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# ***Social Work Relationship and Case Treatment In Social Work Profession***

By

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## **Introduction**

Social Work profession is characterized by a good working relationship also referred to as rapport. Social work is a profession that helps people to cope with or solve their social problems. According to Ekpe and Mamah (1997:1) "social work is one of the resources that society provides to help people meet their needs and facilitate their social functioning". Pincus and Manahan (1973:9) state that "social work is concerned with the interaction between people and their social environment that affects their ability to accomplish their life task, alleviate distress and realize their aspirations and values". A professional social worker cannot treat any case in social work practice without adequate involvement of social work skills and techniques and social work professional relationship. Thus, the importance of professional relationship in case treatment in social work cannot be overemphasized. It is in the light of this that "social work relationship and case treatments in social work profession" form the theme of this essay. Schubert (1982:106) observes that frequent reference has been made to the social worker- client relationship and the way it is manifested in the interviews. In this work attempt is made to present:

- (a) Social Work professional relationship
- (b) the development of relationship in Social Work,
- (c) common elements of Social Work Relationship,
- (d) types of Social Work Relationships,
- (e) factors affecting relationship formation in Social Work, and
- (f) professional relationship and case treatments in Social Work and

## **Social Work Professional Relationship**

In spite of the early recognition of relationship as a basic concept in social work, and in spite of the years of concern with the development and use of relationship in practice, according to Compton and Galaway (1977) "a clearly defined concept of the social work relationship is yet to be articulated."

Keith-Lucas (1972:8) defines the helping relationship as the medium, which is offered to a person in trouble through which he is given the opportunity to make choices, both about taking help and the use he will make of it. He identifies the qualities of the relationship as (a) Mutuality, (b) Reality and (c) Feeling. Perlman (1957) says that relationships is a condition in which two persons with some common interest between them, long term or temporary, interact with feelings. Relationship leaps from one persons to the other at the moment when some kind of emotion moves between them. They may both express or invest the same kind of emotions, they may express or invest different or even opposing emotions or one may express or invest emotion and the other will receive it and be responsive to it. In any case, a change or current of feeling must be experienced between two persons. Whether this interaction creates a sense of union or of antagonism, the two persons are for the time connected or related to each other.

According to Biestek (1957) the essences of relationship is an interplay, a mutual emotional exchange, an attitude, a dynamic interaction, a medium, a connection between two persons, a professional meeting, a mutual process. The purpose of relationship is that of creating an atmosphere, the development

of personality, a better solution of the client's problem, the means for carrying out function, stating and focusing reality and emotional problems, and helping the client make a more acceptable adjustment to a personal problem. Similarly, Pincus and Minahan (1973) write that a social work relationship can be thought of as an affective bond between the worker and other systems with which he may be involved and that relationships may involve an atmosphere of collaboration, bargaining or conflict.

The concept of relationship is central to all social work practice. The process of helping incorporates the relationship between the client and the social worker as a major medium of helping. According to Butrym (1976) "it is through the relationship that the person with a problem is supported and nurtured, can experience respect, acceptance, empathy and caring, and can be offered hope in his current plight for an improved future." This is best summarized up in Perlman's (1957) own words: That within the problem-solving approach is the relationship that warms the intelligence, sustains the spirit and carries the person forward in what would otherwise be a cool, rational process. Its rewards nurture and steadfastness and recognition make it possible to bear the frustrations and compromises that problem-work involves, since there are few life situations that yield easily to problem-solving efforts and fewer still that may be completely solved. Moreover, relationship developed offer the sense of oneness or identification of client with social worker. Relationship is a means to the end of problem solving and not an end itself.

According to Brammer (1973:48) "relationship is the principal process vehicle for both helper and helpee to express and fulfil their needs. Relationship is the chief means for meshing helper problems with helper expertise. Relationship emphasizes the affective mode, because relationship is commonly defined as the inferred emotional quality of the interaction.

#### **Development of Relationship**

Relationship in a social work helping process develops out of purposive interaction, out of the business with which the worker and the client (or other systems) concern themselves. It can not be presumed that the client is looking "for a helping relationship" when entering the social work situation, but rather that the client comes out of concern about a problem in which the professional relationship is instrumental in working toward a solution. We do not speak of the worker's "establishing a relationship" or "offering a relationship", neither do we speak of needing a good relationship before difficulties can be discussed. The relationship comes out of the communication about difficulties. It grows and develops out of purposive work. The professional relationship as an effective, experimental interaction should develop as necessary to the task. It is not necessarily pleasant or friendly, sometimes the problem worked out in reaction and anger, in conflict as well as in collaboration or bargaining. According to Keith-Lucas (1972) in a helping situation a relationship will grow wherever people demonstrate to others by their action and words that they respect the other, that they have concern for them and care what happens to them, and that they are willing both to listen and to act helpfully.

The fact that the relationship develops out of purposive work means that it has motion and direction and emergent characteristics. It grows, develops, and changes and when the purpose has been achieved, it comes to an end. The time structure is another variable, which directly affects the nature and rate of the development of the relationship. Whether time limits are imposed on the process arbitrarily by outside forces or are imposed as necessary for task accomplishment, they have a deep effect on the emergent quality of the relationship. The frequency of meetings and the amount of time the participants spend together affect the climate of the relationship and the speed with which it develops. The setting in which the worker and the other system find themselves will also affect relationship, since the setting interacts with time and purpose. In every instance the operational purpose will be affected by the setting, and the worker's position within it, and in most instances the limits of the purpose will also be imposed by the setting and the worker's position within it.

### **Common Elements of Social Work Professional Relationship**

According to Specht, Victory and Briscoe (1977:84) the relationships the social worker form with the people in the four systems of social work (client, change agent, action and target systems) are the medium through which he carries out the activities. They emphasized that although social workers form different relationships with different systems, there are common elements in all professional relationships which differentiate them from personal relationships. According to Pincus and Minahan (1973 :69) "three major characteristics of social work relationships can be identified. These elements are:

(a) **Purposefulness**

First, social workers form relationships for a professional purpose. The social worker forms a professional relationship for a purpose related to his planned change work.

(b) **Client Focused**

Second, in professional relationships the worker devotes himself to the interests of his clients and the needs and aspirations of other people, rather than his own interests.

(c) **Objectivity**

Third, the worker forms relationships based on objectivity and self awareness which allows him to step outside of his own personal troubles and emotional needs and to be sensitive to the needs of others.

According to Pincus and Minahan (1973) there are several reasons why the three professional characteristics named above are essential in social work relationships. Social workers receive sanctions from specific client systems and from the community that establishes and pays for social work service. These sanctioning sources expect the social worker to use his knowledge and skills to provide impartial, objective service in the best interests of the client. The social worker is expected to be motivated by ideals of service to others rather than personal profit and gains.

If the social worker does not maintain relationships based on objectivity and self-awareness, his own emotional reactions to other people will have an impact on his ability to achieve his purpose.

(d) **Types of Social Work Professional Relationships**

According to Specht, Victory and Briscoe (1977:84). A relationship can be thought of as an ~~affective~~ bond between the worker and other systems operating within a major posture or atmosphere of collaboration, bargaining or conflict.

Thus, in Social Work, a relationship could be essentially:

(i) collaborative, (ii) bargaining and (iii) conflictual in nature.

### **Collaboration Relationship:**

According to Pincus and Minahan (1973:72) social workers normally have collaborative relationships with clients, indeed, the essence of forming a working agreement or contract with a client is for the social worker and the client to agree on the goals for the change process and the methods to achieve these goals. The social worker agrees with the client to work together in the specified and defined problem of the client. Collaborative relationships with clients are facilitated by social work values that stress self determination and democratic decision making.

People will more readily follow through on a change effort and if necessary, take risks and make changes themselves, if they have sanctioned the change efforts, have helped establish the goals for change, and have developed trust and confidence in the worker. True collaborative relationships are possible only when there is agreement on the goals of the planned change effort and the methods for achieving the goals between the worker and his target system (those people the change agent needs to change or influence in order to accomplish his goals). However, both Rogers (1969) and Specht (1969) stress the importance of the target's perception of the worker's goals and methods. Interestingly, even if the worker believes his goals and the goals of his target are the same, if the target system perceives the goals as being different, it may resist collaborative relationships. The client's perception of the attitudes and procedures of the worker are crucial growth promoting or growth inhibiting characteristics of a helping relationship. Thus,



collaboration seems to be possible when the target believes it is in his self interest to collaborate or at the minimum, he will not lose through collaboration.

Collaborative relationship based on trust and mutual agreement on means and ends are feasible in many different situations; examples include:

- (a) A school social worker agrees to help a teacher work with a child who is disrupting a classroom.
- (b) A social worker at a child welfare agency meets with a group of pregnant unmarried women to help them think through alternative courses of action, and.
- (c) A worker with a community health planning agency helps agencies coordinate their services to the mentally retarded.

### ***Bargaining***

Pincus and Minahan (1973) emphasized that when social workers make their first contact with a potential client, action, or target system, the systems in a sense, are in a bargaining relationship, each is testing the other to determine what the other's goals are, what demand will be placed on all parties, and what the outcomes of the change efforts might be. If after this initial testing, the conditions amenable to collaborative relationships emerge, then a contract can be reached and collaborative relationships can follow.

The word bargaining implies that each party has something to gain as well as something to lose in the effort. According to Brager and Jorin (1969) often each party would rather concede something to the other than fail to reach agreement at all. If the other system perceives that the goals of the change agent may not be entirely in its own self interest and that demands will be placed on it to develop new skills or ways of relating and working with others, the bargain relationships may continue. As Specht (1969) puts it, bargaining is likely when one or the other parties expects that he will end up with more or less of something like money, facilities or authority.

Social workers and other systems may enter into bargaining agreement for four reasons. They include:

- (a) The cultural norm or value placed on working together to resolve differences appears to mandate at least a show of minimal cooperation and some attempt to resolve differences. This value makes it possible for a social worker to persuade several people to work with him, even if some of them mistrust him and one another and they share different goals.
- (b) A bargaining relationship may be the only way a system can acquire desired resources. For example, a patient in a mental hospital may agree to cooperate with a social worker and enter group therapy in return for special privileges.
- (c) The status or power relationships between different systems may force a bargaining situation. A truly collaborative relationship may be difficult to achieve between people of different statuses because collaboration often requires a distribution of power in which each party has an opportunity to influence the other.
- (d) The force of law may cause parties of unequal status into a bargaining situation. For example, a parolee is forced into a contract with his Parole officer. Unless a voluntary contract based on shared goals evolves, the two are essentially in a bargaining relationships.

### ***Conflict***

According to Pincus and Minahan (1973) if the bargaining relationship break down and the parties cannot reach agreement or accommodation or if polarization occurs between the perceived differences in the goals and demands of all parties, conflictual relationships may follow. They may also be inevitable if the shared goals of the change agent and client systems appear to pose a serious threat to the

self interests of the target system and are perceived by the target as requiring major changes in its functioning.

Conflict is also likely to follow if the conditions that led to the establishment of a bargaining relationship were not present at the outset of the change effort and if there appears to be no desire to negotiate differences. Specht (1969) believes that conflictual relationships involve modes of intervention in which context and disruption are the prevailing tactics. Contest or disruption is rooted in the competition for power in human relations.

The social worker faced situations when the use of conflictual relationships is required in order to achieve the shared goals of the worker and client system. A social worker acting on behalf of the community as client may have essentially a conflictual relationship with parent accused of child abuse.

A social worker involved in conflictual relationships on behalf of his client system may not always operate with the expected social work values of openness, mutual trust, and use such tactics as protest, demonstration, open confrontation, threat and court orders in his efforts to influence the target system, be it individual, group, or community organization or institution.

### **Factors Affecting Relationship Formation in Social Work**

According to Hepworth and Larsen (1997) relationship formation in social work is affected by many factors. These factors among others include the following:

#### **(i) *Ability to Relate***

The ability to become personally involved into personal associations vary greatly from person to person. A lot of variables usually influence the extent to which people usually allow themselves into relationship. These factors include a person's personal security and person's identity, past experience etc.

#### **(ii) *Physical and Emotional States of the Participant***

We know that people are usually not very approachable when they are bothered by a physical malaise or emotional problem. In addition to the ways in which these conditions affect the formation of the relationship, they are also significant for the beginning stage of the relationship. When the client and social worker have not yet come to know one another well enough to be sure if these reactions are or are not typical of one's behaviour.

#### **(iii) *Presence of Self Consciousness and Anxiety***

Anticipating feelings either for or against established prejudiced for entry into significant human association, for instance people develop anxious feeling when they are experiencing something for the first time. This anxious feeling could arise as a result of uncertainties of the agency, fear of rebuke etc. All affect the outcome of the relationship. Most often, people come prepared to act and to respond in a certain manner unless something wise happened.

#### **(iv) *Expectations***

People frequently tend to anticipate well before they first come into relationship, what possible gain, losses, or experiences that will accrue to them out of the relationships. The outcome of any relationship has a lot to do with the expectations of both the client and the social worker. Also if you have a very high expectation when you are going into a relationship, the relationship may turn out not being fruitful because your expectations was too much.

Goldstein (1973) in a study found out that "expectations are in fact the major determinant of human behaviour. He also went further to say that how persons expectancy are confirmed or unconfirmed will affect how they will come to understand the relationship, feel and act within it."

#### **(iv) Minimal Sharing of Values**

Before a social worker and client can form a good relationship, there is need for them to hold some basic values in common. There is also need to share certain beliefs and experiences. These values serves to establish sufficient commonalities. Without this, a persistent sense of distance or alienation will prevail thereby hindering the formation of the relationship. In addition, the worker and the client may continually experience conflicting cultural values or see their respective world differently, such difference in values may arise from the following: political, religious, social attitudes, life experiences and child rearing practices.

#### **Professional Relationship and Case Treatments in Social Work**

Social work professional relationship is needed in all case treatments in social work practice. In all the areas of social work which include: case work, group work, community development, social research, social planning and social administration, social workers cannot effectively work with the clients in these areas without establishing and using appropriate social work professional relationship.

The client(s) usually bring problem(s) to the professional social worker and the two work together to solve the problem through a good professional relationship that must be established between them and the problem has to be understood through the client's full explanation of the problem. The emphasis both in diagnosis and in treatment is on the client(s). For example, a husband may have frequent quarrels with his wife, a boy may not be allowed by his parents to marry the girl of his choice, a child with delinquent problem like truant from school or stealing from other children in the school, or a whole family may be disintegrated as a result of marital instability.

In social work treatment, solution to a client problem can be attained after one or many interviews that must be based on good working relationship with the client. In a case, usually one item needs to be added to a client's state of mind and everything becomes clear, logical, meaningful, enabling the client to utilize his coping capacities to solve his problem. This client may get an insight into his problem through the social worker clarification of the problem and working relationship between them.

Similarly, a client who suffers from phobic stressors like the fear of snake, the social worker could make use of systematic desensitization to treat the case and good relationship is the medium for the service. Systematic desensitization is a method of counter conditioning developed by whelp in 1938 based on his theory of Reciprocal inhibition. He observed that two opposing emotions cannot coexist simultaneously in an individual. For example, a person cannot be happy and sad at the same time.

Systematic desensitization involves breaking the anxiety - evoking stimulus into various aspects of it that is capable of evoking stress response. These aspects are constructed into a hierarchy from the least anxiety-evoking to the highest and gradually you expose the individual to the phobic stimulus that evoke the anxiety while the individual relaxes. This is because anxiety relaxation cannot coexist in an organism at the same time. For example, if a client comes to a social worker and his case is that of fear of snake, the social worker will enter into a collaborative relationship with him/her based on trust and mutual agreement on means and ends. The social worker will first make use of story about snakes, some snake pictures, which he will introduce to the client. This may be followed by some objects in form of snakes like rubber snakes before bringing in the main snake itself. The social worker exposes the client gradually to the snake that evokes the anxiety while the client relaxes. The worker continues like this until the client goes through all the experiences and at the end of which the client will notice that the fear of snake has gone and he is most willing to face the snake.

Professional relationship enables the social worker to utilize social work skills and techniques in case treatments. According to Onejeme (1998:111) social work practice has developed specific techniques for dealing with social problems. These consist of four major steps based on social work relationship, namely: (a) Assessment (b) Planning (c) Intervention (d) Evaluation and (e) Termination

An over-view of these major steps is essential here.

**Assessment** In working with the members of the family involved in family conflict, the worker begins with a process of assessment and establishing a working relationship. Assessment here refers to the social worker's effort to understand the situation before him. He analyses and conceptualizes what he observes. The social worker's assessment is the agency of the problem presented by the member(s) of the family involves both the clients and the worker in defining the true situation confronting them. The social worker tries to identify and state the problem with the client, the impacts of all the systems connected to the situation is noticed.

**Planning** After this assessment, this will be followed by planning with the members of the family. Planning refers to the identification of the nature of change sought with the members of the family. For example, the worker in planning with the members of the family will try to work out possible lines of action and alternatives. It could be how best or ways to provide resources, or ways to follow to see the members of the family make a better resources utilization. This planning will be followed by intervention or action.

**Intervention** This intervention specifies the activities and procedure in which the worker would engage with the clients to obtain the desired goal which they look ahead to achieve.

**Evaluation** Evaluation normally follows the intervention. This would enable the worker and the family members to determine whether the strategies used were appropriate to the goals they sought and whether the results achieved are indeed in keeping with the goals that they attempted with the family members in relation to the family conflict.

**Termination** Termination is the final stage in the helping process. The social worker ends work with the family members. This is if the method goals achieved the outcome goals. It also consists of exploring the meaning of and reactions involved in terms of feelings towards the termination. Termination is not just some point reached at the end of the planned change effort but an integral part of the whole process which the worker carefully prepares for and helps bring about.

#### **Conclusion**

In social work practice, crucial to the success of any case treatment is the establishment of professional relationship between the social worker(s) and the client(s). The client is made to understand that he/she is accepted as an individual with dignity and self worth and that his problem can be dealt with by himself/herself by working with the social worker on the problem.

Relationship is essentially the chief means for meshing client's problem with the social worker's expertise.

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