



Practice Notes:

Assessment and Goal Setting - Etched in Stone or Moving Target?

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Practice Notes is designed as an educational tool to help Ontario social workers, social service workers, employers and members of the public gain a better understanding of recurring issues dealt with by the Complaints Committee that may affect everyday practice. The notes offer general guidance only and members with specific practice inquiries should consult the College, since the relevant standards and appropriate course of action will vary depending on the situation.

Assessment – A Crucial Component of Practice

The importance of assessment in the practice of social work and social service work is undisputed, regardless of one's theoretical orientation or work setting. Beginning with course and field work experiences in social work and social service work educational programs, there is an emphasis on the importance of theoretical frameworks and integrating theory into practice. In professional practice it is well understood that the assessment process, which takes into account the multiplicity and complexity of factors, is key to understanding the client. This understanding leads to the conceptualization of the client's problems, which in turn is used to establish a common understanding of the problem with the client and a contract which outlines the desired outcome, the specific objectives and the means to achieve these. On this basis, the work may proceed. Failing to establish this foundation is akin to building a house on quicksand – it quickly leads to serious problems. In social work and social service work practice this can result in harm to the client. Consider the following scenario:

Daniel, the 12-year-old son of separated parents, is referred to the social worker by his mother, who feels he needs counselling to help him deal with the losses associated with his parents' separation, and to provide him with a neutral place to express his feelings. The social worker meets individually with each parent for a one-hour long session, and then sees Daniel weekly for 10 sessions. In the initial contact, both mother and Daniel expressed concern that due to the stress he is experiencing, he is having difficulty concentrating at school and there is some decline in his school

performance. After two sessions with Daniel, the social worker concludes he has "learning challenges" and embarks on a series of educational exercises with him, aimed at improving his attention and memory. However, the member does not discuss with either parent or the client the change in the focus of the services being provided from counselling relating to the separation of Daniel's parents to educational exercises.

This scenario engages the following College standards:

- Members are reminded that the client and the member "participate together in setting and evaluating goals"¹ and that they "respect and facilitate self-determination in a number of ways including...encouraging them to decide which problems they want to address as well as how to address them."² If the member's conceptualization of the clients' problems changes, resulting in a change of approach or services, discussion should occur with the clients about this, ensuring their agreement before proceeding.

The requirements of a social worker to document her assessment, diagnosis, formulation, plan and key elements of the contract³, and to participate with clients in setting and evaluating goals, provide the foundation for everything that follows. Self-awareness by the member throughout the professional relationship is also crucial. Consider the following scenario:

Michael is the nine-year-old son of parents who are engaged in custody and access litigation. Michael is referred to the social worker with the consent of both his parents, for counselling to help him deal with his parents' separation and the stresses associated with the ongoing litigation. The social worker sees each of the parents in individual sessions and then provides counselling to Michael in a series of weekly sessions. Some months after the sessions with Michael have finished, his father's lawyer requests a letter from the social worker reporting on the therapy with Michael. Without contacting any of her clients - Michael, his mother or father - the social worker subsequently writes

the letter, containing her opinions and conclusions which are supportive of the father. The nature of the social worker's opinions reflected those usually seen in custody and access reports, though the stated purpose of contact was to provide counselling to assist Michael's coping with his parent's high conflict separation, and the social worker's contact with the parents had been minimal.

The above scenario raises a number of issues and engages the following College standards:

- The issue of whether to release clients' information to a third party must be carefully examined: "Prior to releasing information from a record that pertains to more than one client, for example, a couple, family group...College members receive authorization from each individual client."⁴ Additionally, "College members inform clients of the parameters of information to be disclosed and make reasonable efforts to advise clients of the possible consequences of such disclosure."⁵ Even with consent, a member may feel that releasing information is ill advised, for example in the context of acrimonious court proceedings, and should take steps to convey this concern to the client.

- In providing information about clients to a third party "College members do not make statements...or issue or sign a certificate, report or other document...that the member knows or ought reasonably to know are false, misleading, inaccurate or otherwise improper."⁶ A document provided by a member should therefore focus on the nature of the member's contact with the client and not venture opinions about issues that have not been addressed in the services provided.

- High conflict situations are emotionally charged for all parties, and members are not immune. Members must be "aware of their values, attitudes and needs and how these impact on their professional relationships with clients."⁷ The record should: "report impartially and objectively the factors relevant to the client's situation. The record clearly distinguishes the College member's observations and opinions from the information reported by the client."⁸ The record should also "be free of prejudice and discriminatory remarks."⁹

Had the social worker in the previous scenario demonstrated this personal, clinical and contractual clarity it would have contributed greatly to a focus in her practice and helped her avoid straying into dangerous waters that were not in her clients' best interest.

Revisiting Goals

While it is crucial to maintain focus on the agreed upon goals that flowed from the initial assessment, assessment is ongoing and goals can be revisited. Consider the following:

Maria, a newly separated mother of three children, seeks counselling to help her deal with her recent job loss and home stress. The agency she contacts offers up to six sessions and this is explained to her at the outset. The goals that she and the member agree upon are therefore modest, in keeping with the time-limited nature of the services available to her. She and the member agree that the ultimate goal will be to link her to other resources that would provide the ongoing assistance she requires. After the third session, however, Maria calls the member to inform her that her children have been apprehended by child welfare. Understandably distressed, she asks the member to contact the child welfare worker and the member agrees. The member and Maria then decide together that their immediate goal will be to determine what Maria needs to do in order to have her children returned to her. The member advocates with her employer on Maria's behalf to extend their contract for two additional sessions and is successful in this. Maria and the member deal with the urgent child welfare issues and Maria is linked to resources that will provide ongoing support for her personal and family issues and assistance in finding employment.

In this situation the member was aware of the "purpose, mandate and function" of her employing organization, and "how these impact on and limit professional relationships with clients"¹⁰ and was mindful of this in her initial contract, though when a crisis arose, was able to renegotiate with the client to focus on the immediate issue of the apprehension of her children. The member also appropriately advocated on behalf of her client¹¹ and was able to extend the sessions to allow her and her client to return to their original contract.

As already established, client participation in setting goals is pivotal. This is more difficult, however, when the client is a family and more particularly, a family fraught with conflict whose members may agree on very little. This challenge is compounded when the goal for intervention is imposed by an external body:

Jill, a 14-year-old girl who lives with her mother and stepfather, has no contact with her biological father. He has gone to court to have his access reinstated. The Judge orders reconciliation counselling and the social worker is retained. She meets with Jill for 12 sessions, and during sessions, Jill consistently expresses that she does not want contact with her father. With Jill's consent the social worker conveys Jill's stance to both parents and legal counsel for each of the parties, including Jill. She recommends that Jill be encouraged by her mother and stepfather to participate in counselling and that they, as well as her biological father, also engage in counselling about how best to assist Jill in reestablishing contact with her father.

Jill continues to state to the social worker that she does not want contact with her father, nor does she wish to continue the counselling. Jill's mother and stepfather state that they will not insist that Jill attend counselling.

Clearly, although there was initial agreement, there is not a consensus about the contract and the goal will not be met. The social worker decided to revisit with all parties the stated goals of their work together and to reevaluate them to determine whether the work can continue.

Are assessment and setting goals etched in stone or a moving target? Neither. What is required is initial assessment and conceptualization of the problems, collaborative goal definition and agreement about the key elements of the contract. This solid foundation will provide a focus and clarity for the ensuing work. Members must also be alert to their own reactions and to new information and situations, and work with the client or client system to revisit, and when appropriate, renegotiate goals. Members are encouraged, especially when dealing with complex and high conflict situations, to seek consultation.

For more information, please contact Pamela Blake, M.S.W., RSW, Director, Professional Practice and Education at 416-972-9882 or 1-877-828-9380, ext. 205 or e-mail pblake@ocswssw.org.

9 *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000 Principle IV, Footnote 2. (e)*

10 *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle I, Interpretation 1.7*

11 *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle III, Interpretation 3.12*

Please note that any references to the College's Standards of Practice in this article refer to the first edition of the Standards. The second edition of the Standards of Practice did not come into effect until July 2008.

Footnotes

¹ *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle I, Interpretation 1.1*

² *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle I, Interpretation 1.3*

³ *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle IV, Footnote 3. (g)*

⁴ *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle IV, Interpretation 4.3.6*

⁵ *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle V, Interpretation 5.1.5*

⁶ *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle IV, Interpretation 4.1.7*

⁷ *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle I, Interpretation 1.5*

⁸ *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2000, Principle IV, Footnote 2. (b)*