Applicability and Relevance of Social Work Knowledge and Skills in the Context of Bangladesh

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Tulshi Kumar Das
Department of Social Work, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh
Email: tulshikumardas@gmail.com

Abstract

The practice of social work is correlated with the successful application of its knowledge and skills with different sections of people. Although social work in Bangladesh as an academic discipline is heavily influenced by the clinical social work practice basically borrowed from developed countries, especially from the USA, there is an increasing demand for qualified social workers for working in the development fields. Therefore, the curriculum of social work has included different issues relating to both clinical practices as well as socioeconomic development activities. But the students of social work are inadequately trained up because of which they hardly come to know as to how the knowledge and skills of social work could effectively be used for socioeconomic development for the poor and for the improvement of mental state and psychological affairs of the affected people due to our ill-structured field work training program. There seems to be huge prospects for appropriately trained social workers in the fields of development activities and also in some specific practice settings which are yet to be fully discovered in Bangladesh. The application of social work knowledge is widely but not appropriately or consistently ensured by most of the NGOs functioning in the country, and as a result the services provided are not at all flawless. In this paper, attempts are taken to explore and recommend the effectiveness of social work knowledge in the said fields by presenting certain innovative strategies towards gaining field-based knowledge with a view to opening a new horizon of social work practice in a country like ours.

Introduction

Social work education in Bangladesh was at first introduced at the University of Dhaka in mid 1950s with the support of United Nations. Since then it has spread to different public universities as an academic discipline. But the journey of social work education across the country was never smooth. Rather it has been a struggle through which social work has gradually emerged as a vibrant academic discipline in some of the public universities in Bangladesh. The struggle of course still remains unfinished since the necessity of social work education is yet to be widely recognized. Only five public universities out of thirty four have so far introduced social work discipline for academic study, offering bachelor, masters, MPhil and PhD degrees. Although the employment opportunities for social work graduates could be described as encouraging in Bangladesh, the discipline is not in a position to prove itself as a separate academic entity which is indeed unique and essential like many other disciplines, for examples, economics, law or even public administration. Social work as an academic discipline has all the attributes to grow in a fashion that could be made distinguished by dint of its outstanding contributions in the fields of socioeconomic development programs in a country like Bangladesh. There are many fields where social work is expected to be practiced as Bangladesh is still listed as least developed country having poverty as the major problem. Therefore, the focus is generally made toward poverty-reducing by implementing different socioeconomic development programs as planned by the government. So, the scope for application of social work knowledge and skills is likely to be pertinent across the country taking all potential fields into consideration. Thousands of NGOs are working across the country and most of them are found involved with multiple socioeconomic programs for improving the conditions of the poor. Beyond these activities, efforts are also perpetually made by the government itself supported by many other international organizations for achieving the same goals as an unending process. Most of our social work
graduates primarily find employments in NGOs, making in many cases substantial contributions at different stages of socioeconomic development activities (Das and Others, 2008). But social work has not yet achieved adequate attention and the status it deserves from the concerned authorities; rather at times it is unjustifiably undermined. People in fact do not know much about social work discipline and some consider it as similar as sociology, holding prejudices and misunderstanding regarding the nature and scope of this discipline (Singh, 2010). The dominance of science and technology related disciplines has also to a greater extent prevented the steady progress of social work at the university level confining it to only five public universities. The establishment of more than twenty public universities in the last fifteen years where mostly science and technology based disciplines have been introduced for academic study, hardly offering social science based disciplines, proves adequately that the policy makers for higher education only emphasized the knowledge of science and technology, ignoring or putting less importance on social science. Social work as an academic discipline found no room in the newly established universities because of the policy makers’ aiming exclusively at strengthening science and technology based knowledge. A very few private universities have recently introduced social work discipline, but obviously sufficient time is needed to grow it prominently in future. This seems to be a hard fact that social work educators, instructors and others concerned failed to present social work as a vibrant academic discipline very effective and successful, especially in order to deal with our acute problems caused by poverty. The knowledge of social work should prepare the social workers to challenge the existing social order and must ensure the participation of people in the process of development (Desai, 2001). But the social work program introduced in our country at the university level did not make much progress toward this goal. Therefore, the familiarity of social work discipline is indeed frustrating. Newly established universities, be it public or private, hardly show any interest in opening social work as an independent academic department.

Social work is often considered as an applied social science. The students of social work must perform internship/field work in order to learn and understand as to how the knowledge and skills of social work could be applied in a real situation. After the successful completion of internship a social work student can become competent to work with different categories of people. Unfortunately, the way internship program is planned and completed in the department of social work at university level may be described as superficial, misleading, and ambiguous; leaving the students confused, ill-skilled and sometimes frustrated hoping no future with it (Singh, 2010). Most of the students do not exactly know what are the activities they are supposed to perform during the time of internship, though that has been made mandatory for them in the curriculum. In many cases the external supervisor does not have any knowledge about social work since he lacks social work background. The internal supervisor who is a teacher of social work often does not supervise the students adequately. As a result, the students learn little. In order to get rid of this situation, social work educators, practitioners, experts in different fields of social work should immediately sit together to innovate strategies and pragmatic policies to be introduced for the students so that internship/field work for them becomes effective, knowledge-fulfilling, enjoyable, and satisfying, making them confident as skilled social workers.

There are ample opportunities for practicing social work in the fields of family and child welfare, women welfare, in hospitals and schools, probation and correctional settings, mental health centers and many other fields (Das. et al. 2004). Apart from that, developmental activities are undertaken by GOs and NGOs throughout the country where social work knowledge and skills could be very effectively applied for socioeconomic development of the disadvantaged. A considerable number of social work graduates usually find employment regularly in different NGOs working across the country. Although these graduates have been performing their duties with a very good reputation, there is a lot left to be done from the social work perspective. If the students of social work are properly supervised especially during their internship/field work in the assigned agency then they would become very competent in applying social work knowledge and skills. The ways GOs and NGOs have been implementing their socioeconomic programs may not be described flawless, and it is strongly believed that proper application of social work knowledge and skills in this field can bring about much better results. Social work graduates are expected to prove their competency in the developmental fields and once done may help the discipline to become established as unique and essential compared to many other disciplines. This is a great possibility (Siddegowda, 2010). The paper shows the hidden prospects of social work approach in the field of socioeconomic development programs.
NGO Activities in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the most highly populated countries in the world. The rapid growth of the population in the country has resulted in very complicated and multifarious socioeconomic problems since its independence in 1971. The current population is estimated as ranging from 142 to 159 million, emerging as the seventh most populous country in the world. The size of the country is 144,000 square kilometers with an unprecedented density of population (World Health Organization, 2005; BBS, 2007). Apart from the efforts made by the government, many non-government organizations also came forward with diverse plans and programs to address multiple problems especially the problems of poverty from the year of 1980s. The country has made considerable progress in the fields of literacy, gender parity in schooling, and even in the reduction of population growth (World Bank, 2005). Although the developmental activities already implemented in the country have highly been appreciated, there are reasons for considering the development initiatives already undertaken little taking the country’s huge population into account. Still multidimensional psycho-social and economic problems, the problems of child labor, women oppression, women and child trafficking, over population, acute poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of sufficient health, services, etc. are very much common and pressing social issues in Bangladeshi society. Non-government organizations (NGOs e.g. BRAC, Grameen Bank, Proshika, ASA, etc.) have undertaken innumerable activities for socioeconomic development through micro-finance, human development training, conscientization and advocacy to improve the life situation of the poor and the backward section of the population of the country (Samad, 2009).

The contribution toward socioeconomic development of the disadvantaged made by NGOs in Bangladesh is a reality. It has been recognized that there should be a concerted effort undertaken by GOs and NGOs jointly for the successful implementation of development projects. Although strong criticisms exist about the activities of NGOs (Muhammad, 2010), it is nearly impossible to discard the role being played by many NGOs in the field of socioeconomic development sectors. There are some NGOs which are only on paper, functioning without any legal permission, and established for making profits only. Some NGOs like Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Grameen Bank, and Association for Social Advancement (ASA, presently stands for Hope), etc. have become internationally reputed, serving the poor and the destitute in quite a few countries in the world. Grameen Bank of Dr Muhammad Yunus has even won the Nobel Peace Prize in the year of 2007, gaining unparallel reputation to its micro-credit programs (Das and Others, 2008). Although the doubts are all around whether the micro-credit programs could really be described as highly successful in reducing the severity of poverty, since the sufficient and authentic data regarding its success are yet to be produced. Micro-credit has also been described as debt-trap (Muhammad, 2010).

There are as many as 80% of the villages of Bangladesh have been covered by the NGOs and more than 24 million people (approximately one-fifth of the population) are direct beneficiary of NGO activities. Most of the NGOs are engaged in social welfare and development activities, human rights and advocacy activities and some of them are committed to community development, child welfare and women’s development activities (HDSA, 1999). There are NGOs involved in the implementation of health and sanitation related projects, and a few working in the field of HIV and AIDS.

The Relevance of Social Work Knowledge to NGO Activities

The activities of NGOs have got strong relationship with the functions, aims and objectives of social work. The ways NGOs make efforts to improve the quality of human life, social work as an applied social science discipline performs many similar activities for achieving the same goals. Unfortunately, NGO officials do not have much knowledge about social work since most of them are not of social work background. It may be worth mentioning that the activities of NGOs could be better implemented by those having training and degree in social work. The plans and programs designed and implemented by NGOs can bring about much better results for the targeted people if knowledge and skills of social work are appropriately used at each and every stage.

A large number of community development projects have been undertaken by NGOs across the country according to the desire of the donor agencies, because the donors like sound and cost-effective mechanisms adopted by many NGOs for the effective implementation of different projects undertaken. The NGOs working in the country receive huge amount of money per year from the donor agencies for implementing different development activities. So, this money should be properly utilized with the successful implementation of development programs. The successful implementation could be made possible if the knowledge and skill of social work is applied in the activities of NGOs.
One of the important activities undertaken by majority of the NGOs is to have introduced micro-credit program for the poor, especially for the destitute and helpless women in the rural areas. The aim of distributing micro-credits among the rural marginalized women is often described as to make these women self-reliant by involving them into different income generating activities. NGOs usually go through from one step to another in order to achieve this objective. Formation of groups with the female members, distribution of credits and encouragement for utilizing credits properly, etc. are implemented according to the set rules of most of the NGOs. This may be emphatically mentioned here that the knowledge and skills of social work could be appropriately applied at every stage of the process of implementation of micro-credit based programs. One of the basic methods of social work is social group work which may well be applied in the formation of groups for micro credit programs. In addition, the functions of each group need to be run according to the formula of social group work if best results are expected. One should not forget that no development activity could be undertaken and implemented without the formation of groups, and social group work of social work discipline for any such programs initiated by both GOs and NGOs may produce better outcomes if appropriately applied. Conflicts and other types of problems that are generally created among the group members may also be resolved by another basic method of social work called social case work. “Motivation” – one of the skills of social work is usually used to motivate the group members so that the objectives of the group are achieved. The group worker uses the knowledge of social work to help emerge leadership quality from the group while working with the members. Multiple activities in relation to making the common people aware regarding health, education, human rights, HIV/AIDS, environment, child labor, family violence, family planning, dowry and many other issues undertaken by a number of NGOs in Bangladesh where social action of social work and community development approach could effectively be adopted. Different projects formulated by NGOs aiming at improving the socioeconomic conditions of the underprivileged may be successfully accomplished through the use of community development approach of social development related to the knowledge of social work. Social workers are expected to be skilled in interviewing the people since they need to work with them very closely. Both participatory approach and the skill of interviewing learnt from social work should be applied for ensuring the participation of the targeted people in each and every development activity.

The knowledge of medical social work is equally helpful for the successful implementation of health intervention programs being undertaken by many NGOs across the country. No development programs could be planned and implemented without the support and participation of the community people and the application of community development and community organization of social work in this field would definitely produce maximum benefits for the targeted people. The kinds of research activities usually undertaken by most of the NGOs may be better conducted by those having trained in social work since the students of social work practically learn as to how to conduct social research. There are NGOs providing legal help to the poor in need and the social workers can be instrumental in making the people aware regarding the legislations existing in favor of them, and they can show the way as to how legal help is to be received if recruited in those NGOs, because the social workers are supposed to study and know the entire legal system existing in a country. Working with physically and mentally challenged people is another field for social work practice and people with the specialization of psychiatric social work are expected to perform better in this field. There are some common activities like policy making, planning, supervision, monitoring, directing, coordination, communication, report preparation, fund raising, budgeting, recruitment, selection, training, job description, job analysis, job satisfaction, networking, etc. being performed by almost each NGO working in the country and the social workers can better contribute here since they have knowledge about an auxiliary method of social work called social welfare administration dealing with those activities. There is no doubt that from the very beginning of policy making to the implementation and evaluation process of different socioeconomic development programs undertaken by NGOs could be effectively accomplished by applying social work knowledge and skills (Das and Others, 2008). The same is true with the development activities of GOs. The social workers are expected to be skilled development workers capable of bringing about significant positive changes in socioeconomic conditions of the marginalized people living in the community. Be it a government program or non-government or even voluntary, the application of social work knowledge and skills would produce better outcomes in this regard. It may be mentioned here that social work knowledge is already applied in many development activities but in a very scattered way since most of the people involved do not have training in social work, and are incapable of making significant progress. But one should not make any mistake thinking that NGO workers are social workers. NGO workers are not social workers, but NGO workers with social work training may perform better compared to others having no social work training.
Specialized Fields of Social Work and their Practice

There are some major settings existing in Bangladesh where specialized fields of social work could be very effectively practiced. Medical social work, family social work, social work with women and children, psychiatric social work, institutional and correctional administration, disabled welfare, rural and urban community development, welfare for the indigenous people, industrial social work and labor welfare, community organization and welfare for the aged, etc. are the major specialized fields of social work which have ample opportunities to be practiced in different practice settings existing throughout the country. Most of these specializations in social work education have in fact grown out of American pattern of social work education, not expected to have the local situation of any other country into consideration. Still the specializations of social work may bring about better results if properly applied anywhere in any situation with an open mind to the local conditions. Medical social work is essential to be practiced in all government and non-government hospitals for making health services being provided to the patients more effective and successful. But in a very few number of hospitals across the country where medical social work in the name of hospital social services has been running, even that too with numerous limitations. This is a fact that basic health needs are not fulfilled in our society due to insufficient number of doctors and inadequate medical facilities and therefore the development of medical social work in our hospitals seems to be an ambitious goal. The department of social work established in different universities in the country also did not introduce specialization course on medical social work. It may be hoped that specialization on medical social work would be introduced in the department in future.

The application of the specialization on psychiatric social work is in fact non-existent in Bangladesh. Unfortunately the field of mental health is almost ignored and the kind of services rendered to the people with mental illness is extremely poor and inadequate in the country. In most cases of mental illness the common people are forced to practice superstitions and prejudices due to non-availability of proper treatment nearby. Only a few affluent can avail the opportunity of taking treatment from some hospitals or private clinics located in big cities. The treatment is also expensive which the poor cannot afford. Since psychiatric social work is considered as an important component of treatment, especially for those with mental disorders and mental deficiency, mental health department needs to be introduced in each and every hospital where psychiatric social workers can play an instrumental role in making the entire process of treatment more fruitful. The specialization on psychiatric social work is yet to be opened in the department of social work at university level in our country. The development and practice of psychiatric social work is well recognized in many countries including both developed and developing ones considering its importance for mental health of the people.

Social work with family is a common specialization offered by most of the schools of social work at home and abroad. This specialized field also includes child welfare in many cases. The specialization of family social work is often considered very important in each society and culture. It is therefore considerable number of public and private social welfare agencies have been established in many countries for offering multiple services to the suffering families. One of the major objectives of family social work is to help each individual member of the family for attaining harmonious relationships so that individual and the family could be rescued from the situation of disorganization. Most social workers working with the families use social case work method, marriage counseling, motivation, etc. in order to address family conflicts and many other problems related to the family (Nagpaul, 1980). Apart from that, family social work deals with the problems of marital conflict, disturbed parent-child relationships, fatherless families, motherless children, single adults having separated from their families, problems of the aged, etc. Many of our social work graduates are employed in family and child welfare agencies (government and non-government) addressing family and child related problems. There are many non-social workers also employed in the agency having no training in social work but playing the role of social workers while working with the families and children. Along with social case work method the knowledge of psychology, psychiatry and psycho-analysis are widely applied by the family social workers everywhere.

In Bangladesh, the application of social group work method and the practice of field work in group work settings has been considered utmost important, especially in the development activities. The social work department of each university has introduced a mandatory course on social group work. Social group workers help individual member of the group improve their social functioning by using group process and dynamics. This method is found effective while applying and working with children, youth, adults, the aged, and with the physically or mentally unhealthy persons to promote adjustment to different life situations through group experience (Nagpaul, 1980). A large number of social workers have been appointed in government and non-government development organizations throughout the country having the scope to practice social group work at different stages of development activities.
The potential of social group work in relation to the application of this method at field levels seems to be huge in Bangladesh.

Another specialization of social work is criminology and correctional administration which is not that much developed and popular in our country yet. People do not have much knowledge regarding the expertise of the social workers having trained in criminology and correctional administration. Services rendered to probation and parole, separation of juveniles from adult criminals, vocational training, rehabilitation and after care, and training of personnel for correctional administration may be described as extremely poor. The people involved in providing such services, in most cases, do not have social work background at all, let alone specialization. This field of practice should be given importance with the appointment of social workers trained in the said specialization. Social work department of each university offers a course on criminology and correctional services in our country, but often not in a shape of specialization.

The specialization on industrial social work or labor welfare has a historic correlation with the emergence of social work profession. Industrial labor has always been considered as an underprivileged group which needs special amenities and welfare services for decent living and the social workers from the very beginning of industrial revolution that took place in the UK in nineteenth century have been working to benefit this group (Patil, 2010). This historical legacy is very well carried on in different countries as the social workers with the specialization of labor welfare usually get good opportunity to work in industrial settings. Industrial social workers are involved and working in the fields of personnel management, business administration, social insurance, trade unionism, social security measures of the officers and workers performing their assigned jobs in industries. Training program for labor welfare as a part of social work education has been undertaken and is in great demand since skilled industrial social workers are found working successfully in the industrial settings in many countries. Although the application of industrial social work could be described widespread, the field is not that much developed and recognized in Bangladesh. But this specialization of social work is quite potential in the country.

Both community development and community organization approaches have been considered very important for improving the situation of different sections of people in our society. Since Bangladesh is a least developed country where a significant number of people still live below poverty line and most of the people live in rural areas, the specialization on community development approach of social work is indeed highly applicable. There are many development projects undertaken by government and non-government organizations where community development approach is well adopted in our country. A considerable number of social work graduates are engaged with community development activities under the implementation process of government and non-government organizations located both in urban and rural areas. This is a field which seems to be extremely important in the context of Bangladesh. Each of the department of social work in different universities has already introduced both the courses “community development” and “community organization” in its curriculum.

Theories for Social Work Practice

There are a number of theories mostly rooted in other disciplines considered essential for social work practice. Cognitive behavior theory is often used by the social workers for improving the psychological functioning of mentally ill individuals (Engel and Schutt, 2005). Both cognitive and behavior theory may be used in managing the stress and increasing social skills of the service users by the social workers. The social workers can help the clients learn techniques to replace negative thoughts by taking help from both the theories. Behavior theory is connected with learning theory in which, as it has been said, we learn most behavior through the consequences of engaging ourselves in a particular behavior. Cognitive theory also finds its root in learning theory which assumes that perception of the people in relation to what they do or experience can explain their behavior (Payne, 1997). These theoretical orientations may be very helpful for our social workers working at development, health, and industrial sectors.

Attachment theory is often applied by the social workers, especially while working with children. One is expected to be well-versed in the theory, possessing good observational skills and skills in asking questions and listening before the application. Social workers are supposed to have in-depth understanding of any theoretical framework necessary in practice situation like attachment theory requires a certain ‘lightness of touch’. It cannot be helpful to try and make everything fit appropriately into the scope of the theory and one should not suggest to others that your knowledge of the theoretical model makes you necessarily the exclusive ‘expert’ (Bechett, 2007). Unfortunately, theoretical perspectives in relation to social work practice are not emphasized in the curriculum of social work discipline introduced at university level in Bangladesh.
Functional theory is another important framework for practicing social work. The central factors in functional theory are: the social agency, the worker, resources, client need, and the client’s use of self. These factors are generally independent and interdependent conditions having huge potentials in relation to producing expected results. Functional theory helps create a well integrated and systematic rationale and vibrant framework for dealing with the fast growing and changing social needs and demands (Yelaja, 1974). Role theory has been used by the social workers in conjunction with social system theory. It is important to understand how the actors interact with each other in any system like family system, examining the role expectations and role prescriptions of the actors, especially when imbalances and dysfunctions of the system are well identified. Role theory has also been used by those working and engaging themselves in modifying the behavior of the clients through behavior modification therapy. The social workers here try to reinforce certain behavior to help the client achieve a more successful enactment of more socially acceptable roles (Strean, 1974). There are many other practice theories existing in the knowledge system of social work, but the students of social work hardly study them, and even they do not have the scope to be aware about the theories since the curriculum of social work does not include them. It is not that the theories do not have limitations. There are problems with theory, but students must know, study, and critically review the available theoretical frameworks for social work practice. The important and relevant fields for social work practice in a country like Bangladesh could be described as social policy, planning, social and economic development, social research, etc. which are pathetically ignored, less emphasized, and ill-equipped.

Evidence-based Social Work Practice

Evidence-based practice means social work profession should be built upon empirical knowledge about the outcomes of different kinds of intervention system. But it has not been followed in most cases in many countries. Since, in Bangladesh, the profession is yet to be recognized, and it is therefore the foundation for social work practice is still absent. The theoretical knowledge of social work which is taught in the classroom does not have very concrete scope to verify its effectiveness empirically. This is not the case for other professions like medicine, engineering and so on. Even evidence-based practice in social work is also criticized from multiple points of view. The general criticisms existing against evidence-based social work practice are: a) social work research should be conducted for dealing with much broader aspects than only assessing the effects of available treatment models. b) Methodological problems may also be identified. It is difficult to measure the effects of a particular treatment model since there is multidimensional factors involved here which frequently interfere and interact with each other. c) Each context is unique and therefore every intervention strategy should be unique. The strategy of an intervention in a specific context could be difficult to be adopted appropriately in another context (Dellgran & Hojer, 2003). But the fact is that a dynamic profession always runs on the basis of empirical evidence. The quality of a profession is only improved and updated through new knowledge generated by frequent research activities. The practice of a profession and the findings of continuous research activities for the profession can effectively produce empirically proven and evidence-based practice opportunity for a profession like social work.

Conclusions

The application of entire social work knowledge system has been emphasized throughout the paper. Social work as a profession as well as a discipline is based on practical activities and therefore application of its knowledge is of paramount importance. In a country like Bangladesh theoretical part of social work discipline is well organized and dynamic too, but practical part of it is monotonous, boring, confusing and of course misleading. Students performing practical activities in the name of internship perhaps do not understand the applicability of social work knowledge while they are in the fields working with different categories of people. There is no doubt that sometimes in many cases the students sent to the fields for performing internship do not get adequate guidance and supervision. So it becomes impossible for the students to perform their assigned duties perfectly. Possibility of applying the knowledge and skills of social work has been very keenly explored in this paper. It is also hoped that appropriate application of social work knowledge and skills in the fields of development activities as well as in the clinical settings in Bangladesh can produce much better results than currently received. There are many areas where ample opportunity exists for social work practice but the areas are yet to be identified and experimented. Even the diversity of different kinds of theoretical framework which can facilitate the professional activities of social work at each stage of application is not much known to the students. It is therefore the knowledge of social work has become difficult for many to apply. The knowledge of social work must be known and understood in full; otherwise the application may be partial, incomplete and ambiguous. An effort has been made in the paper so that the vast areas for the application of social work knowledge in Bangladesh could be discovered and explored. The paper firmly shows that social work profession can produce high quality services in any society if appropriately practiced.
References


[14] Ibid.


