

The Necessity of Holistic Values, Approaches, and Practices in Social Work

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### Abstract

Despite growing evidence of the effectiveness of holistic perspectives in social work, there is not one all-encompassing definition or view of wholeness or holistic wellbeing in the field of social work. A holistic perspective is inherent in social work values, approaches, and practices, but there are often limits to a holistic perspective that are difficult to change. Based on a review of current holistic values, approaches, and practices in social work, it is necessary to determine a consistent definition of wholeness, educate clients and other professionals about holistic approaches, and conduct more research on the effect and ways to measure wholeness.

### The Necessity of Holistic Values, Approaches, and Practices in Social Work

In researching the perspectives and values upon which the profession of social work is based, one notices a persistent presence of the idea of wholeness. Although there are various perspectives to be taken within the field, most of them are based on the idea that a person cannot be easily separated into his or her individual parts. Any problem an individual has is not contained to one area of life but is complicated by the many and complex parts of the person. This is why social work approaches draw on so many fields of study: medical, psychological, sociological, cultural, and spiritual. A person is not merely any one of these parts but is so intrinsically and delicately affected by each.

The values the profession is based upon draw on this idea of wholeness. To begin, there is not simply one value, but many, which include at its core the dignity and worth of the person. Included is not only the dignity and worth, but also the importance of the relationships in life and the impact of social justice or injustice upon an individual. Consequently, interventions in social work take a dynamic and multifaceted approach, including all the fields of study noted above. While not explicitly stated anywhere, the profession of social work is based on this value of wholeness and the devastating effects when there is a significant obstacle to an individual's sense of wholeness. Therefore, there is a necessity to review this value within the profession, its varying definitions as influenced by the individual and culture, how it manifests itself in social work approaches and practices, limits to it, areas where its impact is lacking in social work education, and suggestions for improving the use of this mindset within the field of social work.

### **Defining Wholeness**

While it is clear the value of wholeness is essential in social work, it is not always clear how that value is defined. What it means to be whole and to find wholeness varies across professions, religions, cultures, identities, and circumstances. It can be a simultaneously straightforward and mathematical concept as well as an elusive, abstract concept. Harris and White defined a holistic approach in social work as one which “Seeks to understand people within the context of their whole lives—past, present, and future—rather than seeing them only in relation to their role as ‘service users’ and recognizes the relationship between the individual and the circumstances that shape their lives” (2018c, p. 1). A holistic view of a person includes an understanding of the person’s individual systems as well as how all these systems function together for the entire well-being of the person. When a person’s biology, psychology, social life, and spirituality thrive, it contributes positively to the person’s whole. If even one of these parts fails, the whole is threatened.

To expand on the definition of physical wholeness, wholeness from a social work perspective may be viewed as the fully functioning life systems in a person’s life that cooperate for the entire well-being of the person. Traditionally, these life systems include biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual well-being. Other approaches may separate these systems further. A holistic perspective is that which views the person through the lens of each of these individual systems, understands how these systems contribute to one another, and has a goal of each system cooperating for the overall well-being of the individual. As the human body consists of multiple systems which must either thrive together or fail together, human well-being consists of multiple systems which either help or hurt the individual’s well-being. This view may

cause social workers to provide complementary and alternative therapies which may vary from mainstream practices (VandenBos, 2015a). Clinical social workers may also decide to take an integrative psychotherapeutic approach which combines theoretical models and techniques to meet a client's particular needs (VandenBos, 2015b). It is necessary for social workers to be aware of these other life systems and understand the impact each has on the individual.

Anna Scheyett stated,

The mission of social work is to promote and support individual and community well-being, and to fight social injustice. Social workers do that because we learn how to see and understand the invisible inner connections between people, and their families, and their neighborhood, and their community, and society, and laws, and policies. And we know that when those connections tangle or break at any of those levels, problems happen. So, we learn evidence-based interventions that can help solve the problems around those tangles and breaks. And with that, we can make powerful change happen (TEDx Talks, 2015).

Social workers see the connections among all aspects of life and ensure these connections are fully functioning for the overall betterment of the individual.

Wholeness would be lacking without the conviction of a Christian social worker that inherent dignity and worth is given by a loving creator God. Christian social workers have the same values as professional social workers. Characteristics like service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competency are all important to Christians (National Association of Social Workers, 2017), but they have an even deeper view of the value of dignity and worth. This worldview shapes a Christian social worker's

definition of what it means to be whole. In addition to viewing the many aspects of a person's life as important and contributing to the whole, a Christian social worker ultimately views the theory of wholeness as either brokenness apart from God or wholeness given by God through grace. According to John Piper, a well-known Baptist pastor and author, "Seeing that glory in the person and work of Jesus is the way this grace-this 'grace upon grace,' this grace of wholeness-comes into our broken lives. Beholding glory, we are becoming whole" (2009, p. 20). This is what it means to be whole for a Christian. Even if every other life system is well and thriving, if the spiritual life system is lacking a relationship with God, wholeness can never be achieved, either in this life or the next. The Bible explains this principle in Mark 8:36 by asking the rhetorical question, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (New King James Version).

### **Wholeness in Social Work Values**

The social work profession is based on the essential values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competency as described by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; 2017). These values shape perspectives, theories, and approaches in the field which then shape practices and interventions. These values shape everything that is done in social work because they answer the most important question of why social work exists as a profession and what its purpose is. The National Association of Social Workers releases a Code of Ethics periodically to guide the profession's focus and unify its professionals on the same set of core values. The most recent version of the Code of Ethics was released in 2017 and outlines the six core values listed above. Each value builds on the other to culminate in the core mission of social work, "To enhance

human well-being and help meet basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty”

(National Association of Social Workers, 2017, p. 1). Human well-being is a culmination of wellness in every area of life, so each of these areas must be considered for holistic well-being to be achieved. The social work values instruct social workers how to ethically assist clients in their journey to well-being (Bent-Goodley, 2017), and they must be the starting point in understanding a holistic perspective.

### **Service, Social Justice, and Dignity and Worth of the Person**

The value of service displays the following ethical principle, “Social workers’ primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems” (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, p. 5). The use of the words “people in need” shows that a person is lacking something vital, often in one of the life systems mentioned above. In social work, services vary widely because needs vary widely. A lack in the economic life system requires financial resources or improved income for the individual to thrive. There may be a lack in the psychological or emotional life system, so a person lacks a sense of freedom, identity, justice, or healing from trauma. Services in this area may provide counseling. In each service given, a part of the client’s life is hopefully restored. Specific services are often confined to one life system, but as seen in the definition, when one life system is hurting, it can affect the whole person. When this same hurting life system is restored to health, the whole person can be better restored to holistic health. Therefore services take a multi-faceted approach. For example, services in social work could include providing information, legal advice, counseling, and government services such as welfare programs, and financial aid. Social workers also work to change



legislation that benefits vulnerable and oppressed populations. All these services are based on the value of service that recognizes the varying needs of vulnerable populations.

The value of social justice displays the following ethical principle, “Social workers challenge social injustice” (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, p. 5). This value displays a high regard for a community that is both legally and socially just to its members (Bent-Goodley, 2017). Injustice is the violation of the rights of another human being. Within the U.S., these rights include not only life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but other rights of freedom of speech, religion, the right to education, the right to vote. Social workers often address injustice in the areas of oppression and discrimination. They also work with populations that are more likely to experience oppression and discrimination due to vulnerabilities. Social workers care about injustice not only because it is morally wrong, but because injustice can cause devastating effects on the individual in all areas of life. Oppression and discrimination can seriously deter a person’s emotional, psychological, biological, economic, religious, social, and work life systems. Oppression and discrimination also have a compounded affect, meaning that oppression in only one of these life systems can have a dramatic impact on the person’s overall well-being. When injustice occurs, the whole person suffers. Therefore, social workers fight injustice in all realms. Important social work policies concern injustice in child welfare, basic human rights, disabilities, marriage equality, financial opportunities, and human trafficking. Injustice in any one of these areas can significantly alter a person’s sense of wellbeing, therefore, social workers fight injustice at every level to ensure each individual has the same opportunity for holistic wellness as another individual (Bent-Goodley, 2017).

The holistic viewpoint is most evident within the value of dignity and worth of the person. This value displays the following principle, “Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person” (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, p. 5). The social work profession is entirely centered around the idea that every human being, regardless of class, socioeconomic status, intelligence, gender, age, culture, or any distinction, has an inherent dignity and worth simply because of being human. This high view of humanity causes the response of professionals to injustice. These professionals regard individuals highly and, despite any challenges, differences, or difficulties in working with others, seek to maintain a level of acceptance to all (Berlin, 2005). This acceptance does not tolerate injustice or harm, but instead is an understanding of both the humanity and autonomy of the client. An understanding of humanity leads to compassion, equality, and empathy on the part of the social worker. An understanding of autonomy leads to change and respect on the part of the client. This combination leads to acceptance which leads to positive change (Berlin, 2005).

This acceptance is an all-encompassing acceptance because it is based on the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings. In a way, it is an acceptance of the client as a human being, and therefore someone who both struggles and fails, succeeds and changes. It is an acceptance that sees the whole person, both the potential for good and potential for evil, the potential to succeed and the potential to fail, the potential to remain stagnant and the potential to change and evolve. Social workers must accept both sides of humanity, and in this acceptance, they offer a route to success for their clients no matter the circumstances. Social workers understand that life is complex, varied, and unique to each individual. This holistic view of humanity shapes every interaction with clients, every policy change, and every social work

practice. Social workers, above all, see their clients as whole human beings. Their practice reflects nothing less.

### **Importance of Human Relationships, Integrity, and Competency**

The value of the importance of human relationships displays the following ethical principle, “Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships” (NASW, 2017, p. 6). The NASW further defines this principle in the following way, “Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities” (NASW, 2017, p.6). Social workers realize that individuals rarely operate individually. There are always relationships to be considered, either as harmful, helpful, or both. Social workers take into account this aspect of a client’s life, recognizing that any change in the client’s life could affect others. The reverse is also true; others are often a contributing factor to a client’s harm or well-being. By seeking to restore relationships, social workers contribute to the social life system and family system. Social workers seek to restore wholeness in this area by strengthening current client relationships, utilizing them for the client’s needs, and teaching healthy communication, conflict resolution, and admission of needs in relationships. Trauma is often the result of poor relationships, so social workers seek to heal physical, mental, and emotional trauma caused by poor relationships. When the social and family life systems are attended to, clients often find success in other areas by having a functioning support system. Just like social workers’ value of dignity and worth, this value of human relationships drives many practices and interventions for the result of client well-being.

Integrity and Competency as core values reflect the moral base of the profession that drives the purpose for social workers' services. These two values recognize that the profession, at its core, has a strong moral tradition that must be upheld. Despite diverse definitions of morality, the profession's heartbeat is a moral response of compassion and care for the vulnerable and oppressed of society. As Bisman stated, "At its core, social work must respond to the moral imperative of caring for the neediest among us" (2004, p. 109). Social workers not only respond with professional services but with integrity and competency in order to fulfill the mission of social work. When combined, the values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence effectively shape social work perspectives and practices that result in holistic wellness for clients.

### **Wholeness in Social Work Perspectives**

#### **Bio-Psycho-Social, Systems, and Psychodynamic Theory**

The first perspective to consider in a holistic viewpoint is the bio-psycho-social perspective. This commonly utilized perspective in social work considers the individual's biology, psychology, and sociology to complete assessments and shape goals. This theory was first developed by Engel (1977) who theorized that the traditional medical approach for psychiatrists lacked an integration of other systems that play a role in interventions. This theory achieves a holistic view in several ways: it includes an assessment of three to four life systems, it requires the social worker to refer to another professional if the social worker is unable to assist in a specific life system (such as a referral to a medical doctor or psychiatrist), and it attempts a balance among these systems that views the client through the lens of each separately and as a whole simultaneously. Harris and White (2018a, p. 1) described the bio-psycho-social

perspective as “A more holistic perspective on health and illness because of its stress on the inter-relationships between physical, psychological, and social functioning.” Lastly, the three systems it investigates are broad enough to cover most of life’s problems, and the condition of the three systems are easily reported by the client. Overall, it provides a broad overview of the client’s current condition highlighting both strengths and weaknesses to result in a holistic view of a client’s current state of well-being.

The strengths-based approach in social work focuses on understanding and utilizing client strengths and protective factors instead of focusing on the client’s weaknesses. The emphasis is on what is right with the client instead of what is wrong with the client. The strengths-based approach assesses clients for their assets, skills, expertise, resiliency, and ability to change (Harris & White, 2018d). This approach is holistic in the sense that the assessment of strengths can encompass strengths in all areas of life. A client’s economic, physical, social, socioeconomic, education, mental and emotional health and more are all considered in this perspective and utilized for greater client success.

Psychodynamic Theory, largely based on Sigmund Freud’s work, emphasizes the impact psychological development in childhood has later in adulthood. Although the title of the theory conveys a narrow focus on the aspect of psychology, variations of the approach convey the impact psychological development has on a person’s current actions and relationships (Thompson & Stepney, 2018). This approach theorizes that negative psychological development negatively affects other life systems later in life. The treatment for this problem is based on the opposite: positive psychological development positively affects other life systems. Although treatment options may focus primarily on psychological healing and growth, the result is

betterment in every other life system previously impacted by negative psychological development. Thompson and Stepney (2018) further explained, “If we want to influence the social, we must have an impact on the psychological as well. If we want to help with the psychological, we must see how social experiences and relationships explain and develop people’s thinking” (p. 67). Social work students learn this at the bachelor’s level through classes in human development and behavior which draw from the works of Freud, Erikson, and Jung. In clinical settings, social workers draw from this theory to shape interventions and treat mental health diagnoses. This theory is further evidence of the holistic viewpoint in social work. By showing the negative impacts of psychological development to a person’s well-being, this theory also shows the overall wellness that a person can achieve by finding healing and growth in the area of psychological and mental health.

### **Perspectives of Society and Individuals**

Social workers use another method of reaching the goal of human well-being through viewing the field in three different perspectives. These are often categorized as microsystem, mezzosystem, and macrosystem social work. Microsystems work with individuals one-on-one to bring about individual well-being and help individuals cope with problems. Mezzosystems work with small groups and communities to bring individual and community well-being. Lastly, macrosystems work to promote a just society through bringing social change that treats individuals well (Council on Social Work Education, 2015.). Although social workers may work in one specific setting, there is often overlap among all three areas. Social workers understand it takes effort on both the part of the individual, groups, and larger society to work independently and together to produce social change that is beneficial to everyone.

On the microsystem level, social work seeks to promote health of individuals in multiple areas. However, until the late 1990s, interventions in the spiritual aspect of life were largely overlooked. Aguilar (1997) first described the importance of including the spiritual in social work interventions, however, by recognizing society's growing recognition of a body, mind, and spirit view of humanness. Even if religion is not a factor, the ideas of purpose and meaning in life are included in a person's whole sense of self. As Aguilar stated, "How can we say we value the person without nurturing the part that is spiritual?" (1997, p. 83). This kind of thinking leads to practices which focus on client strengths and spiritual health as methods for positive changes. This is also based on transpersonal theory which proposes a sense of connectedness is essential to human development. This theory recognizes diversity in one person's sense of well-being compared to another's. This is all part of understanding individual wholeness. Social workers cannot prescribe what well-being means for each individual. They can only recognize that multiple life systems impact the individual and seek to incorporate goals in any area that may be struggling.

On the macrosystem level, social workers have placed a growing emphasis on the social aspect of social work. Due to an ever-changing society with ever-changing and complex problems, social workers have had to continually expand their knowledge base and practice skills to create effective change (Kreiviniene & Rimkus, 2016). Recent examples of this are the MeToo movement, refugee and immigrant policies, climate policies, feminism, and the opioid crisis. Social workers at the macrosystem level create support for individuals in these areas and take part in shaping laws and policies that are just and fair in all these areas. They educate the public about mental health, addiction, and domestic violence. The information given is continually

updated based on the most recent research and always reflects the nature of social work to fight injustice.

Lastly, one author described the unifying purpose of social work as the “just sense of well-being”, that social justice and individual well-being are not two exclusive goals, but the goal of social work is a “just sense of well-being” for all (Keenan, Limone, & Sandoval, 2017, p. 19). This study found that social workers whose practices are built on this unifying purpose do so because “Worth of all human beings frames and fuels a commitment to work toward a just sense of well-being” (Keenan et al., 2017, p. 21). Each of these social workers viewed each human as having worth which required them to act to bring justice. They challenged injustice everywhere, on every level, and there was no distinction in practice setting. Workers across all levels of practice viewed clients as whole human beings and cared about the whole human being, which drove them to fight injustice in every area of practice including microsystem, mezzosystem, and macrosystem settings (Keenan et al., 2017). Injustice occurs at every area of life, and injustice at any level damages the well-being of a person, so social workers practice at every level to restore justice, therefore providing a holistic sense of well-being.

### **Wholeness in Social Work Practices**

Social work is not only based on strong values and relevant theories but is acted out in the form of evidence-based practices. These are interventions based on the most recent research and informed overall by the best evidence and what tends to work (Harris & White, 2018b). Social workers bring these evidence-based practices into every area of social work. The Council on Social Work Education stated, “Social workers understand strategies designed to eliminate oppressive structural barriers to ensure that social goods, rights, and responsibilities are



distributed equitably and that civil, political, environmental, economic, social, and cultural human rights are protected. Social workers: Apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels; and Engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice” (2015, p. 7-8).

Social workers understand that human rights are important at the individual level and oppression of these rights is detrimental to the human. Social workers intervene in cases of injustice or inequality to ensure a society which promotes well-being for every individual. Social work practices encompass a large range of interventions and behaviors, but three important areas relating to holistic wellness are trauma-informed care, the working relationship, and competencies.

### **Trauma-Informed Care**

An understanding of trauma is vital in understanding the holistic approach social workers take. Licensed clinical social workers understand that past or current trauma can impact every part of a person’s life. Namely, trauma affects the whole person, so social workers must understand the impact trauma has and think of ways to aid the healing of the whole person. Trauma impacts the individual by changing the usual mental and emotional responses so normal functioning is no longer possible. The behaviors of the individual begin to change based on the mental and emotional disturbances taking place. An incident that seems at first to mainly affect physical well-being can cause devastating impacts in all other areas of life. For example, rape is a physical trauma on the surface. However, there can still be extreme psychological trauma after the person has physically healed. This psychological trauma can affect social relationships, ability to work well, spiritual beliefs, mental and emotional health, drive, beliefs, and countless

other areas of life. This example shows the reality of interconnectedness of life systems. If damage is severe enough in one system, it causes damage to the surrounding systems. Suddenly many systems are failing all because one system failed. Therefore, interventions for cases like these are multi-faceted. There may be interventions in each system: physical, mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual, all based on client needs. The goal of the social worker is to use professional knowledge to guide a client to reaching health and wellness in each of these areas.

Another example of this is in a commonly diagnosed trauma illness: posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD]. This disorder results in intrusion symptoms, negative mood, dissociative symptoms, avoidance symptoms, arousal symptoms, and impairment in functioning due to exposure or experiencing death, serious injury, or sexual violation (Kanel, 2018). Some kind of trauma causes damage emotionally by inducing fear, horror, anger, guilt, and absence of common positive emotions such as happiness, satisfaction, and love. Trauma can cause prolonged psychological distress, flashbacks of the event, or recurring memories or dreams that are distressing in nature. This may cause physical symptoms of sleep disturbance and trouble concentrating. This may also cause behavioral changes in social environments such as irritable and angry behavior, reckless behavior, and social and occupational impairment in functioning. It also causes the individual to avoid situations, activities, or places that cause recollections of the traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association, 2014). As seen in this description of PTSD, trauma can often cause significant damage to an individual's wellness, not just physically, but psychologically, emotionally, behaviorally, spiritually, socially, economically due to job impairment, and in countless other ways. Because social workers so often work with individuals who have experienced trauma, it is vital for social workers to recognize the countless ways

trauma affects every area of life. Social workers seek whole healing, meaning they seek healing of trauma in every area it affects.

This understanding of the impacts of trauma has led to Trauma-Informed Care. “Trauma-Informed Care is a strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment” (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2009 p. 133). Even if social workers are not directly working in a mental health setting, they often work with individuals who are more likely to have experienced trauma. They therefore approach their clients with an awareness that past trauma is a possibility and they must be prepared to handle any consequences of the trauma. With this sensitivity, social workers practice trauma awareness, emphasize safety in their environments, provide opportunities for clients to rebuild control, and provide a strengths-based approach to clients who have often felt powerless (Hopper et al., 2009). This strengths-based perspective is essential because it allows the individual to realize that, in light of all the harm that has been done to them, they are not broken individuals. The whole has damaged and will take time and work to mend, but it has not been broken. The social worker provides this support and mentoring in various ways all with the goal of showing the client that restoration is possible, maybe not to the version of whole that was present before the trauma, but to a new version of wholeness that includes the new strengths learned by the individual in overcoming trauma. Well-being then, does not mean an absence of any past trauma or difficulty, but an integration of it in a way that highlights the strengths of the individual to overcome it.

**Working Relationship**

Social workers model wholeness through a social work practice known as the working relationships or therapeutic relationship. In this style of connecting to the client, social workers practice empathy, rapport, and acceptance. When social workers use these skills, they show the client that they too, are human. They are not just a professional with all the answers. They acknowledge the complexity of their own life by admitting they have a personal side, they have struggles as well, and they have their own life with all its complexities. This is seen in empathy when a social worker acknowledges the tough situations a client may be in. Showing their humanness and their wholeness allows the client to see a healthy model of this and allows them to trust. The working relationship has been considered an essential factor in client success. A meta-analysis of the working relationship in correlation to outcomes in clients who use CBT for depression found: the therapeutic alliance is moderately related to client outcome and the therapeutic alliance tends to be stronger later in treatment. While a rating of moderate may seem insignificant, it is a greater score in comparison to other factors in CBT (Cameron, Rodgers & Dagnan, 2018). As this study revealed, not only is the therapeutic alliance a holistic way to approach clients, but it is effective in producing successful results.

The working relationships is vital in social work at the microsystem level and is often one of the biggest determining factors of success in working with clients. One study by Ferguson & Gates (2015) showed the success of an early intervention program with fathers was due primarily to a holistically-based therapeutic relationship between the service workers and fathers in the program. This success happened when service workers maintained a working relationship that gave the fathers support in matters of job and educational opportunities, identity, self-esteem and

bettering their relationship with their partner and did not only focus on practical parenting skills. The fathers not only improved in their knowledge and skills as parents, but also gained confidence because of the holistic approach to parenting which the service workers took with them (Ferguson & Gates, 2015). These results support the idea of a holistic approach that all areas of life are interconnected. In this study, a holistic approach to parenting strongly correlated to successful parenting. The parenting skills were not only dependent on the father having the correct knowledge, but on having better relationships with the mother and having a better self-esteem and sense of identity. Because these aspects were interconnected with the father's ability to parent, the service worker's focus on all these aspects in the therapeutic relationships led to greater success overall.

### **Competencies**

The core competencies of the Council on Social Work Education are essential in shaping a holistic view of social work practice. These nine competencies guide educational standards for social work university programs and set a standard of practice for licensed social workers as listed in the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). The Council on Social Work Education stated, "EPAS recognizes a holistic view of competence; that is, the demonstration of competence is informed by knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes that include the social worker's critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgment in regard to unique practice situations" (2005, p. 6). These competencies are the following: (1) demonstrate ethical and professional behavior, (2) engage diversity and difference in practice, (3) advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice, (4) engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice, (5) engage in policy

practice, (6) engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities, (7) assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities, (8) intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities, and (9) evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). All of these competencies contribute to holistic practice in their own way, but five of them contribute in more specific ways. The competencies of diversity, engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities are especially essential in a holistic approach.

Social workers engage in diversity and difference in practice, recognizing that wellness and holistic health look different to everyone. According to the Council on Social Work Education, “The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including but not limited to age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status” (2015, p. 7). An understanding of these dimensions of diversity is essential in treating clients with respect and delivering services that are sensitive to individual differences. Social workers see each of these aspects of diversity as parts of the whole and therefore strive to respect each one. For example, a culturally-based holistic system of care (HSOC) was used in substance abuse treatment services for Native Americans that combined evidence-based practice with a Native American worldview of wellness. The HSOC combined elements of classical substance abuse treatment, mental health, family services, employment, life skills, community, heritage, and spirituality in treatment resulting in substantially lower rates of substance use after six months. Not only were

substance use rates lower, but the rates of employment and enrollment in schools or training programs increased while the rates of depression, stress, arrests, and suicide attempts decreased (Wright et al., 2011). Although this study did not show these rates in comparison to non-holistic approaches to substance abuse, it still showed the interconnectedness of areas of life. It also showed the importance of utilizing holistic approaches that are culturally appropriate. Social workers recognize the importance of diversity and are competent in dealing with diverse populations. In having a holistic approach, social workers must understand that overall wellness can be a subjective term. When steps are taken to pursue culturally-appropriate wellness, the results may often be more successful.

Social workers practice holistically when they utilize the competencies of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation. There must first be an understanding of how to engage with clients of diverse backgrounds and personalities. Social workers must then especially have a holistic view during assessment. Depending on the type of setting and reason for services, preliminary assessments can evaluate a client's current strengths and weaknesses across all areas of life including the economic, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. One example is child safety assessments in the field of child welfare. These assessments may include topics in physical and motor skills, intellectual ability, cognitive functioning, academic achievement, emotional and social functioning, vulnerability, ability to communicate or protect themselves, developmental needs, and readiness of youth to move toward independence (Lou, Anthony, Stone, Vu, & Austin, 2008). Based on assessment, intervention must include all relevant concerns in the person's life. Social workers think outside the box to provide interventions that address the whole problem, not just one part of it. If a social worker is not able to provide an

intervention, the social worker must refer the client to a professional who can. Lastly, social workers re-assess the whole individual in evaluation of services completed. In each step, the social worker may consider problems and interventions in every aspect of life. In combination with the other competencies, these four competencies allow social workers to provide services in a holistic and all-encompassing way.

### **Limits to a Holistic Perspective in the Field**

All of this may seem good in theory, but it must be recognized that there are reasonable limits to a holistic perspective in a social work environment. The first reason is that social work agencies do not frequently focus on the whole person at one time, but instead offer specific services for one area of life or one kind of problem. For example, common social work agencies may focus on domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, hospital social work, foster care and adoption, end of life care, or school social worker. Although these social workers may begin with a holistic view, they are often required to focus on one area. A hospital social worker will necessarily focus on the impact of biological and medical problems and find ways to solve them. All of their work will stem from how the individual's medical system has been impacted and how it will impact other areas of life. Their focus will be on the medical, but they still must understand the interconnectedness of other life systems in order to send the patient home with all the psychological, biological, economic, and social supports possible.

Some of these limits are due to jobs which prescribe the kinds of interventions specific social workers can provide. In accordance with the value of competence, social workers most only provide services in their specific area of competence which they are licensed to provide (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). For example, it is the priority of a Child



Protective Services caseworker to ensure a child's safety. Despite any other problems in the family, the caseworker must close the case if the child's safety is not at risk. It is not their job to provide other services, but they may refer to other services for the purposes of ensuring a safe home for the child. Agencies at different levels are limited in their capacity. They cannot provide all the services an individual may need in one place, so a client may often receive services in only one area of life because it is more difficult to provide services in other areas. A Child Protective Services agency cannot provide economic support to a family; it may only refer to another service. The client must then choose whether to use this support or not. If the client chooses not to follow through on the recommended support, the agency has done all it can and must leave the individual.

This leads to an important limit on delivering holistic services to clients: client autonomy and resistance. Although the purpose of the social work profession is to enhance human wellness in every aspect and fight social injustice, many clients will resist a professional's attempt to fulfill this purpose. A social worker may easily see where a person may be lacking in a certain area, but if clients are unwilling or undesiring of improving their own wellness, the social worker cannot force it on them. Human wellness looks differently to different people, so clients may stay in a situation that a social worker would view as negative when the individual has a different definition of wellness or injustice. Sometimes the client may even acknowledge the harm to wellness but may still be unwilling to change for various circumstances, including distrust of the professional, a lack of self-efficacy, the impact of poverty, a lack of true investment, embarrassment, lack of knowing how to complete tasks, and effects of bio-social factors (DaGrossa, 2017). This is a hard, but necessary part of social work that social workers must

realize in their attempts to assist people. They can never force wellness on someone; it must be pursued on the client's part or it will not be true wellness.

### **Implications for Social Workers**

As Lou et al. (2008) described, there is a great need for standardized methods and instruments which measure well-being. Social workers may agree that a holistic approach is necessary for human well-being, but there is not a single, accurate way to measure well-being. This is partly limited by the realization that an individual's sense of well-being will vary from another individual's. However, it would benefit professional social workers to have a more standardized way to measure well-being in particular areas. For this to occur, there needs to be more research done on how to measure well-being and how accurate these measurements are.

Another area for improvement is in education, both at a macrosystem and microsystem level. Although social workers may understand their actions as coming from a holistic viewpoint, clients may be confused by the dynamic approach social workers take. For these practices to be effective, social workers need to not only understand the importance of holistic approaches but teach this perspective to their clients. Social workers should convey to the client that interventions in all areas are for the goal of overall health and wellness. One possibility in clinical settings is the teaching of contemplative pedagogy. This may include contemplative practices of sitting and walking meditation, yoga, haiku, free-writing, art, and many other similar practices. Social workers should be willing to do the same practices as their clients and may benefit personally and professionally from holistic practices themselves. After recording the experience of two social work students who used these practices, Wong noted, "Contemplative pedagogy allows them to see how their being and doing intertwines, to connect with their

wholeness within and with that of their clients, and to bring their unique embodied understanding of critical social work into their personal and professional lives” (2013, p. 279). Social work education needs improvement in this area to make interventions not only more holistic from the social worker’s point of view, but from the client’s as well.

Another implication is in the arena of training other professionals. Although social workers are often educated with a holistic mindset, other professionals are not educated in the same way. However, since there is benefit to holistic approaches in social work, it may benefit other professionals to be trained in the holistic perspective of humanity. One example of this is in training non-mental health professionals on mental health. One study found that mental health training programs increased the professionals’ knowledge of mental health and empathy, challenged prejudice and stigma of mental health, and improved their response to mental health situations (Scantlebury, Parker, Booth, McDaid & Mitchell, 2018). While it may be impractical for every profession to have a holistic approach at its core, other professionals may be able to integrate the holistic approach in small ways such as implementing these kinds of mental health trainings. Even if they are unable to provide a holistic intervention due to their job responsibility, their response to clients may be more beneficial. This makes it important for social workers to be well-aware of area resources in order to appropriately refer clients to the right services. For example, social workers could give holistic education and training to doctors, teachers, religious leaders, even business owners.

### **Conclusion**

A holistic perspective is necessary for the success of social workers in today’s society. The evidence shows that a holistic perspective is not only inherent to social work values, but has

a significant place in theories and strong evidence in practices. These three areas of social work, values, approaches, and practices, indicate that a holistic approach to social work is necessary for client success and overall well-being. Despite the importance of a holistic perspective, there is not one standardized way to define whole well-being or measure it in the world of social work. There are also limits to a holistic perspective that are difficult to overcome. Social workers and clients would benefit if this were to be changed. Clients are not only people with problems; they are whole people who want to be viewed as such. Social workers can begin to implement this perspective further by studying the effects of holistic practices, finding new ways to define and measure wholeness, integrating holistic perspectives into client education, and by educating other professionals about the importance of whole well-being. Christian social workers especially can add to this approach by their recognition of dignity and worth given by God. By recognizing the interconnectedness of every complex part of life, social workers may find more effective solutions to social problems and ensure client well-being in every area of life.

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