

Teaching and Practice of Community Organization and Development in South Asia: Evidence from Pakistan and Nepal

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Abstract

Community Organization and Development (COD) is one of the core methods of social work and is taught in schools of social work across South Asia. This study is based on the semi structured interviews with social work educators in Nepal and Pakistan, and the personnel narratives of the authors. It provides a background of teaching Community Organization and Development, with its practices and methods in South Asian region (particularly in Pakistan and Nepal). The study discusses the nature and challenges for community work and its relationship to social work teaching and practice. Its main theme is to find out the answer that, how to teach and nurture students of social work to gain perspectives and skills of community organizing? The study concludes that social work educators specializing in teaching and practice will have to (un)learn and refocus. The teaching strategies to engage students need to be revised and re-interpreted with the new social work curriculum teaching methodologies.

Keywords: Social Work; Community Intervention; Teaching Innovation, Pakistan; Nepal.

1. Introduction

Community Organization and Development (COD) is one of the primary methods of social work which taught and practiced to some extent at the macro level by the departments/schools of social work across South Asia. Working with communities is an art in itself that requires a high level of skills, motivation and background knowledge (science) about the culture, traditions and norms. Teaching and practicing of COD in South Asian region especially countries like Pakistan and Nepal offers challenges to social work practitioners and educators, due to their diverse nature in terms of language, cultures, economic, political and social values and practices. The educators can recognize and define culture, which is actually a complex activity. Culture is the sum total of a people's thoughts, beliefs and behaviors; as such, culture serves as a schema for living and interpreting reality. It is important to point out that every individual, family and community has a culture (Lum, 2007). Culture shapes the ways in which all people, families and communities define problems and conceptualize strategies for problem resolution (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005; Laing, 2009). Thus, culture and norms does

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have a profound impact on social work teaching and practice through community organizing and development.

Hardina (2000) lists core analytical skills required and should be acquired by social work students in community practice, including information gathering and processing, legislative research, needs assessment, participatory action research, political analysis, population forecasting and social indicator analysis, power analysis, program development and planning, resource development, budgeting, and grant writing. Hardina (2000) argued that analytical methods often used in practice but seldom systematically discussed, assist the practitioner (in the case students of social work) in identifying community problems, planning interventions, and conducting evaluations (Hardina, 1997 & 2000).

Solas (1990) conducted a qualitative study of four undergraduate social work students at various points in their education in order to identify criteria for effective teaching. The results indicated that students felt 'the most important component of overall teaching effectiveness was the relationship between the educator and themselves', which we discuss further below.

Community organization practice requires that professional social workers utilize strategies, tactics and tools associated with a particular community organization model to influence change. The given different models, approaches, strategies, tactics, methods and socio political contexts (in a particular country and community), teaching community organization differs substantially and offers new insights within a particular country and across the region. The case study of Pakistan and Nepal used as empirical evidence for the nature and challenges of community work and its relationship to social work teaching and practice.

2. Methodology

This study is based on qualitative semi structured interviews with six social work educators (three each from Pakistan and Nepal) in addition to personal narratives of the authors. The central research question answered in this paper is: How to teach and nurture students of social work to gain perspectives and skills of community organizing and advocacy? The personal narrative methodology which is used in this study is the expression of the oral version of personal experiences of both functional and reflective as described by Labov & Waletzky (1997). It is a method of recapitulating past experiences by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events that actually occurred. The study of narrative extends over a broad range of human activities: novels, short stories, film, folk tale, interviews, oral memoirs, chronicles, histories, comic strips and other visual media (Labov, 2008). Connelly & Clandinin (1987) described that, the notion of narrative unity is not merely a description of a person's history but is a meaning-giving account, an interpretation, of one's history and as such provides a way of understanding the experiential knowledge of classroom participants.

This paper is divided into five sections. After the brief introductory section, an analysis of literature on teaching and practicing community organization is presented in section two. An in-depth discussion on the status of COD teaching and practice in South Asia in general and Pakistan and Nepal in particular are presented in section three. A detailed discussion is presented in section four using self-narratives of two social work educators from Pakistan and Nepal in teaching COD and challenges faced and strategies implemented. Section five concludes the study and offers way forward.

3. Literature Review

Community organization (known as communitarian social work) is one of the primary methods of the social work profession which aims to find sustainable solutions of problems existing at community level (Bosco, 2010). According to Fink, Anderson, & Conover (1968), community development is considered a macro method of practice in social work. One of the primary goals of a community development practitioner is to lead the individuals and groups into a prosperous and progressive life. Community is the social place used by family, friends, neighbors, neighborhood associations, clubs, civic groups, local enterprises, churches, ethnic associations, temples, local unions (McKnight, 1987). McKnight (1987), also stressed that the essence of community is people working together and one of the characteristics of community work is a shared responsibility that requires many talents.

Rothman (1974) has developed three models of community organization which are locality development, social planning, and social action. Rothman's (1996) framework for analysing and organizing approaches was useful for social work educators and students for understanding the core dynamics of community organization. There are four specific components of Rothman's framework, namely (a) social philosophy, (b) nature of power relationships, (c) change orientation, and (d) change strategies, were useful in analysing each of the community organizing approaches.

Weil (1996) also extensively reviewed models of community organization. She argued for the reframing of community organization into four overarching models of community practice, including development, organizing, planning, and changes.

This study is using a synthesis of above frameworks (Hardina 1997; Weil, 1996; Solas 1990; Rothman 1974, 1996) by analyzing COD teaching methodologies and mentoring strategies of South Asian social work educators using indigenous practices, culture and change as major drivers for community organizing (Nikku, 2010). This study argues that there is ample social action, community advocacy practices from the South Asian region that can be developed further to develop new models of community organization. These models can further be tested by the social work students, practitioners and educators in the field work settings, share and publish their results so as to contribute to the knowledge base of South Asian social work teaching and practice.

4. Community Organization and Development in South Asia

South Asia is the home to nearly two billion people and has been the site of violent historical controversies (Bose & Jalal, 2004). This region is panoply of languages and religions with a rich and complex history, culture, natural characteristics, imposing hills and mountains, lush green river plains, arid deserts and brown plateaus and the geographic locations (Bose & Jalal, 2004). The region encompasses eight diverse independent states including: Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. South Asia has remained a British colony for almost 200 years. Culturally, this region is one of the most multilingual parts of the world. This region is also the liminal space between Islam and Hinduism, and the origin of hybrid cultures like sufism. The countries in this region are faced with similar challenges like: poverty, illiteracy, poor access to education, human rights violations to name a few. The governments have followed different trajectories at the national and regional level for education (Vaish & Gupta, 2008).

In Pakistan, social work as a profession is not new but yet it has not gained the status of a fully accepted profession in the society (Rehmatullah, 2002). For Pakistani people, it is just charity oriented work for the welfare of deserving and destitute. In the wake of enormous social problems, Pakistan started social work education in the country on the recommendations of United Nations (UN) experts soon after its independence in 1947. The purpose of social work education was to prepare professionally qualified and trained social workers who can confront the challenges and have the capacity to deal with social problems in a scientific way. It is not out place to say that Pakistan got many social problems in inheritance immediately after its independence; the country has been facing a number of social problems such as illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, health and hygiene problems since its existence as an independent country. All these problems were prevailing on a massive level and thus the community approach was necessary for its solutions. Keeping in view the scenario, community development was included as a subject in the curriculum of social work at bachelor and master levels of syllabus. But unfortunately these courses did not contribute much, due to the westrenized theories, models and approaches which were and still are difficult to synchronize with the local culture and communities. There is need to discourage imported teaching methodologies and replace them with a localized, indigenous models (Rehmatullah, 2002). She stressed the need for application of theories and models that are developed by Asian educators.

Social work educators narrated that they are still facing a number of bottlenecks in teaching community development as the majority of social work curricula is still the same which was introduced in 1954. There is a need for revised curriculum which reflects the societal needs and aspirations. Ali & Rafi (2013) narrated that social work in the modern era is not a charity work, but it is the systematic and objective task performed for the social well being of communities and people. By owing to certain reasons already mentioned

above such as old curriculum being taught has been imported which is not 'as it is applicable in local culture' therefore there is a need to indigenize the social work model in accordance with local needs and resources for the solution of local problems. The respondents have recommended that social work practice must be carried out in the local culture and traditions.

Community organization and development educators in Pakistan have taken note of these challenges and are converting these difficulties into opportunities. Students of social work in their final year are placed in various government and non-government agencies for their field work practicum. Where students join ongoing activities of the different non-governmental organizations and agencies and hence apply their learnt theoretical knowledge in the field into practice. This opportunity provides them a chance to transform their social work knowledge into practice in the local context.

5. Teaching Community Organization and Development: Department of Social Work, University of Sindh Jamshoro

University of Sindh Jamshoro is located in the center of Sindh province in the city of Jamshoro, which is on the right bank of Indus River. The small city of Jamshoro is surrounded mostly by the rural areas. The majority of students (more than 80 percent) are from rural backgrounds.

5.1. Teaching and Practice Innovation

The department of the social work, University of Sindh has introduced its four-year Bachelors program (BSW) in 2004. This program aims to equip the students to work in the variety of fields within the context of social work practice. The BSSW program provides placement opportunities to its students in various government, non-government Organizations and community sectors. The department also holds regular field work visits in various organizations and community settings. This section discusses the teaching of a social work course and its challenges and learning opportunities.

5.2. Community Organization and Development

The subject of Community Organization and Development COD (SW-525) is taught in the 6th semester of BSW. In the fourth year (in both semesters) the course Practical Community Development (SW-604) & (SW-608) was taught respectively. This is a field practicum course designed to help students who can apply their theoretical knowledge/ community organization models (discussed in the class room) into practice in their field placements. The author who also taught the same batch of students during the third year (COD SW-525) also had the chance to continue supervise field practicum during the fourth years. This has given him the opportunity to further interact with the students. It was an opportunity for the author to implement his innovative ideas into practice.

As the course Practical Community Development is spanned across two semesters, the author divided the students into groups and reiterated the

objectives of practicum during the 7th semester (4th Year). There were total number of 65 students in the BSW 2009-12 batch they were divided in 13 groups (11 rural groups and 2 urban groups). The students who were from the same area/village/Tehsil were grouped together to work with indigenous communities. The idea of grouping students on the basis of origin of village was to manage the mobility, cohesiveness, resources and also to get the best out of their indigenous experiences. It was easy for the students to move and work within each other's community. The students were involved in a 21 days of field work learning. Each student was given an opportunity to work in his/her own community and in other communities. A minimum of three students formed a group and hence each student had the chance to work in two other settings other than his / her own community.

The learning objectives were decided in the beginning of the course and discussed and modified keeping the needs of male and female, rural and urban students in context. The students have decided to work collectively and planned to host each other in their own native community settings. The primary objective of the learning event was to organize the rural communities where there are no existing structures and to restore and strengthen where the traditional communities are already structured. It was also decided to carry out baseline surveys to analyze data to feed in to the existing rural management programs. Beside these primary objectives, as community organizer's the students were consented to play the other main roles of social work such as enabler, educator, advocate, broker, mediator and case manager. As a class, we social workers have come to terms with that the profession of social work (Pakistan is not an isolated case) encourages creative ways of working with individuals, families and communities to resolve the challenges, and aims to promote empowerment, enabling people to take action to improve their lives. Keeping the local needs of community in view, the students were facilitated to play their respective roles to impart and educate the communities on the following objectives: to aware and educate communities about interfaith harmony, on gender equality and to work with communities to prevent violence against women and girls. In addition, we social workers have also planned to raise awareness and educate communities about child rights to prevent child marriages and discuss about fundamental rights that as a citizen guaranteed to them by the constitution of Pakistan. Lastly, we also planned to facilitate and play the bridge role between, agencies, line departments and communities.

In the 8th and final semester (of the 4th Year BSW) of Practical Community Development (SW-608) the students are placed in various government and non-governmental agencies to link and learn further from the field practitioners. As this semester is the last semester of the BSW program, the practicum also provide them the future working/job opportunities. It proves to be the best time for social work students to build connections and to do some networking for their future endeavours.

6. Integrating Didactic, Experiential and Reflective Learning Model

Pakistani social work educators teach and facilitate students to define community and guide them to identify features of communities and strategies to organize them. Students gain the understanding that community is the social set of people having common values and sharing the same resources, needs, challenges, risks and a number of other resources that prevail in that particular geographical area. In addition to the collective understanding, social work educators also introduce and discuss the work of renowned scholars of community organization (mostly from the West) and from the region.

The first author of this paper is a faculty member in the department of social work university of Sindh Jamshoro, Pakistan. He narrates his own experiences about how he has introduced and integrated the theories from the West within the indigenous contexts. The author further narrates his self-experience of engaging social work students in non-formal education settings, where each and every student is invited to share stories of their own communities. The idea was to bring out the different indigenous ways of community management and governance. The idea of consenting students to narrate their communities, contexts, practices and value to name a few resulted in rich understanding of communities in Pakistan in general and Sindh in particular. The debates and discussions became a part of the teaching Community Organization and Development (SW-525) course at Jamshoro. Many of the students have expressed that they have learnt about the different indigenous, modern and western approaches of understanding and organizing of the communities. As a part of these class practices different new ideas and approaches were identified and selected for the practice in the actual community settings.

The second novelty in teaching this class was the use of a Jig Saw Picture puzzles (Aqsi Moammo) representing each piece of the puzzle as a component of the community. This technique helped students to understand the community and its sub parts and working in small groups further facilitated to solve the community issues in class room context which can be applied in the field. The idea of solving the puzzles had a twofold objective: one is to encourage the students (male & female) to work with each other and to participate in group activities. And the second was to emphasize the importance of each and every piece to complete the puzzle. The students have realized that if the puzzle pieces are scattered (community is disorganized) and if not aligned (the community is distorted). In addition, the author also arranged experiential classes in actual community settings locally known as (Mach Kachehri) bone fire gatherings. This is an old and traditional way of gathering of community members in the winter season. The bonfire usually takes place at the open to sky venues during the moderate cold winter. But when the weather is extremely cold, the bonfire takes place in a hut (locally called Laandhi) made of mud walls and the bamboo roof. Though the practice of rural community gathering during night times is a routine throughout the year it differs in summer. In summers it takes place in the open to sky and

without the bonfire. The experiential classes were held in the 2nd semester that falls in winter so that the students had the opportunity to witness and be part of the bonfire community gatherings, during which many community issues and politics are being discussed. The bonfire gatherings (*Mach Kachehri*) are one of the important platforms to discuss the prevailing issues of the community and to work out appropriate solutions. The communities also occasionally organize special bonfire gatherings where they share folklores, riddles and Sufi music. These meetings also serve the purpose of recreational, cultural, community planning and a source of information exchange.

The community members offer tea and Pearl millet porridge (*Bajhri je rab*) which is the symbol of warm hospitality and a local tradition. The learning experience of attending a bonfire gatherings and learning the community issues directly laid a strong foundation for students who later involved in meso and macro social work practice. In addition, the warm hospitality and acceptance was quite a new experience for many of the urban students especially girls from urban areas. Normally in most of the communities these bonfire gatherings are only meant for the male members of the community but in some communities' elder women are also allowed to sit and participate. While in some communities' women have their separate bonfire gatherings. The student feedback (both oral and written) shows the evidence that the experiential visits and bonfire gatherings were very useful in understanding the community structures, practices and issues that can be addressed through possible social work interventions. One of the urban female students Ms. Romana student of 3rd year BSW 2009-12 batch expressed her feelings;

“for me it was an experience of a lifetime, I only heard about (*Mach Kachehri*) but never thought that I will ever participate in one. Never even thought that the community people are that much talented having no formal education, we actually learn so many things from them. I am very much inspired by their love and hospitality, the experience is totally mesmerizing and I want to go again and again”.

Mr. Ali Raza, the student of 3rd year BSW 2009-12 batch, who was from the community that was visited and also was the facilitator of the (*Mach Kachehri*) expressed his feelings that;

“when I was asked to facilitate the *Mach Kachehri* I was bit worried about the participation of female students, but when I discuss with the community members they not only allow them to participate but gave them a warm welcome by honoring them with the gifts of (*Ajrak*) a block printed shawl. As social work student and a community member, I felt that the elders of community liked the active participation of females and it has lent a positive impact on them regarding girl's education”

As a result, students paid attention as actively participated in the learning process. They were able to relate the insights gained by these visits into further class room discussions on community dynamics and power and realized that they them-self were part of a community and have unique roles to play. Students were able to understand the theoretical tenets of community organization discussed by scholars like John McKnight, Paulo Freire, Thomas Reginald Batten, Donna Hardina, Marie Weil, John Solas, Jack Rothman, Robert Goodman and Peter Hodge.

The community platforms do provide community vehicles that give voice to diversity and assume that consensual contribution is the primary value (McKnight, 1987). The author further stated “the proliferation and development of community associations allow for the flowering of creative solutions” (p.56). One of the important factors of exposing the students in to the actual community settings was to observe the interaction of students with the community members, as mentioned above as “sense of community”. As social work educators, we were keen to develop the sense of community in the students, so that the students are nurtured in both university and community contexts.

As a social work educator and practitioner, the author reflected that his own beliefs about community organization did also influence the teaching and learning process. For example, the introduction of new approaches and structures to work with communities (by NGOs and donor communities) have neither been successful in the past nor will they have any effect in the future. The new structures have challenged the age old traditional system of village governance and decision making by Wadera system which in some communities proved to be exploitative. From this discussion, two crucial community organizing approaches have evolved: first, how to strengthen the existing/traditional community structures of community organizations, second, how to awaken the rural communities so that they can benefit from the modern governance practices and resource management. As a class we further debated on these issues and have agreed that one way to strengthen the existing power structures (Wadera system) is to make them proactive and to drive them on practical sustainable development of their communities by introducing non feudal and inclusive practices. The second challenge is the rural awakening especially their own rights and responsibilities. The fact is that in the remote rural areas where the literacy rate is alarmingly low and the people are deprived from their basics rights and responsibilities. Even in the presence of the modern means of media and communication technology which exist (Smart phones and Satellite TV in rural households) but the lack of perceptiveness still rampant in rural Pakistan. This is a huge challenge for community organizing and development.

The student groups over period of time provided a space of their own world to reflect themselves and their assumptions regarding their communities and to learn about community dynamics and strengthen their knowledge and skills about applying indigenous approaches in their day to day work with

communities. The students were able to take charge of their own learning and hence performed well having the sound background knowledge about their communities and the theoretical knowledge of the community organizing. The students mentioned in their field practicum reports that they gained required skills to organize, train and restore the values of rural communities and they can design and implement rural programs that are sustainable development. During the briefing session it was also discussed about the continuous rise in social inequality, terrorism and extremism in Pakistan, have put social work educators and professionals in a very challenging situation. There is a high need to rejuvenate and redirect social work strategies to address the prevailing challenges of the current Pakistani society. To cater these prevailing challenges social work educators and professional have to take full responsibility as skilled professionals to educate and enable the new breed of social workers in a manner so that they can work as change agents and bring desired changes in the society.

The overall results of the initiative were very positive. The 11 rural student groups were able to organize, restore and restructure many village organizations during their field placement of 45 days. As a result, out of 33 community interventions, 19 Village Development Organizations (VDO's) were formed and 14 organizations were restored and restructured in the year 2012. The 2012 cohort concluded that the public need to be educated about their rights as a citizen of Pakistan and should also be conscientised (shaoor) about their basic rights, privileges and responsibilities using community organizing models. As a class we were able to achieve the goals of learning by applying didactic leaning as a model for teaching and practicing COD in Pakistan that is appropriate and reflective as well as applicable to use in social work teaching in Pakistan, especially rural Sindh.

7. Teaching Community Organization at the Nepal School of Social Work: Connectedness and Building Relationship

Teaching at the Nepal School of Social Work (NSSW) is not only a responsibility but a passion. The faculty at NSSW has a role in building relationships with the learners not only limited to classroom interactions but spans across a spectrum of activities. The neighborhood, rural and urban camps that the second author of this paper conducted over years gave necessary insights about teaching and practicing commutarian social work in a trainstion country like that of Nepal. The author educator reflected:

I have taken teaching as a form of scholarship and served as a faculty member in charge (during 2005-2010) for the macro social work courses at NSSW. This position in particlaur has given me the opportunity to understand student's attitudes towards issues like to feeling of a community or inclusiveness. At the same I am also aware that I am also been observed by the students and they are also making an assessment of me and my

attitudes and views. I used to share my life experiences and incidents from my own difficulties with access to education hailing from a village agrarian family. I sometimes felt I was exposing myself and asked myself am I revealing too much and crossing the professional boundaries. Reflecting back I find that these incidents inside and the outside the classroom did help in building connectedness with the students which I believe have implication on their professional training my teaching career.

Student group named 'Young and Hopeless' staged a 48 hours hunger strike in 2011 demanding constitution from the current members of the Constituent Assembly of Nepal. This action would not be something that would appear as a social work tool of practice in a formal curriculum. But for the students it is a part of their responsibility as young citizens of Nepal and also as students of social workers putting their conscience in to practice (Nikku, 2012, 2013). Similarly other student initiatives at NSSW further provide evidence on how teaching and mentoring opportunities shape the community practice in Nepal are: Nepal Unites for Social Work, We Stand to Understand, Yug Activist Group, United Hands for Social Development at NSSW staged silent protests in different parts of Kathmandu Valley to raise the public awareness about current consensus politics and delays in constitution writing. These groups are actively using web technologies to mobilize public wakefulness and participation on crucial social, political, cultural and educational issues in Nepal.

8. Conclusion and Way forward

The two main questions that we posed in the beginning of this paper: how to teach, facilitate and nurture social work students to gain perspectives and skills Community Organizing and Development? And what are the best strategies to help students to acquire relevant organizing skills and practice methods have been answered.

As social work educators teaching a course on community organization, as one of the core courses in the Bachelor of Social Work degree at two different schools of social work in Pakistan and Nepal, we confirm the findings of Hardina (1997) and continue to struggle to find meaningful ways to teach this course in order to accomplish stated learning outcomes.

It was evident both from Pakistan and Nepal that social work students being members of the local communities were very much encouraged and supported by their peers and seniors. The students continued to coordinate with the village development organizations (VDO's) even after completion of their field practicum requirements in the case of Pakistan. During this process the students have learnt the group formation and facilitation skills. As a result, organizing the community members did not stop at the level of participating in the winter bonfire meetings but continued to help and facilitate rural

communities to identify available community resources to them in order to address their issues like importance of education for girl children.

Teaching Community Organization and Development (COD) in Pakistan and Nepal has been a multidimensional task, on the one hand, there is a dearth of locally produced literature for teachers and students, on the other hand, there are not many voluntary agencies which are practicing community development approach in the practical sense. Additionally, the local cultural settings that promote the norms of male supremacy, it is difficult to train gender mix (both men and women) students using role plays and street theatre for example where there is a need for working together leading to critical self-reflections to develop as a professional self. It was also evident that the government and non-governmental departments engaged in the community development have such an approach that is closes to social planning model of community organizing (Rothman, 1974; 1996). Due to this top down approach of technical process of problem solving and bureaucratic corrupt practices, building community capacity or fostering radical or fundamental social change has not become the major goal of this model of community practice that was evident in the case of Pakistan compared to Nepal.

From the two case studies it is very clear that social work educators in community development have to perform multifaceted tasks as part of their job responsibilities for incucation of community organization and development skills in their students. Community organizing and development educators have to relate the imported knowledge with the local needs and resources, so that an in-depth understanding about community, its structure, power dynamics, strategies and resources can be developed by the students who are professional social workers in making. Educators have to find ways to turn challenges into learning opportunities as is evident in this study, with their mentoring role during field work placements of the students. They have to conduct regular supervisory meetings with the students and help them to apply community development knowledge into practice.

The study argued that social work educators engaged in teaching community organization in developing countries like that of Pakistan and Nepal are frequently confronted with varied obstacles that need to be overcome if teaching and professional goals are to be achieved. Teaching community organization needs a variety of strategies: class room teaching coupled with appropriate field practicum placements to provide the students with a real life community living and understanding of livelihood issues.

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