

The Building Blocks of a Helping Profession: Social Work

Social work as we know today has a deep historical background from different countries all over the world. It was born because of the fact that our society is not perfect and there are parts of the population who are suffering because of poverty, social injustice, deprivation of rights, and the like. There are a lot of social problems present in our society and this is what every social worker has to face in his/her profession.

Like any other multi-disciplinary professions, social work also borrows knowledge from different disciplines and professions (sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, humanities, biology, medicine, law, etc...) so that he/she can present more opportunities or alternatives for his/her client's concern. This multidisciplinary approach is being used to understand complex social problems also because of the fact that as societies grow bigger, social problems also become more complex.

After many years of existence, the profession of social work was able to devise a way to organize their broad bodies of knowledge into three (3) general areas of knowledge and that is: Social Welfare Policies and Services, Human Behaviour and Social Environment, and Social Work Practice. These general areas of knowledge can also be taken as a synthesis of the borrowed knowledge from different disciplines and profession for social work to have its unique set of knowledge base.

Social Welfare Policies and Services are mainly about the basic understanding of the needs, the society's problems, and the provisions that are available to help solve the problem. This knowledge area allows a social worker to think of realistic and grounded general social welfare policies for institutions to be able to act in accordance with the pressing need. The words "realistic" and "grounded" are to be emphasized on this part since these are very crucial to the creation and implementation of social welfare policies and services. Policies and Services that are not realistic and grounded are bound to fail because it will not attack the root of an individual's, the groups', or the communities' problems and concerns. The creation of good social welfare policies and services can prevent future social welfare problems that might stand a threat to the population. The prevention of these future social welfare problems then can lead to further development of the society, economically, politically, culturally, etc...

The study of Human Behaviour and the Social Environment is proven to be not an easy task. One must have a critically open mind, the ability to have a keenly observe individuals, groups,

or communities and the sensitivity on how they interact on each other.

This area of knowledge may use the question “why?” the most often as a social worker must understand the reasons of certain phenomena happening in his/her client. As complex as it is, it is critical for one who studies human behaviour and the social environment that an individual is a “bio-psycho-social” being. It is a recognition that an individual’s biological make-up, his/her thoughts or feelings, and the external environment (sociological, cultural, political, and economic) can all be considered as factors which can influence his/her behaviour. These factors however, are not to be treated individually, but as inseparable interacting forces which contribute to an individual’s behaviour and personality. It is therefore an interesting field of competence on how helping professions such as the social workers understand an individual through studying different factors which may affect an individual’s behaviour and personality. Taking a closer look at the data on which a helping profession can work on, a lot of these will be categorized as qualitative, thus, cannot be measured by mere computations and numbers. Data being qualitative means it is also subject to a lot of interpretations from different disciplines. A good and competent social worker however, will analyse the data by seeing it from the bigger picture of society. She/he might start from the current society’s socio-economic-political macro structure, going to the individual’s mezzo interactions, up to his/her micro world definitions and realities. After being able to fully analyse an individual’s behaviour, helping professions then can act more effectively on trying to solve or create opportunities / alternatives for the client’s problems.

The third area of knowledge on which social workers operate is on the Social Work Practice. This area of knowledge focuses primarily on the values and ethics a social work professional must have. The ethics of social work might come easier to understand as the black and white of the profession while the “value” system that a social worker can be quite subjective. As like how social workers believe on individuality, each social worker also has their own experiences in work and life that might also have influenced on how he/she thinks of certain phenomena or situation. This can affect the decision-making processes and the prioritization methods of a social worker. Fortunately, this is already a recognized concern in the field of the profession. Social work organizations and professionals have been able to devise ways on how to deal with the value dilemma that social workers might encounter while talking with clients. It is not an assurance however, that social workers will never be wrong, but it puts a good mechanism for social workers to reflect on their actions. Social work practice allows the social worker to reflect on what tools, methods, and competence must he/she equip with to be able to effectively and efficiently deliver his/her service as a social worker to the clients. The area of knowledge can also be considered as dynamic, as being capable to evolve and fit in the

current realities of a society where it belongs. Although there are certain universalities which keeps the practice of social work a global understanding, each country / society have its own unique set of societal structure, culture, political system, etc... which can make the practice for every country also unique.

After being able to get a grasp of the three general areas of knowledge for social work, the writer has been able to reflect it on some of the Philippines' realities in terms of social welfare and development.

The Philippines, being a third-world country where poverty and social injustice is still prevalent, has more reason to create good social welfare policies and services to its constituents especially those who belong in the marginalized sectors such as the farmers, the fishermen, indigenous peoples, women, children, etc... From what the reader can infer from the statements above, good policies and services come from realistic and grounded reasoning. Unfortunately, the Philippines' institution mandated for social welfare might have shortcomings in their area of responsibility. One example of this is the application of the 4Ps program in the Philippines. The 4Ps program is a program created by (another country) and it is said to be successful at that level. Being successful at that, the Philippines' social welfare institution therefore decided to adapt the same program here in the Philippines. By evaluating the current state of the program and without prejudice to possible improvements, one might say that it is already a failure in this level and period of time and there can be two simple reasons for that. First, if the institution claims that the program helped a lot of marginalized families, then we go to "how can we say that we helped?" by giving the family 400 pesos / child / month? By giving the family 500 pesos / month for health? These kinds of questions don't tell the impact of the program. It only states numbers and quantity but how about the quality of help that the program made? The point is, quality impact must be taken into consideration for the program to avoid developing dependency on its partner-beneficiaries. One can say that a program is good and of quality impact if ironically, it makes the program "useless" for the partner-beneficiaries in the long run. Once that happens, one can say that people's lives have really been uplifted. Second, after implementing the program for a couple of years, how come that funds are roughly liquidated or documented at least? This is a manifestation of the institution failing to administer and implement the program effectively and efficiently. In summary of the events related to the program, one can say that resources are not utilized in its full potential and there is the manifestation of mishandling of funds which can also lose the confidence of partners, local or international, who help fund the program.

After being able to identify the three areas of knowledge and its importance for social work, it is also an imperative to know social work's main purpose. Equipped with the three areas of knowledge and skills, a social worker is expected to enhance an individual's or group's social functioning. What is Social Functioning?

Social functioning is basically the interaction between the individual and his/her situation or environment. There is a distinction between the social situation and the social environment. The social environment can be treated as the complex combination of different social systems, structures and cultures, etc... while a social situation is a certain subset of a social environment. The study of one's social functioning therefore is an attempt to make sense of that person's realities. By being able to study one's social functioning, social workers are able to come up with the appropriate response to the client's problem. These responses are heavily based on the social workers' three general areas of knowledge combined.

There is a doctor from the United Kingdom named Eugene Heimler who was able to link social functioning to psychotherapy. The doctor's work became famous and was termed as the Heimler Method of Social Functioning (HSF). Basically, the HSF is a method for counselling where the therapist is taught to listen to the client not only by just hearing and understanding the words but also to infiltrate and "be" in the client's world. Being able to do so, the doctor believes that it would produce solutions to the problems through the client him/herself.

In summary, the three identified general areas of knowledge of social work: social welfare policies and services, human behaviour and the social environment, and social work practice are syntheses of the different borrowed knowledge from other disciplines which help social workers understand different client realities and their social functioning. By doing so, social workers are able to comprehend and connect with client's worldview and make solutions which fit their reality or re-create that reality if it posts any disadvantageous positions to the client or other individuals. The real challenge now for social workers is to strike a balance between theory and practice for their decisions to be always grounded and fit in the current realities of the society where he/she belongs, Praxis.