

VI. SOCIALINIO DARBO TEORIJA IR PRAKTIKA

UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF SELF IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract

Since the inception of social work numerous practice theories have been advocated. These range from the "Friendly Visitors" of the Charity Organization Society to the co-constructors of reality of post modern practice. Each of these perspectives emphasized the importance of "relationship" in practicing social work. This term in more recent times has been called "use of self." Rarely in the literature is either "self" or "use of self" defined. This article illustrates the links between practice theory and assumptions about self. The authors provide a relational perspective of self and then define both self and use of self for social work practice. Finally, an example of use of self is provided.

Keywords: self, use of self, knowledge in practice, relational theory, practice theory.

1. Introduction

The history of social work includes several paradigm shifts. From the focus on moral character emphasized by the friendly visitors of the Charity Organization Society to the co-construction of reality advocated by Parton and O'Byrne (2000), each shift has brought with it a change in the self-understanding of social work. With the change in self-understanding, the practice of social work has changed as well. These changes effected the most basic perspectives of social work including ideas about knowledge, self and relationship.

1.1. Technical-Rational Knowledge and Knowledge in Practice

One paradigm shift that has occurred in recent decades is toward evidence based practice models. While practice as conceived today is represented by a number of viewpoints, some practitioners believe that all interventions can be deduced from formal theory. This standpoint is based upon a technical-rational perspective (see Habermas 1972; Schon, 1983; and Gowdy, 1994). According to Kondrat (1995), technical-rational knowledge is based on "a kind of rationality in which

decisions are made by weighing alternate theories and alternate means relative to expected outcomes" (p. 411). In short, from this perspective social work becomes a science.

Yet social work has also held a long commitment to another mode of practice. While what social workers call this type of practice has changed over the years, the practice itself has always had a place of central importance within social work. The recognition of the importance of the relationship between the social worker and the client is pivotal to this form of practice. Within the U.S. literature the significance of the relationship is noted by Mary Richmond in *Social Diagnosis* (1917), Grace Marcus in *Some Aspects of Relief in Family Case Work* (1929), Virginia Robinson in *A Changing Psychology in Social Case Work* (1930), Jessie Taft in *The Dynamics of Therapy in a Controlled Relationship* (1933), Gordon Hamilton in *Theory and Practice of Social Case Work* (1940), Herbert Aptekar in *The Dynamics of Casework* (1955), Helen Harris Perlman in *Social Casework; a Problem-Solving Process* (1957), and Florence Hollis in *Casework: a Psychosocial Therapy* (1964), to name a few prominent authors. Over time the concept of "relationship" has evolved into the term "use of self."

This mode of practice emphasizing relationship is based on a type of knowledge different from technical-rational. Relationship, or use of self, is based instead on practical knowledge: knowledge-in-practice. According to Kondrat (1992) this type of knowledge is developed in the interactive domains of practical, value laden beings acting in the world. Social work's commitment to this second type of knowledge is reflected throughout the practice literature in the importance of the concept "use of self."

2. Perspectives on the Use of Self

Among practitioners, "use of self" is variously defined as the social worker's honesty and spontaneity (Davies, 1994), his or her genuineness, vulnerability, and self awareness in interaction (Edwards and Bess, 1998), as well as the mindful use of one's belief system, the ability to be empathic, a willingness to model and share one's self, and the ability and willingness to judiciously self-disclose (Dewane, 2005). These qualities-- honesty, genuineness, awareness, etc-- are significant in relation to the underlying theory that provides a definition of self and mechanisms for change. All of these attempts to define use of self appear to have in common an important implication. According to these definitions, the worker brings a solid, constant self to the professional interaction.

Rather than approaching use of self from the perspective of self as an object (that is a relatively stable, objective entity) the authors are suggesting that we may benefit from approaching self from the perspective of self as process. From this perspective, self cannot be considered in isolation. Rather, self only exists within a process in relation to an "other." The "self" of which one becomes aware and uses mindfully in social work practice is the result of the accumulation of past interactions as well as the specific interaction with *this* client at *this* time, for the specific purpose of *this* social work practice. It is the current interaction that provides the process that maintains, modifies and re-creates the accumulated past interactions. This process also maintains, modifies and re-creates the self.

2.1. Theoretical Perspectives and the Nature of Self

This redefinition of self is indicative of another shift in thinking since the time of early social work. Underlying the perspective proposed in this work is a theory of self that can be found in both the constructionist and relational theories of psychotherapy, as well as some sociological literature.

Representatives of the constructionist psychotherapies¹ which address the notion of self as a non-concrete, non-continuous phenomenon include Kenneth Gergen (1999) and William Lax (1996), to name just two. Gergen stated "[t]he concept of the self as an integral, bounded agent is slowly becoming untenable" (p. 202). This is true, he averred, due to significant cultural change. The sense of self is the result of interactions within a community. Relationships within a community confirm the sense of a continuous self that one holds. The fact that one no longer abides continuously within a single community, and because the bonds which create the expectations and obligations that define the self are not constant over time, the sense of self as an unvarying entity has eroded.

Lax's (1996) understanding of self is similar to Gergen's (1999). For Lax, self is a product of interacting with others who perceive that they understand one. Self is created and maintained in the narrative process with others.

¹ The author (M. A.-C.) uses the term "constructionist" here with a specific intent. The perspective is a combination of constructivist and social constructionist perspectives. The term "constructionist" seemed the most efficient way to communicate this blending.

This narrative or sense of self arises not only through discourse with others, but *is* our discourse with others. There is no hidden self to be interpreted... A permanent self is merely an illusion that we cling to, a narrative developed in relation to others over time that we come to identify as who we are [emphasis in original] (p. 200).

Relational theorists in respect to this topic include a number of psychoanalysts. Psychoanalytic relational theory, it must be noted, sees itself largely as the inheritor of ideas generated by Object Relations theory, Interpersonal psychology, Self psychology, and a host of other sources (Mitchell and Aron, 1999). The current thinking among relational analysts is that a stable sense of self is a developmental product that is achieved through the process of internalizing the primary caregiver's experience of the infant. This sense of self, which is a product of interaction, may optimally feel stable. But in fact "[t]here is no 'self,' in a psychologically meaningful sense, in isolation, outside a matrix of relations with others. Neither the self nor the object are meaningful dynamic concepts without presupposing some sense of psychic space in which they interact..." (Mitchell, 1988, p. 33).

Pre-dating these traditions and contributing to them is the work of George Herbert Mead (1934). According to Mead, the self is created within the process of interaction:

The self has a character which is different from that of the physiological organism proper. The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his [*sic*] relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process, pp. 135-136).

Mead (1934) is making a distinction between human beings as organisms, biological entities, and selves. From his perspective the self develops from an interactive process with others. It is necessarily social.

Along with Pierce (1960) and Cooley (1992), Mead (1934) provided the foundation for symbolic interactionism. This is a sociological perspective that views humans self as an initiating actor who continually adjusts his or her behavior to the actions of other actors. These adjustments require interpretations of the other actor. This requires treating the actions symbolically. The process rests upon one's ability to think about and to react to others and one's own actions and even one's self as a symbolic object. The symbolic interactionist sees humans as active, creative participants who actively and jointly construct their social world. This tradition has been continued by Herbert Blumer (1969) who coined the term "symbolic interactionism," Harold Becker (1963), Erving Goffman (1959), and Norman Denzin (1989), among many others.

3. Use of Self in Social Work Practice

If the self is thus created in ongoing interaction, the importance of the uniqueness of the specific interaction cannot be understated. Just as the social worker undergoes a process of self creation during the course of working with a client, the client likewise brings a self-in-process to the event.

The client's self in terms of knowledge of self, meaning systems and worldview is like the worker's in some important ways, but in many equally important ways the client is different. The client and the worker have similar enough meaning systems that they are able to communicate though these systems. Nonetheless, they are not identical. The client carries different meanings than the social worker in relation to events, including the event that is unfolding with the social worker. The meaning of the interaction to the client and how the client's self will develop and unfold in this interaction is unknown to the worker and is not predictable. Even for the near future the client's self does not yet exist though it is unlikely to be a substantial departure from the current self in process. How that client's unfolding self will affect the development of the social worker's self develops is equally unpredictable. The not-yet-existing self and the ongoing differences in experience between the social worker and the client make the content of the process likewise unpredictable, hence the application of technical-rational knowledge is impossible.

From the perspective of self as process, interaction becomes a significant concept deserving of considerable attention. To understand interaction, let us first examine the notion of action. Action on the part of any individual requires agency, that is, an element of indeterminacy and choice. One chooses to do something with an end result in mind. To put the choice into action one needs to assess the situation and develop a strategy. This process--assessment and strategy development--may include such things as interpreting feelings and/or selectively attending to information from past experiences that may be relevant. While past experiences and here-and-now judgments interact continually in the unfolding of the action, both require interpretation. The meaning of experience is captured through reflection, at times exceedingly brief reflection, upon the experience (Palmer 1969).

Interpretation leads the actor to determine at each moment what is relevant to this process, what feelings one is experiencing that may alter the course of action, and what experiences past and present mean. One of the ways the actor engages in the process of interpretation is through the use of theory-like knowledge of the world that each individual holds. Called variously folk psychology, implicit theories, lay theories, naïve theories or causal schemata (Brunner, 1986, 1990; Heider, 1958; Piaget, 1960), these theories organize knowledge (Murphy and Medin, 1985), and give priority to some phenomena over others. These theories are held in narrative form and offer predictions, interpretations, and explain how and why things happen (Brunner, 1986; Gopnik and Melzoff, 1997).

Some actions are upon an inanimate object. Other actions are with individuals or groups. The second category the authors are titling “interaction” and occurs between at least two acting individuals. When all of the content of the process of action is occurring for two actors in relation to each other, simultaneously, (in other words, during an interaction) there are at least two additional elements involved. First, through a process of interpretation, one actor must adequately identify the intentions of the other actor. Second, the other chooses to respond or not, and if that individual chooses to respond a particular response is chosen. For the interaction to be successful, the “self” needs to act in a way that the “other” is likely to understand. That is, based on the “self’s” folk psychology, one makes an educated guess about the other’s folk psychology, and then acts in a way s/he assumes will be interpreted in a specific manner. The actor must predict how the other is likely to interpret his or her act before s/he engages in the act. In turn, the “other” must interpret the act, which simultaneously requires an assumption about the first actor’s folk psychology, and create a response that is likely to be understood. This perspective has been illustrated by both Mead (1934) and Bakhtin (1981). In the process of interaction both self and other are maintained, modified and re-created. That is, both parties are different as a result of the interaction.

Given this perspective, what does the term use of self mean in social work practice? To answer this question one must first define social work. The authors’ working definition, and it is only a partial definition, is that social work is a purposeful relationship intended to produce intentional change. Given this definition the use of self in social work practice is the establishment, maintenance and continuation of a purposeful relationship through a pattern of interaction that is likely to produce the desired change. The use of self is the purposeful engagement by the social worker of the client. The discussion above illustrates the consideration in this type of engagement.

4. Case Example

The following excerpt is from a research interview that was tape recorded and transcribed. In this instance, the purpose of the interaction was for the social worker to gain understanding of the experiences the research participant had relative to physical symptoms doctors had determined were somatic in nature, and to learn what meaning experiences associated with the symptoms had to the participant in relation to specific social contexts. It must be stressed that if the purpose of the interaction was different (e.g. if the worker was in a therapeutic role), the use of self would be quite different.

In this interview, the social worker began with the “folk psychology” belief that people tend not to want to share embarrassing or otherwise painful experiences, especially not with strangers. The worker held the additional belief that if the study participant felt safe—understood and respected—she would be more likely to share more detailed and intimate material. Therefore, there was a twin purpose to this interaction: to gain information, as well as to constantly monitor and adjust the relationship so that the study participant felt safe enough to provide the information sought.

Two final notes must be mentioned. In this transcribed excerpt, there is no indication of the metacommunication that is occurring. Vocal qualities as well as facial expressions and body language were important in the exchange, but cannot be conveyed in written medium. Second, while the interaction results from two actors the analysis is being conducted only from the perspective of the researcher. A similar process of interpretation and selection of response, we believe, was occurring on the part of the respondent though perhaps not a consciously.

S.W.: You indicated on the questionnaire that you have experienced some physical symptoms in your life that doctors have said have no medical cause. Could you tell me what those symptoms are?

There were several purposes to this opening. First, the social worker wanted to get specific diagnostic information onto the tape as data. The worker held the belief that talking about concrete

aspects of the experience is emotionally easier to discuss than feelings. To this end, the social worker posed the question as a “warm up” to more “difficult” material.

At this point establishing the relationship as safe, warm, and understanding in order to facilitate the participant’s disclosure was of primary importance. She defined the somatic symptoms as “symptoms... doctors have said have no medical cause.” This was intended to communicate to the participant that the social worker is separate from the doctors, and she does not necessarily accept the doctor’s explanation (or lack thereof) of the symptoms. Rather, the social worker is leaving space for the participant to define her own experience, and the worker is attempting to communicate that she is accepting of the participant’s understanding.

The social worker is inviting the participant to act by posing the question. The invitation can be accepted or declined. In this way, if the participant responds she is taking an active role in the process. It becomes equally “her” interaction. By posing a question rather than beginning with a statement the worker was attempting to minimize the power differential between the two.

P: Well, when I was younger, it was probably, I think third grade, when I got my period for the first time. I used to get like, just severe cramps that if I was walking and got a cramp, it would just put me down on my knees, and they really couldn’t find any cause for that at all.

The worker understood this response to be tentative. She believed that the participant’s response had a sense of finality to it. It seemed to the worker to be compliant, without being expansive. The social worker wondered if the participant was testing the worker to see how safe this exchange would be. The interviewer wanted to participant to elaborate more, and reinforce safety.

S. W.: OK. Any other physical symptoms that you’ve experienced or talked to the doctor about?

Again, the manifest content here is the symptoms. The latent content, however, is still the relationship. Tone of voice and body language (not available through the medium of transcripts) indicate that the social worker is really interested and accepting. “OK” indicates that the social worker is not going to challenge the participant’s account. Again, the social worker was aware of the twin purpose of this interaction: to get specific information, and in order to do that adequately, to help the participant feel understood and appreciated.

Another aspect of this response was that the social worker was still interested in getting the account of the symptoms, rather than delving into their meaning. For this reason there were aspects of the participant’s response that the interviewer chose not to pursue, such as the degree of pain associated with the symptom, as well as the participant’s experience of the doctor not finding any cause.

P: Just, you know, I was diagnosed with an ulcer at an early age, you know, no specific cause for that either.

The social worker understood this response to again be short, with a sense of finality. At this point the social worker believed that the participant was creating a boundary. The social worker believed that if she continued to press the participant might experience this as a boundary violation, which could be experienced by the participant as non-attuned, or even invasive. As the relationship was a prerequisite to the rest of the work, the interviewer chose to drop the subject.

Upon secondary reflections, the social worker has come up with an alternate theory, which is that the point the participant made twice now was that the doctors didn’t find a cause for the symptoms. Perhaps she was indicating that this is where she wanted the interaction to go. However, the worker did not pursue this direction based on the format of the interview, which was itself based on the belief that concrete descriptions are easier to discuss than feelings.

S.W.: So these have been bothering you since childhood?

On the manifest level, the interviewer wanted to get duration of the symptoms into the record for the purposes of the study. Again, the choice to move on was out of the desire to respect what the social worker believed the participant was establishing as a boundary.

P: Um hm. And migraines.

At this point the social worker understood that the participant was offering new information that was not specifically elicited. The worker interpreted this to mean that the participant was engaged enough to move forward with the social worker’s agenda. Her activity level, and perhaps her degree of engagement, seemed to move in a positive direction to the interviewer.

S.W.: Who knows about your physical symptoms? The painful periods, the migraines, and the ulcers?

The interviewer moved forward in the manifest content by eliciting information concerning the arenas in which meaning may have been elaborated in relation to the symptoms. Yet the reiteration of the symptoms that the participant indicated was a relational message that the worker had been listening to the participant, and that the participant's contribution was important. It was as reassertion of the relationship.

P: Well, my mother knew about, about the painful periods 'cause she, on occasion, I would end up in the emergency room or at the doctor's office. Probably my aunt, 'cause she's a nurse. Other than that, I don't really think anyone.

At this point the social worker understood the participant's response to be content filled. The social worker interpreted this to indicate that the participant was becoming less guarded (or, based on secondary reflections, perhaps we were moving into an area she wanted to discuss). The worker believed that the participant understood now that her account was valued and felt a degree of safety that had previously been missing. The ending of the production seemed to invite further exploration.

S.W.: I'd like to find out more about the interactions that you had with these three people about your symptoms. I'm going to start with the doctors in the emergency room. Can you tell me what a typical trip to the emergency room looked like?

In this production the social worker was attempting to clarify her purpose, and lay the foundation for what was going to follow. By giving the participant this preview, the worker was attempting to take the mystery out of the interview. The social worker was acting on the folk psychology belief that when people know exactly what to expect from another in interaction, this builds a sense of safety and control into the interaction. The worker further believed that a sense of safety and control are important qualities in a relationship.

5. Discussion

Through this case example, the authors wish to demonstrate that in order to move toward the purpose of a professional interaction, the social worker must act on the folk theories he or she formulates in the process of interaction. Acting on these folk theories may take place outside of the social worker's awareness. When this is the case, the success of the actions so formulated is serendipitous. When, however, the social worker can bring his or her folk psychology into awareness and test the theories about the other's motivations as they arise, the worker is in a better position to move the interaction toward its intended goal.

This understanding of use of self is based on two shifts in thinking in social work. The first is the notion that not all of the important aspects of a professional interaction are optimally based on formal theory. Indeed, every interaction requires that the participants act on theories they hold about the other's motivation and the meaning of the interaction for the other. The authors are suggesting that becoming conscious of these theories as they arise, as well as testing those theories rather than assuming them to be "true" are important aspects of the purposeful use of self in social work practice.

The second shift that is important to this work is in the definition of self. By defining self as a process that is created and maintained in interaction, rather than as a solid constant entity alters the understanding of "use of self." If self is a process that is highly contextual, the application of formal theory becomes untenable in the use of self. Undoubtedly, as new perspectives and paradigms arise, social workers will continue to refine our definition of use of self to enhance our practice.

6. Conclusion

Through the use of dialogue taken from a research project, the authors have demonstrated how a social worker's use of self may unfold in a professional interaction. The authors have argued that such use of self may never be reducible to formal theory, largely because the process is unpredictable at the outset. Self, rather than a solid continuous entity, is instead defined as a process. Each subsequent act by the worker and client are determined by the meaning that is created in the previous act.

Use of self as here defined can be broken into several components. Both actors must consider their own and the other's agency, which is broken down into assessment and strategy development.

These processes are themselves contingent upon interpretation and selective attention on the part of both parties. Interpretation is based on the folk psychology or implicit theories about motivation each carries in narrative form.

For use of self to successfully help a client move toward a desired end, the social worker must formulate a theory about the client's motivations, and act on that formulation in a way that the client can understand as meaningful to the current context. The worker's action must simultaneously communicate an approximation of the client's understanding of the current situation, as well as invite the client to continue the interaction. This may mean that the client affirms that he or she feels understood, or it may invite the client to attempt to revise the social worker's understanding of the client's meaning system. Each must continually adjust their own folk psychology to come ever closer to the other's, leaving enough open-endedness to the process in order to change one's theory about the other when the necessity becomes apparent. In this manner meaning is continually shifting, being revised in a direction that ultimately benefits the client.

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SAVĖS PATIES SĄVOKOS TEORINĖ INTERPRETACIJA IR JOS NAUDOJIMAS SOCIALINIO DARBO PRAKTIKOJE

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Summary

Socialinio darbo, kaip profesinės veiklos, pradžioje jos intervencijos objektu laikyti klientų tarpusavio santykiai. Laikui bėgant socialinio darbo objektas buvo pervadintas savęs paties naudojimo praktika. Vis dėlto socialinio darbo teorijoje sąvoka „pats“ menkai apibrėžta. Iš dalies tai galima paaiškinti socialinio darbo teorijų kaita, kurių kiekviena pateikdavo vis kitokią „savęs paties“ sąvoką. Pavyzdžiui, Malonių labdaros lankytojų organizacijos darbuotojai kliento savimone tapatino su jo/s asmenimi. Psichoanalitinei teorijai tapus socialiniu darbu, individo „pats“ pradėtas sieti su jo/s psichika, t. y. *id*, *ego*, *super ego*. Vėlesnė naujovė „paties“ suvokimą sieja su socialiniu veiksmu pagrįsta George'o Herberto Meado (1934) teorija. Visos trys socialinio darbo teorijoje vartojamos „savęs paties“ koncepcijos – konstruktyvistinė, socialinio veiksmo, ir psichoanalitinė – individo „pats“ vertina kaip socialinės sąveikos procesą su „kitu“. Taigi „pats“ ir „kitas“ yra neatskiriami. Šiame straipsnyje „paties“ sąvoka tapatinama su socialiniu sąveikos procesu, kuriančiu socialinį pasaulį. Empiriniai pavyzdžiai pateikiami iliustruoti šį „paties“ suvokimą.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: pats, savęs paties teorija, socialinio darbo teorija, Sigmundas Freudas, George'as Herbertas Meadas.