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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATIVE METHOD FOR DEVELOPING HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIAL WORK**B.G.I.M. Samarasinghe***Training Officer, Training Division, National Institute of Social Development, Sri Lanka.*

Abstract: The main objective of this study was to explore the applicability of collaborative social work method in the practice of social work in Sri Lanka. The study examined what the collaborative method is, the use of collaborative method in Social Work and the professional challenges faced by social workers when implementing this method. This is a qualitative study and therefore, descriptive method was used. Five social workers who use the collaborative method were selected as the study sample, using the purposive sampling method. For this study, semi-structured interviews and field observations were used as data collecting techniques. The concepts of working relationship and individual working project of help were used as the conceptual basis for analysis. Research findings revealed that the collaborative social work

leads to the solutions for personal problems through the client's interpersonal relationships. It was also evident that this methodology strengthens the client's network of relationships and empowers him/her through it. While this method came into use in the social work profession, it is clear that this method can be used constructively by the social worker in resolving personal problems of clients. Despite the effectiveness of this method, there are various challenges that may arise in the use of this method due to personal factors and relationship issues of the client.

Key words: Collaborative social work, human relationships, descriptive study, social work method and Sri Lankan context

INTRODUCTION

Social work can be identified as an academic discipline and a practice based profession in many countries around the world. It focuses on solving problems at individual, family, group, and community levels. Social Work as a profession “promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being, utilizing theories of human behaviour and social system. Social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental for Social Work” (IASSW and IFSW, 2001). “Throughout much of its history, Social Work has been teaching and advocating inter and intraprofessional collaboration as a practice skills” (Graham and Barter, 1999, p. 06).

Existing knowledge of social work led to the emergence of collaborative method and this is a solution oriented method found in the social work approach. The collaborative method focuses fundamentally on the person's relationships rather than on the problem/problems of the service user. This can be described as a successful method in the contemporary social work profession.

With the collaborative method, the solution to the problem/problems faced by the client lies within the client himself/herself. The social worker is grounded on profession ethics and therefore, must be fully aware of the client's situation, socio-economic background as well as other specific factors related to the individual that are important for the intervention, so as to not discriminate or alienate the client through the process. It must also be said that in considering the power relationship between the social worker and the client, the client holds the power, and not the social worker. The nature of the relationship between the social worker and the client is of critical importance in this method. Social worker must be friend and build a trusting relationship with the client. Patience, humility and ability to actively listen are important qualities for a social worker in collaborative method.

Collaborative social work highlights the notion that social work cannot be practiced without collaboration between the social worker and the client. The basic premise that a social worker who uses a collaborative social work method accepts is that the social worker knows the client as well as what the client wants.

If there is a mismatch between the client's needs and what the social worker thinks his client wants, it may cause a conflict between the client and the social worker. Therefore, in order to build a strong professional relationship between the social worker and the client, it is important for the social worker to have an accurate understanding of the client's expectations.

In this method, the social worker does not dictate terms that are degrading to the client. Here the social worker primarily considers what the client's demand is and even focuses on the client's current needs. Thus, while it is important to build and maintain relationships within every social work method, the Collaborative social work method highlights the importance of personal relationships with the client.

This method of social work practice is used in many cases in Sri Lanka and there is a need for further use of this as a specific method. Therefore, this study paper discusses how it can be used as a

method in social work and how to overcome the challenges faced by social workers in using this method

Methods

Main objective of this study was to explore the applicability of collaborative social work method in the Sri Lankan context. The study first examined what collaborative method is. Then it explored the use of collaborative method in Social Work and the professional challenges faced by social workers when implementing this method. This is a qualitative study and descriptive method was used. Five social workers who practice the collaborative method were selected using the method of purposive sampling. To collect data for the study, the techniques of semi-structured interviews and field observations were used. The study drew on the concepts of working relationship and individual working project of help for the conceptual basis for analysis.

Results

Collaborative social work method is a solution oriented method. It results in “collective problem solving, pooling resources, developing efficient and cost effective service delivery, promoting a better understanding of clients’ needs, improving service delivery, reducing professional burnout, sharing resources and empowering clients and stakeholders” (John, Selina and Heather, 2018). But the social worker does not move for solutions as soon as he/she starts working with his client. The solution to the client's problems evolves through the collaborative social work relationship.

‘In social work, we consider number of strengths of a client. But, in this method we focus only on the relationship network of the client while we are deciding on the intervention’ (A social worker who uses the collaborative method in her practice, 2020).

This method allows the client to think about what he/she wants. Usually when a person is unable to solve a problem by himself/herself, he/she turns to professionals such as a social worker. In such cases the social worker can use the collaborative social work method. Here, the relationship between the client and the social worker is built very slowly and systematically. The trust of the client in the social worker is very important. The client should be brought to a self-realization through the relationship thus built.

How the collaborative method is used in social work discipline

The collaborative method understands the client's problem as a breakdown of the client's relationships or as a problematic situation where those relationships exist. The solution sought through collaborative social work is a co-creative solution, and as such, the client and the social worker work together to create a new situation and find solutions to the problem. This method also aims at improving the quality of life of the client. We can identify some of the key terms used in this method.

1. **Control:** Client must develop self-control in working through the issues. In order to build up self-control, the client’s quality of life must be improved.
2. **Last word:** Client must have the last word and not the social worker.
3. **Develop the quality of life:** Intervention must lead to improving the quality of life.
4. **Experts:** Client is the expert on his/her life and not the social worker.

The quality of life must be improved in order to build up the client's self-control. It is important to consider the client's current situation and how he/she has facilitated the move away from the crisis. The social worker should also investigate on how best to provide the service systems they need.

The process of supporting the client in the Collaborative method can be stated as follows.



Source: Field Data, 2020.

In the collaborative method, a vision and a goal should be formulated by the social worker and the client. This is the collaboration. There are three basic techniques used in this collaborative method. They are;

1. Individual Planning
2. ADHOC
3. Planning in Advance

Individual planning is used to make immense changes in a person's life when needed in complex situations.

'One service user was referred to me when he was 28 years old. He also had Down's syndrome. Mother has passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. The others tried to institutionalize him. But the child did not like it. In a situation like this, a social worker can use a technique called individual planning' (A social worker who uses the collaborative method in his practice, 2020).

In individual planning, social workers examine the expectations of their clients in difficult situations. An individual plan can be prepared as follows.

Goal :

Step	Task	Who	Cost	Till when

Source: Field Data, 2020.

ADHOC stands for *'in the moment'* in Latin. This means making a small difference at a given moment in a client. In practice, the social worker has the opportunity to make small changes in a client's life. But the impact is not small. That change can be so significant that it can create a new world for the individual. In such cases, it is important for the social worker to listen to other people around the client as well and share ideas with them.

Planning in Advance involves creating a plan for the client's future. Such plans can often be made for people with long-term life problems (cancer patients, people with muscle atrophy, people with mental disorders, etc.) and in many of these cases, future plans are made for someone who is gradually weakening or whose situation is changing rapidly.

In such cases the social worker uses this method very carefully making sure the approach is used in a humane, compassionate and dignified manner.

'Most of the times people with mental and chronic illnesses come to us. Despite treatment, many people fall physically and mentally because of the condition they face. We can use planning in advance method for such people. We need to work with the client to make a plan for their future. Because it's hard for clients like this to understand at once what they need to do for such problems' (A social worker who uses the collaborative method in his practice, 2020).

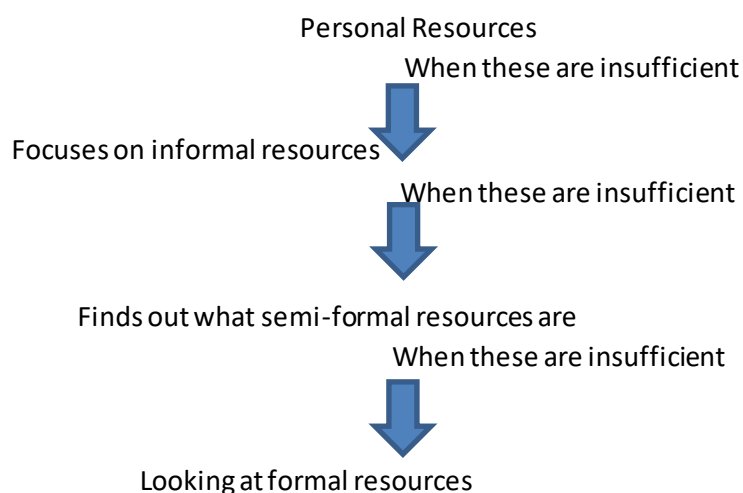
The social worker takes various steps to move towards the resources. When a client works with a social worker, the social worker must take serious consideration of all what the client says. Individuals bring with him/her the solutions, as well as important ideas and resources (internal strengths, knowledge, life experiences, personality, beliefs, strengths, expectations, relationships, survival strategies and physical resources.) The social worker must first find out what resources the client has. There are several types of resources / relationships a client can have. They are;

1. Personal resources
2. Informal resources
3. semi-formal resources
4. formal resources

The social worker first looks at the personal relationships (close relationships) of the client. He/she then considers what informal relationships/resources the client has. The social worker also focuses on the relationships that have links with the client's problem. The informal resources of the client are a very important concept for social work. Such informal relationships can exist before and after a social worker starts work with the client. Relationships the client has with his/her neighbors are an example of this type of informal relationships.

The semi-formal resources category includes various organizations such as rural development societies, pension societies, Red Cross branch, funeral assistance societies and elders' societies. It also includes various community-level relationships. While there are many organizations at community level in Sri Lankan societies in general, they help individuals at different levels.

Formal resources are resources that a person receives in a formal, legal way. For example, this includes salaries paid by the government, pensions, etc. This includes resources provided by social welfare services too. The social worker focuses on the gaps in these resources as well as the gaps in the services.



Source: Field Data, 2020.

When using the collaborative method, the social worker focuses mainly on the client's present condition. Here, the social worker needs to consider four aspects of the client's life. They are;

1. control
2. relationships
3. skills
4. joy/ concern

In considering the kind of control the client has over his/her own life, the social worker looks at the client's likes/dislikes, the kind of decisions the client has made in his/her life, and his/her belief on what life should be.

E.g. - According to the findings of the research (p. 05) social workers should give the priority for the wish of the client (person with Down's syndrome). Thus, social worker set goals to keep him in his house not at an institution.

The social worker should note down client's every expectations and consider the necessary steps to be taken to achieve them. The social worker and the client need to formulate a goal based on the client's wish and aspiration. Here, the client's desire for change is also considered a goal.

When considering client's relationships, the social worker looks into whether those relationships are necessary or whether they need to be changed.

'Sometimes some clients have very strong networks. But they have not used them properly. At such times this method is very successful to use for clients. For example, a woman came to me and she is a single parent mother. That is why her economy has fallen a lot. But when I talked to her, I realized that she had lot of connections to find a job. That is to say, when problems arise, sometimes they do not see their strengths such as relationships' (A social worker who uses the collaborative method in his practice, 2020).

It is also important to consider the skills and knowledge possessed by the client as every client has skills and they should be appreciated (e.g. - though they are suffering from mental illnesses they have skills, knowledge and strengths). The social worker also needs to delve into what brings joy as well as concerns for the client. This will help in understanding the psychological state of the client. Through these four aspects, the social worker is better able to understand the client's true condition and to, identify the client's problem and treatment/therapy best suited for him/her. Through this process the social worker can discuss with the client what needs to be done to alleviate the client's issue.

In the Collaborative method following can also be used: **joining** (social worker and client working together), **discovery** (social worker's findings including strengths of the), **changing** (difference between steps), **celebrating** (appreciate the achievements), **separating** (identifying and separating important facts when moving to the final solution) and **reflection** (reminding the client of the whole process and asking the client to reconsider).

When using the working relationship concept in a collaborative method, the language as well as the strengths of the client should be considered. Building a working relationship in a collaborative method is a professional task. For that, the social worker must have the necessary knowledge and skills.

Individual working project of help concept involves creating a specific action plan based on the client's problem. Here, one can choose the most suitable method from the 03 methods; Individual Planning, ADHOC or Planning in Advance.

Thus, based on theoretical and practical considerations, it is conclusively clear that the collaborative method can be used when appropriate by the social worker in their professional practice.

Challenges faced by the social worker in using the collaborative method

Typically when a client visits a social worker, the social worker recognizes that the client has a specific problem or problems and the social work intervention would be done accordingly. In the collaborative method, the client joins in with the social worker and formulates a vision based primarily on the client's problem.

A challenge is sometime posed when the vision thus set changes as clients work through steps. Then the process that has been done so far may come to a standstill. In such situations the social worker will need to continue working with the client and the social worker must have no regrets about the work done for the client. The client has the right to change his/her mind as well as to change the direction of his/her life at any time. The social worker may use this situation itself, together with the client's quality of life, as supporting factors in guiding and redirecting the client. In this method, the client possesses the expertise on his/her own life and therefore the social worker accepts such situations and adjusts the intervention. Accordingly, social worker may be forced to formulate a new plan.

“When this method is used, sometimes clients change their expectations when all relationships are used for intervention. I have faced this problem a lot. Then sometimes we can't use those contacts again. Because they don't want to help these clients again” (A social worker who uses the collaborative method in his practice, 2020).

Another challenging situation that a social worker may face is when a client has limited resources or if the client has difficulty identifying resources and making decisions. In such cases, the social worker has to work hard to find the resources that clients need. This can be extremely challenging with clients who are experiencing conditions such as mental illness.

There are also situations when the client's needs change for a number of other reasons, and they may be difficult to control. In such cases, the program that the social worker has been working on with the client may change which in turn may cause the client to lose interest and lose confidence in the social worker.

Considering these challenges, it is not possible to say that the collaborative method is appropriate for all cases at all times.

Conclusion

The collaborative method is one of the methods that can be used in Social work to solve an individual's problems. When employing this method, the social worker mainly focuses on the existing relationships of the client rather than other factors linked to the client. It must be noted that there are situations in which the collaborative method is difficult to implement: in cases where the client has poor relationships, mental illness, or external factors that change the focus of the client's life. Therefore, it is up to the social worker to decide with the client, if this is the most suitable method. The social worker must have practice/experience to implement this method and ensure that this method is the correct match to solve the client's problem. Finally, it is clear that although this method is used by many social workers in Sri Lanka, it can still be established in the field of social work as a unique method.

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