

Thinking Practice: The Social Work Integral Model

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Social workers are bound by the mission, values, and ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. Yet a broad, transtheoretical model accounting for these core principles and guiding identification of clinically and ethically sound daily praxis decisions is lacking in the field's literature and practice wisdom. Such a model could aid in assuring dependably sound social worker actions; socialization of colleagues; clearer guidelines for teaching, supervision, and ethical review of peers; and accreditation of educational programs. The Social Work Integral Model (SWIM) emerged from field practice and scholarship for instructional use and addresses this conceptual gap. Further, congruence of the SWIM with Ken Wilber's model of Integral Science suggests SWIM is a theoretical, as well as a practical, advance for the field.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- SWIM is a visual model of and for social work praxis that fosters development of a universally applicable conceptual architecture of social work practice.
- SWIM defines the threshold of competent social work as occurring upon dynamic convergence of the professional self, client, and professional values and ethics in a given context.
- Adoption of SWIM can help guide competent and procedurally just in-vivo praxis and with evaluation of the work of students and peers.

As professional social workers engaged in the field, we frequently develop a comfortable sense of our population, the practical and ethical issues we face in our practice, and the evolving standards and best practices for addressing these practical and ethical issues. Consciously or not, we create a system of thinking about the theories and tasks of doing our work. Those of us who become field instructors, change population foci, or enter the classroom as instructors of social work are confronted anew with the difficulty inherent in learning social work practice. The "comfortable sense" veteran social workers can take for granted stems from their successful development of intellectual scaffolding and conceptual architecture related to the profession. Such intellectual space houses theory, application knowledge, and skill competencies, and enables praxis (the art and science of social work practice). However, this comfortable sense belies the challenging cognitive work of constructing that conceptual space. The task of building this conceptual space can be challenging, overwhelming, and even disorienting to those learning the profession, or even those changing focus within it.

As classroom or practicum instructors talk about theory, students respond by asking, as Cameron and Keenan (2009) similarly report, "But what do I do with the client?" Students and practitioners of social work frequently struggle to understand how theories relate to one another or can translate into effective practice actions (Cameron & Keenan; Rosen, 1996). Students ask questions such as: "When is it okay to ask my client to elaborate on something?" "How do I know if it is okay to use personal disclosure?" or "What if I think my client's goal is immoral?"

These questions reveal the struggle of novices to juggle and apply the ethical and interventional principles that they are learning.

These inquiries also reveal the inherent need for development of a larger, higher-order intellectual space in the competent social worker, wherein the complex multiple mandates, guidelines, and theories of practice may simultaneously coexist and be considered. This intellectual space may be built with purposeful consciousness and a standardized profession-informed schema. It may also be built less consciously through a more idiosyncratic process predicated upon assimilation of partial views derived from multiple and discrete foci, quality of mentorship, and evolution of personal practice precedence. Yet, for reasons including current professional standards and public safety, the former alternative is clearly preferable to the latter. Unfortunately, the latter is normative. As GlenMaye, Lewandowski, and Bolin (2004) articulate, "In real world practice social workers use an advanced generalist perspective, but without specification of a model" (p. 118).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) expects accredited schools of social work to help burgeoning social workers purposefully develop such professional intellectual scaffolding by providing a "coherent and integrated professional foundation in social work" (CSWE, 2004, as cited in Cameron & Keenan, 2009, p. 346). Yet, CSWE guidelines offer elements and outcomes of such an education, rather than a formulary or directive about what constitutes such a foundation (Cameron & Keenan; CSWE, 2008). Additionally, advanced generalist practice still lacks model conceptualization (Lavitt, 2009).

Once associated with rural and frontier areas, advanced generalist MSW concentrations are now appearing in urban settings and are currently the fastest growing master-level concentration (Lavitt, 2009). Multiple social work thinkers have labored without agreement to conceptualize a uniform and generic account of social work or generalist social work practice (see Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2008; Lavitt; Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010; Wakefield, 1996).

How ethics are included within a uniform account of social work is yet another important consideration of the completeness and utility of that account. The National Association of Social Workers (2008) clearly states that: (a) "the [NASW] Code [of Ethics] is relevant to all social workers and social work students, regardless of their professional functions, the settings in which they work, or the populations they serve" ("Purpose of the NASW Code of Ethics," first paragraph) and (b) these should be revered as the primary source of ethical codes in social work practice. It is self-evident that any theoretical model of social work must actively include the profession's values and ethics. Sadly, this is not always done.