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The Context-Specific Optimal Partnership Model

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IS CURRENTLY TAKING PLACE IN THE MOST PROgressive era of social welfare in its history. At first the volunteer and private sectors were seen as primarily responsible for providing social welfare services. The role of government, especially the federal government, was minimal. Next, in the process of addressing social problems and attempting to provide services, volunteers advocated that government participation was necessary. Government participation, however, led to a major pendulum shift, where government and professional services became primarily responsible for social welfare while the volunteer and private sectors took on a supplemental role. Currently, the landscape of social welfare services has progressed to the point where society recognizes that the predetermined roles and responsibilities of public, private, professional, nonprofit, and volunteer sectors are not effective in addressing complex social problems. There is a need for an optimal balance of shared responsibility.

This chapter presents the context-specific optimal partnership model (CSOP) as an alternative approach for guiding social work practice with volunteers. Instead of developing services with predetermined roles and expectations, the CSOP model allows the unique circumstances of an issue to determine who is involved and what roles each sector plays in developing policies and programs.

Before we look at the model, it is important to note that the underlying philosophy behind context-specific optimal partnerships is not a completely radical or drastically new approach to social work. In fact, the model is similar to how Jane Addams engaged in social work practice. Remember from chapter 4 that she assessed the unique context of specific social problems, worked with anyone who would help to advance a social cause or activity, and developed credibility with a wide range of people because she cared less about professional identity and more about involving the greatest number of people possible. Finally, she was willing to be a volunteer at times and at other times to partner with volunteers. As Addams recognized over a century ago, partnerships between social workers and volunteers have the power to revitalize the profession's efforts to fight poverty and advocate social and economic justice.

THE MODEL

The CSOP model consists of two main components—assessing the context of the situation and creating optimal partnerships. The components, however, are not what make the model useful. In truth, the components are consistent with the basic generalist social work practices of assessment, intervention, and evaluation. The key difference is in the approach to carrying out the process. The CSOP model calls for social workers to leave behind any preconceived notions about how issues should be defined, who should be involved, or how issues should be addressed when assessing the context. Similar to qualitative research methodology and client-centered therapy, the model encourages social workers to let the answers and the direction of the partnerships emerge in the process of assessing the context and building partnerships. Social workers should maintain a flexible stance that allows them to let the information guide decisions. In some instances, an assessment may lead to partnerships where government and professional services play a primary role in a partnership with volunteers. At other times, an assessment of the context may lead social workers to decide that volunteers will play primary roles, while social workers and other human service professionals fulfill supportive functions.

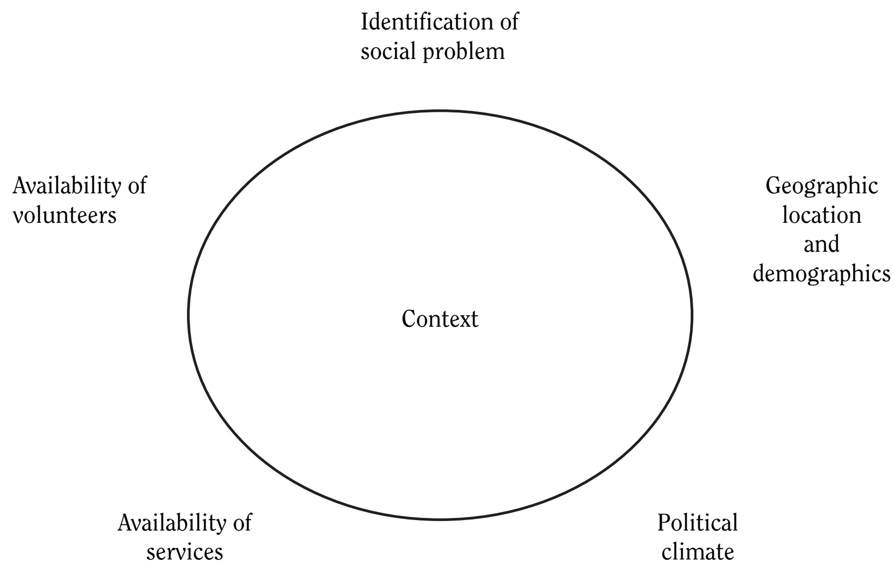
ASSESSING THE CONTEXT

Assessing the context is a comprehensive process that involves collecting information from multiple sources to understand the organizational, cultural, societal, and social class factors that define the parameters of the context. It involves six interrelated steps. Note that social workers do not necessarily have to follow the steps in the exact order they are presented. The important thing to remember is to gather data from each step and then allow the data to inform the assessment of the specific context. Figure 7.1 shows the assessment process.

Identifying the Social Problem

The first step is identifying a significant social problem. Communities can have a multitude of problems. Social workers need to apply their verbal and nonverbal communication skills to work with a broad spectrum of people in order to understand how communities identify and prioritize issues. Social workers need to remember to distinguish between private troubles and social problems. Private troubles may be tragic and may even warrant the attention of social work services, yet they affect a relatively small group of people, whereas social problems are societal conditions that are perceived to be a threat to a significant proportion of the population. As Ginsberg and Miller-Cribbs (2005) indicate, social problems have the potential to threaten large numbers of people: "Threats may be perceived to exist when the consequences of the problem are costly, when others fear they will be injured because of the problem, or when people believe they might be victims of the problems" (p. 57). Social problems, at least potentially, have solutions.

Figure 7.1 Assessing the context



In the process of identifying and prioritizing social problems, it is important for social workers to use their assessment skills to understand how problems emerged. When doing a comprehensive assessment, social workers need to collect information from a variety of sources to determine who identified the problem and how it was brought to the public's attention. For instance, what are people saying in the editorials in local newspapers? What kinds of issues are being discussed at the local diner, at church, and at the grocery market? How are the issues framed by different people? Did the problem begin as a local issue, or is the community facing a social problem that began as a state or national problem and is now affecting local residents? Is the problem isolated to one local community or does it affect surrounding areas?

At times, social workers may disagree with how communities identify and describe their problems. In such instances, it is imperative that social workers exercise restraint and careful judgment in deciding how to proceed. Just as clinicians tune in to all aspects of the verbal and nonverbal communication of clients, social workers must pay attention to all the formal and informal cues and messages they observe. In some cases it may be appropriate for social workers to be educators and raise critical awareness about an issue; however, the CSOP model emphasizes letting clients (in this case the community) assist social workers in defining the problem. Moreover, special attention should be paid to what people from the business community share about a problem. Social workers should avoid discounting views and motives that may at first seem contrary to social work values and ethics. As Jane

Addams realized, social workers, entrepreneurs, and businessmen and women need to work together for any partnership to be effective. Just as she did over a century ago, social workers must be sure to appreciate all charitable impulses and desires, provide business people with direction to channel their charitable desires, and frame the pursuit of social and economic justice in alignment with capitalism.

Understanding the Geographic Location and Demographics

In order to understand the context in which social problems exist, it is often necessary to understand the geographic location and demographics of an area. For instance, communities that are geographically isolated by mountains or bodies of water may have different needs in terms of partnerships than communities with easy access to other areas. In some cases the geographic features are central to the quality of life in a community, and protecting that quality of life is the primary goal.

Although social workers may not be geographic experts, the basic topography of an area can provide valuable information about the social environment. Social workers should answer several questions related to the geographic location of a community. What is the climate? What are the distinctive environmental features (e.g., vegetation, type of soil, elevation, mountains, plateaus, plains, water sources)? Where is the community situated relative to other places? Is a community physically accessible to other communities? Geographic locations of communities can be both unique and similar to other communities. In an assessment, social workers should examine what makes a community unique and what makes it similar to others. As Rubenstein (2002) advises, when assessing geography, social workers must consider "the diversity of culture, economic, and environmental factors, even while making a generalization" (p. 16).

Along with the topography, demographics also provide clues to the context of a community. Given the space, what is the population density? Do people live in one concentrated area or are they spread out? What is the distribution of different age groups, racial and ethnic groups, people of different income levels, and types of housing? Who are the main employers? What are the major religions in the area? Is the community best described as rural, suburban, metropolitan, or urban? Is the population in the community growing, stable, or in decline? When thinking about these questions, social workers should consider not just the area today, but the area as it was a year ago, ten years ago, or even a century ago as well. If there have been major demographic changes, how can they be explained?

Assessing the Political Climate

The political climate has significant influence in shaping communities. Social workers need to spend time and energy assessing the nuances of formal and informal politics if they are to have any chance of developing successful volunteer partnerships. When it comes time to assemble the members of a partnership, it is often a good idea to include elected officials and other community leaders. For starters,

find out who the elected officials of a community are. How long have they been in office? Are elected officials local people who have lived in the community for a long time or are they transplants who recently moved to the area? Does one party hold the majority of the elected positions in the community?

Appointed and hired personnel are also important. Who is the city manager? Is there a director of business development or community development? How did these people get their positions? Who is the director of the chamber of commerce? Who is in charge of water, sewer, and sanitation? It is also a good idea to get to know the chief of police and the principals of schools in the area.

In addition to knowing who occupies key positions in communities, it is important for social workers to assess the relationships between the people who hold these positions. Moreover, it is important to have an idea of how communication flows between leaders in the community. How is information shared? Who talks to whom, and who is left out? For instance, does the mayor have a good relationship with members of the school board? Do the members of the city council get along with members of the county government? Are there areas of shared interest around which social workers can bring city and county officials together in collaboration? Finally, how much influence do business leaders and religious leaders have in the community? Which ones have the ear of certain elected and appointed officials?

Assessing the Availability of Services

Communities have different networks of services. The ways in which people look for and receive help can offer social workers clues about a community. Services can be assessed along a continuum from formal to informal assistance. At one end, formal support consists of services provided by agencies and organizations that operate within a bureaucratic structure. Often they are highly impersonal and generally have no prior relationship with the people they serve. Furthermore, they provide care for a limited or specified amount of time and are best suited for tasks that require specialized knowledge or technical skills (Van Tilburg, 1998). Such services may include mental health and substance abuse treatment and services offered by departments of social services, the Veterans Administration, and large nonprofit organizations. Social workers need to know where services in a community are located, who provides what, and how to access these services. In addition, social workers need to assess the disparities that may exist between the needs and preferences of people in a community and the actual services that are available.

Social workers also need to have a keen understanding of the informal supports. Usually family, friends, and neighbors make up informal support networks. Are people connected to friends and family members? When people in communities face crises or hardships, do they have access to informal relationships on which they can rely for support? What types of assistance are informal supports likely to provide? Is there cooperation between formal services and informal supports?

Communities may have other support systems that fall somewhere in between; these are often known as mediating structures. For instance, volunteer service organizations, civic groups, and religious meeting places often provide people with a primary avenue of support outside their families. People often consider such places extensions of their informal support networks; therefore, they are more comfortable asking for and receiving help from these networks than from bureaucratic agencies and organizations. There is even some evidence suggesting that people would be more willing to use formal services if they were provided by these mediating structures (Stuckey, 1997; Tirrito & Spencer-Amado, 2000). It's important for social workers to assess the potential for collaboration with mediating structures as they develop or participate in partnerships with volunteers.

Assessing the Availability of Volunteers

Each community has its own unique collection of volunteers and potential volunteers. Whether you are new to the field or are an experienced practitioner, you should take the time to assess the opportunities people have to volunteer. Start with the usual resources. Check with local colleges or universities to see if they have volunteer coordinators and ask them where they refer students. Find out which volunteer service associations are available (e.g., Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions Club) and how they spend their time and resources. Attend meetings at the local Elks or Masons. In addition, check local newspapers to see the listing of clubs and gatherings. Although these are national associations, each has locally affiliated clubs that are interested in serving their local communities. Make contact with the listed representatives.

Social workers should get to know the religious congregations in the area. Spend time developing rapport with the leaders of churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques. Some communities have interfaith councils where religious leaders from various denominations meet on a regular basis. Such groups tend to offer the largest potential source of volunteers. Social workers need to make it their business to be invited to these meetings.

Most importantly, remember that it doesn't matter whether a group of people gathers to do scrapbooking or build a house with Habitat for Humanity. Whenever there are people gathered in the community, there is an opportunity for what Addams described as social intercourse, which can lead to volunteerism. Finally, look to develop a network of genuine relationships with diverse groups of people and be prepared to use social work skills to bring them together. These all present opportunities for volunteerism.

CREATING OPTIMAL PARTNERSHIPS

Social workers can use their understanding of the specific context of a social problem to form partnerships. Whereas the assessment phase of the model is more fluid, developing optimal partnerships involves a more sequential series of steps.

This is because it takes time and judgment to recruit people, develop a purpose, and maintain active participation over a period of time; this usually takes more time than is required in direct or clinical practice. These steps are:

1. Determine who should be involved.
2. Assess their interests.
3. Develop a primary goal and objectives.
4. Develop strategies and determine the roles of all involved.
5. Implement action plan.
6. Evaluate progress and partnership.

Before we move forward, it is important to note that social workers must never stop assessing the context. As in clinical practice, ongoing assessment is vital to ensuring that partnerships include the right mix of people, remain productive, and know when it is time to terminate. In some cases, conducting community assessments may be a strategy used by partnerships to learn more about a social problem, build cohesion, or recruit more people. Social workers can use their relationship skills to invite others to participate in gathering data about a community. As Kahn (1994) suggests, social workers should always look to invite and include others in the change process. In the process of developing genuine relationships, social workers should teach and model for volunteers how to be critical consumers of information and advocates for their communities.

Determining Who Should Be Involved

Throughout the assessment process, social workers should have one main question in mind—who should be involved in the partnership? Although each situation is unique, a few general guidelines are helpful. First, invite primary stakeholders who represent various interests in the community. At a minimum, try to include people representing the largest employers, hospitals, and the school system, as well as someone with connections to an elected official. It can also be important to include representatives of religious congregations and social service agencies. Also remember to include people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. If the community is geographically spread out, make sure that there are people invited from every area. This is especially important in rural counties where the majority of the population may be located within the county seat. Unless social workers make a conscious effort to go out and invite people from sparsely populated areas of a county, many people have no way of knowing about the partnership.

Another important group of stakeholders is the people expected to benefit from the efforts of the partnership. Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2006) refer to this group of people as the target system. One of the main premises of this book is that social workers should consider all people in the community, even clients, potential volunteers. Consistent with ethical social work practice, providing the target system

with opportunities to help and participate in the community is the truest embodiment of reciprocal relationships, the principles of self-determination and empowerment, and the strengths perspective. By including representatives of the target system early in the formation of partnerships, social workers can increase the likelihood that new strategies, programs, and movements will actually be useful. Just as important from a larger macro systems perspective, including members of target systems increases the number of people actively engaged in the community—a vital component of a healthy democracy.

During the assessment phase, social workers also should pay attention to people who appear ambivalent or opposed to efforts to address a certain social problem. In their process to initiate and implement change, Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2006) discuss the step of neutralizing the opposition. The formative stages of partnerships are an effective time to prevent or neutralize opposition. Social workers are encouraged early in the process to identify one or two main figures who represent an opposing view and invite them to attend a planning meeting and perhaps eventually join the partnership. Here again, Jane Addams's approach is a good reminder for social workers to validate and appreciate views from segments of the community that may be in conflict with a social work perspective. Avoid getting into ideological debates. Instead, use reflective listening and empathetic communication skills to focus on finding areas in which participants with opposing views hold mutual interests.

Assessing Interests

The goal of the first meeting is to get people interested enough to attend a follow-up meeting to begin making serious plans to develop a partnership. After a few moments of getting-acquainted time, the agenda should focus on explaining why everyone was invited, then assessing their interests. Social workers should model the use of appropriate self-disclosure to frame what they say about the reason for the meeting. The invitation should already have given participants some idea of why they were invited to attend. Share enough information to give participants a general sense of the purpose of the meeting, but do not give the details of a particular view of the problem at hand. Give participants the freedom to share their views; do not impose ideological judgments up front. Set a pragmatic, collaborative, and matter-of-fact tone for the partnership.

Next, assess the interests of everyone participating. Ask broad, open-ended questions that give participants enough latitude to share their opinions. A few useful questions and statements to generate discussion about interests include the following:

- "I was wondering if we could take a moment and have everyone share what it was that interested them in attending this meeting."
- "I am interested to know what each of you hopes the result of this meeting to be."

- "I am assuming that each of you has some awareness about [a particular issue/social problem]. Would each of you please share a little bit about what led you to take the time to attend this meeting?"
- "Let's begin by having each of you share your name, your position, and what agency or constituents you represent." Then as a follow-up question, ask: "If you work for an agency or represent a group of people, could you also share how this meeting might be of interest to them?"

As both facilitators and members of the partnership, social workers should also share their own interests in the issue. It is probably best for the facilitator to share at the beginning. Going first allows social workers to model the parameters of an appropriate response (i.e., how long and how personal the response should be) and to introduce the possibility of collaboration. When sharing, let everyone know that the intention of the meeting is to assess interest in developing a partnership to address a particular social issue. After everyone has had an opportunity to share, use reflective listening and empathetic communication skills to paraphrase a response that highlights areas of mutual interests and concerns. If there is enough "buy in," schedule another meeting with the specific purpose of beginning to plan a partnership. Make sure everyone knows exactly where and when the next meeting will be and how long it will last.

Developing a Primary Goal and Objectives

The next few meetings will focus on developing a primary goal, objectives, and strategies. The primary goal is the vision or end point that the partnership wants to achieve. Normally, the primary goal would already be broadly identified during the process of assessing the context and listening to everyone share their interests. At this point, the group specifies exactly what they want to accomplish. Social workers can use their facilitation skills to lead the group through a process of sharing to generate a statement everyone feels comfortable with. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to share and feels comfortable enough to offer feedback and disagree. Social workers may want to write down what they are hearing as a way for the group to see and reference what is being said. As the group shares, social workers can use their clarifying and interpreting skills to pull together what they hear and begin composing drafts of goal statements. Eventually the group will come to a consensus on one succinct primary goal statement. By summarizing the content and process of the discussion, social workers can make sure everyone knows the primary goal and feels he or she has been a part of developing the goal statement.

The primary goal statement is important because it provides the partnership with its ultimate purpose for working together. However, deciding and stating what the group wants to achieve is different from figuring out how the partnership is going to arrive at its desired outcome. For example, reducing the prevalence of juvenile crimes in Rob County is a worthwhile goal on its own; however, the statement gives no

direction as to how the group is going to reduce juvenile crime. That is the purpose of developing objectives. Objectives are specific stepping stones that lead to the achievement of a primary goal. Appropriate objectives for reducing juvenile crime might include developing an after-school program, creating a volunteer mentoring program, and building a skateboarding park and a dirt-bike park to provide recreational activities. Again, the objectives should be developed and agreed upon by the group.

Developing Strategies and Determining the Roles of All Involved

Strategies are behavioral tasks the group must complete in order to achieve the desired objectives, which, in turn, help achieve the primary goal. Groups create strategies by deciding *who* will do *what* by *when: who* is the individual or group of individuals who will accomplish the tasks, *what* is the tasks to complete, and *when* is the time frame for completing the tasks. One important task is figuring out who else needs to be invited to participate in the partnership. Then members can decide who will invite them.

As a group begins listing strategies, there will come a point when everyone realizes that there is a lot of work involved. Thus it is important to work out expectations regarding how time and energy will be spent up front. In order to do this, the group must designate primary, secondary, and supplemental partners. All are equally important to a thriving volunteer partnership; however, each requires different levels of involvement. Primary partners are people who will participate in every aspect of the planning process. They will organize and attend all the meetings, take on the most time-consuming tasks, and keep everyone else informed and feeling connected. Eight to twelve people are usually primary partners. If possible, at least one person should represent the target system, and another person the potential opposition. Secondary partners may not come to every meeting, but they are ready to take on specific tasks. Although they may not come to all meetings, secondary partners are usually kept abreast of what is happening with the partnership. These partners often have special skills or access to resources that the group needs to be successful. Supplemental partners are people who are prepared to participate in isolated events, such as fund-raisers and specific community projects.

Implementing the Action Plan

At some point, the partnership needs to put all its planning into action. On one hand, the group needs to make sure the four previous steps have been completed. On the other hand, it is important for the partnership to do something that gives everyone a sense of achievement. As discussed in chapter 2, people begin and continue volunteering for a variety of reasons, and the reasons can change over time. The feeling that progress is being made can tap into a variety of motivations for different people. Think of getting started as good for achieving the primary goal as well as for developing active and sustained volunteer commitment.

Social workers should think long term. The networking skills used to develop a partnership can set a precedent for how the community addresses other social problems in the future. In other words, build an active and sustained volunteer force that is ready to participate in the community now and in the future. Here are a couple of recommendations for choosing action steps. In the beginning, select initial action steps that have a high probability of being successful and that build toward larger steps to achieve objectives. This way volunteers are likely to experience a sense of participation efficacy. Encourage action steps that require several people to work together to foster group cohesion and integration. When deciding who is going to do what by when, group together people who have certain expertise and skills with people who have an interest in developing those skills. Whatever action steps the group decides to implement, make sure people have enough information and training to feel confident; however, allow for enough flexibility to give volunteers a sense of autonomy as to exactly how they will complete certain tasks.

Evaluating Progress and Partnership

Making evaluation a priority at the beginning of a partnership is a way of providing volunteers with information. Then social workers can use the data gathered to offer feedback to the group. The feedback can be used to maintain focus, provide evidence of time well spent, and adjust how the partnership is operating. In working with volunteers, evaluation serves three major purposes by monitoring processes, outcomes, and volunteer commitment. Evaluations can monitor the processes of the partnership. Process evaluations focus on how the group is getting the work done. Is everyone feeling heard? Are the meetings useful? Is the group staying on task and, at the same time, building rapport? Evaluation can also help determine if the group is making progress toward its primary outcomes. Brun (2005), Ginsberg (2000), and Royce, Padgett, Thyer, and Logan (2005) are all excellent sources to assist social workers in carrying out both types of evaluations.

In the process of developing a context-specific optimal partnership, social workers should pay special attention to monitoring volunteer commitment. Use the volunteer commitment scale to assess how people feel about volunteering for the partnership, how long they have volunteered, how often they volunteer, and how much time they spend volunteering. Galindo-Kuhn and Guzley (2001) have developed a scale to measure volunteer satisfaction. Consider using their scale to make sure people are content with the amount and flow of communication, the opportunities to get together, and the schedule and work assignments. In addition, make sure volunteers feel supported and useful. If people are satisfied and committed, they are likely to recruit other volunteers, to stay around when the group experiences any setbacks or challenges, and to be more interested in helping in the future.

SUMMARY

This chapter set forth the CSOP model as a useful approach to working with volunteers. The model is consistent with basic generalist social work practices of assessment, intervention, and evaluation. The key difference is that the model promotes emergent thinking and action that develops in the absence of any preconceived notions about how issues should be defined, who should be involved, and how issues should be addressed. It is important for social workers to think in terms of cultivating a culture of volunteerism in their communities. Developing volunteer partnerships to address social problems is as much an ongoing philosophy of how to approach social work practice as it is a specific intervention. As White (1997) aptly states, "A golden opportunity may be presenting itself to influence public opinion, and hence public policy, on such issues as welfare reform and crime through the involvement of more [volunteers] who will see and begin to understand what we encounter in our daily work and through our research" (p. 317).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND LEARNING EXERCISES

1. The author contends that the future of social work as a valued profession is related to how willing we are to develop partnerships between secular and sectarian professionals and volunteer, and how successful we are in those endeavors. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Think of a social problem in your area and try to answer the following questions. Who first identified the problem? How was it brought to the public's attention? Who is writing editorials about it in the local newspaper? What are they writing? If you were to try to organize a meeting, which of these people would you invite to participate? Are you leaving anyone out? Why?
3. Conduct a geographic assessment of your area. What is the climate? What are the distinctive environmental features of your community? What makes your community unique and similar to other communities? Has the geography or demographics changed over time? How? How might the answers to these questions have an impact on the significant social issues facing your community?
4. Begin expanding your network of potential volunteer partners. Take a look at your local newspaper or Web sites about your community. Look for a listing of community events. Assess how many different civic groups gather each week. Which ones do you think you should know more about in your capacity as a social worker? Contact a couple of them and go to a few meetings.