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TOWARD A MORE ADEQUATE  
CONCEPT OF "ORGANIZATION" IN SOCIAL  
WORK PRACTICE THEORY

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A generic model of social work practice requires the formulation of frameworks that indicate what is meant by intervention at the "organizational" level. Usually "organization" is put at some midpoint in a hierarchy of social levels (such as individual, small group, organization, local community, society). However, when one looks at the various social work practice frameworks, there is very little development of knowledge about the process of intervention at this mid-level. Since the "macro" levels of community and society can probably be best conceptualized as "inter-organizational" arenas, social work practice knowledge for these levels is also hindered. This article intends to look at what some practice frameworks say about organizational intervention and also what these frameworks assume about organizations. From this beginning exploratory analysis, a direction for practice theory is indicated that can move toward a more adequate practice theory for intervention at the "organizational" level.

Organizational Intervention in Practice Theories:

A wide sample<sup>1</sup> of social work practice theories from casework, group work, organizing and social planning were analyzed as to what they assume about organization intervention. All of the various theories recognize the reality of organizations for analyzing problems, but they vary in how they conceive of the relation of social work intervention to organizations. Table I summarizes how the practice frameworks conceive of who the worker should be involved with. A large part of the case work practice theories analyzed only emphasize direct intervention with the client who is experiencing the problem. In these theories organizations enter the practice situation as only content during the verbal interactions of the worker with the client. In some of the casework theories analyzed, there is some emphasis on the agency as a setting for practice. This is probably due to the historical influence of "Functionalism" in casework theory.<sup>2</sup> A few writers, especially Hollis<sup>3</sup> as one of

the strongest, do talk about "collateral" work or what Perlman<sup>4</sup> calls "environmental modification". This is largely interaction with organizational representatives. However, most casework theorists if they mention this at all only speak of it in a short section as is found in Reid and Epstein<sup>5</sup> or in only a few paragraphs with no development of the skills or process involved.

Social group work theorists are stronger in their emphasis on work with non-clients. All group work frameworks analyzed emphasize the relevance of the agency for the worker and the action system. There is also a strong minority of these theories which emphasize work with persons or organizational representatives other than the client or the agency which sponsors the worker. Even Vinter who is usually considered to be more "treatment" oriented among group work theorists had this to say about the necessity of the worker intervening with others beyond group members.<sup>6</sup>

It seems important, therefore, that the social worker retain dual perspectives, and attempt to resolve problem situations or processes: both pupils and school conditions should be targets of his interventive activity. He must find ways of serving specific individuals while simultaneously dealing with the sources of pupil difficulties within the school.

This emphasis in group work is related to the dual focus on the individual and society which has been a part of group work history. Also group work developed out of a different social theory which later analysis in this article indicates is a stronger base for practice at the organization level. Further the analysis indicates that all of the "organizing" practice theories in community work emphasize work with organizational representatives. This is also true for most of the community work theories which are designated as "social planning".

Table I  
Emphasis of Practice Theories in  
Action Systems

Type of Social Work Practice Theories					
Primary Involvement of Worker	Case Work (N=11)	Group Work (N=6)	"Organizing" (N=5)	Social Planning (N=6)	Total (N=28)
Client Only	55%				21%
Agency of Worker Plus Client	39%	67%		17%	32%
Other Organizational Representative Plus All Above	9	33	100%	83	47

In looking at the organizational frameworks of different practice theories along another dimension, one can see where some of the limitations are. As indicated, most social work practice theories emphasize that organizations should be changed (Table II). Only a small minority of the case work theorists however identify typologies of change strategies and ways of influencing organizational structure. Most of the theorists analyzed in group work and community work do so. It is only in the group work and in the "organizing" part of community work that there is a beginning of identification of a "process of change" in organizational intervention. One can contrast this "process" emphasis with most of the writings in "social planning". Robert Mayer<sup>7</sup> goes further than most "planning" theorists in conceptualizing the type of "organizational" decisions that must be made before planning can progress. He delineates these as legislation, administrative regulation, public expenditures, political power and judicial review.<sup>8</sup> However, he does not provide conceptualizations for what the worker (planner) must do to move organizational entities toward such decisions.

TABLE II  
 Emphasis of Practice Theories  
 About Change in Organizations

Type of Emphasis about Organizational Change	Case Work  (N=11)	Group Work  (N=6)	"Organizing"  (N=5)	Social Planning  (N=6)	Total  (N=28)
Organizations Should Change	64%			17%	29%
Typologies of Change in Org.	36	67%	60%	83	57
Processes of Change in Organizations		33	40		14

**Organizational Theories in Social Work Practice:**

Further exploratory analysis of social work practice theories indicate that the limitations in practice at the organizational level identified above are related to the type of organizational theory which the particular practice theory assumes. Sociologists such as Etzioni<sup>9</sup> indicate that types of organizational theories have historically developed to understand aspects of organizations which were left out of the early "rationalistic" theories of administration. In the present study several frameworks which these writers have identified were used to categorize social work practice theories (Table III). Two of these organizational theories are related to the "human relation" emphasis in administration which recognizes that organizations are made up of people and therefore are more than rational machines. This human relation emphasis can be differentiated into two types. One is a "psychologistic" emphasis on individual members of organizations and

reduces organizations to some psychological framework. The other emphasis is on the organization itself as a "natural system" with "latent" functions which often contradict the rationally defined "manifest" goals and functions of the organization. This is the position of what might be called "enlightened management" and is also the position of many sociologists especially those in the "structural-functionalist" tradition. Another framework which includes even more hidden aspects of organizations than these two variations are theories which emphasize conflict of ideologies and inequality of power positions within organizations. Dahrendorf<sup>10</sup> is a good example of such a theorist. In his social theory, organizations are viewed as being divided into various conflicting interest groups-- especially those in power positions and those who are not.<sup>11</sup> A fourth framework is identified here as "dialectic" and would be close to what Etzioni identifies as his "structuralist" position.<sup>12</sup> In fact, his theory is a good example of the "dialectic" framework with its stress on the process of compliance (normative, utilitarian, and coercive) as the major variable in an organization. The organization in this perspective is viewed as an arena of conflicts and power plays, but with the possibility of an emerging consensus developing from the negotiations of organizational participants. It is this type of organizational theory which seems to be necessary to undergird formulations of processes of change in organizational intervention (Table IV).

TABLE III  
Types of Organizational Theories  
in Practice Theories

Type of Organizational Theories	Case Work (N=11)	Group Work (N=6)	"Organizing" (N=5)	Social Planning (N=6)	Total (N=28)
Psychologicistic	64%				25%
Natural System	27	67%	20%	67%	43
Conflict	9		40	33	18
Dialectic		33	40		14

None of the social work practice theories maintain completely a "rationalistic" model of organizations. However, one might question whether most social work administration has moved beyond this model. The new emphasis on such "linear system analysis models" such as "P.E.R.T."<sup>13</sup> and "P.P.B.S."<sup>13</sup> may indicate that social work administration may still be attempting to stay within this rationalistic model of administration.

TABLE IV

Relation of Frameworks of Change  
to Various Emphases

Type of Action System	Views of Organizational Change		
	Should change, but no method (N=8)	Typologies of change (N=8)	Process of change (N=4)
Organizational Theories			
Psychologistic	88%	13%	
Natural System	12	56	
Conflict		31	
Dialectic			100%

However, social work practice theories, within their understanding of human behavior, generally emphasize one of the variants of the "human relations" model. Case work theories most often use some "psychologistic" variation depending on the psychological framework dominant in the particular practice theory. Social work theories in group work and community work usually take a "natural system" or "structural-functionalist" model depending again on the social theory behind the practice

perspective. Both human relations models of organizational theory whether "psychologicistic" or "natural system" would seem to preclude the development of processes of change of the organization. The organization is still seen as a closed structure outside of potential worker involvement.

In some community work practice theories especially in "organizing", there is an attempt to use organizational frameworks where the differences of power of participants and the resulting conflicts are not only recognized but are used by the worker. The concept of "advocacy" assumes a partisan role by the worker in behalf of an individual or group who are considered to be unequal in their relation with some powerful organizational entity.<sup>14</sup> The image of the "enemy" and the "system" often become one and the same in such frameworks. However, this conflict framework does not move far enough toward a conceptual base for processes of worker intervention. The organization itself is still viewed as a closed structure with no way for the worker to enter into it.

Only a few practice theories analyzed here--in group work and "organizing"--are using a dialectical perspective on organizations. Also, these practice theories are the only ones analyzed which have moved toward developing concepts of how the worker can be involved in the process of organizational change. Therefore, some form of "dialectical" theory would seem to be needed to form a firm base for working with organizations in social work practice.

#### "Dialectical" Theories of Organizations for Practice:

Though it is not the only social framework that fits the "dialectical" label, one of the most promising theoretical frameworks is the one used by the varieties of studies identified with the "symbolic interactionist" school of sociology.<sup>15</sup> The discussion here will restrict itself to looking at implications of this framework because of the limited space to cover other alternatives. Also the symbolic interactionist framework is related to the social theories that influenced the early development of social group work and organizing, such as John Dewey and Alfred Lindeman.

The most relevant concept about organizations in the symbolic interactionist tradition is the concept of "negotiated order" of Anselm Strauss and colleagues.<sup>16</sup> This concept was used in their research on mental hospitals and views the organizational structure as resulting from the negotiations of participants within the organizations who negotiate with



differential power and ideologies. Any organizational order which emerges is subject to a continuing negotiating and re-negotiating as new participants come in and out of the organization. They found the variable of ideology to be a central variable because it effected what power bases are identified and used by the participants. The full relevance of the concept of "negotiated order" cannot be developed here, but it does provide an understanding of how the worker can enter the organization. The assumption is made that social structure is a product of collective action and negotiations. Therefore, it can be restructured through a similar bargaining process.<sup>17</sup>

The symbolic interactionist approach of the "labeling" school of deviance further points to the organizational dimension of many of the problems handled by social work. Becker's statement is appropriate.<sup>18</sup>

In its simplest form, the theory (symbolic interactionist) insists that we look at all the people involved in any episode of alleged deviance. When we do, we discover that these activities involve the covert or tacit co-operation of many people and groups----  
We discover too that the collective activity going on consists not just of acts of alleged wrongdoing, but rather is an involved drama in which making allegations of wrongdoing is a central feature.

Many of the problems worked with by social workers such as delinquency, mental illness, welfare, blindness, and others are being studied in this framework.<sup>19</sup> These studies would indicate that social work practice at the micro level may have formulated an "action system" (those with whom the social worker is involved) that has insufficient relation with the "target system" (the social relationship that the worker needs to change). The labeling perspective would here indicate that interactions with organizations or their representatives is a necessity if the particular problems are to be solved.

The symbolic interactionist framework emphasizes the "conversational" nature of the negotiations that make up the construction and reconstruction of organizational (or all social) reality.<sup>20</sup> This implies that the practice skills used by the social worker in interacting with organizational representatives are similar, if not basically the same as the skills used with clients or client-groups. The social worker, when he works with organizational representatives, is attempting to

engage the other person in a relationship of mutual involvement around the particular tasks needed to solve the problem which initiated the worker actions. Thus, the social worker must reach for and find the "stake" that the representative has (both personally and as a member of the organization) in working on the problem presented. Differences in social work with organizations are ones largely of emphasis such as the fact that the social worker is interacting with a person who has at least as much and usually more authority. Also, the focus of work is on a problem which is indirectly (mediated by the organization) related to the representative. Conversation is usually more formal and often involves the use of special "vocabularies" or "jargon". Also there is more use of interactions which are mediated by symbolic mediums (such as phone calls, written letters, memos, recorded material, etc.). However, there is the same concern of the social worker for attempting to understand what the other person feels and thinks and through this to arrive at some mutually acceptable contract for work if possible.

From the author's observation the most difficult part of negotiating with organizational representatives is the "power" situation mentioned earlier. The skill of "equalizing" negotiations with persons who are presumed to be of greater power and/or prestige is one of the most difficult skills to learn. It is also emotionally one of the hardest to deal with. Social workers often shy away from such practice for this reason. Of necessity, it often involves confrontation and the threat of bringing in external power. Randall Collins<sup>21</sup> might indicate that this difficulty is related to the class level that most social workers have come out of their experience with the giving and receiving of orders. What might be implied here for the training of social workers is a type of training in dealing with ambiguity, confrontation, and conflict.

Symbolic interactionist research methodology would also suggest a reason for the lack of good practice theory on the process of negotiating with organizational representatives.<sup>22</sup> This area of practice has not been recorded in any detail so that "grounded" practice theory can be developed. Social work practitioners will need to "process record" or tape (even video-tape) various types of negotiating sessions (individual and group) between social workers and organizational representatives related to both informal and formal concerns. When this happens a better knowledge base about practice process in this area can be developed. Participant observation data by both practitioner and other observers might also help. These are all methodologies that are congruent with the "qualitative" direction of most symbolic interactionist research. A good

example of the type of material that would be helpful is Earl Johnson's<sup>23</sup> account of the development of the legal services program within the Office of Economic Opportunity. He presents an insider perspective on the details of negotiations (in back rooms and offices) that went on within the above process of development. Johnson gives direct quotes from speeches and in other gatherings (including parties) which provide insights into the process that is necessary in work with organizational representatives. His account is probably of more value than a whole library of "rationalistic" frameworks of what social planning should be like. These frameworks would seem to imply that the planner is a presidential advisor rather than a middle-range organizational participant.

The last aspect of symbolic interactionist theory which will be mentioned here is its emphasis and use of the concept of "career"<sup>24</sup> (both for individuals and groups). With this concept, symbolic interactionist has linked its concern with deviance to the concerns of stratification and social mobility. Thus deviance is a particular type of failure (i.e., downward mobility) which has been affected a great deal by the labels of official agencies (i.e., police, mental health workers, etc.). By using the concept of "career", social work practice theory could go a long way toward developing a truly generic explanatory theory. Much of so-called "micro" practice has been concerned with how to help individuals or families develop the skills and motivation to continue a positive "career" or reverse a negative "career". "Macro" practice has usually emphasized how total groups or classes can be moved through positive "careers". By integrating both sets of concerns into one model, the organizational negotiations become clearer and strategies that the social worker might develop more obvious. Thus, the "broker", "mediator", or "advocate" analogies, that have been with social work practice from its beginning, make more sense. Such a framework could be helpful toward liberating social work practice from inappropriate ties with the "medical" model and thus make it truly "social" in its theory.

#### Conclusion:

The argument in this article can be simply stated. The exploratory analysis of social work practice theories would seem to indicate that there is a relation between the theories which the practice frameworks assume about organizations and whether the practice frameworks have developed concepts about how organizations can be changed. Such assumptions also limit whether the practice framework also conceptualizes the

interaction with individuals or groups beyond what have generally been called clients. It is further suggested here that organizational theories related to the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism might be explored to further develop practice theory related to the organizational levels. This sociological framework assumes that organizations are constructed through the negotiating interactions of people and therefore they can be restructured through such efforts of people including social workers.

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4. Perlman, Perspectives on Social Casework, p. 49.
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6. Vinter, "Malperformance in the Public School: A Group Work Approach", Social Work, (January, 1965), p. 11.
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8. Ibid, p. 119.
9. Amitai Etzioni, Modern Organizations, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964) see especially pp. 32-49.
10. Ralf Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society, (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1959).

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13. See the very good critical analysis of these methods in Donald R. Kingdon, Matrix Organization: Managing Information Technologies, (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1973).
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