

## **COMMUNITY SOCIAL WORK: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

The concept 'community social work' grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in Britain and gained common currency following the publication of the Barclay Report in 1982.

Even though there is uncertainty in using terms to denote the community work approaches to social work practice, the term 'community social work' is used by several authors. This article attempted to explore the meaning of the concept 'community social work' in order to observe the aptness of the term to narrate the practice of professional social work with communities. It depicts a community social work perspective in terms of professional social work practice with communities.

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### ***Keywords:***

Community social work;

Social work practice;

Social Work;

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## 1. Introduction

The ‘professional social work practice with communities’ is denoted by different phrases such as ‘community work within social work’ (Thomas,1983), ‘social work practice with communities’ (Glison et.al., 2012 and Pawar, 2014), ‘community-orientated social work’ (Forde and Lynch, 2014), ‘social work in the communities’ (Teater and Baldwin 2012), ‘social work community practice’ (Rothman and Zald in Taylor and Roberts, 2013 and Chow, 2015),community-based social work (Roivainen, 2004), social work approaches in community practice (Glison et al., 2012), ‘community-based social work practice’<sup>1</sup>, ‘social work in community development’<sup>2</sup>, ‘community practice in social work’<sup>3</sup>, ‘community practice social work’<sup>4</sup>, and ‘community social work’<sup>5</sup>. It indicates the uncertainty in the use of terms in social work. The lack of agreement and consistency in relation to terminology in social work is not only confusing but can make it difficult for social workers to articulate what they know. It serves as a reminder of the limited priority given to defining key concepts commonly used in social work (Trevithick, 2008).

The concept ‘community social work’ grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in Britain as part of a philosophy of decentralizing and de-bureaucratizing social work provision (Hadley and Hatch, 1981 as in Payne, 2005) and gained common currency in the British Social Services following the publication of the Barclay Report in 1982 (Hadley R. et al., 1987). This article attempted to explore the meaning of the concept ‘community social work’ in order to observe the aptness of

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<sup>1</sup>Rutgers University Center for International Social Work. (2008). Social Work Education and the Practice Environment in Europe and Eurasia (report for the Social Transition Team, Office of Democracy, Governance and Social Transition of the United States Agency for International Development), Creative Associates, International, Inc., and the Aguirre Division of JBS International, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> McDevitt, S. (1997). Social Work in Community Development: A Cross-National Comparison, International Social Work (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), Vol. 40, 341-357 (0020-8720; 1997/07)

<sup>3</sup> Hardcastle, A. David, Powers, R. Patricia, &Wenocur, Stanley. (2004). Community Practice: Theories and Skills for Social Worker (2nd Edn.). New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.pp-10

<sup>4</sup> Mizrahi, Terry and Davis, Larry C. (Editors in Chief). (2008). Encyclopedia of Social Work (20th Edn.). Washington DC: NASW Press and New York: Oxford University Press Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Report of a Working Party established by the National Institute for Social Work in 1980 under the chairmanship of Peter M. Barclay “to review the role and tasks of social workers in local authority social services departments and related voluntary agencies in England and Wales and to make recommendations”

the term to narrate the practice of professional social work with communities. It depicts a community social work perspective in terms of professional social work practice with communities.

## **2. An Overview of Community Social Work**

The term 'community social work' is typically associated with ideas of self-help, voluntarism and facilitating access to local services (Forde and Lynch, 2014). It focuses on the needs of small communities, and, allied with a range of social care services, seeks to engage those communities in providing locally responsive services that meet identified needs (Payne, 2005). According to Hadley et al. (1987) community social work is founded on a fundamentally different conception of the relationship between public services and the people they serve. It is built on the assumption of collective responsibility for dealing with a range of social problems and their impact on individual citizens. In essence, community social work is about 'dialogue' i.e., dialogue between the social worker and the user, between the organizer and the neighbourhood and concerned with shaping and amending services in response to the needs and growth of the community. It is also about the changes in the locus of power and decision making both within services and between them and their users.

Community social work is one of the methods of social work that make social work discernible from other sciences because of its focus on the great social issues of society (Glisson, 1994) and on environmental factors (Koutra, n.d.). It involves understanding the power dynamics and social relations that govern the relationships between various structures and diverse communities and working to achieve social justice through structural change (Canadian Association of Social Workers), and recognizing and managing conflict in as deliberate and rational a manner as possible (Grosser and Mondros in Taylor and Roberts, 2013). It focuses on the inter-relationship with and support for formal and informal networks in order to address individual and group problems and to prevent problems from arising in the first place (Holiček and Baldwin in Leskošek, 2009). By its nature community social work involves a process of change from an existing model of reactive social care to what is described in the Barclay Report as an attitude of mind in all social workers which regards members of the public as partners in the provision of social care. The Barclay Report (1982) defined community social work in the following way:

By this we mean formal social work, which, starting from problems affecting an individual or group and the responsibilities and resources of social services departments and voluntary organizations, seeks to tap into, support, enable and underpin the local networks of formal and informal relationships which constitute our basic definition of community, and also the strengths of a client's communities of interest (Barclay, 1982, p. xvii).

Bennet (1986) clarify that community social work is not the practice of 'a community social worker'; it is not the occasional project group/volunteer scheme tacked on to a predominately case oriented practice: it is not the same as community work. According to him, the key components of community social work include functions of a whole social work agency; collaborative working within teams; working in harmony with both formal and informal social networks; focus on the type and nature of relationships between the individual, individuals, families, organizations and groups and the community; recognition that the bulk of care, supervision, and control in the community is undertaken by members of the community; pro-activeness and readily availability of resources to those in need; and planning to help maximize effectiveness (Watts in Lishman, 1991). Smaleet al. (1988) see community social work as a way of changing the organizational perspective of social services and the practice of social work (Payne, 1995) and argued that community social work involves a process of working out aims and objectives through a review of needs and resources with a wide range of people (Coulshed and Orme, 2006).

Community social work seeks to develop services which respond sensitively to differences in local conditions (Hadley et al., 1987). Community social work practice has historically been characterized by its embrace of social justice values (Delgado, 2011). Community social work, as theory and method, reflects anti-oppressive approaches to practice (Teater and Baldwin, 2012). According to Hadley and Leidy (1996), the methods of community social work include decentralization and integration of existing services; adoption of a wide range of techniques of intervention; and staff, user, and local community participation. The practice skills involved in community social work are enabling, empowering, supporting and encouraging. Good community social work practice would also include counselling skills (Teater and Baldwin, 2012). Group and community work is so central to community social work practice (Hadley et

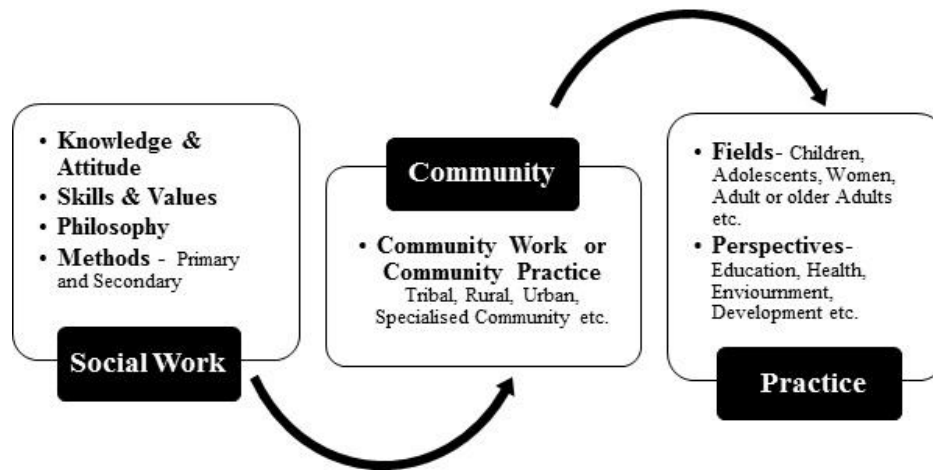
al., 1987). Community social work tends to work through individuals and groups for the wider benefit of the community (Stepney and Popple, 2008).

### **3. Discussion**

The terms in the concept of ‘community social work’, ‘community’ and ‘social work’ stipulate ‘the practice of professional social work with communities as target population or setting for interventions’. Thus, the concept can be considered as a composition of the concepts ‘community’ and ‘social work’. Community social work is perceived as a way of thinking, a dialogue, a process, an attitude of mind and an approach for making changes in the communities to promote social change and development to achieve social justice. It is viewed as formal social work in which a “tripartite linkage” is created between needs or problems, local resources or services and formal or non-formal local networks in the communities. Community social work focuses on the needs of the community and local basis for social services. It emphasizes decentralization of power, collaboration and networking, community participation and community empowerment. It encompasses some fundamental shifts in attitudes and practice while overlapping in many ways with traditional forms of social work.

The work of a community social worker includes working with individuals and groups, and community organization as the primary methods of social work; social work research, social action and social welfare administration as the secondary methods of intervention to the community. Since it works through individuals and groups for the wider benefit of the community, it is not confined only to the macro practice of social work but incorporates micro, meso and macro practices in social work. Hence, community social work relies on all the methods of social work in the context of community, with active community participation for effective functioning of communities. Thus, community social work is a dimension of professional social work practice, applicable to all the fields of social work, where communities are the setting for interventions. Accordingly, the concept ‘community social work’ can be understood as “the application of social work knowledge, skills, attitudes and values; and the adoption of social work philosophy and methods; in the arena of community work or community practice”. The Perspective of Community Social Work proposed to practice by using the existing

professional social work practice with communities can be conceptually developed as the *Community Social Work Perspective*.



**Community Social Work Perspective, Mini Pradeep & Sathyamurthi K, 2017**

However, a clear-cut demarcation of community social work is not available in the literature. The Barclay Committee made a distinction between community work and social work indicating that community work can be an element of social work, but it does not include the whole of social work, nor does social work embrace the whole of community work (Coulshed and Orme, 2006). Baldock (1974) identified a notable similarity in India and many other countries (including the U.K., U.S.A., New Zealand and Australia) i.e., the majority of community workers have no social work training. Banks defines (Banks et.al. 2003:15) community practice as including 'all of those processes that are about stimulating, engaging and achieving active community' (Siddiqui, 1997). Therefore, obviously 'community work' and 'community practice' being broad umbrella terms are not specifically pertaining to the social work realm of practice with communities. Hence, the term 'community social work' can be used to denote the practice of professional social work with communities to emphasize its uniqueness by using the basic premise of social work knowledge, attitude, skills techniques and methods to the different types of community in various fields and settings as mentioned in the proposed conceptual community social work perspective.

#### 4. Conclusion

Community social work practice is rooted in the very beginnings of social work (Glison et al. 2012). The adoption of community work by social work was confirmed by the report of the Seebohm Committee<sup>6</sup> in 1968 which gave widespread publicity and legitimization for community work within social work (Thomas, 1983). The field of community practice within the pantheon of social work interventions can only be expected to increase in importance in the next decade (Delgado and Humm- Delgado, 2013). Even though there is uncertainty in using terms to denote the community work approaches to social work practice, the term ‘community social work’ is used by several authors to indicate the same. Practitioners from different professions- both professionals and nonprofessionals are engaged in community work or community practice, hence those concepts are not specifically pertaining to the social work realm of practice with communities. So, the concept community social work will be helpful to accentuate professional social work practice with communities as target population.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Committee on Local authority and allied personal social services’ appointed in 1965, chaired by Frederick (Lord) Seebohm, to review the organization and responsibilities of the local authority personal social services in England and Wales, and to consider what changes are desirable to secure an effective family service

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