


SECOND EDITION

THE GENERAL METHOD OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE



A Problem Solving Approach

Maria O'Neil McMahon

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A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH

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Foreword to the Second Edition

A serious need in social work is a practice framework for beginning professional practitioners that reflects the distinctions between beginning and advanced practice methods, goals, and skills. Professional values, purpose, and core knowledge are common to both. But despite many helpful attempts to clarify the differences, confusion persists about what the beginning professional social worker “really does” and whether it is “really different” from what the advanced professional social worker “really does.”

The General Method of Social Work Practice helps meet that need and reduce that persistent confusion. In developing a framework for the distinctive practice method, goals, and skills for the beginning level worker, Dr. Maria O’Neil McMahon constructs what she calls the “holistic foundation.” It comprises selected concepts from general systems theory, ecological ideas, and professional wisdom derived from her experience as a social work educator and practitioner. Incorporating this foundation, students focus their perceptions and conceptions for practice on people and environment as a unitary system. People are regarded as biological and psychological beings engaged in continuous exchanges with their social environments, physical settings, and cultural contexts. This knowledge foundation is broad but is not as developed in depth as it would be at the advanced level.

But the book is not overburdened with theory. It is a how-to book written with the learning needs, concerns, and interests of students in mind. It anticipates their experiences and questions as they begin their methods course and enter the practicum. Not only is it a text for the classroom, it will also be helpful to field instructors in planning appropriate practice experiences. Curriculum developers in foundation social work education

will find some organizing principles to use as thematic strands in curriculum design.

Basic social work processes from engagement through evaluation and termination are described and analyzed for individual, family, group, and community work. Skills and techniques associated with each, identified as appropriate for the beginning practitioner, are described and illustrated. Dr. McMahon seeks to enhance the capacities for feeling and thinking, understanding and knowing, caring and doing, in her student readers. Diagrams to clarify concepts, supplemented by imaginative exercises for skills development, support this learning objective. Diverse practice illustrations show how beginning social workers use the General Method to provide services to people experiencing a variety of human predicaments in a variety of environments. Goals set by client and practitioner and the skills of the Method are clearly delineated, and careful attention is paid throughout to the diversity of race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Thus the reader gains clarity about the differences between the two levels of practice and education for practice. The entry-level practitioner learns and applies a general method of working with people and their environments, with limited but significant goals and circumscribed skills of moderate complexity. The beginning worker is skilled in general service provision, in assessing and managing readily amenable and accessible person-environment needs and problems, and in making informed judgments about when to refer more complex or intractable problems to the advanced practitioner.

As the author's analysis and the practice examples show, beginning social workers are prepared to relieve life problems and environmental needs not requiring complex interventions. They provide reassurance, support, and tangible resources; link people to formal and informal helping systems; furnish needed information; and work collaboratively with others in assuring continuity, coordination, and comprehensiveness in basic social welfare services. They are skilled in outreach activities with defined populations in at-risk situations. And their practice in both urban and rural areas spans a variety of institutional bases, including social agencies, health and mental health agencies, schools, industry, housing projects, police precincts, and so on. *The General Method of Social Work Practice* will facilitate the learning of these many professional tasks and skills by the student. It will also meet the interests of the experienced B.S.W. practitioner in ongoing professional development.

Carel B. Germain

Preface to the Second Edition

Since the first edition of this book appeared, several educators in graduate social work programs have recommended that I emphasize in the second edition the valuable use of the text in first-year graduate education as well as in baccalaureate programs. In M.S.W. programs where the foundation for practice is presented from a generalist perspective, it is very appropriate to acquaint students with the problem-solving process identified here as the “General Method.” As graduate students study and develop skills in the use of the Method, they may be led to see how their concentrations may build on or incorporate the General Method into advanced practice. In addition to a general problem-solving approach, graduate students may develop more sophisticated modes or methods of intervention, particularly if their identified concentration is in “practice roles or interventive modes” (see *Curriculum Policy Statement* 7.24.4). The holistic conceptualization of the foundation as presented in Chapter 1 offers a clear picture of the essential dimensions of our profession. The basic values, theories, and skills outlined in Diagram 1-5 serve as a comprehensive framework to be extended in depth and scope into an identifiable concentration at the advanced level.

Recently, major efforts have been made to further clarify and refine the meaning of generalist social work. Sixty-two social work educators and practitioners contributed to the development of a definition, which presents generalist social work as a perspective that uses a generic foundation and “incorporates a problem-solving multilevel assessment and methodology” (Schatz and Jenkins, 1987). As did the first edition, the second edition offers a systematic way of viewing the generic foundation for practice and a problem-solving methodology that allows multileveled, differential assessment and modes of intervention.

In addition to its use in graduate and undergraduate social work pro-

grams, the text has been found to be very valuable in the orientation and training of workers in public and private human service agencies. For example, in the Department of Social Services of the state of North Carolina, a carefully planned three-tiered training curriculum has been designed, which begins with and builds on the basic foundation and methodology of the General Method. Directors, supervisors, and workers in diverse positions have studied and incorporated the use of the foundation and General Method throughout the system in various ways, including case management, record keeping, supervision, and evaluation.

I have learned also that the text is being used for the development of values, knowledge, skills, and methodology in other human service disciplines, such as criminal justice, counseling, and nursing. As brought out in Chapter 1, various professionals in human services are increasingly recognizing the need to see the client, patient, victim, or accused within the context of his or her life-space environment. With a holistic view of person and problem or need, as presented in this book, the provider can more effectively move forward in the process of service provision.

The central focus of this text is the presentation of a six-stage General Method, which builds on a professional foundation and is used in practice with individuals, groups, families, and communities. Tools, diagrams, examples, and exercises are offered to guide and enrich learning for general practice. Examples are taken from the fields of child welfare, gerontology, public welfare, education, community services, and corrections. A highly praised feature of the text is the ongoing presentation of examples to illustrate a worker's sensitivity to human diversity in each stage of the General Method. A fundamental ecological systems perspective is integrated throughout.

Again, I am deeply grateful to many people who helped to make this text a reality. First of all, for assistance with the writing of the original text, I wish to recognize and thank Dr. Carel B. Germain, Sisters Mary Consilia Hannan and Mary Joan Cook, and the students and faculty of Saint Joseph College, West Hartford, Connecticut. Additional consultants included Emilia E. Martinez-Brawley, Leon W. Chestang, Judith N. O'Brien, Margaret Slowick, Arthur R. LaVoie, and Sister Patricia Cook, R.S.M.

For their enthusiastic reception and application of the text, I am deeply grateful to my friends at East Carolina University; Grambling State University; Cleveland State University; Madonna College, Levonia, Michigan; Mount Mercy College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and so very many others. The text was written because of a felt need for such a practice guide. The continued support and appreciation I have received from social workers and educators across the country and from other countries have assured me of the worth of my efforts. I continue to see the work as a beginning response to the need for a holistic conceptualization of the profession of social work, with particular articulation of generalist practice.

Contents

Foreword to the Second Edition by Carel B. Germain ix

Preface to the Second Edition xi

1 *The Foundation for General Practice: A Holistic View* 1

The Search for Holism 2

Holism in Human Services 4

Holism in Social Work 6

The Meaning of General Practice 8

Ecological-Systems Theory 8

An Ecological Perspective of General Practice 10

Values 11

Knowledge 14

Skills 18

A Holistic Conception of the Foundation of Social Work Practice	20
Conclusion	22
Notes	22

2 *The General Method* 25

The Curriculum of an Accredited B.S.W. Program	26
Specialization in Social Work	28
Method Defined	31
Processes in Practice	32
The General Method	35
The Beginning Generalist vs. the Advanced Practitioner	36
Methodologies	39
Summary	41
Notes	41

3 *Human Diversity in the General Method* 44

Cultural Diversity	45
Self-Assessment of Cultural Sensitivity	47
Social Class	49
Sexual Variations	49
Problems and Needs Related to Sexual Variations	51
Self-Assessment of Homophobia	53
Sensitivity to Gender: Working with Women	54
Working with Men: A Call for Androgyny	56
Self-Assessment of Gender Sensitivity	58
Other Diversity Variables: The Person	59
Self-Assessment of Value Orientation	65
The Environment: Rural, Urban, and Suburban	68
A Holistic Framework for Sensitivity to Human Diversity	72
Conclusion	73
Notes	74

4 *Engagement* 77

The Problem	78
Getting to the Problem	82
Identifying Feelings	84
Feelings in Macrosystems	90
Goal Recognition	91
Working with Different Systems	93
Using the Holistic Foundation in Engagement	100
Human Diversity in Engagement	101

Engagement in Diverse Field Areas	104
Conclusion	114
Notes	114

5 Data Collection 117

Gathering Data	118
Fact versus Assumption	119
The Problems	121
The Persons	121
The Environment	122
Maintaining Confidentiality	123
Recording Data	126
Working with Different Systems	130
Using the Holistic Foundation in Data Collection	135
Human Diversity in Data Collection	137
Data Collection in Diverse Field Areas	139
Conclusion	151
Notes	152

6 Assessment 153

Assessment Statement	154
Problem Prioritization	157
Contracting	160
Working with Different Systems	163
Using the Holistic Foundation for Assessment	173
Human Diversity in Assessment	174
Assessment in Diverse Field Areas	176
Conclusion	199
Notes	200

7 Intervention 201

Direct Intervention	202
Information and Referral	205
Case Management and Teamwork	208
Indirect Intervention	210
Designs for General Interventions	212
Working with Different Systems	215
Using the Holistic Foundation in Intervention	218
Human Diversity in Intervention	219
Intervention in Diverse Field Areas	221
Summary	242
Notes	242

8 *Evaluation* 244

- Goal Analysis 245
- Contract Review 250
- Contract Reformulation 253
- Evaluation Questions 255
- Ongoing Evaluation 256
- Working with Different Systems 261
- Using the Holistic Foundation in Evaluation 265
- Human Diversity in Evaluation 267
- Evaluation in Diverse Field Areas 269
- Summary 293
- Notes 293

9 *Termination* 294

- The Meaning of Termination 295
- Reactions to Termination 296
- The Decision to Terminate 297
- A Life-Cycle Approach to Termination 299
- Planning the Termination 300
- Reactions of Service Providers 302
- Developing Sensitivity and Skill 303
- Working with Different Systems 308
- Using the Holistic Foundation in Termination 309
- Human Diversity in Termination 310
- Termination in Diverse Field Areas 313
- Conclusion 325
- Notes 327

10 *Identity and Integration* 328

- The General Method—A Purposeful Procedure 328
- Classification of Methods in Human Services 329
- The General Method in the Classification 332
- The Ecological Generalist—A Basic Identity 332
- The Extended Environment—A Forgotten Commitment 333
- Using the General Method for Social Development 338
- A Place for Radical Social Work 344
- A Holistic Vision—Our Future Challenge 344
- Conclusion 345
- Notes 347

1

The Foundation for General Practice: A Holistic View

In my judgment, one of the profession's most important tasks in theory development is the formulation of a way or ways of thinking about social work as a whole. It has always seemed strange to me and somewhat unfortunate that while we have had theory about casework, group work and community organization we have had little, until recently, about social work itself. The serious consequences of this deficiency in the theory of social work is that it has led us to practice as specialists more than as generalists and without a generalist base to anchor our specialties.

—Gordon Hearn¹

In the present decade, noted social work educators and practitioners have worked diligently at clarifying the educational needs and role expectations for a beginning social work professional.² Controversy and confusion have often resulted from the use of such related terms as *basic*, *core*, *general*, and *generic* to describe the foundation of social work practice. In addition to the search for appropriate descriptive words, studies have been conducted to identify the specific knowledge, values, and skills that are essential for beginning practice.³ Even with these components to constitute the base for practice, the search continues for a conceptual framework that will integrate the various dimensions of social work into a unified whole.

Preciseness in identifying and unifying methods, skills, theory, knowledge, values, attitudes, policies, and programs for social work will remain a challenge, owing to the artful and evolving nature of the profession. This book is an attempt to offer a comprehensive conceptualization of content for understanding and describing professional social work practice at the

entry level today. The beginning worker is described as a professional who has been socialized into the role of a social work generalist. More specifically, the theoretical and experiential preparation for practice as outlined in this book presents a picture of an ecological generalist: someone who works with a variety of client systems and services, using an ecological perspective and a general method. After presenting a holistic view of the foundation for general practice in the introductory chapter of this book, focus will be given to the general method that is commonly used in the education and practice of beginning social workers.

THE SEARCH FOR HOLISM

In the profession of social work, among the human services, and within the human person, there is a growing expression of a desire for holism. As a concept, *holism* has become increasingly popular in diverse professions since the 1970s. It is currently defined and used from various perspectives. In essence, holism refers to a totality in perspective, with sensitivity to all of the parts or levels that constitute the whole and to their interdependence and relatedness. The terms *health*, *wholeness*, and *the holy* are often used when describing holism.

The roots of holism may be found in the writings of Jan Smuts,⁴ Claude Bernard,⁵ Walter Cannon,⁶ Kurt Goldstein,⁷ Andras Angyal,⁸ and others. Smuts introduced holism as a philosophical theory in his book *Holism and Evolution* in 1926. He based the word *holism* on the Greek word *hole*, meaning complete, entire, and whole. Smuts describes the determining factors in nature as “wholes” that are irreducible to the sum of their parts. Focus is on the functional or organic relations between parts and wholes. Evolution in the universe is seen as the recording of the making of wholes.

Bernard (1927) and Cannon (1939) in their work view the human body as a whole and describe the body's capacity to maintain inner balance or equilibrium. A person's “internal environment” is seen as having regulators to cope with external and internal disturbances.

Kurt Goldstein, a neuropsychiatrist, is the major exponent of organismic theory. In this theory, the organism is described as a united whole, with mind and body undifferentiated. Organs and faculties of the body are not independent; what happens to any part has an effect on the whole. Although Goldstein recognizes that the organism is influenced by the environment, he gives predominance to the human organism.

Andras Angyal, who followed Goldstein, said it is impossible to separate the organism from the environment. This would contradict the nature of the whole. Using systems analysis, Angyal conceptualized the “biosphere,” which he described as a holistic entity consisting of the two polari-

ties of individual and environment. The two are seen “as aspects of a single reality which can be separated only by abstraction.”⁹

From the works of Bernard and Cannon, Goldstein and Angyal, holistic medicine emerged. In the health field, holism is a concept that describes perceptions of the patient, of the environment of the patient, and of the various providers of services. In holistic medicine, emphasis is on health and coping capacities rather than disease and sickness. Helping is defined in terms of managing resources rather than treating illness. The physician is encouraged to look beyond the disease and to take a broader look at the patient. Primarily, holism is seen as an approach for viewing the whole person. For example, Goldwag writes:

Here, the aim is to understand the living organism as a total entity and to understand its parts as integrated, interdependent, interrelated systems that can be understood by studying the parts, but without losing sight of their relation to the whole organism.¹⁰

For some health providers, the concept *holistic* or *wholistic* means to see and treat the patient within the environment that surrounds and influences the person. Podolsky writes:

The term “wholistic,” a variant of holistic, signifies that people are treated in the context of their entire environment, including their family situations, social milieu, economic class, and educational attainments, as contrasted with treating only a disease or focusing upon a single complaint.¹¹

In addition, a holistic conception has been used to describe a health center where a group of people join their expertise and efforts with a concerted team approach for comprehensive services.

The City of Health staff also recognizes that no one therapist or single therapy is necessarily the catalyst for healing but rather than a multi-therapeutic approach is the most effective program. With this understanding, the staff works in harmony with one another without the interference of personal ego clouding the attitude of wholeness that prevails.¹²

From this initial overview of the beginnings of holistic theory, it is apparent that early holistic conceptualizations were used predominantly in the field of medicine. Concepts evolved to describe perceptions of the patient, the patient's environment, and the service providers. It is of interest to note that the person recognized as the founder of holistic theory, Jan Smuts, soldier and statesman, was a major advocate of the Commonwealth of Nations and builder of the League of Nations and of the United Nations.¹³

HOLISM IN HUMAN SERVICES

Within the field of human services today, the concept *holism* is commonly applied to consumers of services, their needs, and the services offered. The concept *human services* itself is holistic, in that it draws together professionals and paraprofessionals of diverse backgrounds who are working to meet human needs. The relationship of *human services* to *holistic thinking* is particularly obvious in a contemporary definition that states: "Human services can be defined as an interdisciplinary field encompassing the various concerns related to a person's internal and external environment."¹⁴ Human service workers include those from fields such as mental health, vocational rehabilitation, corrections, welfare, law, child care, social work, housing, education, and physical health.

Professionals and paraprofessionals in human services are growing in the use of a holistic conceptualization of the persons receiving services. The client/patient/consumer is seen holistically when focus is on the whole person—body, spirit, and mind—and on the interdependence of each of the major dimensions of *person*. In addition, the client is not seen in isolation, but within his or her life-space environments. The family, culture, physical surroundings, and society of the individual are seen as essential parts of a holistic view of clients.

In considering the needs of a human being holistically, focus is on the whole hierarchy of needs, and on the necessary and sequential relationship of each. Maslow, for example, identifies the needs of a person as crossing over the physical dimension of person (bodily needs), the intellectual dimension (cognitive needs), and the spiritual dimension (aesthetic needs).¹⁵ With a holistic view of needs, human service workers are aware of the interdependence of needs.

To apply a holistic approach to human services, the interrelationships of various helping professionals with one another and with the family and culture of their clients are highlighted. The need for team building and case coordination and management is seen as basic for effective service. Although certain people with particular needs may come to the attention of individual providers or agencies, holistically minded helpers do not lose sight of the fact that each person is very much a part of other persons, that each need is strongly related to other needs, and that each service can meet neither all the needs of any one person nor one need of all persons. Human service providers are becoming increasingly aware of their dependence on one another within a whole network of human services.¹⁶

To develop the meaning of holism and its application to human services further, a diagram of the triplex of holism is presented in Figure 1-1. The person with multiple needs is depicted within the immediate environment of family, friends, and community, and all are contained within the larger society with institutions and services. Particular institutions to meet

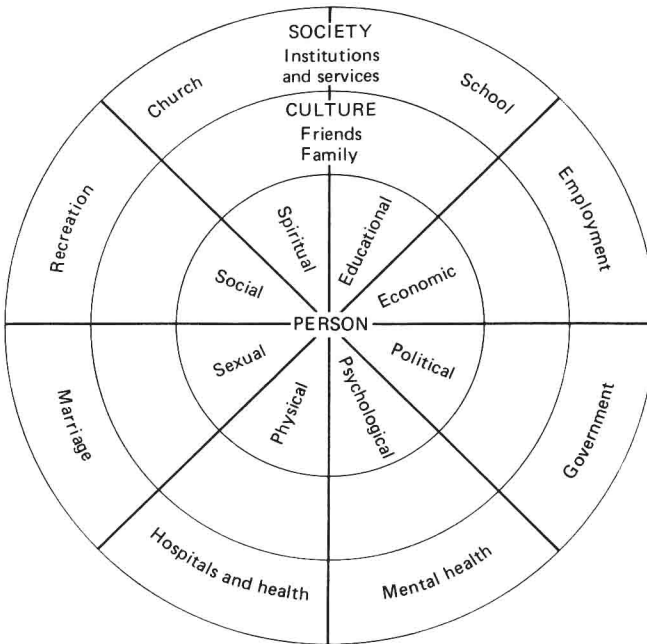


FIGURE 1-1 Holism in Human Services

identified needs are shown with dividing boundary lines that may mark difficult points of passage for the person or family. All of the needs and corresponding institutions are not necessarily felt or used at the same time. They are potential or actual in the cyclical life process of persons in society.

For understanding person and environment, tri-circle diagrams similar to that of Figure 1-1 are frequently used by theorists and practitioners. For example, Kurt Lewin, in his “life-space diagramming,” identifies the “person,” the “environment,” and the extended sphere of reality called the “foreign hull” (see Figure 1-2).¹⁷ Dolores Norton, in her “dual perspective” of practice, depicts the person within a “nurturing system” circumscribed by

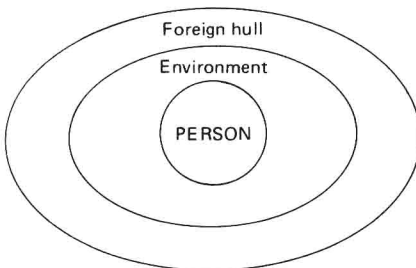


FIGURE 1-2 Lewin's Life-Space

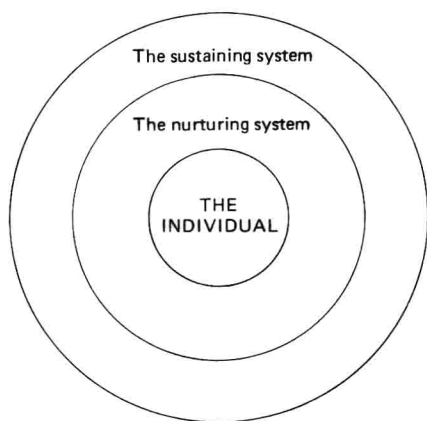


FIGURE 1-3 Norton's Dual Perspective

the “sustaining system” (Figure 1-3).¹⁸ All three holistic perspectives are closely allied to general systems theory and, more specifically, to ecological-systems theory, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

HOLISM IN SOCIAL WORK

Recent writings in social work literature indicate a growing recognition of the value in applying holistic theory to practice. Weick, for example, stresses the “physical” in the person-in-environment paradigm. In addition to a client’s internal and external social environments, she sees the need for workers to become more aware of the physical internal and external environments of clients.¹⁹

Holistic concepts have been used also to describe various aspects of the profession and to describe the whole of social work itself. Certain methodologies and theories have been seen as holistic. For example, in considering different methods of practice, Baer and Federico found that within a generalist approach, emphasis is on a “holistic assessment and intervention at the level of both people and systems.”²⁰ They see general practice as providing a “holistic perspective” of practice situations.

The generalist or unitary conceptualization with its emphasis on systems and their interactions, appears to be the approach that best helps the student to understand situations from a holistic perspective.²¹

Brieland, Costin, and Atherton concur with Baer and Federico in viewing a generalist method as holistic when they write: