



Issue 4, 2007

CONTENTS

Feature Topic:
The Art of Social Work Practice

Social work practice is an informed art, born of balance and structured general knowledge gained through the client-practitioner relationship

- 1 Evidence for the Art of Social Work**
- 2 Articles in Focus**
- 3 Beyond Technique: Performance and the Art of Practice**
- 4 The Limits and Art of Understanding**
- 5 CE4Alliance: Continuing Education Program**

Next Focus

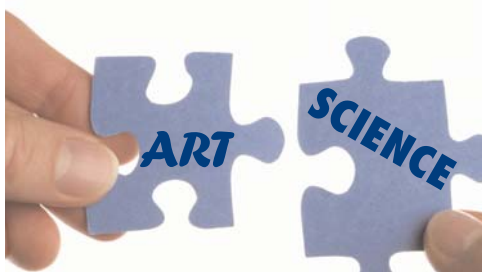
Opportunities in Organizational Change

Promoting successful organizational objectives



Evidence for the Art of Social Work

The essence of social work lies in facilitating human relationships in ways that support and increase potential, enhance choice, and contribute to the empowerment of individuals and groups. This is a remarkably diverse and complex undertaking, subject to ever-changing details that inevitably arise in the challenges of unique and individual lives. As with any such human endeavor, there is no endpoint on the road toward knowledge and understanding. Throughout the history of the profession, social workers have endeavored to develop helping relationships that are grounded in a core set of values and derived from a strong empirical foundation. Much of the quest for evidence of effectiveness has focused on determining which theory, model, or technique will be most effective with which particular problem situation or diagnosis. However, considering the full scope of the evidence for what works in social work practice and psychotherapy, we now know that it is not enough to simply evaluate one model or technique versus another. Although that remains a viable and important aspect of research into practice effectiveness, a much wider scope of inquiry is now called for, including a consideration of the unique characteristics of the client, the unique characteristics of the practitioner, and the unique characteristics of their collaboration. We need to know why some practitioners are more effective than others, why clients with the same problems recover in different ways, what factors contribute to effective working alliances, and what factors detract. Most important, we need to emphasize criteria for success that are developed by clients themselves.



The art of practice is embedded in the capacity of the individual practitioner to form working alliances with clients, and to abstract from the generalities of accumulated knowledge to the particulars and the exigencies of a moment in time. For those practitioners who have long incorporated methods derived from a wide range of models and theories, there is validation in the knowledge that their particular synthesis may be supported by the research into the common factors of change. But there is also an opportunity to use client and supervisory feedback to examine factors that could be impediments to progress. When it is more widely understood that client perceptions have substantial predictive ability as well as practical utility for making within-session adjustments, practitioners are likely to become more sensitive to and interested in incorporating structured evaluative tools.

Science and art in social work must do more than coexist in order for the profession to reap the full benefits of either. They are rather two dimensions of a coherent and integrated whole. Acknowledging the artistic dimension of practice should not be seen as a refutation of science, but rather as an opportunity to enrich and expand the scope of inquiry, and thereby the potential contribution of science. And acknowledging the scientific dimension of practice should not be seen as an imposition on the uniqueness of the practitioner's style, but rather as an opportunity to both legitimate and enhance the structures and tools of improvisation.



Excerpted from "Evidence for the Art of Social Work" by Clay T. Graybeal. Families in Society © 2007. To read the complete article, log in to www.familiesinsociety.org.

Related Articles for Further Reading

(Available at www.familiesinsociety.org)

"Till Death Do Us Part": Evidence of the Rocky Marriage of Artistry and Science (2007)

Strengths-Based Social Work Assessment: Transforming the Dominant Paradigm (2001)

The Empirical Clinical Practice Debate (1987)

Clinical Social Work As an Art Form (1988)

Evaluating Practice: Science as Faith (1982)

Measures for Practice With Families From a Strengths Perspective (2001)

Learning Strengths-Based Practice: Challenging our Personal and Professional Frames (2001)

Narrative and Culturally Based Approaches in Practice With Families (2006)

Personal Motivation as a Criterion in Evaluating Social Work Practice (1980)

Building a Knowledge Base: A Personal Account (1999)

Doing Good Science Without Sacrificing Good Values: Why the Heuristic Paradigm is the Best Choice for Social Work (2002)

The Ecological Approach to People-Environment Transactions (1981)

Grounding Social Work Practice In Theory: Ecosystems (1987)

The Life Course Perspective: A Promising Approach for Bridging the Micro and Macro Worlds for Social Work (2005)



Policy Focus

Evaluating Alternative Approaches to Social Work: A Critical Review of the Strengths Perspective (2006)

A framework for assessment of social work's values and ideals is discussed; in particular, approaches to social work theory, the nature of social work, and the relationship between theory and practice. In the face of changing social regulation and political movements, this article reflects on two significant influences on social work: welfarism and post-modernism. Here, the strengths perspective is critiqued as an example of an alternative approach to social work, and to what degree that approach challenges or supports prevailing methods.

Evidence-Based Practice: An Alternative to Authority-Based Practice (1999)

Key questions regarding knowledge and practice include the following: What values, knowledge, and skills increase the likelihood of attaining outcomes valued by clients? Do social workers have specialized knowledge that makes them more effective than empathic nonprofessionals? How do we know? Social work claims to be a profession that provides special expertise to address certain kinds of problems. Two different approaches to the relationship between practice and knowledge are examined: evidence-based and authority-based. The consequences of these different approaches for clients, social workers, and taxpayers are suggested.

The Deconstruction of Professional Knowledge: Accountability Without Authority (2002)

Many practitioners feel frustrated over the foundations of their knowledge and how they are supposed to use it to help rather than disempower the people they serve. This paper argues that our accountability to the people we serve will come not from efforts to prove the authority of our knowledge, but from a more reflective and dialogic engagement with our knowledge, and with the people served through it—an engagement that seeks constantly to problematize our knowing, to probe and critique it, to trace its origins and assumptions, and explore its implications, to open it to inquiry and transformation.

Practice Focus

Art, Science, and the Economy of Care (2006)

Art and science both contribute to doing good, but they speak different languages. Switching from the often formulaic methods of scientific inquiry to seeing things in new and imaginative ways is exceedingly difficult. But when knowledge trickles down to the arena where practitioners do their work, it has an opportunity to affect those cumulative small changes in peoples' lives that lead to real social change. Real individual and social change comes from seeing subjects in context and noticing what needs attending to, generating the knowledge to know how the issue came about and why it persists, and then artfully using knowledge and skills sufficient to affect change.

"The Power of Place": Another Look at the Environment (CE Course # 100715) (2007)

It seems to be important for social work to modify the person-environment perspective to include more definitive ideas about immediate environments, the small places where people live much of their lives. It may be that some of our schemes, whether practice- or policy-based, to improve the lives of those we seek to help focus on the wrong part of the picture. Although it is important for social workers to assess the play of social institutions, policies, agencies, and the like in people's lives, it is imperative for us to understand the immediate, varied, and shifting environs where people live day to day. In a sense, this requires putting the social ahead of the individual, or at least putting the social on equal footing with the individual in assessment and in practice.

Creative Imagination: The Forgotten Ingredient in Social Work Practice (1982)

Creative social work can be defined as the application of divergent and convergent thinking in the problem-solving process. Such a process can be used to define social work problems innovatively, produce many ideas to solve problems of direct and indirect practice, and lead to the invention of new social technology. In fact, the way in which a problem is defined may be one of the most creative parts of practicing social work.

All articles featured in this newsletter are available on the *Families in Society* Web site: www.familiesinsociety.org.

Beyond Technique

Performance and the Art of Social Work Practice

The art of performance, particularly acting and musicianship, has much to offer clinical social work practice. A continual need exists in the social work profession to examine what contributes to good clinical practice, both from a theoretical perspective and from a human one. What qualities make a social worker successful at her job? What constitutes a good session? a good intervention? Exploring elements and nuances of performance can enhance social work practice by giving valuable insights into the realm of social work that lies beyond technique. In this realm, the practice of clinical social work is an art.

Three prominent parallels exist between the art of performance and the art of social work. The first is the undeniable importance of basic skills and technique, and the intuitive knowledge of when to let it go. Second, both professions require self-knowledge and the ability to use the self in the service of the audience or client. Third, in both professions, the practitioner must have the ability to act spontaneously in the moment to work to her fullest potential.

A career in performance demands a background of theoretical and technical knowledge, the acquisition of which requires discipline and ongoing commitment. At the point of actual performance for an audience, the drills are dropped and artistry takes over. Similar to those in the artistic professions, social workers must have a thorough understanding of their professional knowledge base. For a social work clinician, this background might include familiarity and practical experience with various practice approaches such as the psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioral, or narrative frameworks. The social worker must keep up her



“chops” as well, by both reviewing familiar practice knowledge and seeking out new literature and training. This knowledge must be so well-known by the worker that she need not actively concentrate on it at every moment during a session. A worker will not at all times have her chosen technique or theory foremost in her consciousness. If she is focusing on the client, she may lose herself in the dynamics of the interaction; often, the best work occurs when this happens.

When technical proficiency allows her creativity and intuition to rise to the surface, the worker may then be freed to focus her attention on other, more personal and artistic means of giving and receiving communication. Howard Goldstein’s writings [see page 4 of this newsletter for excerpts of Goldstein’s work] agree that workers should have extensive professional knowledge but says that does not guarantee excellence in practice. Rather, the elements that make practice successful (or not) lie in the realm beyond technique. Across practice approaches, elements central to successful practice include collaboration, personal well-being of the therapist, expectations, and sharing of responsibility by worker and client. This “art of understanding” is inspired by creative and interpretive knowledge inherent in the worker.

Related Articles for Further Reading

(Available at www.familiesinsociety.org)

Social Casework and Strategic Therapy (1986)

The Philosophical Context of a Health Model of Social Work (1986)

A Social Worker’s Use of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (1999)

The First Session: An Interpersonal Encounter (1988)

Relationship: The Cornerstone of Clinical Supervision (1989)

The Privilege of Being a Therapist: A Fresh Perspective from Intrapsychic Humanism on Caregiving Intimacy and the Development of the Professional Self (1999)

The Quiet Remedy: A Dialogue on Reshaping Professional Relationships (2006)

The Autonomy-Paternalism Dilemma in Social Work Practice (1985)

Conflicts of Professional Duty in Social Work (1982)

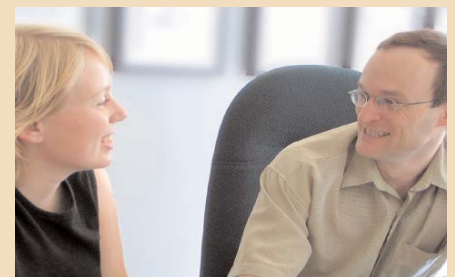
Beyond Technique: Performance and the Art of Social Work Practice (2004)

Empowerment for Our Clients and for Ourselves (1983)

Guilty Knowledge (1999)

Social Work at the Millennium (2000)

Tacit and Codified Knowledge in Social Work: A Critique of Standardization in Education and Practice (2007)



Excerpted from “Beyond Technique: Performance and the Art of Social Work Practice” by Lucy Vance Seligson. Seligson (LMSW) is a social worker in the entertainment industry assistance program, The Actors’ Fund of America. She obtained her MSW in 2003 after working 10 years in professional theater as a singer and actress. *Families in Society* © 2004

Remembering Howard Goldstein (1922-2000)



Howard was a giant in social work and an inspiration to us all. Perhaps most important, most inspiring, was that he always took the road less traveled and that he made such a difference to us all. He enjoyed being a maverick, always pushing the envelope, unwilling to be marginalized, always a twinkle in his eye and giving a gentle tweak to the self-satisfied.

He focused on ethics and moral judgements in practice while others embraced the notion of "neutral" science. He embarked on rich qualitative research when number crunching was in vogue. Howard, an authentic intellectual who derived almost sensual pleasure from the written word, also greatly valued people's direct experience of the world and thought the most important learning for social workers occurred not from books but in the field. Howard quietly but firmly led the way for all of us who dare to be different.

From "A Tribute to Howard Goldstein" (remarks by Ann Hartman and Joan Laird). *Families in Society* © 2001.

Art is What We Do

When we talk plainly about "listening to what a client is saying," what we hear are the unpolished qualities of the autobiography or the novel-in short "fiction." But the term fiction is not used here in its rude sense, as a deceptive falsehood.

As human beings, we are not flawless recorders of our life's experiences. To serve our belief that our existence is rational and logical, our fictions serve as expedient and necessary alternatives to the gaps between the actual and ideal. Thus, the client's fiction or story, like our own, reveals with purpose or intention a particular world view. Putting it another way, the self, as encountered in practice or any other social setting, is not a fixed object or an abstract category; it is always in the process of revealing itself through narrative.

Clearly, what gives [human stories] a dramatic quality is that they are shot through with moral consequences, value conflicts, and diverse meanings and interpretations. If the narrative is the nexus of human relationships, the medium by which we make our selves known and come to know other selves, then what kinds of knowledge will



deepen our understanding of this phenomenon? The objective, systematic, and rational scientific theories serve selective explanatory purposes. But for our practice with storytelling human beings, we require knowledge that will enable us to interpret what is going on and what an individual's experience means within its special context. Anthropology, history, and linguistics fit this requirement. The arts and humanities are equally, perhaps more, relevant: what are autobiographies, literature, drama, and philosophy if not commentaries on life's joys, suffering, and absurdities—themes often encountered in day-to-day practice? Social work practice is often referred to as both an art and a science. But regardless of where science fits into the scheme of the profession, art is what we do, what we use interpretively, imaginatively, and creatively—that is, if the practitioner is not numbed by a preoccupation with the mechanics of theory, method, and technique.

Excerpted from "If Social Work Hasn't Made Progress As a Science, Might It Be an Art?"
by Howard Goldstein. *Families in Society* © 1992.

The Limits and Art of Understanding

Understanding has its limits. Existing approaches to understanding and assessment are exclusionary: by crystallizing selected aspects of the client's situation each approach, by definition, disregards others. More important, the circumstances we are trying to understand are always in flux and change, full of the kinds of mystery and enigmas that are the essence of great literature.

I'm not suggesting that we should give up the pursuit of understanding or settle for less. Rather, we need to go beyond reason alone to use our own greater curiosity and imagination, a sense of "What is it like for you?" and seek sense of and find meaning in persons' lives. This is where the artistry of practice dwells that shifts the focus from *what* I need to understand to *how*.

The difference between the what and how of understanding mirrors the difference between theory and practice. The theorist strives to universalize and reduce, to fit the human condition within an explanatory

framework: that is science. The practitioner, in contrast, strives to particularize and individualize, to find meaning in—if not become part of—the peculiar, diverse, and the fugitive aspects of the human condition: that takes art.



The endeavor to grasp, or make sense of, the metaphoric human experience, the fragments that clients (or other humans) will (and will not) reveal about themselves, the stories they tell, depends on a certain artistry and creativity. Such artistry does not negate the necessary rigors of reasonable scientific thinking; art is often a concomitant attribute of great science and science in many ways informs art. Neither does the art of understanding dismiss the role of theory: bereft of theory, we would be groping our way through an inscrutable world. Not as a replacement or compromise but as a complement, artistry in understanding invites the creative and imaginative powers of subjectivity rather than rejecting them as undesirable contaminants of the pursuit of truth.



Excerpted from "The Limits and Art of Understanding in Social Work Practice"
by Howard Goldstein. *Families in Society* © 1999.

CE4Alliance: Online Continuing Education Program

Using CE4Alliance

Earning continuing education credit with CE4Alliance.com is designed to be simple and convenient. To get started, simply create a free membership account. Your membership account is your record with CE4Alliance.com, allowing us to keep track of all the CE credits you earn. In addition, you will have free access to a number of system features, such as full previews of the course exams, notification of new courses and more. Join today to get started: <http://www.ce4alliance.com/signup>.

An Overview of the Process

Once you have signed up for a free membership account with CE4Alliance.com, you're ready to start earning CE credits online. You will complete the following five steps to earn credits:

- Browse courses, and select one that interests you.
- For each course, review and/or print the course information and exam questions.
- Study the course material. Follow along and circle the answers to exam questions if you printed the course materials.
- Return to the course on CE4Alliance.com, and pay the applicable exam fees.
- Take the exam for each course selected and print out your certificate immediately.

Browse and Select Courses

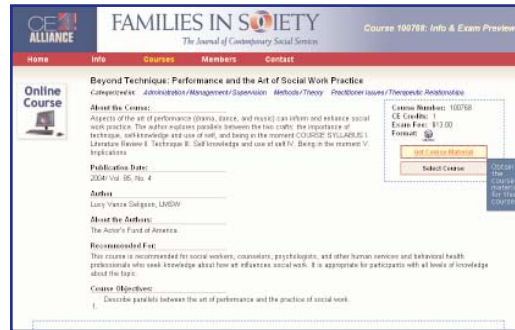
When you come to our Web site, click the "Courses" link from the top navigation menu, and then select one of the options. Start with "Overview," which will list a selection of our courses in each category. On the course listing page, each course will have an image, an excerpt of the description, and some factual data. Click the image or the course title to view the full details for the course, including the exam information.

Get the Course Materials

Most courses available from CE4Alliance.com are based on articles available online from *Families in Society*, the Alliance for Children and Families' scholarly journal for social service professionals. You will need to log in to your CE4Alliance.com member account to access the journal's articles. (*FIS* subscribers can also access the course articles using their own online or print issues.)

Take the Exam

To continue the course purchase, click "Go To Payment". Upon payment approval you can take your course immediately. Each course features an overview, syllabus, and learning objectives. The exam questions are in multiple-choice or true/false format. Click on the answer for each question, and then submit your exam.



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At a time when budgets are tight and dwindling, you may find your options for staff training and development becoming more limited. The Alliance for Children and Families recognizes this dilemma and continually works to provide quality and cost-effective resources.

As part of that effort, the Alliance's online continuing education program, **CE4Alliance**, can help you and your staff keep up-to-date, learn from the innovators, and earn credits.

Use this CE program with the *Families in Society* research and practice archive and your agency will have powerful tools to compliment staff development and quality improvement (QI) efforts. The flexibility and affordability are additional advantages to a program that provides competent, consistent, and interdisciplinary learning.



Don't miss out on new program features, added courses, and surveys, add your agency's staff training or QI coordinator to our mailing list.

To sign up, send an email to:
info@familiesinsociety.org.

"The site is easy to use and the entire process is user-friendly. It is refreshing that the items were detailed and specific, though clear."

Daniel Williger, PhD, Licensed Psychologist
Provident Counseling, St. Louis, MO

Print Your Certificate

Once you have passed the exam, select which accrediting organization is most relevant to your needs, such as the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB). If you need certificates for more than one accrediting organization, you can come back to this page after downloading and modify your choice for another certificate(s).



WEBINARS AND TELECONFERENCES

Interactive Webinars on Practice, Education, and Policy Within Social Services



Learn more about the significant trends and techniques found in the pages of *Families in Society*. You can take advantage of one-on-one discussions with nationally-recognized presenters who share guidelines for clinical services, implications for practice, and recommendations on the delivery and management of those services.

New Webinar Announcement

Working Poor and Social Justice Initiatives

In February 2008, guest editor Sondra Fogel will be hosting a Webinar to discuss issues surrounding the working poor.

For more information,
please visit
www.familiesinsociety.org.

Previous Webinar topics include:

Ethics and Risk-Management

An introduction to risk-management issues in social work incorporating extensive case material of complex practice-based ethical dilemmas and practical strategies designed to protect clients and prevent professional malpractice and liability.

Resiliency Theory in Practice

An introduction to the history and development of resiliency theory in social work and a new practice paradigm called the "Resiliency-Enhancing Model." Specific recommendations for integrating resiliency approaches in work with older adults are included.

Unplanned Termination by Adolescents in Mental Health Services

This presentation explores treatment dropout as experienced and described by clinicians. Discussed are contributing factors and examples provided for positive practitioner responses such as taking a greater proactive role in orchestrating the termination process with adolescents.

Women and Incarceration

This Webinar provides an overview of the impact on families and communities, the systems and people involved in reentry, points of intervention, and policy reforms and recommendations.



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