



A Brief Overview of Integral Social Work

David Kerrigan

The present article seeks to explore Integral Social Work—its meaning and applications. This goal is achieved by exploring the nature of social service in the context of Integral Theory’s AQAL (all-quadrant, all-level) approach. The essence of Integral Social Work is to serve the whole person and the whole of society with the whole of one’s being. This requires that social workers develop *themselves*, while simultaneously helping others, and society, to develop in as full, complex, and healthy a way as possible.

“One thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.”

– Albert Schweitzer

What Is Social Work?

Social work and social service are two concepts that have undergone many transformations and permutations over time. *Social work* is the term used by professional organizations and state licensing boards. *Social service* is seen as the larger vocation of serving individuals and society, although it is also used by professional schools of social work, such as the National Catholic School of Social Service and by governmental departments of social service. Social work is also a term frequently used by non-professionals who seek to serve individuals and society. Since social work is the more commonly used term, it will be the one I use most often in this article.

A simple working definition of social work is that it seeks to promote the well-being of the individual and society.¹ Gibelman notes that there are multiple ways of defining social work (by fields of practice, practice settings, agency-types, functions performed, clients served, methods



used, practice goals, services provided, and types of presenting problems).² These are highly various, and have changed over time, but underlying all definitions of social work is a focus on the person and the environment. That is, both the individual and the social setting in their interactive complexity are of interest, and the task of social work is to effect the best, most just, person-environment interactions possible.

The levels of intervention extend from the world of direct “micro” practice with individuals, couples, and families, to indirect “macro” practice, involving policy and administration at agency, local, national, and international levels. Visionary social workers such as Jane Addams and Mary Richmond have long been aware of the importance of both micro and macro practice and their interaction, although social work has veered back and forth in terms of general emphasis, a trend Richmond described and criticized as early as the 1920s.³

Gibelman also emphasizes that social workers need to engage actively and consciously in the ongoing definition and redefinition of social work.⁴ This article constitutes a contribution to that ongoing discussion.

Integral Theory: Quadrants and Levels

Integral Theory is a complex meta-theory seeking to integrate empirical findings and theories from a range of disciplines. For more detailed expositions, consult the writings of Ken Wilber and other theorists and investigators on whom he draws.⁵ Integral Theory involves five foundational elements. It seeks to explore and explain the concepts of *quadrants* and *levels* (explained below), the notion of multiple *lines* of development (a concept drawn from Anna Freud),⁶ various *states* (e.g., dreaming consciousness), and *types* (e.g., personality and social structure). For social work, a major advantage of Integral Theory is that it can include and integrate available contributions of the different schools of thought addressing human behavior in the social environment.



Quadrants

Integral Social Work acknowledges the four irreducible perspectives represented by the quadrants in Integral Theory: the interior, the exterior, the individual, and the collective. A “heart” perspective, for instance, often emphasizes the subjective, or interior, desire to help, while a “head” orientation tends to emphasize the objective, or exterior, understanding of the functioning of individuals and societies. The micro approach emphasizes the individual far more than does the macro approach, while the macro approach emphasizes the collective (of course, the micro approach also emphasizes the collective on a small, but important, scale).

These dimensions, interior-exterior and individual-collective, naturally interact, and when they do, the interaction is represented by the quadrants (see figure 1). Wilber represents these quadrants with interior-individual in the Upper Left (UL), exterior-individual in the Upper Right (UR), interior-collective in the Lower Left (LL), and exterior-collective in the Lower Right (LR). As human beings, we possess all quadrants at all times. We are individuals with interior experiences of physical feelings, emotions, and thoughts (UL). We are individuals who can observe from an exterior perspective, examining our behaviors, our brainwaves, our facial features, and so forth (UR). We are communal beings who interact and experience others just as they have interior experiences of and with us—encompassing, but not limited to, our mutual physical, emotional, and cognitive experiences (LL). Finally, we are communal beings whose interactions with others can be studied from an exterior perspective—sociologically, politically, economically, physiologically, and so forth (LR). As a sort of shorthand, the interior-individual quadrant could be called “I,” the exterior-individual could be called “It,” the interior-collective could be called “We,” and the exterior-collective could be called “Its.”



	INTERIOR	EXTERIOR
INDIVIDUAL	Psychodynamic theory Developmental theories Cognitive theory Attachment theory Transpersonal theories I	Behavioral theory Referral for medical & pharmacological interventions (biological & genetic theories) IT
COLLECTIVE	 WE Ethics & Social Justice Family & group theories Social capital theory Sociological theories (Weber, Durkheim)	 ITS Sociological theories (Marx, Parsons) Ecological systems perspective Social Learning Theories Organizational theories Economic theories

Figure 1. The Quadrants

Social workers place emphasize different aspects or different quadrants, and historically, social workers have tended to oscillate between the “upper” individual quadrants and the lower communal or “collective” quadrants. To some extent, some social workers have tended to emphasize the Left-Hand interior quadrants, while others have tended to emphasize the Right-Hand exterior quadrants. To their credit, many social workers have attempted to acknowledge the importance of all quadrants. Mary Richmond, for example, emphasized the importance of: the client's feelings, memories, and hopes (interior-individual, UL); careful study of the client’s behavior and objective life circumstances (individual-exterior, UR); the respectful-collaborative relationship between caseworker and client and the importance of compassionate social values (collective-interior, LL); and the careful study of social circumstances and the importance of



social reform (collective-exterior, LR). These she understood as interpenetrating and mutually influential.⁷

Levels

The developmental theories used by social workers are replete with notions of stages, phases, and levels.⁸ It seems that those who study any sort of development (e.g., psychosexual, psychosocial, cognitive, moral, social, spiritual, economic, and societal) observe similar patterns: healthy development involves a move from simpler to more complex forms of organization and function. The new forms add innovative capabilities that were perhaps latent in earlier forms but now achieve a new clarity of definition, with greater differentiation of capacities and higher-level integration of these capacities. The process involves new levels transcending and including older levels.

Unfortunately, development does not always occur in a healthy or functional way. Damage, such as trauma, occurring in early phases of development can compromise later phases of development. New, higher-order capacities can be used to dominate, suppress, or deny older, lower-order capacities. Older, lower-order capacities, especially if pathologically developed, can subvert higher-order development. Development can be inhibited or undone through resistance to further development, the failure of the environment to support further development, fixation, and regression. As systems of any kind become more complex, the potential increases not only for positive outcomes but also for those which are negative.⁹

In terms of positive potential, Gandhi as a child lacked the sophistication of Gandhi the adult. As a child, he could suggest to his mother that untouchability seemed contrary to the inner meaning of religion.¹⁰ But not until he was an adult was he ready to confront the British Empire and lead his nation to independence through a sophisticated program of spiritual and political development and action.¹¹ In terms of negative potential, the toddler whapping a playmate with a



plastic block cannot inflict nearly the damage as that of an adult wielding an automatic rifle or ruling a dictatorship.

There is a general sequence of development for human individuals and societies from one level of organization to another. This pattern emerges particularly if one combines multiple developmental theories. The sequence can be divided into any number of stages, but for the sake of simplicity, I will use a three stage sequence: egocentric, sociocentric, and worldcentric.¹² Most developmental theories focus on only parts of the sequence. For example, Freud's theory of psychosexual development concentrates primarily on a detailed exploration of egocentric levels and, to some extent, sociocentric levels.¹³ Erikson and Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory encompasses egocentric, sociocentric, and worldcentric concerns, as does Weber's theory of societal development.^{14 15}

Keep in mind that any individual may operate simultaneously on multiple levels along different lines of development. Individuals will, however, tend to have a center of gravity at one level, unless they are in a process of transition from one level to another. Likewise, any given society may contain members who are at various levels (each with their own "center of gravity"), but the society itself will also have an average level of development.

At the *egocentric* level, the self is experienced as the center of the universe, with others as only semi-distinct extensions of the self. Worldview and *moral span* (the sense of what is morally valuable) are limited and fundamentally relate to how the individual feels, what the individual wants, and so forth. Societal organizations at the egocentric level are characterized by impulsivity of members and gratifying short-term impulses for safety or power. External norms, to the extent they exist at all, are fairly crude.

As the person develops, he or she moves to the *sociocentric* level, becoming more oriented to the social group (family, peer group, tribe, subculture, professional group, city, nation, co-



religionists, etc.) as the reference point, with the self being seen as part of the social group. Worldview and moral span expand and fundamentally relate to the feelings, values, goals, and norms of the group. The group itself develops clear norms for interaction, which include a special status for the group and its members; persons who are members of the group, especially those who fulfill the group's values, are valued above non-members or those who violate group norms.

As the person develops further, he or she moves to the *worldcentric* level, becoming more oriented to the world community as the main reference point, with the self and all social groups being viewed as part of a vast web of beings. Worldview and moral span expand still further and relate to the needs and aspirations of humanity (or the living world) as a whole. A full-fledged worldcentric society has not yet emerged, although certain worldcentric envisioned institutions have, such as the United Nations. These institutions and the ideals supporting them suggest that an increasingly worldcentric consciousness has been developing over time. It seems that the world as a whole is undergoing a difficult and complex shift from sociocentric perspectives to worldcentric perspectives, with a substantial number of societies still struggling with members who have an egocentric orientation.

Integrating Social Work and the AQAL Model

If social work seeks to promote the well-being of individuals, society, and human functioning (and therefore well-being) as an integrated, interpenetrating, interacting, all-quadrant, all-level (AQAL) affair, what does this mean? Basically, it means that social work needs to find ways to promote well-being individually and collectively, interiorly and exteriorly, and to promote it at all levels. Because of the integrated, interpenetrating, interacting nature of human well-being, it can be promoted in many ways at once, as suggested in the discussion of Integral practice by Wilber.¹⁶ This section will seek to address the promotion of well-being in the individual client,



the social worker, and the larger social system that includes them. I will address two general phases: assessment and intervention.

It is axiomatic that the social worker must start where the client is. But where is the client? We attempt to answer this question through assessment of all-quadrants at all-levels: interior-individual (UL), exterior-individual (UR), interior-collective (LL), exterior-collective (LR) and in terms of functioning at egocentric, sociocentric, worldcentric, and Kosmoscentric levels. From the viewpoint of intervention, Integral intervention would address needs and encourage development to the extent possible in all-quadrants at all-levels.

Integral intervention becomes easier to understand if applied to a case. Consider the case of an immigrant family in which the formerly studious teenage daughter has become involved in drugs and theft. She has started staying out past curfew and using drugs with delinquent friends, and her enraged and highly traditional father has severely beaten her in order to get her to comply with family and community expectations. The girl has appeared at school bruised, and the Department of Social Services (DSS) has placed her in foster care, with a goal of family reunification.

An Integral social worker assigned to this girl's case will seek to understand and intervene in the situation of the girl in all-quadrants at all-levels. What is the girls' subjective experience (UL)? What are her physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, and spiritual experiences? These questions may be asked about others in the person-environment configuration, such as the girl's father, other family members, the foster family, the school personnel, and the social worker; however, for the balance of this analysis, the focus will be on the girl. Let's say that the girl is experiencing intense drug cravings and withdrawal symptoms, a fear for her future and shame about her past, and bewilderment at the actions of the DSS (which would have been inconceivable in her native land). She is also experiencing a sense of spiritual crisis.



What is observable about the girl (UR)? The girl has been taking drugs and this is reflected in her behavior (seeking to procure drugs, withdrawal behavior) and in drug screen results. She has also been stealing. At the moment, she is acting immobilized and her body is undergoing complex changes.

How do the girl and other people feel about each other and their interactions (LL)? How do the subjective experiences and social values they have interact? Let's say that the girl and father share a deep sense of loving connection beneath their conflicts, but they also see themselves as deeply shamed. They also find themselves in the awkward position of having once shared a worldview in which children should unquestioningly obey their parents and parents have the absolute right to use any means to enforce obedience, but now their worldviews are at odds. The girl feels torn between her father's traditional obedience values, her peer group's immediate gratification values, and her social worker's (and the larger U.S. society's) unfamiliar modernistic values of individual responsibility and pluralism.

How does the girl, and others in her environment, interact in the context of various systems (legal, economic, political, educational) (LR)? For example, imagine that the girl and her father, to the extent they have contact, trade recriminations. The girl interacts secretly with her drug-using, criminal friends and involves other children in the foster home in arranging meetings with them. In addition, in a far larger context, companies that had employed many in the community are moving operations overseas, leaving many unemployed, and crime rates are rising, contributing to the delinquent behavior of the girl's peer group.

Finally, to what extent and in what ways, healthy or unhealthy, is the girl (or those she is in contact with) operating at the egocentric, sociocentric, and worldcentric levels? At a time when developmentally she would be expected to undergo a difficult process of moving from a more egocentric orientation to an increasingly sociocentric orientation, the process is breaking down. As implied above, in addition to having and acting on intense egocentric impulses and having an



alliance with friends who share a similar orientation, the girl is also struggling with the difficult transition between a traditional world of sociocentric values and a modern U.S. world incorporating an uncertain mix of worldcentric values. That is, having come from a highly sociocentric culture in which social rules and roles were clearly defined and perhaps divinely given, the girl may have been exposed rather suddenly to a wide range of lifestyles and viewpoints in her school.

Unable to make the leap to a more complex and serviceable cosmopolitan worldview, unable to find and join a social group that shared such a complex worldview, and unable to accept unquestioned sociocentric verities any longer, she may have retreated to the relative simplicity of egocentricity and a social group that celebrates immediate gratification.

The social worker must find ways to help the girl and her family deal with their situation, address their problems and make use of resources and strengths in all-quadrants and at all-levels. At the egocentric level, the social worker might help the girl meet security and gratification needs (UL) by helping to link her, through community organizations (LR), to more positive peers through shared interests (LL) and activities (LR), as well as by helping her, through family therapy and culturally appropriate rituals and practices, to reconnect with her family (LL and LR). The social worker may help at the sociocentric level by helping the girl, through arranging mentoring by an understanding community elder, to learn more about her culture (LR) and its values (LL) and to find ways to embrace its values in a personally enriching, non-stultifying way (UL). As part of this process, the social worker might need to work with the father through private discussions to help him find methods (UR and LR) of upholding cultural norms and values (LL) and reward appropriate behaviors (UR and LR). Both girl and father will need to understand (UL and LL) and negotiate (LR) the partly worldcentric larger U.S. society with its multiplicity of norms and values (LL) and behavioral patterns (LR).



Our Integral social worker is mindful of the macro dimensions of the girl's situation, and may herself be actively involved in advocating for policy changes that can enhance the girl's well-being, as well as that of society (LR). To be brief, she might work for policies supporting community-based businesses, to create positive opportunities for the girl, her peers, and her community. She might also work for policies that support drug treatment opportunities, both inside and outside the correctional system. She also might work for policies supporting restorative justice, so that if the girl should face charges, she will have an opportunity to do good for those she has wronged, to regain self-respect, and to build her sociocentric sense of responsibility—at least to the extent she works for committed change according to her own social values.¹⁷ Insofar as the social worker advocates for, develops, and implements policies, she must also remain aware of the all-quadrant, all-level realities of the world in which policy is approved, developed, and implemented.

It should be noted, if only briefly, that the Integral social worker, in order to be of maximum help to her clients, is often engaged in transformational activities of her own. The difficulty and complexity of this one case should make it clear that avenues to further healthy development and renewal will always need to be found. One of the most important of these transformational activities is the very helping process she undertakes with her clients. In all quadrants and at all levels practicable, she may seek to cultivate her own well-being through personal (e.g., exercise and nutrition, meditation, psychotherapy, healthy and caring relationships) and communal practices (e.g., community volunteering, political action, participation in spiritual community) to enhance her own person-in-environment bio-psycho-social-spiritual functioning. The complex and intense demands of social work could be said to require this level of dedication.

Conclusion

Integral Social Work and Social Service is committed to the well-being of the whole individual and the whole society. This is a complex matter that requires an Integral approach. Human



beings function in interacting quadrants (interior-individual, exterior-individual, interior-collective, and exterior-collective) at multiple levels (e.g., egocentric, sociocentric, and worldcentric). This complexity demands that social workers find methods to understand and intervene in Integral ways that do justice to the person-environment realities social workers face.



Endnotes

- ¹ National Association of Social Workers, *Code of ethics*, 1999
- ² Gibelman, "The search for identity: Defining social work—past, present, and future," 1999
- ³ Consult Richmond, *The long view*, 1930
- ⁴ Gibelman, "The search for identity: Defining social work—past, present, and future," 1999
- ⁵ Wilber, *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000
- ⁶ Freud, "The concept of developmental lines," 1963
- ⁷ Richmond, *The long view*, 1930
- ⁸ Consult Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, *Contemporary human behavior theory: A critical perspective for social work*, 1998
- ⁹ Consult Wilber, *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000
- ¹⁰ Gandhi, "Early glimpses of religious life," 1948/1956
- ¹¹ Consult Fischer, *The life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1950/1983
- ¹² Wilber, *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000
- ¹³ Freud, *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*, 1905/1962
- ¹⁴ Erikson & Erikson, *The life cycle completed*, 1997
- ¹⁵ Weber, *Basic concepts in sociology*, 1962
- ¹⁶ Wilber, *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000
- ¹⁷ Consult Judah & Bryant, *Criminal justice: Retribution vs. restoration*, 2004



REFERENCES

Erikson, Erik H. & Erikson, Joan M. (1997). *The life cycle completed* (Extended ed.). New York: W. W. Norton.

Fischer, Louis (1983). *The life of Mahatma Gandhi*. New York: Harper Colophon. (Original work published 1950)

Freud, Anna (1963). The concept of developmental lines. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 18, 245-265.

Freud, Sigmund (1962). *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (James Strachey, Trans. & Ed.). New York: Basic Books. (Original work published 1905)

Gandhi, Mohandas K. (1956). Early glimpses of religious life. In Homer A. Jack (Ed.), *The Gandhi reader: A sourcebook of his life and writings* (pp. 14-17). New York: Grove Press.

Gibelman, Margaret (1999). The search for identity: Defining social work—past, present, and future. *Social Work*, 44 (4), 298-310.

Judah, Eleanor Hannon & Bryant, Rev. Michael (Eds.). (2004). *Criminal justice: Retribution vs. restoration*. New York: The Haworth Press.

National Association of Social Workers (1999). *Code of ethics*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Richmond, Mary E. (1930). *The long view*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Robbins, Susan P.; Chatterjee, Pranab & Canda, Edward R. (1998). *Contemporary human behavior theory: A critical perspective for social work*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Weber, Max (1962). *Basic concepts in sociology*. New York: Philosophical Library. (Original work published 1925)

Wilber, Ken (2000). *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*. Boston: Shambhala.



DAVID KERRIGAN, Ph.D., LCSW, serves as Executive Director of the Center for Spirituality and Integral Social Work at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. He works as a clinical social worker at Adoption/Attachment partners in Northern Virginia, a psychotherapy practice specializing in helping children and their families with attachment problems. His dissertation on the helping relationship with clinical social work clients and spiritual seekers was one of the first dissertations to use Integral Theory. He is developing a psychosocial self-report measure integrating spiritual transcendence and attachment theory.