



## INNOVATIONS IN SOCIAL WORK AND MAJOR CHALLENGES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*Social work as a profession (and science) originated in the 19th century, in conjunction with many of the social ills presented by the industrial revolution. Social work was initially developed in the United States and England, though has since spread worldwide. Initial concerns addressed by social work included homelessness, poverty, and the inability to adapt to socially accepted or healthy values. Though the types of social work have since diversified to cover many at-risk and in-need segments of the population. Check out 25 of the most innovative initiatives, people, and moments in social work.*

**KEYWORDS:** *social work, Social Diagnosis, society, Social workers, Music therapy*

### INTRODUCTION

1917 Mary Ellen Richmond wrote Social Diagnosis which provided the foundations for modern social worker's scientific methodology. The book built upon her lectures as well as examples from her wide readings in history, psychology, law, and the human body. Other notable acts by Mary Ellen Richmond include obtaining legislation for deserted housewives, founding the Pennsylvania Child Labour Committee, the Public Charities Association, the juvenile court, and the Housing Association. She is often referred to as the mother of social casework.

Cognitive therapy is a type of psychotherapy developed by American psychiatrist Aaron Beck. It is based upon the thoughts, feelings and behaviours that are all connected and replacing those that are difficult or unhelpful with modified beliefs and less distorted thinking.

Social workers often work in conjunction with therapists to perform cognitive therapy by fleshing out the larger picture a Play therapy is an important tool used generally in children aged 3-11. It is a way in which children can express their feelings and experiences in a natural, self-guided yet healing way. By nature, play is children's vehicle for expression of needs, problems, and experiences. Play therapy is an excellent way to work through difficulties in their world. Music therapy involves interventions using creativity, singing, moving, and/or listening to music. This innovative form of help provides ways to communicate, especially for those who may find it difficult to express themselves using words. Strengths in the client's abilities can many times be transferred to other parts of their lives, thus proving an excellent aid. Working through problems in life as well as overall motivation goals can be addressed. Cases in which music therapy might be successfully applied are often identified by social workers focusing on the

well being of children, and have helped to gain widespread acceptance of the practice

### THERAPY

Existential therapy is based upon the existential philosophical works and is a form of psychotherapy that believes that client issues are based on inner conflicts surrounding 4 existential givens about the world around us: the inevitability of death, the responsibilities of being free, isolation, and meaninglessness. This can be used very well within the healing process, social issues, wellness and balance and has been advocated by a number of social workers, particularly when more traditional methods of healing fall short.

Geriatric social work is an innovative type of assistance for the older segment of the population focusing on preserving the quality of life of the aged by organizing a variety of services that many elderly are unable to organize for themselves. According to the Administration on Aging, people age 65+ represented 12.4 % of the population in 2000. This is expected to grow into 19% of the population by year 2030. This translates to about 72.1 million older persons. This field of social work targets problems & issues that often accompany aging, their need to develop as well as to cope.

The rise of crisis intervention as a concern for social workers was a very an initiative crucial to the formation of what many think of as social work today. Crisis theory provides a lens through which events that cause disequilibrium in a client's life are due to a crisis. Through utilizing societal support nets, the community, reassurance, and counselling, social workers help clients to regain a sense of equilibrium.

The impoverished and homeless are often the segment of society more affected by social workers. Innovation in addressing the needs of this subgroup of the population in

regards to frequent hunger, lack of access to education, and inadequate clothing and shelter are frequently evolving. The social worker often builds a relationship with the client, assesses the situation, then develops goals and an action plan to meet those goals. Many times the social worker will draw upon strengths that the individual possesses and help the client implement the action plan, while utilizing resources from the community. Acquisition of new skills and appropriate counselling are many times part of the social worker's job.

Marriage and family initiatives practiced by social workers seek to preserve the essential building blocks of our broader community, economy, stability, and culture: the family unit. This aspect of social work often considers the mental health of parties within the marriage and family, looking at the broader environment, and providing actionable plans for partners and families.

Initiatives in social work based upon behavioral theories is an interdisciplinary field combining psychology, medical and social sciences that are relevant to health, illness, and situational problems. Social work based upon behavioral theory is especially innovative as it can be used to help cope with physical disorders, teaching healthier coping mechanisms, rehabilitation and other social ills in society.

### **ECOLOGICAL STUDY**

Ecological social work is a relatively new initiative. The importance of the "person-in-environment" principle has long been recognized. Recently developed is the "environment-in-person" principle. This environment includes not only social and economic contexts but also the natural world. The reality that context is a primary determinant in quality of life is strongly emphasized by social workers pushing this form of social work. Sustainability of solutions, as well as altering the actual environment in which we find ourselves is often emphasized.

Psychiatric social work has risen in prominence since the beginning of the 1970s, when many of the mentally ill were transferred from state hospitals and private schools into the general population. While it's true that advances in medicine have rendered institutionalization of many unnecessary, many mentally ill still need a variety of supportive services in their life. That's where social workers come in, assisting with supportive housing, daily living skills, transitional employment, housing and counselling needs of the mentally ill.

Though their focus on a variety of support networks and subsections of the population, many social workers become exceedingly knowledgeable about the culture of organized crime and gangs. In acting on gang-related knowledge, social workers will often implement awareness programs, provide support for parents, inform community leaders, direct help and resources, and help develop policies for dealing with gangs in school systems.

Initiatives involving child and family social work are innovative and will continue to evolve with massive overhauls in education and the standards that the children of today must meet. This work provides assistance to improve the social and psychological functioning of children as well as their families. These initiatives help to maximize the well-being of the child and family, thus also interceding with school issues. They may assist parents, coordinate services for children in need, find foster homes for abandoned or abused children, and arrange adoptions.

Many innovative social work initiatives have been developed focusing on grief, dying, hospice and bereavement. There is progress in showing justice, non maleficence (duty to cause no harm for all), tolerance of accepting all viewpoints, showing respect for all persons, confidentiality, autonomy, and confidentiality. In addition to added techniques in dealing with grief and dying, there is great development in palliative or humane care as well as end of life care. This includes complex bioethical and legal issues such as right to refuse treatment, withholding treatment, termination of ventilator support and physician aid in dying. The social work in many of these situations involves helping individuals and families navigate complex interdisciplinary teams.

Innovative initiatives involving children with disabilities have been important and substantial. If sizable decisions need to be made, particular consideration should be given to special populations. Examples of these children are those with mental illness, developmental disability, intellectually deficiency, hearing or vision disability, profound autism, language impairment, and those very ill with a limited life span. The social work involved can gather information for resources, help provide respite care and provide individual, family, or home based family therapy. They are also important parts of a team to help guide educational issues or those needing to be placed in a long term care facility. Social work in this area is quickly expanding as it is best for the child, family and society if children with disabilities can transition to a productive or safe adult life.

The landscape of social work has changed dramatically as the need for spiritual inclusiveness has increased. Many different belief systems come about from people travelling or immigrating, therein lies the need to engage and assist this segment of society. If a social worker is to play an integral part in these situations, they must view the individual or family in a microcosm within their situation. They are also rapidly becoming parts of interdisciplinary groups who assist the spiritually and culturally diverse population.

The social work initiatives involving human rights are also rapidly changing. This requires innovative work based upon simple rights inherent to all human beings. This segment of social work becomes exceedingly complex with its international scope and the attached nation-centered regulations. Focal points for this form of social work include human trafficking, child labor, protection against enslavement, right to an education, protection of children, those with disabilities and the elderly.

Social workers encounter individuals, families, and communities affected by substance abuse disorders. Among these social workers, there are those who specialize in alcohol, tobacco and drugs of all sorts. This work can take place in mental health centers, hospitals, child welfare and aging services, correctional facilities, employee assistance programs and private settings. Long term assistance is many times required as these are chronic conditions. The social worker may provide services from beginning to end of assistance as well as aid in deciding when the individual re-enters society. For individuals with co-existing substance abuse disorders, social workers may be a member of interdisciplinary teams.

Evidence-based practice by social workers is an initiative based upon the idea of optimal behaviour in a planned and systematically organized environment. Evidence-based practice is derived from ideas based on optimal behaviour in a planned and systematically organized environment. This

initiative means that decisions are made after reviewing repeated rigorous data rather than simply relying on rules, single observations or what is customary, a massive shift in the development of social work methodologies.

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a form of social work that involves animals as a form of treatment. While this type of assistance can take many forms, the goals are to improve the client's social, emotional, or cognitive functioning. It is especially innovative as it tends to raise motivational effectiveness and may make a client feel less threatened. This initiative also tends to help build rapport between the social worker and client. Animals that have been used in therapy include domesticated pets, farm animals and marine mammals (such as dolphins). Animal assisted social work is based upon the idea that animals may signal us to safety, security, and feelings of well-being.

Social work initiatives involving those who have medical conditions is a burgeoning field that holds much promise. Since medical conditions affect far more than simply the body, there is a significant need for innovative assistance. Medical conditions affect emotional, financial and social needs. Social workers may serve as case managers, patient navigators, therapists, and locators for resources in the community. The largest percentage of health care social workers is in hospital settings, while others might be in outpatient centres.

## INITIATIVES

A highly innovative form of social work is known for using alternative or integrative techniques. This involves many approaches with origins outside of mainstream medicine or therapy. They are many times used in conjunction or overlapping with traditional approaches. Examples of alternative services used by or encouraged by social workers are deep breathing, meditation, massage, yoga, progressive relaxation, guided imagery, and acupuncture. Alternative medicine changes the game for many social workers in that it allows them a much wider set of tools through which to help a client.

Psychotherapy is central to some social work. Talk therapy is one of the central components of this type of therapy. It can be conducted with people of all ages as well as range in nature. It can be preventative, educational, or long-term. Social workers are sometimes able to work independently, but other times will need to be overseen by a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist.

Managing risk is one of the most important and complex areas of social work practice. When risk isn't correctly handled and responded to, the consequences can be catastrophic. For team managers, being responsible for the risks your social workers are holding, and knowing how to support and challenge their practice, can be daunting.

## MAJOR CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORK

Managing risk is at the heart of social work. But social workers can't remove risk or prevent all harm from taking place. As a manager, it's important that you accept this so that staff are free to practice positively and effectively. If staff live in fear of being scapegoat, they can practice in an overly risk averse way, which doesn't focus on the best outcomes for service users. But at the same time, you need to be confident about holding staff to defensible decisions and challenging poor practice where necessary.

Supervise, don't micro-manage. Your role as a supervisor is to maintain an overview of cases. Staff will be caught up in the detail of the work, whereas the distance you have should

enable you to see changes and risk more clearly. Ask incisive questions of social workers to pinpoint what they're most worried about, what has changed and what interventions are or are not working. This will help them develop their own skills of reflections and judgement.

Learn from serious case reviews. SCRs often highlight that social workers have lost sight of the child by becoming too focused on the parents, and being drawn into their vulnerabilities and problems. The oversight you have means you can ensure that social workers are remaining focused on the needs of the child/ren, and regularly seeing and talking to them.

Be aware of factors that can hamper risk management if they are not recognised or addressed. Social workers can start to minimise the risk of harm in their minds for reasons like burnout or compassion fatigue. For example, practitioners working with sex offenders can find that they have "brutalised" by reading court papers, and start to minimise offences. Supervisors need to understand this process and sensitively support staff to ensure they maintain an appropriate understanding of risk.

It is such an exciting time to be a social worker! It should be no surprise that social work is one of the fastest growing professions in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). Although one of the challenges of our profession continues to be good public understanding of what we do, it is a challenge born of our strength. Social workers defy easy categorization because we work within and across different systems, in a variety of roles, with people across the lifespan and in various communities. We are direct service providers that understand and affect policy. We are policy makers that understand the biopsychosocial dynamics of individuals and families. How can we be all of those things? The common denominator that ties these activities together is our most important role, that of being *change agents*.

The recent launch of *The Grand Challenge Initiative* by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare has great promise for social work for (at least) two very compelling reasons: 1) to communicate to the world what social workers do, and 2) to bring an army of allies in to the profession who want to make a big impact on the world.

The challenges for Social Work are designed to focus a world of thought and action on the most compelling and critical social issues of our day. Each grand challenge is a broad but discrete concept where social work expertise and leadership can be brought to bear on bold new ideas, scientific exploration, and surprising innovations (Uehara et al, 2015).

## CONCLUSIONS

There is little question that the social work profession needs to hone and sharpen its message about who we are and what value we bring. Students and practitioners of social work recognize the areas covered by the twelve grand challenges as areas that are quintessential social work. However, these are not the things that typically come to mind for people we talk to about what social workers "do." The Grand Challenges initiative gives us a vocabulary to educate people about the value that social work brings to the most important social issues of our time, to expand the public's understanding of our various roles, and to define ourselves rather than let others – or our settings – define us. It's high time that we do that.

The Grand Challenges initiative will also help us communicate to young people that social work is the profession to choose if you want to make a big impact on the

world. It will remind those of us who have been in the profession for a while that these are the reasons that we chose social work in the first place. There is good potential for the effort to breathe new life into the social work profession by challenging the ways in which we prepare students and reconnecting us to our roots. Remember, we are *change agents*. Our social work pioneers were not timid and neither should we be.

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