

Social Work with Family

* *Henry Rozario*

Introduction

Family is the basic institution in a community. It is the primary group in which members are born, brought up, formed, trained and socialized to play various roles and functions in society. Hence, it is important that the family maintains its well being. However, there are many problems and issues that affect a family. These problems are multifaceted in nature. The problem or progress of one person affects others in the family. It also presupposes that the causes of these problems could be located within the family and handling of such problems also will involve other members of the family. That is why family is treated as a system and any intervention in family must have this perspective.

Social Work practice with family is based on this system perspective. There are various methods and strategies in the profession, which can be applied to handle the multiplicity of family problems. It is possible to work with individuals in families and there also options to work with groups of family members with common problems and to mobilize resources from the community to assist families in need. There are various techniques, such as family therapy, crisis intervention, marital counselling and pre-marital counselling, which can be used for specific purposes.

This chapter attempts to provide information on the multiplicity of problems in the family, family as a system

* *Dr. Henry Rozario, Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur*

and the various interventions possible in the practice of Social Work with families.

Multiplicity of Family Problems

Problems in families are multifaceted. Problems occur between parents and children. The children may complain of favouritism or over protectionism of parents and parents may observe disobedience or emotional outbursts as problems from children. Problems also occur between the spouses on issues, such as child rearing, life-style and duties towards in-laws. In some situations, families come across a major crisis not because of problems among its members, but due to events, such as death of a spouse or sudden retrenchment of job. Thus, the problems have multi dimensions.

Since the problems in families are multifaceted, problems of any one member of the family may affect or influence other members also. So, the process of helping an individual entails the involvement of the entire family or, at least, those concerned with the problem. For example, most of the de-addiction centers treating alcoholic clients ask either the wife or parents to be present for the family therapy sessions. In some situations, Social work with families may go beyond the family system and may involve work with the immediate neighbourhood or the community at large. Let us take the case of a young wife whose husband had died of AIDS and who has to take care of three children. Social work with this family will involve screening the family members for HIV testing, mobilizing community resources, such as employment opportunity for the mother and subsidizing educational expenses for the children. Thus, the problems of families are multifaceted. Some of these problems are presented

below. Though these problems are classified into categories for the sake of understanding, in reality, they exist as problems of the family as a system, and so, will affect everyone in the family.

Problems Faced by Children in the Family System

- Some parents are overly protective and overly indulgent with their children. Such children get tied down with their parents and lose their individuality.
- In contrast, few parents are indifferent to their children. They may neglect them or may even reject them. This may alienate and estrange the children.
- Some parents verbally abuse children or punish them physically. When parents resort to punishment method often, the children become stubborn and aggressive.
- Some parents exhibit favouritism to one child at the expense of the other. Some parents resort to an equally unhealthy behaviour of comparing one child with the other and letting down that child. Favouritism and comparison may lead to low self-esteem in children.
- Some parents are too authoritarian, while few others are too permissive. While too much authoritarianism stifles the independence and autonomy of children, too much of permissiveness leads to indiscipline and lack of self-control.
- Some children come across parents, who are highly demanding. They want to push their children to greater heights in the field of education and career. These children are unable to cope with this kind of stress and develop anxiety and panic.

Problems Faced by Parents in the Family System

- Many parents come across children, who are disobedient and stubborn. These children defy the norms, rules and guidelines of the family. Parents feel hopeless. Some parents, ultimately, give up to the demands of their children.
- As children enter adolescence, many parents experience difficulties in handling them. Biological changes that are associated with the onset of puberty and the associated emotional instability and heightened sexual feelings create 'storms' and stresses in the adolescents. Some parents are unable to cope with the sudden emotional outbursts of their adolescents and teenagers.
- Most of the adolescents develop peer group relations and are greatly influenced in their hobbies, dressing pattern and interests by the peer group. They gradually become independent from their parents. Many parents are unable to either accept or adapt to these changes.
- Some adolescents yield to infatuation and develop love affairs. Few of them even run away from their families. Such behaviours destabilize the family.
- In extreme cases, youth become victims of substance abuse and amoral sexual behaviour. The parents are thrown off the guard suddenly.
- When the children grow into adulthood, get married and leave the parents to start their own family, many parents experience the 'empty nest syndrome'.
- Some children disown their parents in their old age due to various reasons, such as poverty, strained relationship within laws or property disputes. Their

plight is very miserable if they do not get help from social support systems, such as Home for the Aged.

Problems between Husbands and Wives in the Family System

- In some families, the spouses come across physical abuse and/or verbal abuse from one another. Verbal abuse is more common and equally hurting. Ultimately, it leads to the breakdown of communication and relationship.
- Husbands and wives come across conflicts based on interests, beliefs, values and priorities in life. Either one of them may try to force his/her ideas on the other. This leads to resentment and sometimes retaliation.
- Extra marital relations and the suspicion associated with it cause havoc in the family. Trust, love and concern one had for the other is shattered. It is replaced by distrust, suspicion, seething anger and vengeance.
- Some of the spouses come across permanent sexual difficulties by which they become incapacitated to gratify the physical needs of the other. The social stigma attached with sexual difficulties prevents the spouses to approach a family therapist or a medical practitioner and, thus, the problem remains unresolved. Though in many families this problem may not be brought out openly, however, it may emerge in disguise as some other issue.

Families in Crisis

- Occasionally some families are struck by crisis. The crisis is more acute, especially if it involves the death of a family member.

- Long-term detention in prison on account of crime, sudden loss of job of the only bread winner of the family and drug addiction of children are some crisis events that can destabilize a family.

Dynamics of Family System

Family is a dynamic institution. It has gone through a lot of changes in the process of adapting itself to the changes taking place in other institutions. Family is not only a dynamic institution, but it constitutes a system. As a system, family has sub-systems, such as couples, parents and children. These sub-systems are inter-related to one another and also constantly interact with one another. Thus, any problem or progress in one sub-system will have its impact on other sub-systems and on the overall system itself. This has to be kept in mind in planning any intervention in the family system.

There are various group processes that take place in the family system. Emotional attachment among members of the family is one such dynamics. This attachment provides perfect bonding for its members to understand and accept one another. It also serves as a basis for retaining the values, religious beliefs, traditions, and norms over a long period of time.

Another dynamics observed in the family is its ability to adapt to the environment. Though family remains the primary institution, it co-exists with many other institutions belonging to the fields of education, occupation, government, religion and entertainment. The members of the family are, in one way or the other, connected to these institutions. Thus, the family learns to revise its norms, practices and values in relation to the changes taking place in the environment.

Another important dynamics observed in the family is its stability and harmony. Families provide stable relationship to its members. Each member has a prefixed role as a husband, wife or parent or child. Since each one's roles, functions and responsibilities to the other is clearly defined, there is stability in the family. This stability is the foundation of harmony in the family.

Problems come into family system when internal and external events disturb the above said processes in the family. Some families lose their emotional attachment to one another and may attempt separation. Some families find it difficult to adapt to the environment and get isolated. Some families lose their stability and harmony and indulge in constant quarrel. Ultimately, the families become dysfunctional and lose their relevance and purpose of existence.

If the families have to be restored to their functional state, an appropriate intervention is necessary. Such intervention has to be holistic in nature and treat the family as a system. It is in this context that the various methods of Social work profession become relevant because these methods deal with an individual, the group and the community. The dynamics of family system is such that it necessitates an integrated approach, dealing with the entire system. The following paragraphs will explain the application of different methods of Social Work in the family system.

Intervention Methods in Social Work

1) Social Work with Individuals in Family Setting

In working with a family, the social worker may sometimes limit his interaction on a one to one basis with a member of the family. Certain problems, such as poor academic performance and emotional outbursts

of children or some behavioural problems of parents, such as being authoritarian, too much demanding and overly protective, may not require the involvement of other sub-systems of the family. In certain cases of marital conflicts, the other spouse may be hostile to the idea of working with a social worker. Such situations may necessitate the worker to work with one member of the family to enable him to handle the problem. This helping process goes through different phases, indicating, that it has to be done systematically.

Phases in Working with Individuals

Study Phase

- Attend to the client. Develop rapport. It is very crucial in one to one relationship.
- Listen to his problems. Listen actively. Empathize with him.
- Maintain eye contact. Observe the non-verbal communication and body language of the client.
- Gather all the details necessary for handling the problems. Details include personal data of the client, his family background and the necessary information on psycho-social aspects of his personality.

Problem Assessment Phase

- Gather information regarding the problem, the onset of the problem, its frequency and magnitude.
- Don't probe into areas irrelevant for handling the problems. Don't be curious about matters of privacy, which may not be relevant for addressing the problem.

- Identify the problem to be handled or a positive behaviour to be learnt. It is generally easier to develop new positive behaviour than to eliminate negative behaviours.
- Don't take the entire problem. Take that part of it, which is manageable, which must be handled immediately and above all, the aspect, which has a high probability of success. Success will give confidence to the client to handle more complex problems.
- Summarize what the client says at regular intervals. Respond empathetically not only to the content of his problem, but also to his feelings.

Helping Phase

- Select the intervention method after reviewing alternatives. Encourage divergent thinking in the client.
- Implement the intervention.
- Enable him to take responsibility for his problem solving behaviour. Help him to recognize the challenge involved in learning a new behaviour or in weaning away from a negative behaviour.
- Help him to anticipate bottlenecks and setbacks.
- Monitor his progress. Develop behavioural indicators, so that he can monitor his own progress periodically.
- Review all aspects of the intervention. If your intervention is not working, examine and change some features of the intervention.

Termination Phase

- Termination of helping process must be done carefully and gradually. The decision must be taken in consultation with the client.
- Plan follow-up to ensure intermittent reinforcement of new positive behaviour.
- Assure continued availability when necessary.

2) Social Work with Groups in Family System

Many parents will come across some common problems in bringing up their children. Similarly, the children or the spouses may also have a few problems that have a common pattern. Under such circumstances, it will be more beneficial to help them in groups rather than deal with them as individuals. For example, if a group of parents feel that they need better parenting methods, it will be more useful to bring them together in a group and enable them to share their anxieties, ventilate their feelings and enable them to learn from one another's experience. In the same way, children, who may have been referred for delinquent behaviours or temper tantrums, may benefit a lot if they meet other children with similar problems and work together to come out of the problem.

It is in this context that working with groups assumes significance in Social Work practice with families. Groups provide members with learning experiences, opportunity to share experiences and to engage in mutual problem solving. Members get the opportunity to increase their confidence under the guidance of a professional social worker.

Phases of Working with Groups

Study Phase

- Form the group with members, who have common problems, needs and expectations. (for example, a group of parents wanting to learn better parenting methods)
- A homogeneous group in terms of age, education and occupation is preferable.
- Look into details, such as comfortable seating arrangements and protection from distracting noises from outside. Being seated in a circle is ideal.
- Discuss with group members and identify their main concern. Evolve goals based on their concern.
- Clarify the goals and break them into tasks or activities. If the groups, goal is to learn better parenting methods, work out the knowledge, skills and attitude they need to learn. Based on this requirement, evolve themes, topics, sub-topics and activities to be carried out during every meeting.

Helping Phase

- Conduct group activities. Activities must be arranged in order of importance to goal attainment.
- Ensure a congenial group climate by monitoring basic group processes, such as participation, we-feeling, emotional support, confirmation and acceptance.
- Encourage individuals to freely express their ideas, feelings, attitudes, insights and information.
- At the same time, do not allow dominating, criticizing and moralizing behaviours among members. Make

them understand that such behaviours will be detrimental to group functioning.

- Link every session to the previous and forthcoming sessions in terms of acquiring new knowledge and behaviour. This will enable members to learn new skills.
- Encourage the application of new learning. You can give home assignments to the members.
- Enable them to practice new behaviours in actual life situations. Ask them to record such experiences.
- Review home assignments of members in the group.
- Encourage members to share the implication of group learning in their lives as parents. For example, group of parents working on better parenting methods will share their new experiences of relating with their children.
- Respond to them with reassurance.

Termination Phase

- Give feedback to individuals as well as to the group about its progress. This will instill confidence in the members about their ability to learn new positive behaviours.
- If follow-up is necessary, work out modalities of further follow-up meetings.
- Encourage members to keep in touch with the worker or other members in case of any need for emotional support.

3) Working with the Community for Family System

The family does not exist in isolation, but in a community. The community is the basic support system

for the family. The members of the family are also members of other institutions in the community. For example, the father in a family may be working in an industry and the mother may be working in a government enterprise. The children may be studying in a school and a college. In addition to this, they may be members of a particular religion and residents of a particular neighbourhood.

Some of the problems in the family will affect their role in other institutions in the community and some of the problems of these institutions will also affect the dynamics in the family. For example the industry may go for a lay off and terminate the services of the father of the family. The college may take disciplinary action on the son because of his indiscipline in the campus. A tragic situation may come wherein the only bread winner of a very poor family dies in an accident and the family finds itself on the street. In all these situations, the very process of assisting and rebuilding the family needs assistance from the community. The worker has to mobilize resources that are available in the community to help the families. It is in this context that Social Work practice with the community on behalf of family setting becomes relevant.

Options in Community Work

- Some families may have a common problem and its solution may lie in mobilizing community resources. For example, the worker may be working with a few housewives whose main problem is their inability to take up a job, since there is no one at home to take care of their young babies. These women are desperately in need of additional income. They are skilled and there are jobs available. In such a situation, it will be beneficial to these families if a Day Care centre for Children

could be organised in the community. Here, the attempt of the worker in mobilizing community resources solves the problem of many families.

- Imagine a situation where a bread winner of a family has lost his job. He is also not a skilled labourer. The worker can put him in touch with a vocational skills training institution in the community for learning livelihood skills and, later on, can arrange self-employment loan from a banking institution in the community.
- Sometimes, the worker may have to speak on behalf of children of some families, who are either orphans or from single parent families. These children need admission and concessions in a residential institution for children. He may face a situation where the children are unable to pay for their stay, training or they may not have eligibility in terms of admission criteria. In such a situation, he plays an active role of securing scholarships from the community or ensuring the admission by negotiating the admission criteria.

In all these situations, the worker has to work with the community and mobilize its resources in order to help some members of the family.

4) Crisis Intervention

Crisis can set in a family unexpectedly in form of death of a spouse or a child, extra marital relations, long-term imprisonment of a spouse or drug addiction of an adolescent. It is a critical period in the life of a family. It disrupts family's stability and harmony and puts at stake the security and survival of the members of the family. It is in this context that some external support is needed to these families. Crisis intervention is one

such method, which is widely used in Social Work Practice.

Phases of Crisis Intervention

Assessment Phase

- Enable them to ventilate feelings. This is very important.
- Concern about the origin and causes of the crisis is less relevant. Do not spend much time on this aspect.
- Assess the impact of crisis on the family. Find out the extent and degree of dysfunction and impairment.
- Appraise ego strength of the family members. Identify basic defenses and habitual adaptive patterns of the members.
- Ensure the availability of internal, intra familial and community resources.

Intervention Phase

- Enhance the cognitive perception of the members by providing more knowledge about the crisis and the methods of handling it.
- Enable them to become aware of their feelings, such as grief, shock and anxiety. Provide them assurance and emotional support.
- Mobilize resources, such as material and monetary aid and elicit help from neighbours and relatives. Enable them to mobilize such resources by themselves as well as use it.
- Stimulate restoration of adjustment skill. Teach new attitudes and skills necessary to face life.

Termination Phase

- Point out the maturation taking place in the members while handling the crisis. This is the positive outcome of crisis intervention.
- Follow-up until a healthy equilibrium has been restored. This will help the family to face future threats with authenticity.

5) Family Therapy

Family therapy aims to establish more satisfying ways of living for the entire family. The family is considered as a system and a maladjusted person is given treatment within the family system. It is assumed that the problem of one person in the family is the product of how he interacts with other family members and how others interact with him. Problems, such as alcoholism, marital breakdown and family violence, can be quoted as examples. In this context, it is necessary to work with the entire family or with those, who are concerned about the problem. Family Therapy is one such method, which is widely used in Social Work Practice.

The Strategy

- Develop rapport. Study the family system.
- Determine what is blocking the family from solving its own problem. It is not enough to merely solve the immediate problem within the family.
- Teach the family members to communicate openly their positive or negative feelings, desires and needs.
- Intervene when discrepancies of feelings, words, or actions are noted.

- Encourage members to interact inside and outside the therapy. Show how the total interaction among all members is important for solving the problem.
- Assist family members to objectively review their long held beliefs, values and expectations that may block their problem solving process.
- Open up many new avenues for solving problems. Help them to find appropriate ways of solving their problems. Teach the family to solve its problem by itself.
- Educate the family members about the need to remain in touch with the neighbourhood and draw on its resources.

6) Marital Counselling

Marital Counselling is used to handle conflicts between a husband and his wife. Marital conflicts may occur over virtually anything. Some areas that can lead to severe difficulties are money matters, child rearing practices, failure of duties towards in-laws, inability to meet career demands, extra marital affairs and sexual difficulties. The main reasons for marital conflicts are unrealistic expectations of the couple and their personality traits. In this context, it is necessary to work with both the husband and the wife to restore stability and harmony in relationship. Marital Counselling is one such method, which is widely used in Social Work Practice.

The Strategy

- Develop rapport with the couple.
- Enable the spouse to identify the problem. Discuss with them about its negative impact on their relationship.

- Enable spouses to understand the causes of the problem. Sometimes, the causes can be outside the marital unit.
- Point out how the inability to handle everyday stress in running a family spoils relationship between the husband and wife.
- With their consensus, choose that part of the problem that has to be handled, based on its immediacy and manageability.
- Equip them with the skills of open, direct, meaningful and satisfying communication. Enable the couple to communicate their thoughts and feelings in your presence. Restore their interaction with one another.
- Enable them to develop empathy for one another. Rekindle the love and concern they would have had in the beginning of their marital life.
- Help them to find out their family stressors and teach them stress management techniques.
- Work on the important areas in marital relationship, such as relationship, sexual relationship, fidelity, affection, leadership, responsibilities towards one another and mutual support.
- Give them 'Home work' before they come for the next session.
- Strengthen the support system within the family (family elders) and outside the family (neighbourhood).
- Enable them not only to resolve problems, but also to learn problem solving skills. This will help them in the future to handle their problems by themselves, instead of relying on external help.

7) **Pre-marital Counselling**

Young people need orientation before they get married. Many problems in marriage and, later on, in family life can be traced to the unrealistic expectations and distorted opinions the couple would have entertained before marriage. In this context, it is necessary to organise counselling services for those young people who are about to get married. Pre-marital Counselling is one such method, which is widely used in Social Work Practice.

The Strategy

- Make the clients understand the goals and purpose of marriage in realistic terms.
- Make them aware of their own unrealistic expectations, immature thinking pattern, inappropriate attitudes, which they would have learnt from their own parents or from mass media.
- Train them in skills of interpersonal relationship, communication and problem solving.
- Help them recognize their roles and duties towards one another and also towards their parents and in-laws.
- Make them understand the physiological and biological dimensions of sexual relationship and its significance in marriage.
- Remove their ignorance, fear, guilt, aversion or anxiety about sexual relationship and the associated problems, such as impotence and frigidity.
- Impress upon them the importance of building a family with children. Highlight the importance of

small family norm for our country and indicate the various possibilities and methods of planning a family.

Eclectic Approach

There is no single method for handling family problems. No theoretical system fully explains the dynamics of the problems as well as the methods to handle them. Hence, there is a need to develop an eclectic approach. Eclectic approach is characterized by the knowledge of many theories and several skills for selecting the right approach and techniques with reference to clients.

Social Work practice with family definitely revolves around an eclectic approach. The reasons are obvious. Family is a system and it is dynamic. The problems are multi-faceted. The causes and consequences are complex to understand and difficult to handle. Hence, it calls for an eclectic approach wherein the knowledge and skills of various disciplines are put together to effect change in the family system.

The Social Worker should be able to choose any combination of the Social Work methods of working with Individuals, Groups and the Community and also other strategies, such as Crisis Intervention, Family Therapy, Marital Counselling and Pre-Marital Counselling, described above to handle the problem of his clients.

Conclusion

Family is the basic institution in the community. Hence, it is important that we are equipped with the skills and knowledge of working with families. In this chapter, we have learnt that the problems faced by families are multifaceted in nature. We have also understood that

family exists as a system, and so, handling the problem of any individual member in the family involves the cooperation of many other members of the family system. It is in this context that this chapter on 'Social Work with Family' has presented Social Work methods of working with Individuals, Groups and the Community and also other strategies, such as Crisis Intervention, Family Therapy, Marital Counselling and Pre-Marital Counselling. This might have given us the knowledge and interest to work with families. In fact, there are a few more approaches, but they do not come under the scope of this unit. You can make use of the references given under 'Suggested Readings' to enhance your knowledge.

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