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THE WORKER/CLIENT RELATIONSHIP: RELEVANT ROLE THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The historic concept of "friendly visitor" has blurred the distinction of professional and personal in worker/client relationships. Current social trends and social problems as well as recent theory applications in practice have made these distinctions harder to identify and maintain. Role theory can be used to analyze behavioral indicators of objective and subjective components of relationship.

Relationship Revisited

In social work no term has been used more frequently,¹ but less defined,² than relationship. Mary Richmond, in Social Diagnosis, did not deal directly with the concept and only hinted at it in arguing that the purpose of the social worker is to influence and to know the client in order to serve.³ More recently, Halmos has described this as the worker using his "personality to find out, to understand, and to learn."⁴ Prior to and during the period of Richmond's work, the concept "friendly visitor" was used instead of relationship. The association of the terms friendship and relationship led to confusion about what constituted a professional relationship. The confusing association persists and is epitomized by Boyer's statement that the

professional self necessitates the worker becoming "a friend to the client, but not a friend of the client."⁵ Freud, soon after publication of Richmond's Social Diagnosis, began to influence the practice of social work in this country, and one of his major efforts was to objectify the relationship between the worker and client. Later Otto Rank influenced social work practice through the work of the "functionalists" which subjectified relationship and made it the center and purpose of social work practice. To this day, workers trained in this theoretical model speak of all social work practice in the context of relationship as opposed to the "diagnostic school" which views relationship as a tool in good practice.⁶

All the writings since have been an attempt to balance the objective and subjective components of relationship. Objectivity implies the worker not losing sight of factors such as client needs, problems, resources, and motivations while working to ameliorate weaknesses in psycho-social functioning. Subjectivity, on the other hand, has been characterized as the worker acting out his personal values, needs, and motivations to focus on factors more significant to him than the client. In this context, Hamilton views professional relationships not as just friendly associations, but controlled behavior towards the end of serving the psycho-social needs of clients.⁷ Biestik defines relationship in terms of its purpose in helping the client achieve better adjustment between himself and his environment.⁸ Perlman argues that, upon entering social work, the worker is required to face up to relationship for the first time. For her, professional relationship involves two persons with some common interest who interact with feeling.⁹ Perlman goes on to discuss professional relationship through drawing examples from ordinary human interactions. Without defining relationship as such, Hollis describes it as a means of communication, a set of attitudes, and a set of responses expressed as behavior. She places emphasis on the worker's positive involvement to promote continued commitment on the part of the client while arguing that a bland uninvolved attitude leads to client discontinuance.¹⁰ In elaborating on attitudes, she draws on the work of Garrett¹¹ and makes the distinction of realistic and unrealistic. These concepts are explained as appropriate and inappropriate reactions to the situation on the part of the client and the worker that contain elements of transference and countertransference.

Recent writers have not deviated much from these earlier conceptions except to place more emphasis on objectivity as a crucial component of relationship. This is probably due to increased emphasis on the scientific approach to and professionalization of practice. The

emphasis on the concept of objectivity in relationship is illustrated by the repeated use of the term, in one form or another, in the writing of Brill,¹² Boyer,¹³ Goldstein,¹⁴ Pincus and Minahan,¹⁵ Kadushin,¹⁶ and Siporin.¹⁷ The trend in conceptualizing relationship has been in the area of viewing it as special and identifying the uniqueness, while at the same time recognizing the common characteristics that are shared with other forms of human relationship. Social work relationships are generally viewed as purposeful, client-need oriented, time limited, honest, genuine and realistic, and unequal. The element of inequality serves as the basis for heavy emphasis on objectivity which is usually discussed as the degree of involvement or professional distance the worker must appropriately maintain. All of the above-mentioned commentators on relationship approach the subject from the standpoint of professional objectivity and use the term specifically except Kadushin, who discusses the same principle but uses the alternate term of "disciplined subjectivity."¹⁸ The integration of aspects of professional relationship with objectivity is perceived as accomplishing the purpose of the relationship by the worker maintaining objectivity and stability through ". . . a certain degree of emotional and social distance, and a greater degree of authority and control, self-awareness and self-discipline . . ." than is expected of the client.¹⁹

The purpose of this paper is to explore, through empirical referents and the use of the sociological concept of *role distance*, appropriate degrees of objectivity in social work professional relationships. Using the perspective of sociological role theory to explain relationship, the specific concept of *role distance* is applied to what does and should take place between worker and client. In recent literature, social workers have been attempting to apply various theories of human behavior to practice. In this effort, relationship is rarely discussed in connection with these theories. The trend, intended or unintended, is to discuss separately relationship and application of theory to practice. This paper is an attempt to discuss relationship within the context of a theoretical perspective. Role theory is used because of its emphasis on the varying abilities and capabilities participants bring to a role, and their own unique interpretation of the role which determines their style of interaction. Role theory places emphasis on expectations evident in micro social units, and it ultimately attempts to account for types of role performance by individuals.²⁰

Role Theory and Relationship

The smallest unit of social structure is a norm which is required or acceptable behavior for a given interactional situation. Norms provide standards for behavior as well as standards for judging behavior.²¹ Roles are clustered subsets of norms that refer to expectations for individuals who hold a particular position in a group.²² Roles assume relationship since every role presumes some counter-role.²³ The term role has been differentiated as conventional roles dealing with broad, structural conceptions of everyday performance, and interpersonal roles that define unique human interaction in specific roles and the resulting expectations. Interpersonal roles will be the focus of our analysis of the worker/client relationship. Kinch has described relationship as parallel to Cooley's formulation of primary and secondary groups.²⁴ Primary relationships involve an atmosphere in which involved individuals exchange intimate knowledge, act and react with some degree of spontaneity, and provide realistic conceptions of themselves and what others expect of them. Primary relationships possess an element of quality and involve a degree of unique emotional attachment. Secondary relationships are based on a necessity of cooperation that exists for the fulfillment of aims or goals of the individual participants. Secondary relationships usually involve interaction of short duration with little emotional or personal involvement. Social workers engage in both types of relationships. Depending upon the setting and how the situation is defined, some workers engage exclusively in primary or secondary relationships, while other practitioners alternate between the two forms. A paraprofessional, food-stamp interviewer in a welfare department engages exclusively in secondary relationships with clients, while a psychotherapist in private practice is more likely to develop only primary relationships with patients. A caseworker in a welfare department or a mental health clinic is found to use both types, depending upon the situation. Frequently, workers who only have brief contact with clients mistakenly minimize the importance of relationship, while social workers who interact with clients over long periods of time tend to overemphasize the importance of relationship.

Primary social work relationships can be associated more with psychotherapeutic efforts to change personality and patterns of social relations, while secondary relationships deal more with provision of concrete, tangible services. Both types involve varying emotional, temporal, and structural elements. The emotional element is best conceptualized as having objective and subjective components that determine the degree of authenticity which has been described by Levitsky

and Simkin as a "State of individuation, of truly being one's self."²⁵ Authenticity can be operationalized as the appropriate role blending of objectivity and subjectivity through professional closeness and professional distance. In the objective mode, the worker maximizes professional closeness and personal distance, while in the subjective mode, personal closeness and professional distance are maximized. Using such a framework for relationship, we have the basis for distinguishing helping relationships and other ordinary and extraordinary relationships. So that the objective quality of a practitioner's professional relationship will set the tone of interaction with a troubled client which will differ from the conversation that might take place with a similarly troubled relative. The social worker might feel more competent in the former, but much less comfortable in the latter.

Role Embracement, Role Distance, and Relationship

The relevant degrees of objectivity and subjectivity in professional relationships are difficult to assess and are highly variable given the nature, quality, structure, and duration of the relationship. The problem can be approached from the concepts of norms, roles, and role distance. Social workers are trained to perform according to certain norms, and there are professional expectations regarding role performance. The social worker is expected to treat the client with dignity and respect, accept his right to self-determination, insure his confidentiality, guarantee his privacy, and not judge his behavior. In the role of social worker, the practitioner is to demonstrate warmth and acceptance, show interest and understanding, be genuine, and intervene at a level appropriate to the client's needs. These expectations are not necessarily associated with subjective relationships. All of us enter personal relationships where we do not make pledges of confidentiality or privacy, do not show understanding, do not act genuine, and do not directly intervene. So that objective relationships frequently demand more of us than subjective relationships in terms of performance and involvement. A crucial question in an objective relationship becomes: how much of the self are we going to make available to the situation? Goffman refers to this as role *embracement* and explains that, "To embrace a role is to disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation, to be fully seen in terms of the image, and to confirm expressively one's acceptance of it. To embrace a role is to be embraced by it."²⁶ Objectivity is expressed in many forms in social work training to regulate the degree to which the worker embraces the social work role so that the norm against "over-identification" is not violated;²⁷ but in theory, this is more

easily described than it is attained in practice. Goffman calls this expressed separateness between the individual and his role, *role distance*. The person performs the role but uses certain behaviors to control and limit the extent to which the role is embraced. The extreme of this formulation would be the social worker who is attached to or assigned the role and fails to embrace it, such as the social worker who conceives himself as a warm, loving, giving person, but who is actually cold, rejecting, and destructive.²⁸ Role distance is maintained through such behaviors as nonchalant competence, style of dress, diverting conversation, making jokes, and acting visibly bored. At the other extreme, professional subjectivity is that aspect of social work practice that finds the worker losing sight of his function and professional role and expectations to the extent that his own needs, concerns, and desires enter into the relationship at an inappropriate level.

While it has not been discussed as such, professional role distance has been a subject of concern in recent literature. Writers have been pointing to more active involvement on the part of the worker to promote change in clients as opposed to the more detached worker emphasized in the Freudian conception. The shift has been away from the traditional interpretative model where the aloof worker offers interpretation, insight, and comment, to an experiential model where the worker is actively engaged in the growth and change process. This new conception has been emerging without concomitant development of adequate behavioral referent for the worker to use as an assessment measure of appropriate level of "making the self available to the situation." Stebbins, building on the work of Goffman, has developed the dichotomous distinction of "major and minor role distance"²⁹ that can be helpful in determining appropriate levels of objectivity in social work practice. Major role distance refers to the attitudes and behaviors that occur in highly threatening situations, while minor role distance develops in moderately or slightly threatening situations. In a major role distance posture, the worker can respond with professional detachment, or go to the other extreme of total involvement and take over by relating the situation to himself. A worker's account of his response to a patient's statement of suicidal threat in a group treatment situation involving seven depressed patients illustrates a possible differentiation of major and minor role distance:

Near the close of this group session, Mary said she again felt the desire to do away with herself. These same kind of feelings had perviously resulted in her

hospitalization. She felt that a re-hospitalization would not help, refused to consider that as a possibility, and admitted that during her last hospitalization, she had to struggle against taking a razor blade and slashing her wrists while on a weekend visit home. She was overwrought because she felt 'going back to the hospital would not help and nothing was going to change at home.' The group members were at a loss to help Mary. The group seemed to be looking to me to say or do something. I remember feeling like saying, 'You know, there is a strong possibility Mary will do away with herself before we meet again next week. We might not ever see her again. I hope this is not the case, but it could happen. Does anybody want to say anything to Mary in case we don't see her again?' What I have learned about working to keep people from doing harm to themselves and others prevented me from acting on my true feelings, and the only genuine recourse I felt I had in the situation. My values and feelings were in conflict. Instead of acting on my feelings, I feebly encouraged Mary by saying, 'See you next week!'

In this situation, the worker engaged in major role distance to deal with a highly threatening situation. If the worker could have moved to a minor role distance position and acted on the authentic feelings of the professional self, it is possible that the entire situation could have been restructured to the point other group members would have been able to express concern for the patient and demonstrate that there was genuine regard and caring for her.

Within major and minor role distance, Stebbins identifies the sub-categories of *true* and *false role distance behavior*. In true role distance behavior, the expectations are genuinely disliked and expressed, while in false role distance behavior, the actor attempts to create the impression he disapproves when he is actually attracted to the expectations.³⁰ So that a true role distance would be appropriate when a child-abusing client seeks approval of such behavior from the worker. The worker is put in a more difficult position in false role distance when, for example, a young marijuana user seeks the sanction of the worker. When the worker has been or is a marijuana user, false role distancing becomes an issue, because frequently, the client's expectations are sought as approval through asking the worker, "Do you do drugs?" If the worker admits to past drug usage, he is fearful of

becoming too identified with the client, and if he denies drug use, he takes the risk of being rejected or dismissed as being "straight" and unable to understand. Appropriate false role distance involves expressing to the client serious concern about heavy drug dependence, and at the same time, communicating acceptance of and concern for the drug-dependent client. This form of role conflict is especially found among paraprofessional drug counselors since the clients and workers are alike in age, cultural background, and developmental life struggles.

False role distancing is frequently appropriate in social work relationships but often hard to maintain. As inflation-induced deprivation increases, societal alienation spreads, and bureaucratic complexity promotes frustration and confusion, the worker frequently experiences many of the same problems encountered and articulated by the client, opening the way for the worker to totally embrace the role and join in intellectualizing the negative aspects of modern society rather than constructively using the relationship to promote change and growth that benefits both client and worker. The following case record excerpt illustrates this point:

During the initial interview, Jane described how she thought she was taking the right step by divorcing her husband of eight years. She had struggled through college while caring for a family and received much opposition from her husband, who held no value for education. Upon finishing college, she realized she and her husband had 'grown apart' and had seen this coming for a long time. She became depressed when she could not get a job and upon applying for many jobs, she was required to take a typing test. Interviewers frequently offered her jobs far below her qualifications and salary requirements to support herself and her children. She became so frustrated she 'stormed out' of an interview yesterday and cried all night before coming here today, submerged in regrets and a feeling of failure. As the session progressed, I found myself emotionally withdrawing from the room. It was a really strange feeling until I suddenly realized I had gone through a similar stage myself and was responding to seeing my recent past experience in this person. I reflected upon some of the similar interviews I had in seeking a social work position. At first I felt like just unloading with all my experiences and joining her in attacking the

system and its treatment of women, thought better of it, composed myself, and simply stated I understood before telling her I could work with her around organizing the job-hunting efforts. I asked her to bring her resume to the next appointment and assured her I could provide help in how to handle interviews where her qualifications were not appropriately recognized by potential employers. I did share that I had a similar experience and was able to resolve it with help. She expressed relief and renewed hope.

In this situation, the worker avoided total role embracement, consciously injected objectivity into her role, and engaged in minor false role distance in order to be effective in helping the client.

Role distance in professional relationships generally takes three forms: *attitudes*, *expectations*, and *behaviors*. Using these three areas in connection with major/minor and true/false role distance, relationships can be analyzed and worker/client interaction assessed. Attitudes, expectations and behaviors are interrelated and influence each other. Verbal expressions of workers that reflect *attitudes* and *expectations* can be used to indicate role distance. For example, some worker comments we have observed from interview content analysis are: "If I were in your shoes, I am not sure I would feel that way"; "Let me try to set aside my values for a minute"; "You have had it rougher than me, but . . ."; "If you want my professional opinion . . ."; and, "What you described is common among people who have drinking problems." Language itself is a social act, and these examples, in one way or another, convey to a client a certain role distance recognized by the worker; but at the same time, the first three statements indicate efforts to contract or expand the role distance to relate more directly to the client and his problem. Extreme statements of role distance are expressed by some workers in the absence of the client and demonstrate the *attitudes* as well as the *expectations* of the worker: "You really can't do anything for these people [clients], because they don't want to do anything for themselves," or "You have to start with the premise that they [clients] all lie, then you will be okay." There is no role embracement here, and one can picture easily the nature of the relationship the worker, who holds these attitudes and expectations, has with clients.

Behaviors that indicate maximum role distance are placing a desk between the worker and client, using large rectangular tables for

groups with the worker sitting at the "head" of the table, an office full of bookcases with texts on the shelves, having the client sent or brought to the interview room, placing degrees on the office wall, and use of last names. Behaviors that lessen role distance are worker and clients sitting face-to-face without obstacles between them, greeting clients in the waiting room and personally escorting them to the interview room, use of first names, and conducting interviews in the client's home. Certain attempts to verbally overcome role distance can have the opposite of the desired effect. The worker who uses the colloquial and specialized vocabulary and jargon of the client creates an artificiality that can deter development of an effective relationship. Instead, the worker should use ordinary, natural language that is free of technical and professional terms that might be meaningless to the client.³¹ There are indications that natural or true role distance contributes to the change process. Halmos discusses this aspect of relationship by calling attention to research in support of Homans' hypothesis that interacting individuals tend to become more alike over time.³² If there is to be conscious use of the professional self to promote change in the client, then the worker must offer the client a differential model for identification at given points in the relationship. This view in part deviates from the traditional social work belief that the more similar the worker is to the client, the more likely the client is to invest in the relationship. Tessler and Polansky's research produced results that raise questions about this traditional view, because they found that dissimilarity led to greater verbal accessibility.³³ From a role theory perspective, we are not surprised at this finding, and a young, black social worker's comments illustrate this point:

When I went to work here at the clinic, my supervisor decided to start me off by giving me all black clients since, as she put it, 'I could identify the problems more easily and accomplish more in less time.' I agreed and really thought it would be so easy for me, and I was relieved that I didn't have a lot of white clients to start out with. Well, it was terrible. It was a mistake. Since I was black, the clients felt they didn't have to explain anything. They would get angry because I didn't know exactly what they were talking about. I even had one client tell me I was dumb. After awhile, my supervisor realized the problem and gave me a mixed caseload; but in the meantime, I was so frustrated, I almost quit.

If this supervisor and worker would have used role distancing proposi-

tions to analyze the situation and could have developed some appropriate role distance behaviors, a great deal of frustration could have been avoided.

Conclusion

It is believed by the authors that a professional relationship is an essential component and tool in offering aid to clients, but the worker must come to grips with what Halmos has called "The paradox of a noninvolved involvement. . . ."34 The concept of role distance has been used to describe what is considered appropriate degrees of sharing and interaction on the part of the worker. Much study remains in terms of explicating how modern theories of human behavior as applied to social work practice view relationships. No systematic comparative analysis of Freudian, Existential, behaviorism, and systems theories has been done with respect to relationship. With the explosion of diverse human behavior theories, social workers have been preoccupied matching their practice with theory. Attention needs to be given to applying and developing these theories by relating them to practice. We have attempted to do this through use of role theory and the concept of role distance. Such applications need to be expanded, especially in the case of role theory, since it lends itself to analysis of worker/client relationships. Additional propositions taken from role theory such as *role conflict* (conflicts among expectations), *role strain* (impossibility of meeting all expectations), and *anomie* (lack of clear expectations)35 need to be elaborated in the context of social work practice. Also, the concept of role distance needs to be studied in relation to client behavior and interaction with the worker. Comprehensive theoretical applications of this nature can contribute significantly to further understanding of the social work relationship.

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