

Psychotherapy Guidebook



**SOCIAL
CASEWORK**

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Psychotherapy Guidebook* edited by Richie Herink and Paul R. Herink

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DEFINITION

Social Casework, like the field of social work as a whole, has grown out of a variety of specializations in diverse fields of practice. Current casework theoreticians are not working in the direction of creating a unitary theory or definition of casework; no attempt at such a definition could possibly be accurate or adequate. Social Casework is a general heading for a number of different treatment approaches utilized by caseworkers in different settings. A recent volume entitled *Theories of Social Casework* contains not only chapters on the three major approaches that have developed in casework, but on four other major treatment approaches utilized by caseworkers; behavior modification, family therapy, crisis intervention, and adult socialization (Roberts and Nee, 1970).

In spite of this diversity, there are important characteristics that tend to unify and define any form of casework practice and that are central to the tradition from which casework has grown. These characteristics include:

1. A commitment to understand, differentiate, and to act for and with the individual

2. A traditional role in promoting individually satisfying and socially constructive living
3. A commitment to a base in the behavioral sciences
4. A commitment to the operation of the humanitarian values of the social work profession.

HISTORY

The modern practice of Social Casework originated with the “friendly visitor” in the Charity Organization Society of the late 1800s. Since the Charity Organization Society was concerned with moral reform, as well as the alleviation of poverty, the friendly visitor was utilized to separate the “worthy” poor who were deserving of assistance from the “unworthy” poor who were not entitled to help.

By the turn of the century, the simplistic and moralistic distinctions between “worthy” and “unworthy” poor had begun to break down. There was growing recognition that the poor were often victims of social circumstances beyond their control, and with this recognition came a change in the function of the friendly visitor or caseworker. The caseworker still went to the homes of the poor but now the job was to gather relevant facts about the case, develop an appropriate treatment plan based on these facts, and present the treatment plan to the family to be carried out. It was seen, however, that

families often did not cooperate with even the most carefully developed treatment plan. In an attempt to deal with this difficulty, the process of fact gathering became more and more complicated and attention also shifted to the establishment of a friendly relationship that would help to insure eventual cooperation with the treatment plan. With these developments professional preparation began to be important, and by 1904 a full eight-month training program was being offered at the New York School of Philanthropy (now the Columbia University School of Social Work).

All through their history, social workers have dealt with the most needy and disadvantaged members of the society. Under the pressure of massive individual and social problems, development of theory in the field has often lagged behind the implementation of pragmatic techniques of practice. This was particularly true in the early years of the field and the first attempt to define Social Casework did not come until 1915. This first definition was offered by the great, early theoretician Mary Richmond, who saw social casework as “...the art of doing different things for and with different people by cooperating with them to achieve at one and the same time their own and society’s betterment.”

Although many basic principles and values were beginning to be articulated, the actual process of casework remained in the dead end of advice giving until World War I. The treatment of “shell-shocked” soldiers

began to popularize the concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis, and in a short time these concepts swept casework.

The idea of “resistance” now made it possible to explain the impasse that caseworkers had reached with their clients. The emphasis shifted in casework to an interest in psychological development and “psychotherapeutic” modes of treatment. These ideas continued to dominate casework all through the 1920s and the social reform tradition in social work was pushed to the background (Briar and Miller, 1971).

During the 1920s caseworkers continued to move into more and more diverse areas of practice, such as “medical” social work and “psychiatric” social work. This increasing diversity gave rise to an attempt in the field to articulate the generic principles that underlie all of casework practice. The first great milestone in this attempt was the Milford Conference of 1929. But neither the work of this conference nor that of subsequent theoreticians has laid the issue to rest. The current trend in casework is in the direction of acceptance of the diversity of casework theory and practice.

The 1930s were a time of particular importance and complexity in the development of casework, and a number of the events of that decade have had profound and lasting effects. In 1930 the first great theoretical split in casework as introduced by the publication of Virginia Robinson’s book *A*

Changing Psychology in Social Case Work. Robinson's book announced the "functional" point of view that had developed at the School of Social Work of the University of Pennsylvania in opposition to the psychoanalytic concepts that dominated casework in the 1920s; the controversy of the "functional" versus the "diagnostic" approaches was to permeate casework theory for many years.

Another long-standing controversy in casework has been that of a "social re-form" approach versus an individual treatment approach: One of social work's greatest traditions is rooted in the social action history of leaders such as Jane Addams of Hull House. During the 1920s, the social reform tradition in casework was pushed into the background by the psychodynamic concepts that dominated the field at that time. The Great Depression of the 1930s renewed the awareness of caseworkers of the inextricable interrelatedness of society and individual, and revived their interest in bringing about social changes that would benefit the individual. The social change versus individual treatment issue was not laid to rest, however, and it has continued to echo throughout the years. A current, and extremely promising, resolution of this issue lies in the direction of discarding those concepts and classifications that have proved to be so problematic. In this conception, "treatment" intervention can be at either a social or an individual level, depending on which is most relevant and appropriate (Siporin, 1975).

The introduction of the concepts of ego psychology in the late 1930s was of particular importance for social casework and these concepts have started to provide a point of rapprochement for many of the theoretical splits in the field. An immediate effect was that the concept of the ego as the bridge between inner and outer reality started to provide a theoretical synthesis for Social Casework's dual concerns with the "social order and the psychological depths" (Briar and Miller, 1971). The gradual spelling out of the treatment implications of developmental ego psychology has resulted in some lessening of the theoretical diversity between the three major casework approaches: "psychosocial," "functional," and "problem of the unconscious. The functional approach centered around the School of Social Work of the University of Pennsylvania and was deeply influenced by the ideas of Otto Rank, who had served on the faculty of that school. The term "functional approach" comes from the emphasis that this method places on the use of agency function as basic to the helping process in casework.

There are three central and defining characteristics of the functional approach:

- 1) The functional school works from a psychology of growth. It sees the center for change as residing not in the caseworker but in the client, with the worker's method consisting of engaging in a relationship process that releases the client's own power for choice and growth. The functional group emphasizes man as "determining himself from himself and

from the relationships and external conditions of his life and as acting on and using relationships, including a potential relationship with the caseworker in the continuing creation of himself...

- 2) The purpose of the social work agency is viewed as a partial or concrete instance of social work's overall purpose and as giving focus, direction, and content to the worker's practice. Casework is not considered a form of psychosocial treatment...but a method for administering some specific social service...

- 3) The functional school developed the concept of social casework as a helping process, through which an agency's services are made available; the principles involved are those having to do with the initiating, sustaining, and terminating of a process in human relationship. This means that the worker enters into the relationship with an avowed lack of knowledge of how it will turn out...only client and worker together can discover what can be done with the help offered. The worker's responsibility is for control of his part in the process, not the achievement of any predetermined end. ... (Smalley and Bloom, 1977)

The functional school does not deny the existence of the irrational or the unconscious and the potentially crippling effects of traumatic early experiences. The psychological base for functional practice is, however "...a view that the push toward life, health, and fulfillment is primary in human nature, and that a person is capable throughout his life of modifying both

himself and his environment according to his changing purposes and within the limitations and opportunities of his changing capacities and changing environment.” The purpose of social work then is “... the release of human power ... for personal fulfillment and social good and the release of social power for the creation of the kind of society, social policy, and social institutions that make self-realization most possible for all men.” (Smalley and Bloom, 1977).

The Problem-Solving Approach

This casework approach was developed by Helen Harris Perlman of the University of Chicago in the mid-1950s. Although this approach branched off from the “diagnostic” approach, which was dominant in casework at the time, it is not a radical departure and is still rooted in psychodynamic theory. The problem-solving approach has drawn from concepts of ego psychology, from certain perspectives of the functional school, and from philosophical views of existentialism (Perlman, 1977).

The core assumption of this approach is that human living is a problem-solving process and although people coming for casework help have specific problems, their fundamental difficulty is in their method of solving problems. The focus of casework therefore is not on the specific problem, but on the problem-solving capacity (ego functioning) of the client as revealed through

the problem and the attempts at solution.

The actions of the problem-solving approach have the following aims:

1. To release, energize, and give direction to the client's motivation, that is, to minimize disabling anxiety and fears and provide the support and safety that encourage a lowering of disabling defenses ... and a freeing of ego energies for investment in the task at hand.
2. To release and then repeatedly exercise the client's mental, emotional, and action capacities for coping with his problem and/or himself in connection with it...
3. To make accessible to the client the opportunities and resources necessary to the solution or mitigation of the problem — those opportunities in his environment that are essential conditions and instruments for satisfactory role performance (Perlman, 1977).

The problem-solving model emphasizes the importance of the understanding of the person in the social and interpersonal context, and there is an assumption that the problem will be experienced as a difficulty in person-to-person or person-to-task relationships rather than as an intrapsychic difficulty. The problem-solving approach is similar to the psychosocial approach in its emphasis on the centrality of the relationship between caseworker and client as the context in which the problem solving

takes place. There is a similarity to the functional approach in the emphasis on the client, rather than the caseworker, as carrying within himself the potential for recognizing the nature of the difficulties and resolving them; the process of casework aims at helping the client to mobilize and utilize these potential capacities.

In the problem-solving approach, two major categories of help are offered to the client:

One is to make necessary resources available or accessible and to facilitate the client's use of them by interceding with or modifying the attitudes of those who control those resources. The other is to guide and stimulate the person's use of his own faculties in working over the feelings, thinking, and behaviors that may cause or ameliorate his problem (Perlman, 1977).