

Social Work Principles

IMRAN AHMAD SAJID

Lecturer (Social Work),
University of Peshawar, Pakistan
<imranahmad131@gmail.com>

Nov 19, 2012

I am beginning this topic with this expectation that you have already understood the concept of social work. Particularly, I assume that you understand the definition of social work that has been given by IFSW and IFSSW in 2000 which is *“Social Work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships, the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social system, social work intervenes at the point where people interact with their environment. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.”*

With this understanding of social work, I am taking you forward now with this topic “Social Work Principles”.

Note: Do not get confused by the definition which says “Principles of Human Rights and Social Justice”, here we are talking about “Principles of Social Work” not the “Principles of Human Rights” or “Principles of Social Justice”.

I hope that by the end of these notes, you would have understanding of the following:

- What is the meaning of principles?
- What is meant by the phrase “principles of social work”? and
- Six principles of social work.

Principles

Dictionary meaning of the word “principle” is “the basic way in which something works”.¹

A principle is a kind of rule, belief, or idea that guides you. You can also say a good, ethical person has a lot of principles.²

In general, a principle is some kind of basic truth that helps you with your life. "Be fair" is a principle that guides (or should guide) most people and businesses. A politician who tries to do the right thing rather than win votes is acting on principle. A person who has principles is a good, decent person. On the other hand, if you say “Malthus (a name) has no principles” that means he is dishonest, corrupt, or evil.³

Thus, in simple words, principles are “the basic ways in which something works.”

e.g. when we say, “Principles of Population” we mean, the basic way in which population works. Likewise, when we say “Principles of Sociology” we mean, the basic way in which sociology works. Similarly, when we say “Principles of Social Work” we mean, the basic ways in which social work works.

Social Work Principles

¹ Encarta Dictionary [DVD] 2008.

² <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120611164934AAIU7Jh>

³ Ibid

There have been a variety of principles of social work put forward by various authors. However, the following are the most common to all authors:

1. Principle of Acceptance;
2. Principle of Individualization;
3. Principle of Self-Determination;
4. Principle of Non-judgmental Attitude; and
5. Principle of Confidentiality.
6. Principle of Purposeful Expression of Feelings

There are other principles as well like purposeful expression of feelings, controlled emotional involvement, objectivity, accountability, self-awareness, and principle of access to resources. However, we are discussing the most common five principles of social work.

1. Principle of Acceptance

Acceptance is a fundamental social work principle that implies a sincere understanding of clients.⁴ This principle holds that the professional social worker accepts the client as it is.⁵ Social workers who accept clients treat them humanely and considerately and afford them dignity and worth. Social Workers convey acceptance by taking genuine concern, listening receptively, acknowledging others' points of view, and creating a climate of mutual respect. Acceptance implies that social workers understand clients' perspectives and welcome their views.⁶

To "accept" also mean to "say yes to [an] invitation". In social work situation, a client invites a worker into his life, into his problem, into his emotional stressful state, and into his personal affairs. The principle of acceptance says that the worker shows his/her acceptance by taking genuine concern, listening receptively, etc.

2. Principle of Individualization

The client of a social agency is like all the other persons we have ever known, but he is different too. In broad ways, he is like all other human beings; in a somewhat more limited way, he is like all other human beings of his age or time or culture. But, as we move from understanding him simply as a human being to understanding him as *this particular human being*, we find that, with all his general likeness to others, he is as unique as his thumbprint.⁷

The principle of Individualization means that every client is unique for the worker. As we know that the client is a person, with a problem in his / her life. He / she is a person with a particular religious beliefs, economic position, social status, and a particular cast. The worker has to accept the client with all his/her strengths and weaknesses. Every client is not just *an* individual but *the* individual.

All people are unique and possess distinctive capabilities. When social workers affirm clients' individuality, they recognize and appreciate their unique qualities and individual differences. They treat clients as persons with rights

⁴ Bowling Green State University, <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/dhs/socw/page36398.html>

⁵ M. Khalid. (2003). Social Work Theory and Practice. P. 70.

⁶ Brenda Dubios and Karla Miley. (1995). Social Work: An Empowering Profession. P. 128.

⁷ HH Perlman. (1957). Social Casework: A Problem Solving Process. P. 6.

and needs rather than as “objects” or “cases” or “yet another appointment”. Social workers who individualize clients free themselves from bias and prejudice, avoid labeling and stereotyping, and recognize the potential of diversity. They demonstrate that clients have a right “to be individual and to be treated not just as *a* human being but as *this* human being with personal differences.”⁸

3. Principle of Self-Determination

Determination is a noun derived from the word “determine.” “To determine” mean “to decide something.” Dictionary meaning of determination is “the process of deciding on or establishing a course of action.” From these we can infer that self-determination refer to the process of deciding on or establishing a course of action by a person, or a group, or a state by itself, without any kind of foreign compulsion or coercion etc. Simply, the decisions which comes from oneself, which are the results of one’s own wishes and desires.

In social work literature, Self-determination is defined as “a condition in which a person’s behavior (i.e. his actions and thoughts) comes from his or her own wishes, desires and decisions.”⁹The principle of self-determination is based on the recognition of the “right and need of clients to freedom in making their own choices and decisions.” Social workers have a responsibility to create a working relationship in which choice can be exercised.¹⁰

Stated one way, self-determination means not being coerced or manipulated. State another way, self-determination means having the freedom or liberty to make choices.

In more simple words, this principle means that the worker will not impose his decisions on the client. The social worker only provides a range of alternative while it is the client who has to make the final choice of choosing an appropriate alternative. It is the way social work works—providing alternatives.

4. Principle of Non-Judgmental Attitude

Non-judgmental attitudes form the basis for effective working relationships. The premise that all humans have dignity and worth forms the basis for nonjudgmental attitudes; non-judgmentalism presumes acceptance.

Every man and woman has worth and dignity. It is intrinsic. It is by nature. The principle of nonjudgmental attitude means that Social workers do not judge others as good or bad, worthy or unworthy, dignified or undignified, etc. However, it does not imply that social workers do not make decisions; rather it implies a non-blaming attitude and behavior.

Social workers do not blame the client for being incapable of solving his problems, neither the worker blames him/her for being the cause of a particular problem. The worker remains non-judgmental. It is the way social work works—being nonjudgmental.

5. Principle of Confidentiality

⁸ Brenda Dubios and Karla Miley. *Op. Cit.* p. 128.

⁹Melissa Floyd Taylor, Ph.D., LCSW, University of North Carolina, Greensboro. (2006). Is Self-determination Still Important? What Experienced Mental Health Social Workers Are Saying. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*. SPRING 2006, VOL. 3, #1. <http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/content/view/29/44/>

¹⁰Brenda Dubios and Karla Miley. *Op. Cit.* p. 132.

Confidentiality, or the right to privacy, social worker must not disclose the clients information, such as their identity, their discussion with professionals, professional opinions about clients, or records. Since clients often share sensitive, personal material with social workers, preserving confidentiality or privacy is essential for developing trust, a key ingredient of any effective working relationship.¹¹

6. Purposeful Expression of Feelings

Emotions are an integral part of human life and people experience a range of feelings. Clients need to have opportunities to express their feelings freely. Although it is not particularly prudent to encourage clients to gush unabashedly with sentiment or be uncontrollably tied up with anger or negative feelings, social workers direct clients to express their feelings purposefully. Social workers have to go beyond the content of “just the facts” to uncover feelings that underlie these facts. By listening attentively, asking relevant questions, and demonstrating tolerance and non-judgementalism, social workers encourage clients to share both facts and feelings.

Although expressing feelings is desirable, a client’s expression of feelings must be purposeful—it must serve a purpose in the process of discovering solutions. The purpose may be to relieve pressure or tension in a way that releases the client for positive or constructive actions. Feelings also reveal the depth of the client’s understanding of problems for feelings themselves may even be the problem. For some clients, expressing their feelings to a concerned listener is a cathartic, or cleansing, experience that enables them to put their situation in perspective.

Expressing feelings solidifies relationships. The purposeful expression of feelings brings feelings into the open so they can be dealt with constructively, allows for a more accurate understanding of the affective or emotional elements of the situation, and provides opportunities for demonstrating psychological support.¹²

Helping Material (Books/Websites/etc)

1. Encarta Dictionary [DVD] 2008.
2. Yahoo Answers. (n.d.)<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120611164934AAIU7Jh>
3. Bowling Green State University, <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/dhs/socw/page36398.html>
4. M. Khalid. (2003). Social Work Theory and Practice. P. 70.
5. Brenda Dubios and Karla Miley. (1995). Social Work: An Empowering Profession. P. 128.
6. HH Perlman. (1957). Social Casework: A Problem Solving Process. P. 6.
7. Melissa Floyd Taylor, Ph.D., LCSW, University of North Carolina, Greensboro. (2006). Is Self-determination Still Important? What Experienced Mental Health Social Workers Are Saying. Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics. SPRING 2006, VOL. 3, #1 . <http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/content/view/29/44/>

¹¹Brenda Dubios and Karla Miley. *Op. Cit.* p. 133.

¹² Ibid. pp. 129-30