

Learning from Clients

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A defining characteristic of social work as a profession is its focus on the individual in context, on the dual concern with promoting individual well-being and social justice. Social workers promote social justice and social change on behalf of clients, using the term “clients” inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (NASW, 2000). At its best, social work practice and knowledge development are based on recognition of and responsiveness to client perspectives in the pursuit of social and economic justice. Despite a commitment to this dual purpose for social work in the United States, the two concerns are often treated as if they are either unrelated or even in competition with one another (see, for example, Centennial Issue of Social Work, 1998; Specht & Courtney, 1994). This false dichotomy or polarity, the “micro–macro divide” as this phenomenon has come to be known, has fueled heated debates, inspired practice approaches, and influenced curricular reforms in our profession. Indeed, I find myself reluctant to highlight one or the other side of this divide for fear of misrepresenting our larger purpose. As illustrated, however, in the classic study by Tony Maluccio (1979), *Learning from Clients*, we have much to gain from focusing attention on the perspective of those we serve. This issue of *Social Work* is organized on the premise that we have much to learn from clients. It brings together a series of articles designed to explore and illuminate client perspectives.

Many professions claim a concern for clients, but social workers have organized much of their thinking and acting toward making decisions informed by client perspectives. There are at least three ways that client perspectives are important to social workers. First, it is axiomatic that social work practice “starts where the client is.” We know that ethical and effective practice is based on the worker learning from clients, on the client feeling understood, on the worker’s response to the client’s definition of the problem, and on the

client’s involvement in developing and seeking a solution. Second, the perspective of the individual, group, or organization is important because social workers often have the opportunity to “give voice” to or to recognize and legitimate clients’ concerns. Social workers have access to those who may have been silenced, ignored, or diminished by social institutions or practices. At the same time, they have access to the social institutions that can bring recognition and resources to their concerns. Finally, the perspective of clients is significant because the fundamental goals of our profession are to promote human well-being and social justice. To promote social justice, our response to individuals must consistently focus not only on their perspective, but also on their perspective in the multilayered social context in which they live. The voice of service users—our clients—is significant because it helps us stay true to our purpose, to live up to our ideals and standards.

Starting Where the Client Is

We learn very early as social workers that we must “start where the client is.” There are several reasons for this. First, client concerns, perspectives, and definitions of the problem provide the most relevant direction and focus for our work. Second, although it is only beginning to be documented empirically, we know that when we focus on issues of greatest concern to clients and provide the services they say they need, our work is more effective (for example, see McLellan et al.; 1997 Smith & Marsh, 2002). In the lead article in this issue, “Toward an Actor-Centered Social Work: Re-visioning ‘Person-in-Environment’ Through a Critical Theory Lens,” Kondrat describes the challenges inherent in taking the client’s perspective in social work. She takes the position that, although we have been interested in frameworks such as the ecosystems perspective that seeks to incorporate the individual within the larger context, “Social science and social work literature

have long been plagued by a conceptual disconnection between theories of individual action and interaction, on the one hand, and theories of society and social change on the other.” Kondrat highlights how the fundamental purposes of the social work profession have not been well-served by available theoretical tools. She offers a clear explication of an alternative in the form of Giddons’s critical theory and reveals how this theory can tell a “more integrated story about the connection between persons and their social environment.”

Several articles in this issue represent studies asking clients to articulate their perspectives and preferences. We are interested in learning clients’ experiences with social problems and the societal response to them as well as in learning their understanding and interpretation of their experiences. In “Breaking the Web of Abuse and Silence: Voices of Battered Women in Japan,” Yoshihama asked battered women in Japan to describe their experience with their partners’ violence. The perspectives of these women “facilitated the development of not only a shared understanding of the problem, but also mutual support and action to address it.” In “Deciding Who to See: Lesbians Discuss Their Preferences in Health and Mental Health Care Providers,” Saulnier went to a group of lesbian and bisexual women to identify their perspectives and preferences when selecting physical or mental health practitioners. In “The Client’s View of a Successful Helping Relationship,” Ribner and Knei-Paz asked clients of a multiservice agency to describe their experiences with helpers and their definition of a successful helping relationship. Boehm and Staples also went to consumers of social services as well as social workers to explore how they understand the concept of “empowerment” in the article “The Functions of the Social Worker in Empowering: The Voices of Consumers and Professionals.” They identify the fact that although the term “empowerment” is widely accepted and used in social work, perspectives of consumers and practitioners have been ignored. In a second article focusing on client perspectives and empowerment, Linhorst, Hamilton, Young, and Eckert asked people with severe mental illness in a public psychiatric hospital to identify barriers to empowerment through treatment planning. They use client perspectives to identify a number of organizational conditions that facilitate client empowerment through treat-

ment planning, for example, ensuring adequate staff time, promoting staff attitudes that value client participation, and providing clients with a range of treatment options.

Giving Voice to the Silenced Clients

A second way in which social workers are organized by client perspectives is when they give voice to those who may have been silenced, ignored, diminished, or disrespected. Social workers have been sensitive to the social and political processes that serve to provide access and legitimacy to some groups and not to others. In the same way that a photographer works with foreground and background in a negative to enhance perceptibility of certain objects, a social worker has the capacity to identify individuals whose perspectives have not been recognized and understood. Two articles in this issue represent efforts by social workers to recognize or give a voice to the position of individuals who the authors identify as having been ignored or “oppressed.” In a juxtaposition of conflicting values, one focuses on lesbians and one on Evangelical Christian social workers. In an empirical article entitled, “Among the Missing: Content on Lesbian and Gay People in Social Work Journals,” Van Voorhis and Wagner examined the content of articles on homosexuality published in four major social work journals between 1988 and 1997 and found the preponderance of articles focused on HIV/AIDS and reflected a problem-oriented view, which they believe limits the effectiveness of practice with gay and lesbian clients. They conclude that, “[p]ractitioners must not only be knowledgeable about homosexuality and sensitive to gay and lesbian clients, they must be active in dismantling the heterosexism that permeates the culture.” Coming from a completely different value stance, Hodge, in his article, “Does Social Work Oppress Evangelical Christians?” focuses on social workers rather than clients. He uses a comprehensive literature review to define Evangelical Christian social workers as a misrepresented group deserving greater sensitivity and respect. He suggests that one way in which the dominant social work ideology oppresses Evangelical Christian social workers derives from the standard in the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2000) that guides social workers to practice without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (as well as race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, age, marital status, political belief,

religion, or mental or physical disability, standard 4.02). Hodge suggests that this aspect of the *Code of Ethics* is itself discriminatory toward Evangelical Christians with a “conservative faith-based construction of reality” and serves to “restrict the parameters of discussion” in the profession. Among the remedies he identifies: encourage journals to feature “Evangelical constructions of reality on a par with other groups”; “increase the numbers of Evangelicals in the profession so that social work is more representative of society”; and, “provide a climate of support for Evangelical faculty members to disclose and discuss spiritual frameworks in a classroom setting in the same manner as gay men, lesbians, and feminists are encouraged to discuss their personal perspectives.”

Responding to Client Perspectives

The third way in which our activities are organized by the perspectives of our clients is that we refine and improve interventions and services on the basis of clients’ feedback and reaction. Three articles in this issue seek to explicate clients’ experiences with services or service systems and use these perspectives in the development or refinement of services. In the article entitled “The Child-Centered Social Worker and the Sexually Abused Child: Pathways to Healing,” Anderson, Doueck, Krause, and Weston propose the concept of the child-centered social worker who integrates traditional roles of networker, broker, support person, educator, mediator, therapist, expert witness, and advocate to minimize the potential for system-induced trauma for child sexual abuse victims. In “Work/Family Fit: Voices of Parents of Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders,” Rosenweig, Brennan, and Ogilvie use findings from focus groups conducted with working parents of children diagnosed with mental health problems to identify their coping strategies. Based on the perspectives of these service users, they explore program and policy implications for improving services in the areas of employment, child care, education, and mental health. Finally, in an article examining the response of African American families to residential treatment for families whose child is diagnosed with a mental disorder, “Voices of African American Families: Perspectives on Residential Treatment,” Kruzich, Friesen, Williams-Murphy, and Langley recognize that families are increasingly involved in a range of planning, decision-making, and evaluation roles.

Based on the premise that family involvement is related to better outcomes for children, the authors used focus groups to understand African American responses to residential treatment. They identify a set of concerns of African American families and detail their relevance to program development.

In these three ways—by understanding and affirming clients’ views of their situations, by giving voice to their concerns, and by using their perspectives to develop and refine programs and policies—our professional activities are shaped. The articles in this issue of *Social Work* provide outstanding illustrations of the social work commitment to client perspectives. They show that we use client perspectives to promote social justice one individual, family, group, organization, and community at a time. They clarify the fact that it is by listening to clients and responding that we most effectively realize our professional responsibilities to promote well-being and advance social justice. ■

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