

Perceiving Community Social Work: An Exploration of Community Practice of Professional Social Workers in Kerala

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Abstract

Community social work signifies a practice dimension of professional social work with communities as the setting and target for interventions, embracing all the aspects of intervening in or with communities in all the fields or sectors of social work practice. This small-scale cross-sectional study conducted among professional social workers in Kerala tried to perceive community social work by observing its specific nature and attributes, processes and models and practice at different levels of interventions and activities. The findings indicate that community social work practice in Kerala is primarily developmental in nature, focuses more on social and spatial dimensions of community, highly involves organizing and planning processes, and mostly addresses the community problems of capability and competence mainly through capacity building activities largely at community or neighbourhood level usually adopting models of programme development and coordination and sustainable development. The key attributes of community social work and major issues to its practice are outlined in the study.

Key Words: Community Social Work, Professional Social Workers, Community, Social Work, Community Practice

I. INTRODUCTION

Community practice is an integral part of social work profession. In India, a variety of practitioners belonging to different professions including social work are engaged in it. Being an umbrella term, the uniqueness of community practice by professional social workers is not recognized distinctly. This study attempted to distinguish professional social work practice with communities by conceptualizing it as 'community social work'.

The concept 'community social work' grew up in 1970s and 1980s in Britain and gained common currency following the publication of the Barclay Report in 1982. Community social work signifies a practice dimension of professional social work with communities as the setting and target for interventions, embracing all the aspects of intervening in or with communities in all the fields or sectors of social work practice. It can be understood as the application of social work knowledge, skills, attitudes and values; and the adoption of social work philosophy and methods; in the arena of community work or community practice (Mini and Sathyamurthi, 2016 and 2017b).

In Kerala, many professional social workers are involved in community practice through community-based projects and programmes of Government or NGOs. But their practice is rarely studied and documented from a professional social work perspective of community practice. This study is an exploration of community practice of professional social workers in Kerala to perceive community social work.

II. BACKGROUND REVIEWS

Barclay Report (1982, p. xvii) defined community social work as “formal social work, which, starting from problems affecting an individual or group and the responsibilities and resources of social services departments and voluntary organizations, seeks to tap into, support, enable and underpin the local networks of formal and informal relationships which constitute basic definition of community, and also the strengths of a client’s communities of interest”.

Mini and Sathyamurthi, (2017a) mentioned the major attributes of community social work as Preventive in nature; Simultaneous emphasis on community, and the individuals & groups within the community; Tapping, developing or sustaining formal and informal local networks in communities; Partnership between community, statutory services and voluntary agencies; Encouraging mutual aid; Collective responsibility; Attempt to harness community resources; Interventions at micro, meso and macro levels; and Promoting social justice and inclusive development.

Mini and Sathyamurthi (2017b) explains the eight dimensions of community social work viz. Spatial, Social, Relationship, Virtual, Civic, Commonality, Identity and Intentional. While the spatial dimension of a community focuses on the geographical divisions like urban or rural in which the community social work is practiced, the civic dimension can be understood from the political divisions such as panchayat or municipality. The social system, social networks and social interactions among the people creates the social dimension of a community. Relationship dimension of the community can be understood in terms of affiliations or associations among the people. The unity or we feeling among the people based on their common features indicates the commonality dimension of community. The virtual dimension of community involves technologically enabled relationships and networks. The grouping of people, based on functional or emotional identity give rise to the identity dimension and that based on particular interests for specific actions or purposes indicates the intentional dimension of community in community social work.

According to Propman, Erlich and Rothman (2001), community practice involves building solutions to three kinds of community problems broadly conceived as Problem of Cohesion, Problem of Capability and Problem of Competence. In problem of cohesion, the community is not, as yet, a community in the connected sense. Problem of capability flows from cohesion and as capability increases, the problem of competence emerges.

Banks et al (2003) as cited in Pierson (2008) refers to community practice at three different levels of interventions. Those are: (i) Practice at community or neighbourhood level with a focus on microlevel activities including capacity building, community development and community education; (ii) Practice at organizational or inter-organizational level such as service development and outreach, community liaison, partnership formation and community service provision; and (iii) Practice at societal level including activities to modify institutions, shape cultural debates, and intervene in politics and debates about social justice and citizenship.

According to Weil (2005) community practice encompasses four central processes viz. (1) Development that includes the models of community development, social development, economic development and sustainable development; (2) Organising which includes locality development, neighbourhood organizing, organizing in communities of interest, development of local leadership and coalition development; (3) Planning that includes the models of social planning and programme development and coordination; and (4) Action for progressive social change that includes the models of political and social action, pluralism and participation, leadership development, coalitions and engagement in social movements.

Srivastava (1999) discussed the issues of inadequate research base, lack of strong professional organizations, lack of public recognition of social work as a profession, difficulty in application of theory and confusion about the concept of social work in the practice of professional social work.

III. METHOD

This small-scale (n = 25) cross-sectional study was conducted among professional social workers in Kerala to distinguish community social work by observing its specific nature and attributes, processes and models, practice at different levels of interventions and activities, and practice related issues. Data were generated through an interview schedule developed based on the review of literatures. Non-probability, convenience sampling was used to select 25 respondents. The data were analysed through descriptive statistics using univariate analysis techniques like frequency distribution tables, charts and diagrams.

IV.FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Demographic Characteristics

The 25 professional social workers participated in the study included 12 academicians and 13 practitioners. Within practitioners, there were five Project Coordinators, three Programme Managers, two Trainers, two Supervisors and one Counsellor.

Age of the respondents vary from 25 to 56. Majority of the respondents were of the age between 30 and 40 years. There were fifteen males and ten females among the respondents. Most participants were working in Ernakulam (n =14) and Malappuram (n = 7) districts. There was single representation from Thrissur, Palakkad, Idukki and Thiruvananthapuram districts each. Only 24% (n = 6) of the respondents have membership in any professional social work associations.

Regarding education of the respondents, five have MPhil, four have PhD and two are pursuing PhD after completing their Masters in Social Work. All other 14 respondents did their Masters in Social Work. Specialisation of majority of the respondents (n = 13) is Medical and Psychiatry. There were nine respondents specialised in Community Development, two in Family and Child Welfare and one in Personnel Management.

Twelve respondents (48%) work in the field of social work education as they are academicians. Others (52%) who are practitioners, work in the fields of women empowerment (20%), Welfare of Elderly (12%), Child Development (8%), Health, Education and Natural Resource Management (4% each). Years of experience of the respondents vary from two to twenty years. More than one fourth (28%) of the respondents have experience of ten years and above, less than three fourth (72%) have less than ten years' experience amongst which 36% have less than five years' experience.

4.2. Nature of Practice

The participants' work with community is more developmental in nature. Less than half of the respondents involved in developmental practice, whereas less than one-fourth involve in work with all preventive, curative, developmental and rehabilitative characteristics. Others adopt any of these or combinations of any of these in their practice. The kinds of community problems addressed by professional social workers varies. Less than half of the respondents always address the problems of capability and competence, while less than one-fourth always address the problem of cohesion. Others address these problems rarely, sometimes or regularly.

The participants work with different dimensions of community. Vast majority of them work with spatial, social, political, commonality and intentional dimensions. Majority work with relationship dimension, more than three-fourth with identity dimension and less than three-fourth work with virtual dimension. (Figure 1)

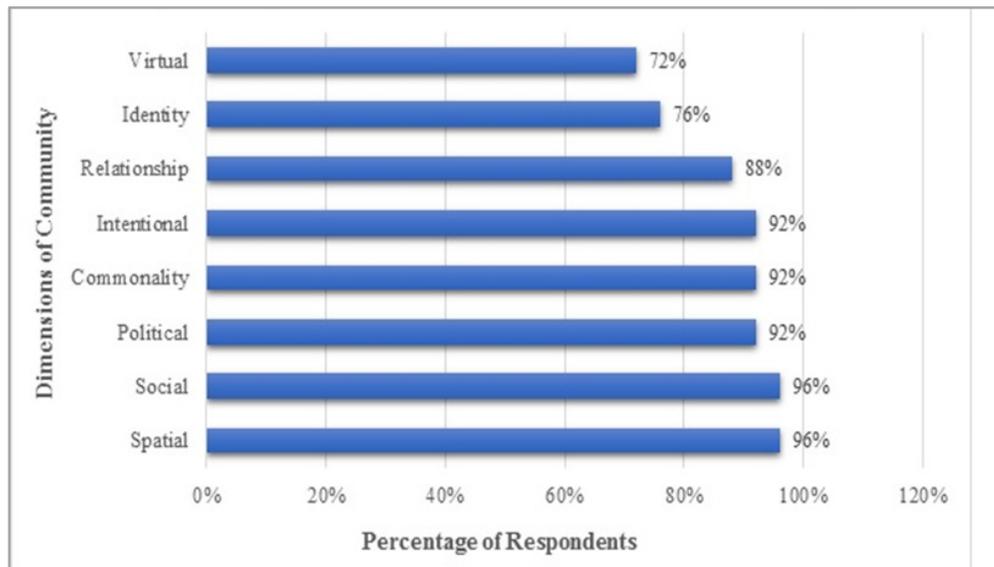


Figure 1: Respondents' Work with Different Dimensions of Community

- Within spatial dimension, 36% of the respondents work with rural communities only, 28% of them work with all types of communities in geographical division and 20% work with both rural and tribal communities. It specifies that majority of the participants work with rural communities.

- In civic dimension, 40% of the respondents work in panchayath only and 32% work with all type of political divisions such as panchayats, municipalities and corporations. It means less than three-fourth of the respondents focus their work in panchayats.
- 44% of the respondents always and 36% regularly work with social dimension of community.
- 44% of the respondents sometimes and 28% of the respondents always work with relationship dimension of community.
- In identity dimension, 52% of the respondents work with both emotional and functional identity groups and 24% does not work with identity dimension of community.
- 44% always, 28% regularly and 20% sometimes work with commonality dimension of community.
- 28% not at all work with virtual dimension of community while 24% always, 20% sometimes and 20% regularly work with virtual dimension.
- 40% regularly work with intentional dimension of community while 24% always and another 24% sometimes work with that dimension.

4.3. Attributes of Practice

- **Partnership** – Less than half of the respondents always make partnerships with statutory bodies, less than one third always partner with voluntary agencies and more than half always make partnership with informal sections of the community for doing community work
- **Team Work** – More than one-third of the participants work within multidisciplinary teams, and less than one-third work within various teams viz. multidisciplinary teams, team of community representatives and team of social workers.
- **Networking** - Less than one-third of the respondents always work with both informal and formal local networks, less than one-fourth regularly and less than one-third sometimes work with such networks. Less than half of the respondents work with local networks by tapping them into, supporting, enabling and sustaining them. Very few works only by supporting them and very few only enable them.

More than half of the respondents do networking with non-governmental organisations, voluntary organisations, government departments, community based organisations, political and religious associations. Very few network with all these except political or religious associations and very few networks with only non-governmental organisations and voluntary organisations.

- **Collective Responsibility** – More than three-fourth of the respondents focus on collective responsibility in their work with communities.
- **Emphasis on Elements of Community** – Less than half of the respondents give simultaneous emphasis on community, and the individuals and groups within the community. Less than one-fourth of them work by giving emphasis to groups in the community or emphasizing community as a whole.
- **Self Help and Mutual Aid** – More than half of the respondents give emphasis to both self-help and mutual aid while very few give emphasis only for mutual aid or only for self-help.
- **Ensuring Community Participation** – More than one-fourth of the respondents ensure community participation through participatory methods, key persons in the community, community leaders and community-based organizations. Less than one-fourth seek the help of only community-based organizations or utilize community leaders and key persons in the community with community-based organizations to ensure community participation.
- **Involvement in Administrative Aspects**- More than one-fourth of the respondents rarely involve in administrative aspects but less than one-fourth sometimes or regularly and very few always involve in administrative aspects.
- **Focus on Empowerment – Dimension** – Less than half of the respondents focus on all social, economic and psychological dimensions of empowerment in community work. Less than one-fourth focus on only social and psychological dimensions, while very few focuses on only social and economic or only on social dimension.

Level – More than half of the respondents focus on the empowerment of individuals, groups and communities. Very few focuses on the empowerment of groups, a meagre percentage focus only on the individual empowerment or only on the empowerment of communities.

- **Harnessing Community Resources** – More than three-fourth of the respondents do identification, mobilization and utilisation of community resources. A meagre percentage do identification only or both identification and utilization.

Table 1: Attributes of Community Social Work

Sl.No:	Attributes	% of Respondents
1.	Partnership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • with statutory bodies • with voluntary agencies • with informal sections of the community 	48% 32% 52%
2.	Team Work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • within multidisciplinary teams only • within multidisciplinary teams, team of community representatives and team of social workers 	40% 32%
3.	Networking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • with both informal and formal local networks • with NGOs, VOs, Govt. Depts, CBOs, Political and Religious associations 	92% 60%
4.	Collective Responsibility	80%
5.	Emphasis on Elements of Community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • simultaneous emphasis on community, and the individuals and groups within the community • only to groups in the community • emphasizing community as a whole 	48% 24% 20%
6.	Self Help and Mutual Aid <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • emphasis to both self-help and mutual aid • emphasis only for mutual aid • emphasis only for self-help 	56% 16% 12%
7.	Ensuring Community Participation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • through participatory methods, key persons in the community, community leaders and CBOs • only through community-based organizations (CBOs) • CBOs, community leaders and key persons 	28% 20% 20%
8.	Involvement in Administrative Aspects	92%
9.	Focus on Empowerment <i>Dimension</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all social, economic and psychological dimensions • only social and psychological dimensions • only social and economic • only on social dimension <i>Level</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • of individuals, groups and communities • of groups only • of individual only • of communities only 	48% 20% 12% 12% 60% 16% 8% 8%
10.	Harnessing Community Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identification, mobilization and utilisation • identification only • both identification and utilization 	76% 8% 8%

4.4. Processes and Models of Practice

A vast majority of the respondents (96%) are involved in organizing, majority are involved in planning (88%) and development (84%) and a significant percentage (64) is involved in action for progressive social change ascendant processes of community practice.

Programme development and coordination is the mostly adopted model of community practice by the respondents. A vast majority of the respondents (92%) are involved in it for planning process in community practice. Sustainable development model is adopted by a majority of the respondents (84%) and more than three fourth (80%) of the respondents adopts models of community development, social development and organizing in communities of interests for development process in their work with communities. Model of coalitions (28%) and political and social action model (32%) in actions for progressive social change are the least adopted models of community practice.

Table 2: Involvement in Adoption of Central Processes and Models of Community Practice by the Respondents

Central Processes and Models	Involvement	Frequency of Adoption		
		Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently
Development	21 (84%)			
Community Development	20 (80%)	6	5	14
Social Development	20 (80%)	(24%)	(20%)	(56%)
Economic Development	17 (68%)			
Sustainable Development	21 (84%)			
Organising	24 (96%)			
Locality development	15 (60%)	9	8	8
Neighbourhood organizing	16 (64%)	(36%)	(32%)	(32%)
Organizing in communities of interest	20 (80%)			
Development of local leadership	16 (64%)			
Coalition development	11(44%)			
Planning	22 (88%)			
Social planning	17 (68%)	2	9	14
Programme development and coordination	23 (92%)	(8%)	(36%)	(56%)
Action for progressive social change	16 (64%)			
Political and Social Action	8 (32%)	13	5	7
Pluralism and Participation	11 (44%)	(52%)	(20%)	(28%)
Leadership development	13 (52%)			
Coalitions	7 (28%)			
Engagement in social movements	10 (40%)			

More than half of the respondents (56%) frequently adopt different models in development and planning processes of community practice whereas more than half of the respondents (52%) rarely adopt different models in process of action for progressive social change. Hence, it can be understood that all the central processes and models of community practice are practiced by the professional social workers in Kerala, though the frequency of adoption varies.

4.5.Levels of Interventions and Activities in Practice

The respondents intervene in the communities at three different levels: community or neighbourhood level, organizational or inter-organizational level and societal level. More than half of the respondents (52%) do interventions at all the three levels in their work with communities. Nearly one fourth (24%) of the respondents do interventions only at community or neighbourhood level. A meagre percentage of them practice only at organizational or inter-organizational level(8%) and very few (12%) practiceboth at community or neighbourhood level and societal level.

The major portion (84%) of the circle indicating community or neighbourhood level of interventions in Figure 2 is represented as characterized by the practice of the respondents.Thus, it is evident that professional social work interventions happen mostly at community or neighbourhood level.

- At the community or neighbourhood level of interventions, activities of more than half of the respondents (56%) include capacity building, community education and community development. 24% of them do only capacity building.
- At organizational or inter-organizational, less than one-third of the respondents (32%) are involved in activities of service development and outreach, community liaison, partnership formation and community service provision. 20% of the respondents do only community liaison.
- At societal level, less than one-third of the respondents (32%)are involved in activities to modify institutions, to shape cultural debates and in debates about social justice and citizenship. 20% of the respondents are involved only in activities to modify institution.
- Majority of the respondents (88%) are involved in capacity building, a significant percentage (64%) are involved in community liaison and more than half of them (60%) are involved in activities to modify institutions.

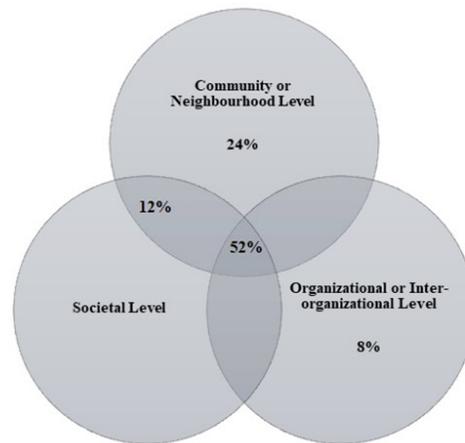


Figure 2: Practice at Different Levels of Interventions

Hence, capacity building at community or neighbourhood level, community liaison at organizational or inter-organizational level and activities to modify institutions at societal level are the significant activities of community social work practice.

4.6. Issues Encountered in Practice

Major findings related to the issues faced by the respondents in their work with communities are:

- A vast majority of the respondents (96%) face difficulty in application of theoretical knowledge of community work in the field mainly due to spatial and temporal context of theories.
- Lack adequate research base for social work practice with communities is an issue for more than three-fourth of the respondents (76%).
- More than half of the respondents (56%) opined that social workers fail to make their presence felt in the society.
- According to more than three-fourth of the respondents (76%), social workers working with communities are regarded as non-professionals in the society and lacks public recognition.
- A significant percentage of the respondents (68%) face lack of clarity in the meaning, about the activities and practices of social work among community people.
- Less than three-fourth of the respondents (72%) felt lack of statutory recognition for social work practice with communities as great issue.
- Nearly majority (80%) of the respondents feel that professional social work organizations in Kerala are not strong and vital enough to promote social work practice with communities.

Therefore, it is understood that the major issues faced by the respondents in community social work practice are associated with application of theory in field, research base, public awareness of social work, professional recognition, social workers' involvement in society and effectiveness of professional social work associations.

V. CONCLUSION

The study explored the community practice of professional social workers in Kerala for observing community social work. Even though, the study was limited by its small sample size ($n = 25$), it helped to sketch out the basic nature and major attributes, processes and models, practice at different levels of interventions and activities, and the major practice related issues of community social work in Kerala. Further, major attributes of community social work and how far each attribute is there in practice are outlined in the study.

The findings indicate that community social work practice in Kerala is primarily developmental in nature, focuses more on social and spatial dimensions of community, highly involves organizing and planning processes, and mostly addresses the community problems of capability and competence mainly through capacity

building activities largely at community or neighbourhood level usually adopting models of programme development and coordination and sustainable development.

The issues associated with professional social work practice with communities suggest the need to encourage better involvement of social workers in social issues, promote researches related to community work and strengthen professional social work bodies so that community social work practice is recognized as a needed professional practice and gets due recognition from society and statutory bodies. Further researches exploring each domain of this study in different regions with increased sample size are needed to have a depth understanding of community social work practice.

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