

Practice Considerations

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Goal: This unit presents practice considerations to bear in mind and apply in direct work with clients.

A. Strengths-Based Perspective:

The social work profession is informed by the strengths-based perspective. The strengths-based perspective focuses on a client or client system's inherent strengths as a place to build from for assistance and empowerment. It differs from the medical model that tends to focus on the pathology of "what is wrong?" A starting point from a strengths-based model could be inquiring "what knowledge and skills do you possess"?

Professor Dennis Saleebey states that practicing from a strengths orientation means that... "everything you do as a social worker will be predicated, in some way, on helping to discover and embellish, explore, exploit the client's strengths and resources" to help them "achieve their goals, realize their dreams," and shed their own misgivings, inhibitions and societal domination.¹

Rather than focus exclusively on problems, social workers and clients work together to think about hope and possibility. Strengths-based practice is a collaborative process empowering clients to recognize their own skills and resources, to learn how to use them to mobilize needed resources, and/or to take other steps to achieve greater economic security.

For example, a client may have a family member or access to community support that could help with a financial difficulty, such as a loan of money or providing child-care. But the client may be resistant, embarrassed, or ashamed to ask for such help. In such a situation, one can work with the client to overcome the resistance, and/or use roleplaying to prepare the client to ask for what he/she may need.²

B. Problem Solving: Strengths-based practice and the belief in client self-determination suggest that (social) workers help clients to build their problem-solving capacity rather than simply “hand out” solutions. To avoid the latter, (social) workers can assist clients to acknowledge personal problems and also understand that these issues may be rooted in larger environmental challenges. These could include unmet needs for food, housing or jobs; insufficient community supports (i.e. child care, after-school programs or home health aides); or interpersonal challenges and troubles at home or on the job. The process of engaging clients to frame their problems within this context may make tasks more manageable and contribute to problem solving. Understanding that the broader social or economic environment may be a contributing factor rather than the result of an intrinsic deficit or flaw can be helpful. When clients who are facing home foreclosure or find themselves chronically unemployed understand that the “problem” may be rooted in a larger economic context and not their own inadequacy, it supports their self-esteem.

Once a problem-solving strategy has been identified, practitioners can work with clients to identify the strengths and resources needed to accomplish their specific goals. This can include supporting the client emotionally, helping the client to re-frame and break down issues of concern into manageable discrete components in order to resolve problems, prioritizing problems, and assisting in accessing resources. The client who is facing home foreclosure may decide to work with his or her social worker on identifying concrete steps and to develop an action plan that enables him or her to re-negotiate a mortgage loan.

C. Engaging Clients in Discussing Financial Issues: The ability to speak openly about sensitive topics is essential to working effectively with clients. Direct practice typically involves discussing topics that elicit powerful emotions, and success in developing a productive and collaborative working relationship with clients relates, in large part, to the practitioner’s ability to establish a comfort level in exploring highly charged material. As discussed in Unit One, individual and cultural discomfort about discussing money issues may interfere with establishing rapport and building trust, especially in the engagement phase where the worker and client do not know each other very well or come from different backgrounds. The more comfortable workers feel about raising financial issues with clients and their own capacity to sensitively respond to client reluctance to disclose financial details can make a significant difference in the ongoing relationship.

Human service workers can increase their comfort level through the conscious use of self-awareness. This, in turn, depends on the worker's own ability to explore issues that stimulate ambivalence, uncertainty, and/or discomfort internally or with clients. These topics may include sexuality, spirituality, religion, race or gender identity; discrimination due to race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, disability or other personal attribute; as well as behaviors that elicit counter-transferential responses on the part of the worker.

Discussing finances often poses a similar challenge to people's comfort levels. Some providers and clients view talking about money as a taboo or polarizing topic since society tends to define this as a private issue. People may also hesitate to talk openly about money because others may use information about their income and assets to derive positive or negative associations about status. Given that both workers and clients may experience these reactions, the challenge becomes two-fold: firstly, developing enough confidence and comfort to raise questions about income, assets, budgeting, and debt with our clients; and secondly, recognizing that clients may not be ready or too reluctant or conflicted around money to discuss these issues immediately, if at all.

D. Identify the Relevance of Economic Issues: Social workers are trained to recognize the importance of completing a bio-psycho-social assessment. This tool helps the social worker (and the client) understand the presenting problem in a broader context including, but not limited to, the client's hopes, wants, needs, resources, and coping patterns. A client's "presenting problem" is often a starting point for change. It's not that clients are "wrong" in their identification of what they believe needs to be changed. The presenting problem is often something that needs immediate attention, but may require other issues be tackled that the client does not see clearly or does not wish to address. Addressing these other issues might be central to deal with the root cause of a presenting problem. When helping people enhance their social functioning, discussing only the presenting problem may reduce the "symptoms" but not eliminate or change the client's circumstances. If the assessment is narrowly focused, the underlying concerns will likely result in continued concerns in the client's life.

For example, the veteran who returns from military service and cannot find employment, despite repeated efforts, may become angry and disillusioned and begin drinking excessively. The social worker who sees the client is likely to identify the presenting problem as alcoholism or seek to rule out Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. However, for the client the pervasive sense of being a failure may be intimately connected to chronic unemployment, as well as to the alcohol abuse.

A solid bio–psycho–social assessment should include an economic component. An economically literate social worker explores and is attuned to the central role of economic and financial issues in a person’s life and can discuss entitlements and asset building strategies if needed.

For Discussion:

1. How might teaching or incorporating problem–solving skills for issues around money differ from other problem–solving skills?
2. Reflect on a client who has very different values or spending habits around money. Is your perception (or judgment) of this individual based on personal values? Societal values?
3. As you read through the section concerning engaging clients in discussing financial issues, to what extent did you think that personal finances were a taboo or polarizing topic? If you agree, to what extent are your thoughts a reflection of your family upbringing or other personal experiences?
4. If you have had direct practice experience either at work or in an internship, was the client’s financial status (income and/or assets) a factor? If so, how was the topic addressed and made a part of the work? If not, how might it have been, now that you reflect upon your work?

NOTES
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1. Saleebey, Dennis, (2002). *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*, Longman.
2. Shulman, Lawrence (2006). *The Skills of Helping Individuals, Families, Groups, and Communities*. Thomson; Wadsworth; 5th edition.