CHAPTER 6

SOCIAL WORK WITH INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

Applying Direct Practice Skills

Social workers may find themselves working in social policy and administration settings, but it is important to understand the processes and activities of direct practice or intervention. There are three main categories of direct practice: (1) social work with individuals, (2) group work, and (3) community work. These specializations or fields of direct intervention emerged in the 1940s. Today, many schools of social work use this breakdown for purposes of social work training.

Most social workers and social service workers will find themselves involved in one of these three forms of direct practice in their careers, and more likely they will be involved in all three. This requires that social workers have multiple skills and a broad-based perspective on social work practice. This chapter introduces the first of these fields and discusses the main activities a social worker is likely to encounter.

Introduction to Direct Practice

Social work practice essentially consists of a series or process of interventionist actions. The worker calls upon his or her repertoire of helping knowledge, skills, and values and applies it in particular ways in specific situations to achieve purposeful change. While each situation will require different interventions, the process or steps are essentially the same.

A useful analogy is that of a skilled dancer who knows the steps involved in a particular dance, but to be truly excellent, must re-combine the moves into new patterns. Social work requires this kind of artful improvising, or the ability to “think on one’s feet.”

Regardless of the approach taken to social work, it is important to have an understanding of all three fields of direct practice. Figure 6.1 indicates how each field influences the other and reveals that a primary intervention in one field may involve some level of intervention in the others.

Working with Individuals and Families

The process of helping individuals is sometimes called social casework, although this term is now infrequently used. A majority of social workers spend their time working with individuals in private or public agencies and increasingly in private practice, although this is still rare. Even though other types of social work are increasing, the practice of social work with individuals still predominates.

Individual social work is aimed at helping people resolve their problems or situations on a one-to-one basis—that is, helping unemployed people obtain work or training, providing protective services for abused children, providing counseling for mental health, providing parole or probation services, supplying services to the homeless and poor, coordinating services for people with AIDS, and coordinating discharge services for a person being released from hospital.

Social work with families involves working with a couple, or a child and a parent, or entire families to help them address specific situations or achieve purposeful change. Often the work focuses on communication or relationship difficulties, or on transitions or family crisis situations. Examples include: violence within the family, relationship breakdown, care for family members with disabilities or the elderly, issues at school, help for immigrant families, and families facing economic crisis.

The profession of social work has a long history of working with the needs of families and family members, predating that of many other professions. Social work models tend to emphasize empowering family members and developing more secure relationships between family members. When working with vulnerable families, such as families in transition (e.g., immigrant families, divorcing parents) and families living in poverty, the emphasis is on stabilizing connections with social institutions such as schools, churches, child welfare agencies, and hospitals.