

Person-In-Situation: History, Theory, and New Directions for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

This article explores the history of the person-in-situation concept in social work practice, identifies difficulties in integrating the concept in practice theories, and explores how philosophical innovations have informed a more integrated approach to social work theory. The potential impact of the convergence of integrating subjective and objective phenomena in philosophy with integrating the person and environment perspective in clinical theory is discussed.

Introduction

The concept of “person-in-situation” or “person-in-environment” stemmed from the beginning of social work and its dual focus on both individual assistance and social reform. The historical development of the concept reflects political, social, and economic concerns as well as debates within the profession of social work. It has been central to direct practice¹ in particular, though there have been difficulties in applying the concept within some of the major theoretical frameworks adopted by social workers. This article will trace the person-in-situation concept throughout the history of social work, examine how practice theories have often failed to fully integrate the concept, and explore the convergence of contemporary philosophy with advances in integrating the concept in clinical theory.

History

The early years of social work practice are defined by the contributions of Jane Addams in the settlement house movement and Mary Richmond in social casework. The two influences represent the beginnings of the dual focus of social work on social reform (by the settlement house movement) and on individuals and families (in social casework). Mary Richmond (1922) attempted to bridge these divisions by emphasizing the importance in work with individuals and families of the interaction between the person and the environment. She defined social casework as “those processes which develop personality through adjustments consciously effected, individual by individual, between men [sic] and their social environment” (pp. 98–99). Here we encounter the first formal conceptualization of

direct social work as focusing on both the person and his or her environment. Richmond proclaimed that the social worker should be “no more occupied with abnormalities in individual than in the environment...no more able to neglect one than the other” (p. 98). Richmond’s casework occurred within the context of the relationship between social worker and client, but she promoted both direct action through that relationship and indirect action through use of environmental resources (p. 101). Furthermore, Richmond stated that in the “absence of services... social workers should develop substitutes and push hard to secure community agencies still lacking” by making use of “arguments and illustrations from casework” (p. 115). In this way, she understood that casework, group work, community work, social reform, and social research were all interdependent aspects of social work that should come together on the behalf of clients. Hence, Richmond was able to contextualize individual, direct action within the framework of the environment and the multiple functions of the social worker.

While Richmond’s work synthesized concerns about the person and environment in both the assessment of cases and in the activities of the social worker, the rise of psychoanalytic theory soon shifted this focus for social workers in direct practice. Freud’s work and his focus on individual pathology became widely read and popular among social workers in the U.S. (Simon, 1994). The intrapsychic focus of Freud’s theories as well as the analytic stance of abstinence of the practitioner in treatment led to a reduction of attention to, and intervention in, environmental causes of distress. By the 1940s, some direct practitioners were beginning to label themselves as psychiatric social workers and explicitly aligning with psychoanalytic theory and practice.

It was then that Gordon Hamilton (1940) wrote the influential *Theory and Practice of Social Casework*. Hamilton clearly incorporated aspects of psychoanalytic theory including transference, defense and resistance, and interpretation into casework practice. In the preface to the 1951 edition of *Theory and Practice of Social Casework*, Hamilton identified herself as part of the diagnostic school and expressed her allegiance to Freudian theory, though she also stated that by the time the second

¹ Direct practice here is used to distinguish work with individuals and families from macro level administrative, community, and policy social work.

edition was published she believed social work practice fit more with ego psychology and psychodynamic theory than with the specialty of psychoanalysis (pp. v–vii). Hamilton reaffirmed social work’s traditional concern with the environment and “committed not only to understand the structure and dynamics of personality but also to rediscover the use of environmental or social therapy” (p. v). Hamilton was the first to make use of the phrase “person and situation” as a way to define the distinguishing characteristics of social work as a “humanistic” or clinical profession (p. 3). She used the construct to highlight the interaction between the intrapsychic and objective, with the interaction being the primary domain of the social worker. Hamilton perceived the role of the direct practice social worker as understanding intrapsychic conflict while making use of the healthy aspects of the client to help the individual adapt to his or her environment, though she fails to equally emphasize intervening to cause the environment to adapt to the individual. She did recognize that counseling frequently needed to be accompanied by practical assistance that required the social worker to develop an understanding of the community, the client’s social needs, and the resources to meet those needs (p. 84). She also included the use of social resources as one of the four characteristic processes of direct practice (p. 26). Thus, while psychodynamic theory strongly influenced Hamilton’s approach to practice, she returned to the emphasis on person and situation in assessment and treatment, and in defining the unique perspective of the profession.

Hamilton’s desire to define the profession was not unique in her time. There was a prevailing fear that social work would become absorbed in other professions such as psychology, psychiatry, medicine and sociology (Turner, 1978). By the 1950s, mental health work had strong popular support and therapists held high status, leading to higher status for psychiatric social workers (Turner, p. 2). Psychiatric social workers advocated for casework to be recognized as a form of psychotherapy and appeared to be more aligned with psychiatry than social work. In clinical settings, direct practice social workers were seen as experts on the external factors of a case, while psychiatrists were experts on the internal factors, though in fact the roles of the social worker and psychiatrist were not so clearly defined in actual practice (Turner, p. 9). Despite ambiguity in actual roles, psychiatrists were held in higher status and frequently supervised social workers, paralleling the higher status given to “internal” or intrapsychic

issues as opposed to environmental issues on a case.

In the 1960s, awareness of social problems began to expand greatly, impacting the focus of the social work profession. The publication of *The Other America*, the implementation of President Kennedy’s social programs, and the growth of the civil rights movement all contributed to renewed interest in social reform (Simon, 1994). The social programs of the Great Society and the War on Poverty heightened this interest. Social workers began to question direct practice and condemned psychotherapy as a “band-aid” approach that did not address underlying social issues (Turner, 1978, p. 3).

In the midst of this change in the social climate, Florence Hollis (1964) published *Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy*. As in the prior works of Hamilton and Richmond, Hollis directed attention back to the interaction between the individual and environmental factors in social work, stating that, “Central to casework is the notion of ‘the-person-in-his-situation’ as a threefold configuration consisting of the person, the situation, and the interaction between them” (p. 10). However, Hollis limited her understanding of “situation” to an interpersonal dynamic between the client and significant others such as friends and family rather than broader socio-political concerns. She also stated that the difference between social casework and psychiatry was “mainly a matter of methods” and that emphasizing differences in culture would risk understating universal Freudian personality dynamics (pp. 11–12). In defining the distinctive characteristics of casework, Hollis noted that casework “gives weight to both person and situation in diagnosis, works primarily with the individual but also enters into the environment when it is in the client’s best interest” (p. 267). The influence of the focus on intrapsychic dynamics in the previous decade is evident in Hollis’s emphasis on individual treatment and her alignment with psychodynamic theory. However, she did note ways in which the social worker could intervene in environmental factors, including referring to other professional experts, suggesting resources, preparing the client to make use of resources, enlisting social supports, influencing others on behalf of the client, and “direct marshalling of resources and services on the client’s behalf” (p. 112). Hollis also noted:

Not since Mary Richmond’s time have we given the same quality of attention to indirect as to direct work. This neglect has tended to downgrade environmental treatment in the worker’s mind...[as] something unworthy of serious

analysis.... This is an absolutely false assumption. Environmental work also takes place with people and through psychological means.” (p. 77).

So even in the midst of her adherence to Freudian and psychodynamic theory, Hollis called for a renewal of social work's traditional focus on the environment and identified it as serious, psychological work for the social caseworker.

Even as Hollis advocated the recognition of the interaction between the person and the environment, the profession began in the 1960s to turn its attention away from direct practice and toward community organization, policy design, and social action (Goldstein, 1996). Direct practice caseworkers lost their status, schools of social work reduced curriculum space allotted to direct practice intervention and theory, social work undergraduate programs proliferated, and social work doctoral programs increasingly emphasized administration, social policy, and research (Goldstein, 1996, p. 90). Supporters of direct practice were accused of “blaming the victim” of oppression and pathologizing marginalized groups such as women, gays, and people of color (Goldstein, 1996). Direct practitioners, in turn, felt that the poor were being deprived of individualized services, social work was becoming deprofessionalized, the quality of treatment available was suffering, and direct service was being abandoned by the NASW (Goldstein, 1996).

Direct practitioners turned to psychosocial theories that emphasized the person-in-situation to defend direct practice as relevant to the mission of social work. In 1978, Turner's *Psychosocial Therapy* detailed the debate within social work and emphasized skills in relating to individuals, families, groups and communities, as well as skills in mobilizing available resources. Turner highlighted the knowledge and skill direct practitioners need to make use of community resources and noted the “liberating effect” on clients when such resources are made available (p. 60). He also added the role of facilitator to social work practice as a means to integrate the complex web of resources and services involved in care for clients. Turner noted that the need for a multi-skilled direct service social worker was becoming evident as psychosocial therapy gained attention and highlighted a variety of needs and interventions.

Many social workers at that time equated clinical social work with psychodynamically-oriented casework and psychotherapy, an effort to promote private practice, and an attempt to achieve higher status by psychotherapists within the profession

(Goldstein, 1996, p. 91). Some social workers questioned whether clinical practitioners respected the traditions of social work, especially those of social justice and concern for the poor and oppressed (Goldstein, 1996). Critics of clinical social work contended that it still relied too heavily on psychodynamic theory and only “paid lip service” to the person-in-situation perspective. However, by 1980 a broad definition of clinical social work had arisen that “reaffirmed its person-situation perspective, its concern with the social as well as personal context, its biopsychosocial assessment lens...[and] broad knowledge base” and reaffirmed both agency-based and private practice (Goldstein, 1996, p. 93).

In clinical social work in the 1980s, theories such as self-psychology, the ecological perspective, object relations, couples and family theories, cognitive/behavioral, crisis intervention, task-centered, and empowerment theory increased in popularity (Goldstein, 1996). Psychodynamically oriented clinicians began to make use of new theories and models for the treatment of women, people of color, gays, and lesbians (Goldstein, 1996). Criticism and debate regarding clinical social work practice (particularly private practice) remained, as some perceived it as failing to address the needs of the poor and oppressed (Specht, & Courtney, 1994). Yet evidence suggests most private practitioners also worked at least part time in agency settings (Goldstein, 1996), and case related advocacy was still being practiced by clinical social workers both as a part of work in agency settings and on their own time as volunteers (Ezell, 1994).

Continuing challenges for the profession by the 1990s included an increasingly diverse knowledge base, specialization, and professional fragmentation (Goldstein, 1996). In the face of these challenges, clinical social work again made use of the person-in-environment/situation concept to unite the profession (Goldstein, 1996; Lieberman, 1987). In 1987, the Board of Directors of the NASW, the Federation of Societies of Clinical Social Work, and the American Board of Examiners accepted a common definition of clinical social work that included a basis in knowledge and theory with “particular attention to person-in-environment” and services that consist of “assessment, diagnosis, treatment, client-centered advocacy, and evaluation” (Northen, 1995, p. 8). Most current clinical social work texts now make use of the term “person-in-environment” and spend at least some space on the environmental/social aspects of assessment and treatment (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 1996; Brandell, 1997;

Cooper & Lesser, 2002; Northern, 1995; Webb, 2003). However, the concept is still not fully integrated into discussions of theory and treatment. It may be relegated to a special chapter (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 1996), posed as an opening statement (Northern, 1995, Cooper & Lesser, 2002; Webb, 2003), discussed only in the context of assessment (Northern, 1995; Cooper & Lesser, 2002; Webb, 2003), or not discussed at all (Turner, 1996). This is due, in part, to the continuing difficulty of integrating the person, the environment, and the interaction between the two in the theories that guide clinical social work practice, as theories have traditionally focused on intrapsychic issues with minimal attention to the environment or socio-cultural issues with little emphasis on the individual.

Practice Theories

This section explores four established social work practice theories that have differing approaches to and emphases on the person, the environment, and the interaction between the two. These theories, which include psychoanalytic theory, ego psychology, constructivist theory, and radical theories, represent a broad range of theoretical traditions that all have some difficulty integrating a balanced person-in-environment perspective.

The psychodynamic theories that have influenced clinical social work have had difficulty including both the environment and the interaction between person and environment in approaches to practice. One of Freud's basic tenets of psychoanalytic theory was that an infant begins from a pleasure principle but must later adjust to the demands of the reality principle. Freud assumed that individual needs and drives precede the infant's perception of reality, a view that newer postmodern theorists have questioned (Saari, 2002). The potential effects of the sociopolitical environment on intrapsychic processes were not considered in psychoanalytic theory. In regard to the environment, Freudian theory assumed that society was monolithic and universal, and that it was built on social consensus (Thompson, 1992). Freud did not account for competing needs within society or variations in how individuals experience culture and society. This then negated the need for attention to social justice issues, attention to cultural diversity, and the impact of real experiences of oppression and discrimination in the lives of many social work clients. Thus, both the interactive effect of the environment on personality development and the need to confront environmental issues were excluded from Freudian theory. The theory had at its

base the person, but not the environment or the interaction between it and the person. Social workers attempted to modify this theory in order to account for the person-in-situation perspective, but it was only "tacked on" and not truly integrated into theory (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 1996; Hamilton, 1951; and Hollis, 1964). A consequence of this is that environmental interventions have also never been truly integrated into psychodynamic social work practice. So, following Richmond's writings (which were completed prior to Freud's overwhelming influence on the profession) significant works addressing social work direct practice struggled to modify Freudian theory and practice to integrate the person-in-situation concept.

Hamilton recognized this issue and turned to ego psychology in an attempt to combine intrapsychic theory with the person-in-situation focus of social work (Hamilton, 1951, preface). However, while Hartmann, a leading theorist of ego psychology, focused on the ego's adaptation to the "average expectable environment", he failed to account for the cultural complexity and diversity that is encountered in modern society (Saari, 2002, p. 3). Furthermore, ego psychology has not accounted for socio-cultural phenomena such as oppression, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and competing class interests. Since the societal issues that have a very real impact on clients' functioning and sense of well-being remained unacknowledged, they could not be addressed through the psychodynamic framework. In fact, some have argued that psychodynamic theories focus the social worker's attention on the individual's adaptation to society, which could cause him or her to "blame the victim" for a failure to adapt to an oppressive society.

More recent postmodern philosophies have influenced psychodynamic theory, leading to the adoption of constructivist theories (Saari, 2002). Constructivism is based on the idea that knowledge is context bound and that "social life is not uniform nor determined by essential processes" (Houston, 2002, p. 151). Under this theory, there is no one reality outside of the subjective experience and no universal claims can be made as to truth or knowledge (Carpenter, 1996). This relativism has appealed to social workers as it negates the claims of universalism and the valuing of dominant worldviews over those of oppressed or devalued cultures (Houston, 2002). However, without any reference to the objective world, there is the question of how constructivists can account for the role of the environment in shaping the individual. In fact, Carpenter (1996)

notes that a principle concept of constructivism is structure determinism, that is that human experience is predominated by internal processes that determine perceptions and preclude the direct influence of the environment. This form of constructivism is unable to explain the very real effect of environmental influences such as oppression, poverty, trauma, and violence. With the exclusive focus on the subjective, the environmental component involved in the person-in-environment perspective is eradicated. In fact, Carpenter states that through this lens, “psychosocial problems’ do not exist in the ontological sense but only in language and thought” (Carpenter, 1996, p.157). Using that premise, one could propose that clients’ problems are a result of faulty thinking, so that changes in their subjective experiences or thought patterns will eradicate their perceived problems. This then places the responsibility for the problem back with the client rather than with very real inequities and environmental constraints. If social relativism is the basis for social work practice, there is no role for advocacy to change social structures that perpetuate social inequality and empowering clients to act collectively.

Radical social work diametrically opposes the relativism of constructivist theory. Radical theory draws heavily from Marxist concepts and emphasizes politics, class conflict, ideological hegemony, and socialism (Thompson, 1992). It highlights structural inequities inherent in a capitalist society and the role of culture and belief systems in perpetuating inequality. It refocuses the attention of the social worker on the environment. Radical theory creates a problem for clinical social workers in that it attributes individual difficulties to structural inequities. It would accordingly prescribe structural interventions rather than individual, family, or group work. Radical theory would thus require social workers to focus any direct practice on educating clients and empowering them to change the structures that contribute to their oppression rather than helping them to adapt to the status quo (Thompson, 1992). The risk of this approach is that the social worker may impose his or her values and worldview regarding the sociopolitical nature of problems upon clients who are seeking help. Client self-determination is negated as the social worker educates the client on the “real” causes of his or her problems and insists on political awareness and political action. Furthermore, radical theory can at times dehumanize the individual by solely focusing on sociopolitical determinants without acknowledging the role of individual choice and action.

Radical social work’s incorporation of a sociopolitical viewpoint of the environment comes at the expense of an enriched theoretical understanding of individual and subjective experiences. Thompson (1992) notes, “the oppressive social order manifests itself in a variety of significant ways—social, psychological and emotional” (p. 105). Thus the social worker should not neglect the individual’s experience in attempting to address social issues.

All of the above perspectives of psychoanalytic, psychodynamic, constructivist, and radical theory have been unable to adequately capture and balance both aspects of the person-in-environment construct. This has contributed to the difficulties within the profession, including bitter divides between community organizers and direct practice workers. Furthermore, despite the value placed on understanding both the person and the environment, the lack of a cohesive theory for clinical work can lead to a lack of integration of interventions at both the individual and environmental levels. The relatively recent decline in the primacy of psychodynamic theory has led to more theories from which clinical social workers can choose but can also result in fragmentation. An eclectic approach, which makes use of a variety of theories, is not guaranteed to integrate these differing perspectives, leading to difficulties with achieving balance between approaches and a lack of guiding principles to clarify difficult clinical decisions.

New Developments in Practice Theory

Some social work theorists have attempted to address the difficulty of integrating environmental and intrapsychic considerations by making use of contemporary philosophies that attempt to unite subjective experience (person) and objective sociopolitical realities (environment). This section will explore how authors have begun to apply principles from Sartrean existentialism, Michel Foucault’s postmodern theory, and Bourdieu’s critical realist philosophy to re-examine and more fully integrate the person-in-environment concept.

Thompson (1992) uses Sartrean existentialism to develop an existentialist framework for social work practice. Thompson identifies the core existentialist principles of freedom and responsibility. Existential freedom is self-creation through choices and actions as opposed to deterministic accounts of human nature (Thompson, 1992). This includes responsibility for one’s own actions, which contributes to the range of options available to oneself and others (Thompson, 1992, p. 175). Sartre was particularly

interested in the moral dimensions of how individual praxis becomes sociopolitical in its context and consequences (Thompson, 1992, p. 176). Through this framework, Thompson is able to integrate the person-in-environment concept as a dialectic between existential freedom and political liberty. Existential freedom equates with ontological freedom, or the capacity for the individual to make choices, while political liberty is the range of choices available to the individual (Thompson, 1992). The framework allows for the subjective individual experience, objective environmental constraints, and a constant exchange between the two that leads to a totalisation of experience. Thompson uses this framework to develop principles for existential social work, give examples of the principles in direct practice, and use the principles to critique other prominent social work theories. Some of the principles for practice that he draws from existentialism include the concept of a shared subjective journey, authenticity in confronting difficult choices, responsibility and solidarity, self-creation as a prerequisite for political liberty, recognizing contingency and choice as opposed to stability, and recognizing and managing the dynamic tension between authority and non-directive practice in social work.

Saari (2002) approaches the problem of the intersection between person and environment by identifying the difficulties in psychoanalytic and developmental theory, particularly the criticisms of postmodernist Michel Foucault, and by using postmodern theory to reformulate ideas about the therapeutic relationship and the nature of change. Saari concludes that there has been little consideration of the environment in psychodynamic theory—even in postmodern constructivist theory—but that postmodern philosophy can be used to interrelate the intrapsychic and environmental (p. 156). She notes Foucault's main criticism is that psychotherapy can be used as an instrument of domination of individuals' subjective experience in support of societal oppression (p. 54). Foucault argues that psychotherapy can act as a form of social control through hierarchical surveillance of the clients' thoughts and impulses by the analyst, normalizing judgment or classification of the client into good or bad categories which may seem arbitrary to the client (e.g. DSM-IV), and the examination which combines the prior two categories to produce judgments that can have significant consequences for the individual's status in society (pp. 93–94). Saari accepts that psychotherapy can be used to dominate others as described by Foucault, but she notes

psychotherapy can also be liberating by helping clients create new meanings and participate in their cultural environment. She constructs a new vision of psychotherapy that accounts for the environment in concepts of liberation, meaning, culture, and symbolization. By attending to issues of power, acknowledging client's social and environmental realities, and assisting the client in constructing new, meaningful narrated identities in the context of self-determination and adherence to the client's, rather than the therapist's, goals, Saari demonstrates how psychotherapy can be liberating rather than dominating. Furthermore, she notes that "understanding the interrelated nature of inner and external worlds ought to lead" to both better conditions for human functioning as well as the improvement of psychotherapy for our clients (p. 164).

Houston (2002) also comments on constructivist theory in social work and uses Bourdieu's critical realist philosophy to develop a model for culturally sensitive and politically radical social work. Houston notes that Bourdieu's philosophy integrates an understanding of Marxist ideas about how culture and class shape society with a respect for individual human agency. The philosophy contends that societal inequality is reproduced by culture in modern capitalism, but also acknowledges that individuals can effect change in their daily lives through choice and action (p. 155). Similarly to Thompson, Houston highlights this dialectic between personal agency and structural inequality in understanding the interaction between subjective experiences and objective social realities. Houston believes that a model based on the principles of critical realism "enables practitioners to gain an in-depth understanding of the nexus constituting the person in society" (p. 163). Houston uses this philosophy to develop a four-stage model for culturally sensitive social work that includes understanding the relationship between culture, power, and reproduction; enhancing professional reflexivity; developing cultural sensitivity; and raising awareness and empowering clients. He argues that social work practitioners cannot solely attend to the subjective experience of their clients without also understanding how issues of power and culture affect both the client and the client/worker relationship. In his work applying critical realism to child welfare interventions, Houston also highlights the interaction between the objective and subjective that accounts for intrapsychic, familial, social, political, and economic factors in a model for assessment and intervention (Houston, 2001). Again he argues for understanding how all of these

factors interact to create the client's reality and need to be understood by the social worker for ethical and effective practice.

Future Directions for Social Work

The theoretical contributions of Houston, Saari, and Thompson, among others, represent the future of the development of the person-in-environment concept in social work practice. The convergence of philosophical understandings of the interrelatedness of subjective and objective phenomena with social work's historical attempts to develop a comprehensive approach to both humans and their environments can lead to exciting and innovative, in-depth theories that truly integrate both the person and the environment. While these concepts are not simple or easily distilled into concrete techniques, their complexity and depth offer a rich framework for guiding flexible and responsive practice. The concepts offered, once integrated into clinical practice, have the potential for providing a firm foundation for the complex and difficult decisions that clinical social workers face daily. These theories could improve social work practice by allowing clinicians to develop a full understanding of how the realities of social justice and oppression affect the subjective experiences of our clients. With this improved understanding, clinicians would be better able to relieve individual suffering, ensure culturally competent practice, avoid contributing to oppression, empower clients, and integrate social action and clinical advocacy into their practice. Clients would no longer need to be either adapted to society or abandoned in the pursuit of structural social change, but a clearer understanding of how social structures inform individual development and how individual's choices impact social structures could emerge.

This emerging understanding could also help unite the traditionally divisive poles of the profession. The divides between micro and macro issues, or personal and social issues, could become less distinct as the interaction between the individual and the environment is more fully integrated into theory. Social workers could consequently see all levels of practice as interdependent rather than competitive or unique. We may still develop specialized skills in psychotherapy, clinical advocacy, clinical research, community organizing, social research, administration, or policy, but all levels of practice would inform each other and distinctions would be more fluid and less rigid. The clinical social worker would understand and combat the effects of sociopolitical inequalities with individuals while the community

organizer would understand how subjective experiences and individual agency can be used and valued in activism, organizing, and social change. In this way the profession could combat fragmentation and fully realize Mary Richmond's vision of interdependence between casework, group work, community work, social reform, and social research in service of our clients.

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