer, whose primary client, it may be said, is the whole community, faces this problem in more acute and potent form than any of the rest of us, for he is dealing powerful, discordant forces that take even a longer time to become integrated, than do those in individuals and face-to-face groups. He has to believe and to remember, constantly, that the community is the master of its own destiny; that it has the right to make its own mistakes; that it also has within itself a reservoir of infinitely varied insights and strengths of all its members, which must find outlet in the formulation and achievement of its own purpose, if the genius of democracy and its special values are to be conserved and fulfilled.

It is when we turn to the methods and processes of community organization, and the skill it requires, that the haze of uncertainty and ambiguity as to its relationship with generic social work becomes most difficult to dispel. This is not surprising, in view of the relatively brief time within which these problems have been subjected to systematic study. There is, however, undoubtedly developing an ever-widening acceptance of a basic concept of method and skill in the area of practice which identifies it positively with that which dominates other areas of social work, namely, the worker’s capacity to initiate and sustain a di-

rect helping relationship with individual people and groups of people. The use of such method and skill is obviously modified and complicated by the fact that the individuals and groups with which the community organizer works are often representatives of other groups whom he may not directly or regularly meet, but of whose interest and feeling and purposes he must be alertly aware. But his relationship to those groups is, nevertheless, from this point of view, ultimately dependent most directly upon the way in which he uses himself in his relations with their individual representatives.

There is, however, at least one historical and contemporary manifestation of a contrary concept of what constitutes the basic process, methods and skill in community organization, which tends to separate and distinguish it from what we have described as generic social work practice. That is the concept which places heavy emphasis upon the methods and skill necessarily involved in research, administration, planning, and interpretation, as factors in the professional equipment of the community organizer. There is little doubt in my own mind that all these processes, in their best estate, involve not a little of the same self-awareness and sensitivity to others in a relationship which we have described as the dominant attributes of sound method and skill in all social work. There is nothing inherently incompatible between these skills and the basic skill of social work. But the danger signal, in relation to the question under discussion, must be hoisted, because of the way in which, in the literature as well as in practice, they are apparently separated and dissociated one from another. Research, planning, administration, and interpretation are frequently assumed to be concerned only with things, with facts, with ideas, rather than with people; they are made to appear as products of some sort of occult, private operation, apart from any process that goes on in relationship with others. Then they are made to assume such importance in the total equipment and activity of the community organizer as to overshadow the primary social work process method, and skill of using one's self in direct personal and group relations. They are thought to require an utterly different kind of person, subject to a different kind of discipline.

Indeed, one writer has recently suggested that the primary skill of developing and using constructive individual and group relationships is so imperfectly understood and is so largely dependent upon inherent personal quality rather than professional discipline that what we have called the secondary skills and responsibilities of research, administration planning and interpretation must continue apparently to determine

the major equipment of the community organizer. Yet, the same writer remarks that the development of the professional process of community organization in social work has placed increasing emphasis, "not upon the attainment of immediate objectives, but upon methods of strengthening the intergroup process."³ How is that "intergroup process" going to be still strengthened, through professional intervention except by the disciplined command of one's professional self in direct relationships with individuals and groups?

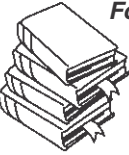
In summary, then, I conclude that community organization practice is social work practice that its practitioners can share in the development of a single profession of social work on three conditions: (1) if and when their focal concerns and their primary objectives relate always to the development and guidance of the process by which people find satisfying and fruitful social relationships, and not to the attainment of specific, preconceived products or forms of relationship; (2) if and when these objectives are sought consistently through the realization of a democratic philosophy amid faith which respects the right and the responsibility of communities, as of individuals, to create their own satisfying relationships, and to use those relationships to their own chosen ends; and (3) if and when the basic processes, methods, and skills that are demanded and employed in actual practice are those that inhere in the worker's capacity to initiate and sustain a helping, not a controlling, relationship with individuals and groups.

All of this demands extraordinary faith—faith in people, in their capacity, individually and in the mass, to discover and to fulfill their own needs, and, above all, faith in a helping process itself, as a medium through which people individually, in groups, in intergroup relationships, and in the mass, can, if they will, discover their own purposes and powers, face their actual alternatives, appraise their potential consequences, and muster their resources to choose and achieve their own appropriate ends. It requires, also, the kind of faith and the kind of feeling that finds its highest satisfaction in facilitating the achievement of others rather than in the exercise of personal power. It demands faith, also, that progress in a democratic society must have democratic roots as well as democratic trunk and branches.

This is the faith on which social work as an integral whole is founded, and which it has justified by works of unquestioned validity and significance in our society. If community organization actually demands and expresses that same faith in its daily operations, it is, indeed, a part—a vital, constructive part—of social work practice.

NOTES

1. Wayne McMillen, "Community Organization in Social Work," in *Social Work Year Book, 1947*, ed. Russell H. Kurtz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1947), p. 110.
2. Arthur Dunham, "The Literature of Community Organization," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940) p. 413.
3. McMillen, *loc.cit.*



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