



Social Dimension

Issue 1 | April 2018



A Note from Us

Highlights & Events

Fun Facts

Our Gems

Perspectives

Announcements

Page 2

Page 3

Page 4

Page 5 - 8

Page 9 - 15

Page 16

WELCOME A Note From Us

Dear Members,

Hope the year has started off in good spirits for everyone! As part of SASW's Executive Committee and the Publications Subcommittee, we would like to extend our warmest welcome to members and readership community.

SASW's Social Dimension online publication is grateful for your

followership and hopes to continue engaging you in the coming months.

A committee has been formed to look into continuing publication efforts for the association. On that note, I am delighted to introduce the members of our Publications Subcommittee who will be bringing to you some highlights in the field.

Through our publication efforts, Social Dimension aims to:

- *Keep members informed about SASW's activities and initiatives in the profession*
- *Engage members in vibrant exchanges*
- *Recognise contributions of Social Workers*
- *Encourage sharing of practices and knowledge*
- *Capture good work and reflections in practice*
- *Be a voice for the professional body where possible*

contributions in the sector, good practices and many others! So, do keep a lookout for publications in the near future! We will also be glad to have you writing along with us. Should you have a write up or article to contribute to us, do write in to us. Contact details have been provided in our newsletter.

It was good catching up with some of you on the 24th March 2018 at Social Work Day 2018. This year, the organizing team had set out to celebrate the profession and Social Workers through the Carnival at Marina Bay Carnival. Hope you had enjoyed yourselves with friends and loved ones as much as the team enjoyed bringing the event to you!

We would like to thank all members for the years of support extended to the association and looking ahead to connect with you through Social Dimension!

Prema Mohan (Ms)
Chair, Publications (SASW)

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| | <i>Publications Chair</i> |
| Prema Mohan | Lead Social Worker, AMKFSC Community Services Ltd |
| | <i>Member</i> |
| Ho Hui Ling | Lead Social Worker, Care Corner Singapore Ltd |
| | <i>Member</i> |
| Cherylene Aw | Centre Director, TRANS SAFE Centre |
| | <i>Member</i> |
| Woo Peiyi | Assistant Director, Family Partnerships Platform, South Central Community Family Service Centre |
| | <i>Member</i> |
| Lyon Koh Lin Lu Lyon | Assistant Senior Social Worker, AMKFSC Community Services Ltd |

As cited in literature, the beginnings of social work in Singapore can date as far back as 1946, when the Social Welfare Department was set up to address issues of malnutrition during World War 2. Subsequently, in the post war period, situation stabilized, and the focus shifted to the protection of children and women. The set-up of the Department of Social Work in the then only University in Singapore, in 1953, marks the recognition of Social Work as discipline of study locally.

Since then, many pioneers in the field have left lasting impressions in

us with their unwavering commitment to the field. I continue to witness, with much gratitude, this spirit of sacrifice and endurance, in many of you who continue to serve in this profession selflessly. It is indeed a great privilege through publication and involvement in SASW, to be able to learn from these influential leaders in the profession. The team would like to bring these heartening experiences closer to you through Social Dimension in the coming months.

We hope to bring you coverage of SASW's events, interviews with professionals making outstanding

Highlights & Events

| Date | Events |
|--|--|
| 19 th January 2018 | SASW Work Plan Retreat. Attended by SASW Executive Committee Members, Office Staff and Chapter/ Special Committee Chairs and Co-Chairs |
| 3 rd March 2018 | Pulse 3: About People in Communities who are Passionate about Leading Communities Time: 10.00am – 1.00pm Venue: National Volunteer Philanthropy Centre @ 6 Eu Tong Street, #04-88, The Central, Singapore 059817 |
| 24 th March 2018 | Social Work Day Time: 4pm – 8pm Venue: The Promontory @ Marina Bay, The Prudential Marina Bay Carnival |
| 10 th April 2018 | SASW Dialogue Session with Mr Chan Heng Kee, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health Time: 10.00am - 12.30pm Venue: Lifelong Learning Institute |
| 14 th to 15 th July 2018 (TBC) | Social Work Induction Camp |
| 16 th November 2018 | Outstanding Social Worker Award |

Social Work Practice Survey

SASW under the Professional Networking Session (PNS) initiative, is conducting a survey to understand the gaps in Singapore’s social work practice and in the provision of healthcare and social services.

Under this initiative, SASW will be conducting a series of Professional Networking Sessions and cross-sector projects to gather social workers and related professionals in addressing the common gaps raised through the survey and develop a feasible solution for adoption.

We will like to invite social work professionals to participate in this survey. Please click [here](#) to access the survey. Alternatively, please go to <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/sasw-x-sectorsurvey>

Professional Networking Session (PNS)

SASW administers the PNS with funding from the Ministry of Health. Under PNS, SASW organizes case discussions & talks and supports Communities of Practice (CoP) and encourages cross sector projects related to healthcare issues. Case discussions and talks involve the use of case studies to enhance the learning of participants during these events. Look out for our Palliative case discussions (PALNET) and Legal Forum in the second half of this year.

CoP and Cross-sector projects target a. role and practice-related problems; b. inter-setting/sector or cross-setting/sector service gaps, particularly for the community and Intermediate & Long-Term Care (ILTC) sector; and c. cross-cutting issues affecting social work practice and care transition.

SASW currently support the four following CoP:

1. Transition Care (from Restructured Hospitals to Nursing Homes)
2. Renal CoP
3. Grief and Bereavement CoP
4. Community Care CoP

More information on these CoP will be put up on SASW website soon. For more information and enquiries, please contact:

Ms Faezah Sallimin: faezahsallimin@sasw.org.sg (98798952)

SASW Supervision Service

The SASW Supervision Service helps to select and match supervisors to social workers who are unable to obtain supervision at their organisation. This is done in partnership with the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the Ministry of Health.

Eligible social workers can receive funding for up to 30 hours of supervision when matched with an external supervisor through the SASW Supervision service. The social worker's agencies can expect to pay a rate of between \$24-\$40 per hour for the supervision service after the funding.

For more information and enquiries, please contact:

Email: supervisionservice@sasw.org.sg

Ms Faezah Sallimin: faezahsallimin@sasw.org.sg (98798952)

Ms Pearlyn Lee: pearlynlee@sasw.org.sg (97504223)



FUN FACTS *Did you know...*



Past OSWA Winners

| Year | Winners |
|------|--|
| 2017 | Dr Vincent Ng Ms Zahara Bte Mahmood |
| 2016 | Ms Nancy Ng Ms Chee Wai Yee |
| 2015 | Ms Lee Yean Wun |
| 2014 | Ms Cheung Siew Li Ms Julia Lee |
| 2013 | Ms Yogeswari d/o Munisamy |
| 2012 | Ms Esther Lim Li Ping Ms Wu Mei Ling |
| 2011 | Ms Ng Tzer Wee |
| 2010 | Mrs Sylvia Mun Ms Han Yah Yee |
| 2009 | Mr Mohd Ali Bin Mahmood Mrs Seah Kheng Yeow |
| 2008 | Ms Long Chey May Mr Chan Whee Peng |
| 2007 | Mrs Yee-Chow Choy Yin Ms Crystal Lim Ah Yan |

| | |
|------|--|
| 2004 | Mrs Wong Cher Meng Ms Ho Lai Peng Mr Shawn Koh Chu Bian (Merit Award) Ms Joyce Tan Swee Yee (Merit Award) |
| 2003 | Ms Ngo Lee Yian Mrs Lee Lay Beng |
| 2002 | Ms Maureen Fung Swee Kim Ms Koh Hwee Cheng, Esther |
| 2001 | Mr Samuel Ng Beng Teck Ms Pang Kee Tai |
| 2000 | Ms Goh Soon Noi Mr Arthur Ling (Merit Award) Mrs Deby Sarojiyu Krishnan (Merit Award) |
| 1999 | Ms Ang Bee Lian Dr Myrna Blake |
| 1998 | Ms Sudha Nair Mrs Winnie Phoon |



Past PSWA Winners

| Year | Winners |
|------|---|
| 2017 | Ms Lam Hui Cheng Kristine |
| 2016 | Ms Lee Kaiyi Ms Lin Jingyi |
| 2015 | Mr Isaac Teo Ms Lee Hwee Yoke Kitty Ms Koh Shi En Grace |
| 2014 | Ms Wong Li Jin, Michelle Ms Lee Sin Yan |
| 2013 | Ms Ng Shi Quan, Lynnette |

| | |
|------|--|
| | Ms Wu Ka Ma, Carmen |
| 2012 | Ms Jean Koh Yan Fang Mr Ivan Woo Mun Hong |
| 2011 | Mr Mohamed Fareez Mohamed Fahmy |
| 2010 | Mr Chua Chye Huat Alvin |
| 2009 | Mr Chua Wei Bin |
| 2008 | Mr Lim Chong Chee, Bryan |

Our Gems

In this Issue, Social Dimension features two veterans in the social service sector. On behalf of members SASW Publications Committee will like to thank Ms Hayley Chau and Mrs Toh-Chia Lai Ying for taking time to interact with us.



About Ms Hayley Chau

Ms Hayley Chau, Deputy Director, Operations (Community), Tan Tock Seng Hospital, has more than 20 years of experience in various social work settings. She started out as a medical social worker upon graduation, has experience working in social service planning, and is currently in hospital operations management. She has also worked jointly with a team that was awarded with the 2017 National Healthcare Innovation and Productivity Award in Care Redesign.

Amongst Ms Chau's several noteworthy contributions is her longstanding service to the Singapore Association of Social Workers for the past 12 consecutive years in various capacities.

What drew you to the Social Work Profession?

I had initially wanted to be a teacher before the change of mind to opt for social work instead. Taking General Paper for A levels made me more aware about the issues of inequality and hearing about the profession from a social worker friend further piqued my interest.

What does Social Work mean to you?

Being a social worker means being an agent of change and/or control in different ways. It means actively intervening to bridge better access to resources by the vulnerable among us, and recognising the strengths people have instead of focusing on the deficits. When I was working in direct social work, I was often challenged and personally encouraged to see how the human

spirit prevails. Although I do not practise direct social work now, the principles I learnt, for example, the strengths perspectives, continue to guide me in my work endeavours.

Tell us about your journey with SASW?

I've served in the SASW Exco for more than ten years as my small way of vicariously contributing to the profession and carrying on the mission of Social Work. In SASW, I witnessed and participated in the initiation of the first social workers day celebration in 2007, organizing social work induction camps, as well as organizing various social work celebration events and symposiums. Being in SASW has helped maintain my link and bond to the profession all these years as developments unfolded over time.

What do you look forward to for the future of the profession?

As a profession, we have come a long way. Social workers today practise in such a diverse range of settings. The challenge that lies ahead is on how the profession continues to evolve with the changing times and how to work with different groups out there to meet the needs of users holistically. I hope to see more social workers and agencies which are able to work across macro, mezzo and micro levels, and to integrate ethical practice with relevant research.

What would be some words of advice you may have for beginning social workers?

The first few years are crucial for your development in the field. Look for opportunities to be mentored,

always be keen to learn, love your work, and see the value in it for your clients as well as for you.

"Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are" (Squire Bill Widener of Widener's Valley, Virginia).



Reflections by Interviewer

Ms Hayley's unwavering commitment to social work and SASW has been a remarkable contribution. Affectionately known as one of the "Founding Sisters" of SASW's bi-yearly Social Work Induction Camp, she has been a role model for many of us. Her counsel and advice in the Executive Committee has anchored the generations ahead. Thank you Ms Hayley for the interview and on behalf of SASW, for the years of service with us. (Prema, Publications Chair)

What attracted you to the study of Social Work?

I came from a family with a humble background and was an active youth leader in secondary school - that was the driving force that led me in the field of social work. Social work was grounded in practice.

What does social work mean to you?

It is my way of returning to society.

How will you describe your journey as a Social Work Professional? What were some highs and lows in your journey?

My exposure to Social Work started with my field placement experience. I was then doing community work involving senior citizens. To this day this experience has impacted me greatly. Of the experiences I remember, the most distinct is having helped an elderly who committed suicide and who was going lengths to find her long-lost parents.

On another instant, I had a chance to support a mentally challenged young adult who had been raped, by placing

About Mrs Toh-Chia Lai Ying

Mrs Toh has been serving SASW as a volunteer committee member for about 19 years. She is currently working with The Salvation Army. She was trained in Social Work from 1977 to 1979. She joined a statutory board doing community outreach work for two years following her graduation. Following this, Mrs Toh, joined a multinational corporation and spearheaded several initiatives. Some of these included, starting the Welfare Section to oversee the setup of a medical clinic and the well-being of foreign workers.

In 1988, she was one of the first few social work professionals to be employed at Salvation Army to strengthen the social work practice standards. Mrs Toh supported the Secretary for Social Affairs and the team in setting up their childcare, student care centres and coordinating Social Programmes, including Case Referral and Service Reviews. She has spent 30 years in various roles such as Social Service Coordinator, Human Resources Director and Special Projects Consultant.

Mrs Toh has been known for her varied contributions in sectors beyond social work and her passion for integrating her social work skills in the roles that she took on. She is also a strong believer of lifelong learning. Mrs Toh currently pursues her Master in Applied Gerontology in Nanyang Technological University. She hopes to contribute to elder service sector in the future.

her in a temporary shelter and supporting her elderly mother. These memories are etched in my memory. Both these experiences taught me about mitigating risk in communities where what clients reveal outwardly may not totally represent what they might be feeling inside.

My profession as a social worker begun with me starting a service for senior citizen in my first job which I am still proud of. However, I was not able to see this journey through as I wanted to work in a refugee camp overseas. However, attempts to achieve this dream was not successful.

The rest of my social work journey, involved offering support in service development for example in the areas of child care services, residential care services and coordination of services for the organisation.

My low point recently has been about not being able to do ground work for a long time. I also missed out on having peer support from classmates who studied Social Work in the University as well.

Volunteering in church and involving in the elderly ministry has kept me close to social work. I see participating in SASW as a professional responsibility.

How has the profession changed over the years since you started on your journey?

I would like to believe that we started with a pure heart of service but the challenge for now is that we have to use both hard, heart and soft-ware to experience breakthrough for clients. Over and above this, you need to have strong

leadership, be able to think and speak up on the spot, make full use of IT to your advantage, be able to know enough to work in multi-disciplinary teams, encourage innovation and lots more. Emotional draw alone is not enough. It is natural in any career to aspire for progression and advancement. The profession as a result has grown leaps and bounds like other industries as we remain relevant and competitive.

Share with us your journey in serving SASW for several years.

Firstly, maintaining my membership keeps me connected to the social work profession. Being part of SASW gives me a sense of belonging and I cherish the friendships formed in the association. Love for the profession and the appreciation I have for the hard work that members in the association put in keep me questioning about what I can do for the association.

What are some regrets or pain points you have about the sector?

What do you hope can be done to attain some form of resolution?

Things are more regulated these days, and this is a double-edged sword. This could result in the loss of spontaneity, warmth, worth and value – sometimes as professional we could be struggling with our identity and feeling like we are

lesser than other professionals. We have to remind ourselves that good service based on our professional code of ethics should be priority for us.

The employing agencies play a valuable enabling role in promoting the professional identities of Social Workers by recognising the varied and critical roles they play in enhancing service delivery and in promoting an effective work environment where the Social Work Profession can flourish.

This profession has many faces, therein lies our identity issues. The profession should rally around itself, respect diversity but should also take pride in values that we hold in common. Transferrable skills, equitable rewards, leadership, succession planning could help in strengthening our professional identity.

What is your hope for budding social workers and aspirations for the profession?

I hope that the profession will continue to make the young ones feel welcome and keep them and all professionals close through positive influence, by maintaining morale, providing mentorship in times of need and allowing room for everyone to be vulnerable and not judge one another. Such a positive professional culture will continue to sustain them.

Reflections by Interviewer

It was indeed a great privilege for me have a peek into Mrs Toh's motivation and energy. Mrs Toh's years of contribution, humility and generosity in spirit has deeply touched me. The reminder that service should be the profession's ultimate motivation, has been anchoring. Thank you, Mrs Toh, for the interview and on behalf of SASW, for the years of service with us.
(Prema, Publications Chair)

A Framework for Working with Multi-Stressed Families in Singapore

Past Attempts at Consolidating Practice

This reflection is based on a project that I undertook in 2006 while pursuing my Master in Social Sciences (Social Work), in the National University of Singapore.

As a social worker then of four years in a Family Service Centre, I was understandably grappling with several uncertainties in practice. The rumination over what theories and perspectives best inform my practice heightened my anxiety, as articulating my practice was increasingly a challenge. The postgraduate programme therefore gave me the space and time to consolidate my practice to the best of my abilities. I embarked on a six-

month, Independent Study Module supervised by Dr Allison Rowlands on putting together a framework for beginner social work practitioners in working with multi-stressed families in Singapore.

Interviews with five social workers with one a half to three and a half years of working experience, further suggested drawing on mainly drawing on three theories and perspectives to guide the framework. This is summarized in the table provided below.

| | Family Centred Perspective (Informed by General Systems Theory & Ecological Perspective) | Social Constructivism | Strengths Based Perspective |
|----------------|--|--|--|
| Family | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A family is a natural social system extending over generations, has a family life cycle and a structure of its own. ▪ Families display a recurring pattern of interactional sequences in which all members participate. ▪ Through these interactional sequences families help maintain relationships or they modify interactional patterns to accommodate to changing needs of family members. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A family is a particular context for practice ▪ Unique qualities or powers reside in this system. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A naturally occurring resource in clients' lives that possess strengths of its own |
| Problem | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lacks or deficits in the environment. ▪ Dysfunctional transactions between the systems. ▪ Dysfunctional adaptive strategies ▪ Result of interrupted growth and development of an individual. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Socially constructed reality ▪ There is not one objective truth about a situation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Result of a mismatch or disequilibrium between the client's needs and environmental demands and resources that is causing difficulty, puzzlement and often pain (Cowger, 1992, pp.143) |
| Change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Change in one part affects the rest of the system. ▪ Focuses on transactions among person, family, larger social forces and systems. ▪ Changing the way family establishes rules, communicates and negotiates differences has | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Oriented towards the future ▪ Optimistic about change. ▪ The therapist and those who share in the particular goals and purpose of meeting, are involved in effecting change. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Change can only happen when you collaborate with clients' aspirations, perceptions and strengths and when you firmly believe in them (Saleebey, 1992, pp.42) ▪ Effected through tapping on naturally occurring resources in the |

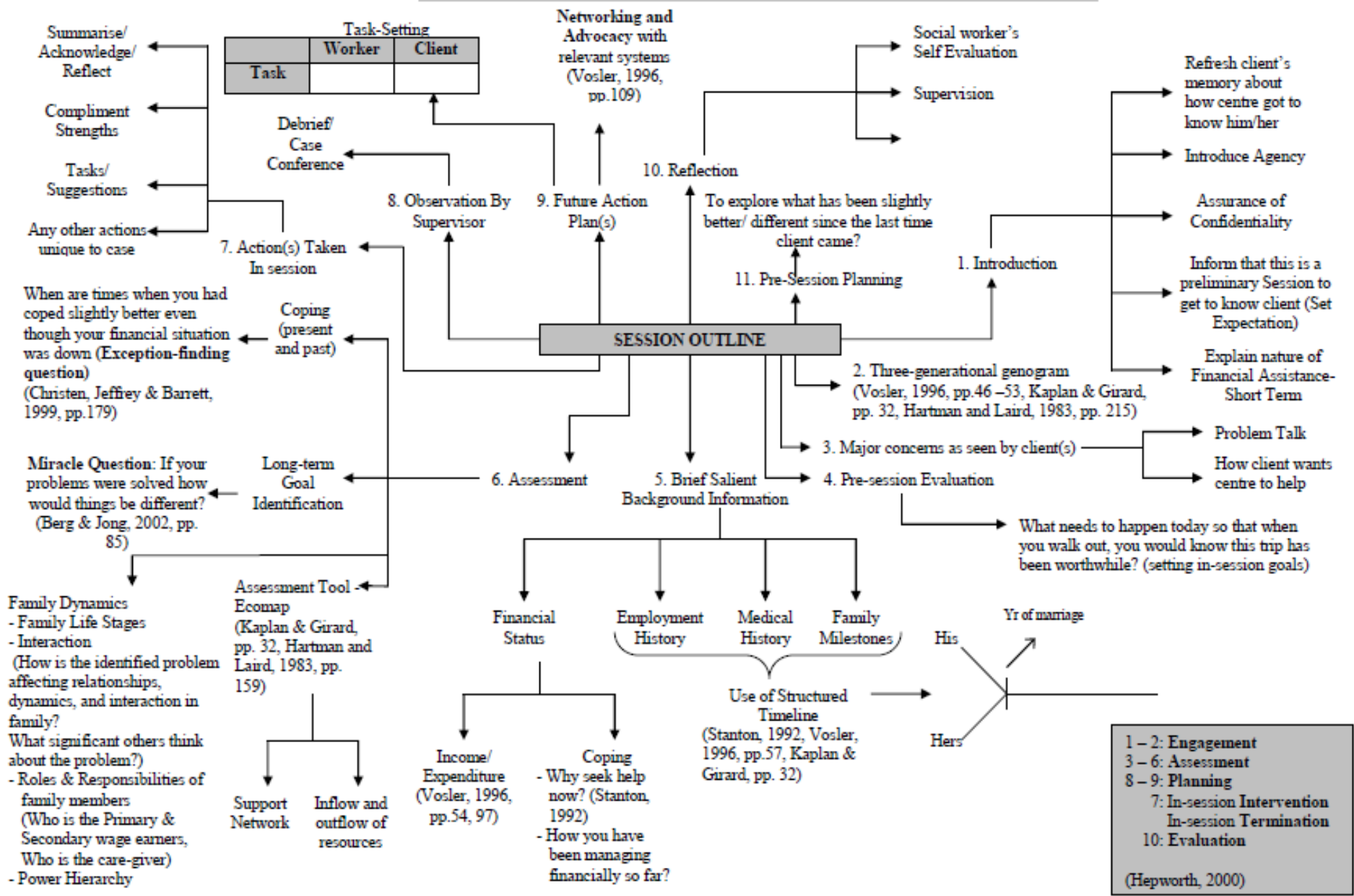
| | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| | numerous implications for the development and well-being of its members. | | clients' world (Saleebey, 1992, pp. 43) |
| Assessment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patterns of interaction, nature of transactions between person and environment. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies client competencies, strengths and resources and avoids being pathological Past successes Future plans/ goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengths including physiological factors (Cognition, emotion, motivation, coping, interpersonal), environmental factors, personal factors and obstacles (Cowger, 1992, pp.144) |
| Goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen or change patterns of transaction between systems. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To cooperatively search for the best in people and their relationships – a search for the aspirations, qualities, skills and commitments that give 'life' to their existence, sustain hope in face of adversity and offer possibilities for desired change (Lowe, 2004) Co-constructed, client-directed goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek to develop abilities and capacities in clients by assuming that clients already have a number of competencies and resources that may be used to improve their situation (Saleebey, 1992, pp.15) |
| Intervention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of wide range of strategies and techniques. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Therapeutic conversation that liberates suppressed, ignored or previously unacknowledged voices or stories. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assuming a collaborative stance Helping give voice to and acknowledging the authenticity of individual's story, values and beliefs Recognising individual's efforts and successes in surviving Giving attention and making links to possible communities of interest where the individual's strengths are respected and can begin to flourish (Saleebey, 1992, pp. 9) |
| Components in the Framework (Refer to Framework to working with Low-income, multi-stressed families) | 2, 5, 6, 8 (observation by supervisor), 9 (Networking), 10 (Constitutes feedback about session) | 3, 4, 6 (miracle & exception finding question), 7 (compliment strengths) | 7 (compliment strengths), 11 |

The table above attempts to capture how each theoretical perspective defines the family, problem, change, assessment, goals and intervention.

The diagram below illustrates a possible framework for early engagement with clients facing multi stressors. It serves more as an information gathering guide and does not include a conversation guide or possible intervention strategies that might best work in resolving financial difficulties.

However, through the interviews done with the selected social work practitioners, it was established that group and community level interventions over and above casework were crucial in countering the impact of structural constraints that multi-stressed families face.

Framework for Working with Low-income, Multi-Stressed Families



Reflections Upon Looking Back

Looking back at the above consolidation attempt now, I recognize the need to further contextualise the framework to fit the changing landscape of practice. With the introduction of the Code of Social Work Practice (CSWP) for FSCs in the periods between 2013 to 2014, casework practice processes have been fairly standardized and assessment framework has been aligned to the Biopsychosocial Spiritual Model (BPSS), along with a focus on risk for the vulnerable populations. Social Work Practitioners across agencies are inheriting a common language to describe and analyse situations faced by individuals and families. As a result, the once pressing need to consolidate and articulate practice seem to have shifted, giving way to more structured ways of thinking about clients and their families.

Though this shift in practice has its merits, it does not negate the need for practitioners to continually consolidate practice and experiment with intervention strategies and make necessary assessments and formulations that best support the need for these interventive strategies. Beyond the frameworks and guidelines, which

are generously available, work with the individuals and families in need, is largely characterized by the conversations that we have with them. Skills such as empathy, attunement, extending positive regard, attentive listening, strengthen therapeutic relationships and form the basis upon which change can happen.

“The practice of Social Work changes across time and context, necessitating practitioners to step back to consolidate the work that we do, intermittently.”

Conclusion

The practice journey for me personally, stands at revisiting some of the above fundamental knowledge and skills and integrating them with the recently-emphasised BPSS and risk sensitive assessments. Moving forward, some considerations for continued work on this framework may include:

- Incorporating social work knowledge base such as Systemic, Strengths Perspectives into the BPSS framework when organizing data gathered from client(s)

- Creating succinct risk assessment for the various vulnerable clientele that we encounter in the context of the FSC, for example, children, families (namely, family violence) and elderly
- Creating corresponding reflective responses and questions to the various components of the framework

The practice of Social Work changes across time and context, necessitating practitioners to step back consolidate the work that we do, intermittently. Undergirding to this is an assumption that every practitioner, beginner or otherwise, has implicit knowledges that inform practice. The challenge for us, given the context of Social Work Practice today, is to risk explicating and documenting, evolving practice (with all its uncertainties) as realistically as possible, so that local social work practice knowledges and wisdom, in all its imperfections, could be shared. In light of this, what will we set out to do today?

Written By:

Prema Mohan, Lead Social Worker, AMKFSC Community Services Ltd

References:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_University_of_Singapore

<https://www.msf.gov.sg/about-MSF/our-organisation/Pages/history-and-milestones.aspx>

Cowger, C. D. (1992). Assessment of Client Strengths in Saleebey, D. (Ed). *The Strengths Perspective In Social Work Practice*. New York: Longman

Hartman, A & Laird, J. (1983). *Family-Centred Social Work Practice*. New York: The Free Press

Hepworth, D. H., Larsen, J. A. & Rooney, R. (2000) *Direct Social Work Practice: Theory and Skills*, USA: Brooks/Cole

Jong, P. D. & Berg, I. K. (2002) *Interviewing for Solutions*. USA: Wadsworth Group

Kaplan, L. & Girard, J. L. (1994). *Strengthening High Risk Families: A Handbook for Practitioners*. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International

Saleebey, D. (1992). *The Strengths Perspective In Social Work Practice*. New York: Longman

Stanton, M. D. (1992). The Time Line and the “Why Now?” Question: A Technique and Rationale for Therapy, Training, Organizational Consultation and Research in *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 1992, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 331 – 343

Vosler, N. R. (1996). *New Approaches to Family Practice: Confronting Economic Stress*. USA: Sage Publications

Personal Epistemology of “Therapy”

This reflection paper is contributed by Patricia Wee. Patricia is currently pursuing her Master degree in the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago. She has several years of practice experience at AMKFSC Community Services Ltd.

What is “therapy” and the Conditions for a “therapeutic” relationship?

Safety

I would describe therapy as a process personified in space, where healing takes place in a safe and contained environment. In this case, the therapy space comprises the therapist, the client(s) and the therapeutic space between them. I think it is important to give attention to how the different actors give and make meaning of the shared space, as well as how both co-construct this space. I believe that the therapeutic space is intentional and political. The therapist by virtue of their training and employment assumes a position of power over the client who seeks help to find a resolution to their pain. Hence, I think it is professionally and ethically essential for the therapist to be intentional in their approaches, as well as to be upfront with their values with regard to who the client embodies and the issues that they shoulder into the space of therapy. I believe that therapy is a strategic exercise, and the intention to partner and support the client should be an overt practice. The therapist should be unafraid to take moral stands on difficult and complex matters, while being able

to hold the client with acceptance and empathy. In this case, the therapist holds the therapeutic space with suspended judgement of who the client is.

Respectful Collaboration

Therapy, to me is about respectful collaboration. There is plenty written in the literature on the topic of collaboration. However, I still struggle with how genuine partnership looks like in the therapeutic space. If I were a client, I would wish for my therapist to hear my story sincerely, and listen for the spaces in between my words to help me understand where I should travel in my therapeutic journey. I would wish for my therapist to walk alongside me in every moment of the session, and to challenge me to recognize if what I want is what is best for myself. In this aspect, I think this might be what I would define as respectful collaboration – a process where my therapist is my equal and as human as I am, in accepting and witnessing my pain and to validate my strengths.

Growth-Focused and Life Giving

The therapeutic space should provide life and energy. I likened it to be like an oasis where tired travelers can seek refuge and rest

from an unforgiving environment. The space should also convey safety and fairness, where clients can feel validation and deep understanding from someone truly interested in what they choose to share. I believe that therapy can provide liberation to a human’s spirit, when the therapist connects with the client as well as provides the conditions for growth in the therapeutic space. Many renowned therapists have referred to therapy as a dance between the actors. I understood this analogy to show how two people negotiate and attune to each other to lead and follow in the therapeutic space.

Culturally Sensitive

Helping professionals often cite the necessity to be culturally sensitive as one of the hallmarks of socially just and responsible therapy. However, I remain skeptical to the notion that we can ever attain competence to work with all individuals, families, groups and community who seek our support with their pain. Hence, I am of the opinion that a cultural attuned therapist recognizes their own histories, shortfalls, prejudice and biases so as to take courageous and responsible action to refer the client to therapists who are better attuned to the needs of people who seek help.

Contextualizing “Therapy” and The Role of Social Workers

In summary, the concept of therapy is a socially constructed one. Elements of therapy changes with time, social and political climates, changing needs of the people who seek support, and more. While I believe there are universal experiences to emotional pain; what is considered “therapy” is also unique to its environment. In Singapore, we have heavily imported from the West what we think therapy should be. The reality is that we often feel out of place with the Westernized concepts and ways of resolving internal conflict: the likes of differentiation, individuation, promotion of self-worth and the constant need to increase self-esteem.

As an Asian therapist, I struggle to reconcile how these concepts match our collectivist histories and ways of life, and to be cognizant that these

“I also firmly believe that a social worker must assume responsibility to seek and develop a professional support network to act as mirrors to their blind-spots, a base to return to in times of doubt and uncertainty, and most importantly to parallel a healthy therapeutic relationship so that the social worker can experience feeling deeply understood and safely held.”

are largely White westernized ideals. To be an effective therapist, I believe that we need to embrace our indigenous cultures, histories and wisdom to make sense of the available knowledge and to co-create more avenues of healing for those who are in pain with us.

I always feel torn in truly understanding how the role of a therapist and a social worker is different and differentiated in the realm of “therapy”. There has been much debate within the social work profession, specifically discussions around how social workers seemed to have pursued the lure of doing social work from the armchair, as espoused by Specht and Courtney (1994) in their book *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Has Abandoned its Mission*. The narratives have since matured, and dialogue has emerged on how it is needless to dichotomize the world of (psycho)therapy and social work. However, the distinctions or boundaries are more difficult to decipher on the ground. How then do we balance internal transformations and keep the external world accountable for the social injustices suffered by the oppressed and vulnerable?

Of course, I believe that a social worker must maintain a social justice and an anti-oppressive lens when partnering individuals, families, groups and communities who have suffered and are in pain. I also firmly believe that a social worker must assume responsibility to seek and develop a professional support network to act as mirrors to their blind-spots, a base to return to in times of doubt and uncertainty, and most importantly to parallel a

healthy therapeutic relationship so that the social worker can experience feeling deeply understood and safely held.

Challenges in Help-Seeking

Taking the First Step

In my opinion, people seek support and help when they are deeply in pain, particularly when they feel isolated or misheard by their loved ones or community. People also seek help to re-establish connections to people and relationships they treasure. Most importantly, people seek to heal when they consider seeking help.

Despite that, I believe that taking the first step to build a relationship with a professional helper is not easy. Personally, I struggle to make the first call to screen potential therapists. I worry about the therapist – who they are (history, ethnicity, identities), what are their fundamental values and beliefs, are they able to listen what I have to share, will they like me and me, them? Most importantly, will I get better? It is frightening to imagine having to share the same physical and emotional space with a stranger. And yet, many made the calls and arranged the first meetings. Because, people all want to become better.

Assumptions and Biases, and Action Taking

In individual therapy, I assumed that everyone is a motivated actor, except in cases where people are mandated to seek help. However, I neglected to consider a different set of dynamics in family therapy. The

unique circumstance that family therapy brings is that a member's symptom often requires a family's involvement – that is whether they are present or not in session. And it is always a challenge to convince key actors of their role and part to play in a loved one's pain and recovery. That said, it also implies that not every member is as invested as the client to better things, especially those who we think have perpetuated the "problem". I have my reservations in working with certain personalities whom I think have "courted" the problems and resulted in consequences that affect the other people (usually pain) in the family. I also have great difficulties partnering individuals who exhibit lack of "morality", and whose actions inflict hurt and harm onto others. My reactions sourced from negative and unpleasant encounters I have with certain people in my life. And they have the propensity to trigger feelings of anger and disdain in me. I am aware of the possible countertransference that can result from such interactions. Having said that, I

always felt that it is easy to say that critical consciousness and reflective practice can counter these interactions and processes in therapy. My challenge is to ensure that there is sustainable action to ensure these reflective practices take place.

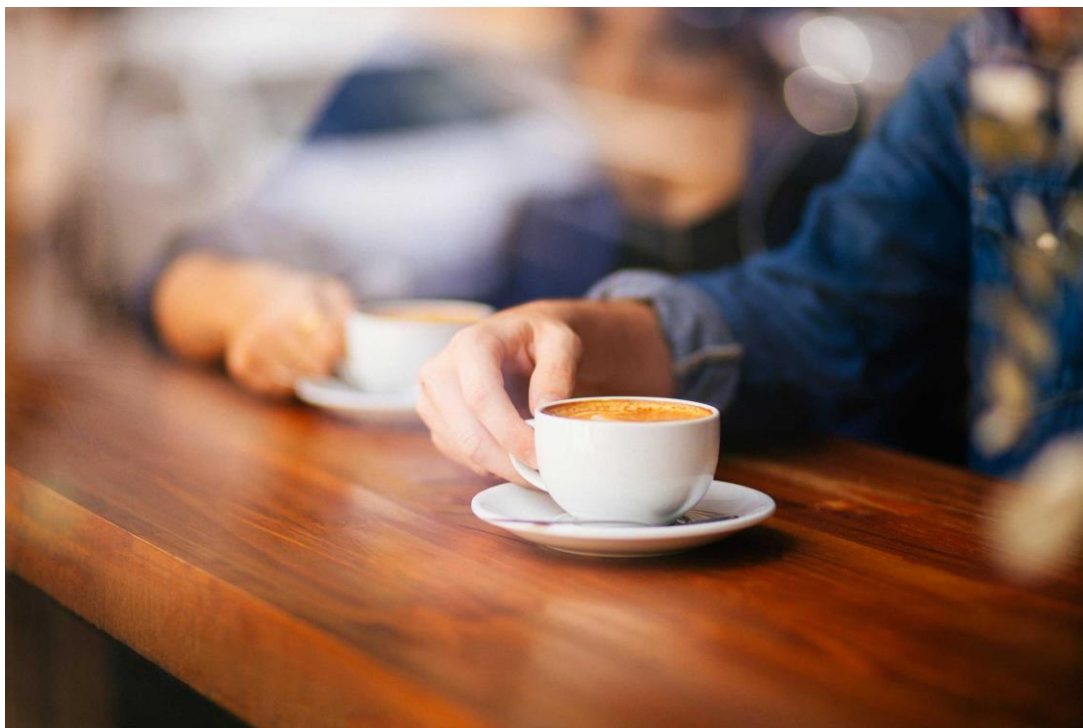
Too often, we hear therapists and social workers feeling overwhelmed – by mounting caseloads, competing administrative demands, influx of more "complex" cases which demand more of their energy and time, and increasing need to be more accountable to funders by chasing key performance indicators. In such climates, it is easy to push time for reflective practice further down the priority list. Hence, I think that it is important to seek and develop professional environments which prioritize critical reflection, and when possible to craft out protected time for reflective supervision. Therapy and social work practice can be isolating work. Due to the temptation to retreat inwards when we hear and experience ours as well as our

clients' pain, we risk perpetuating our alone-ness when we feel emotionally and mentally exhausted. As such, I believe strongly that we have a professional responsibility to take care and be accountable to one another by making sure that supportive structures are in place to support our professional work and health.

Returning to my biases towards certain personalities who seek therapy, I believe that the space to consult with, be vulnerable with, and be truthful with colleagues can be a great support and help. It also reflects a parallel process where I can experience being heard, my feelings validated and to feel supported to acknowledge that the best option is to refer the client to another professional. "Therapy" brings such abstraction, that we are constantly negotiating our understanding of it as we develop as people. It is not an easy subject, but an essential one to wrestle, when we take on the role of the "therapist".

As social workers, what is "Therapy" for you?

Written By:
Patricia Wee (Ms)
University of Chicago
School of Social Service
Administration



Announcements

Write with Us!

The Publications Sub-Committee will like to call out for written contributions related to your professional work. We will be glad to receive any articles, reflection papers, research studies, advocacy papers, good clinical practice, case management, programmes, community work and management and governance practices that you will like us to feature. Do get in touch with us at publications@sasw.org.sg to explore exciting possibilities! We welcome all queries and contributions.

Forum

This segment will feature any opinions, suggestions and feedback you will like to share with SASW and/or the Publications Sub-Committee. Please email us at publications@sasw.org.sg to stay connected with us. Selected opinions, suggestions and feedback will be featured in our subsequent issues. We appreciate all contributions and hope to stay connected with you!

Acknowledgement

SASW would like to acknowledge the following support extended by members for the release of our first E-Newsletter:

All Publications Sub Committee Members

Special thanks to *Ms Grace How Mei Hui*, Social Worker, TRANS SAFE Centre for the design work.