
21. Social work practice with older adults

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INTRODUCTION

Evidence reveals that older adults are among the most stigmatized groups in the US and Western societies, where ‘youth’ is highly valued, fueling a multi-million-dollar industry focused on staying young. This emphasis reveals the stigma and negative attitudes toward aging. Like racism or sexism, ageism refers to negative attitudes, stereotypes, and behaviors directed at older adults based solely on age (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, 2018; Chiangog, 2021; Richeson and Shelton, 2006). Ageism appears in domains such as the workplace and health-care. For example, workplace age discrimination, such as mandatory retirement, prompted the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (81 Stat. 602). Subtle ageism also occurs in healthcare, where older adults are often viewed as incapable, influencing their treatment and care (Adelman et al., 1991; Gordon, 2020; Richeson and Shelton, 2006).

Individuals generally express more negative attitudes toward older adults compared to younger individuals (Kang and Chasteen, 2009; Nelson, 2011; Teater and Chonody, 2017). The distinctions between ‘young’ and ‘old’ become more evident when considering the general category of ‘older adults’ rather than specific examples. Research shows that older adults are not perceived as a homogeneous group but instead consist of various subtypes (Brewer et al., 1981; Hummert, 1990; North and Fiske, 2012). These subtypes range from negative traits such as vulnerability and frailty to positive attributes like kindness and competence, which often differ by gender (Brewer et al., 1981; Richeson and Shelton, 2006). Social workers must strive to understand these complexities and help navigate the diverse perceptions of older adults.

APPROACHES TO PRACTICE WITH OLDER ADULTS

Due to the growing older adult population, there is a global need for gerontological practice across health and social services (Youdin, 2014). Social workers in this field require specialized knowledge of issues such as multicultural concerns, sexuality, medical and psychological challenges, dementia, substance use, housing, residential placement, and end-of-life care (Dev et al., 2020; Youdin and Brownell, 2014).

The mission of social work practice with older adults primarily focuses on micro and mezzo levels, with limited emphasis on macro practice. Many social work students prioritize micro practice, often neglecting broader social issues, resulting in a psychological rather than a comprehensive perspective. However, social work curricula are increasingly adopting a holistic approach, recognizing the influence of social and cultural factors on psychological issues (Adams et al., 2017; Gasker, 2023). Master’s level social work programs now offer training to address aging from micro, mezzo, and macro perspectives, though it is unclear how much

students utilize this opportunity. This contrasts with nursing education, which emphasizes the importance of working with older adults (Harris et al., 2013; 2021). Social work schools must prepare future social workers for the growing aging population by equipping them with relevant knowledge and skills.

The Nature of Social Work Practice with Older Adults

Social workers play a vital role in home healthcare while helping individuals solve and cope with daily issues (Browne, 2019). Those who work with older adults may assist in medication management, adaptive living skills, and identifying resources that may benefit individuals and families. Geriatric social workers are vital to helping older adults navigate the often-complex world of aging and the stereotypes that accompany them. For example, in many cases, older adults and their family members must choose from the many local and national resources but are not always equipped to make these informed decisions. In this regard, social workers assist in the following ways:

1. **Transitional Planning:** Develop a transition plan after a hospital or nursing home stay to assist the individual in making a successful recovery. This may include transportation or in-home care services.
2. **Communication:** Communicate with interdisciplinary teams to ensure everyone is collaborating on the plan of care. This will assist in mitigating the siloed communication channels between the individual, healthcare providers, and their caregivers. In addition, some social workers are trained to communicate with insurance and manage care providers and various programs to which the individuals may be entitled.
3. **Resource Support:** Social workers are a wealth of information regarding aging care services. From identifying local programs and resources you or your loved one can take advantage of to offering expert input on complex subjects like end-of-life care, geriatric social workers can tap into a broader network to help identify which services would help improve a senior citizen's overall quality of life.

The Challenges of Social Work Practice with Older Adults

With the growing older adult population, ensuring their quality of life and access to services is increasingly critical, primarily when they rely on care (Ghența et al., 2022). Social workers entering the geriatric field must be well-trained and knowledgeable about aging-related issues (Goldberg, 2021; Lee et al., 2006; Milne et al., 2014). Exposure to internships serving older adults and gerontology-focused courses on aging practice, family dynamics, and clinical care will equip students with a deeper understanding of the social, physical, mental, and financial challenges of aging (Steitz et al., 2021). While working with older adults, social workers develop patience, compassion, and problem-solving skills. They address complex systemic barriers and family conflicts that affect care. Despite these challenges, gerontological social workers can enjoy working with older adults and build meaningful connections with clients who appreciate their compassionate care (Milne et al., 2014).

Social Work Practice: Using the Strengths Perspective in Working With Older Adults

The demographic overview of social work practice with older adults may appear impossible to tackle. Indeed, if a social worker focuses solely on what is ‘wrong’, the challenges will overwhelm both the client and the social worker (Vishal, 2018). However, social workers must focus on the ‘strong’ – strength to identify the older adults’ abilities, personal attributes, and social assets, which can aid in finding solutions to the issues facing aging. Strength-based approaches are often used with older adults to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression to promote quality of life (Chapin et al., 2016; Chapin and Lewis, 2023).

Assessing Strengths in Older Adults

Assessing strengths is crucial in strength-based social work practice with older adults (Chonody and Teater, 2017). Social workers use interviews, checklists, and strength charts to identify clients’ strengths and develop client-centered intervention plans (Kaplan and Berkman, 2016). This approach allows social workers to view clients holistically, addressing psychological rather than pathological issues and seeking resources to help them thrive (Saleebey, 1996). While strength-based approaches can be challenging due to the abstract nature of some issues, skilled social workers can design effective, collaborative interventions. Chapin et al. (2016) outline the foundational principles of using a strengths-based approach. This approach may vary but generally includes the following key elements (Saleebey, 1996):

1. Everyone has individual strengths.
2. All experiences (including the negative) may allow for opportunities for growth.
3. The social work assessment process often makes references to limitations rather than capabilities.
4. Collaboration increases motivation and engagement in clients.
5. Resources can be found in almost every environment.

Life experiences are central to the strengths of older adults, who are often stereotyped as inactive and dependent. Using strengths-based approaches with older adults can help reduce the trauma of aging and improve mental health in various settings (Chapin and Lewis, 2023).

Social Work Practice: Service Settings for Working with Older Adults

The need for social services for older adults aligns along a broad scale, from limited support of homecare services, home health aide services, and meal services to extensive care in rehabilitation settings (Kalantari et al., 2021). The roles of social workers range from traditional practice as an advocate, case manager, therapist, or broker to non-traditional roles such as yoga teacher, exercise coach, and spiritual counselor, to name a few. Hospitals and nursing homes are often seen as the most common settings for social work practice with older adults (Brennan et al., 2020). However, these settings only represent a small part of the opportunities available for interested social workers with a passion for knowledge about older adults.

Social service agencies are common settings for social work practice with older adults (Knickman and Snell, 2002; Toth et al., 2020). About 5% of the older population reside in

nursing homes and assisted or independent living facilities, receive home healthcare or geriatric care services, and participate in adult day programs (ASPE, 2020). Other key practice areas include legal settings and the growing field of pre-retirement counseling.

Direct Practice in Social Service Agencies

Direct practice with older adults in social service agencies involves addressing their unique needs, concerns, and challenges. Social workers play a critical role in enhancing older adults' well-being and quality of life. In larger communities, these agencies provide a range of services tailored to older adults, such as case management, counseling, mental health support, housing, transportation, home care, and protective services (Siegler et al., 2015). These services may be offered through the Department of Social Services, local Councils on Aging, churches, and other community organizations. In small communities or rural areas, however, services for older adults may be offered within regional agencies or in agencies that serve other populations that employ social workers with expertise in working with older adults (Levasseur et al., 2020).

Often, the initial contact with a social worker is a family member concerned about their loved one and unsure how to begin receiving services. Social workers are essential in coordinating and initiating services from various agencies that offer care management for older adults (Reckrey et al., 2014). Although family members often provide caregiving, the strain of the responsibilities can become very overwhelming for them. As a result, in some cases, the caretaker of the older adult becomes the client and can benefit from support groups and respite services. In this sense, as an immediate crisis often causes contact with a social worker, caregivers may need reassurance, support, and a structured plan to stabilize the situation in various areas. Key aspects of social work practice in social service agencies may include:

1. **Case Management, Advocacy, and Planning:** Social workers assess the social, emotional, and physical needs of older adults and their caregivers. They coordinate community resources, advocate for access to healthcare, housing, transportation, and financial assistance, and collaborate with clients, families, and interdisciplinary teams to develop personalized care plans. They also empower clients to maintain self-worth, independence, and autonomy in decision-making (Biegel et al., 2021).
2. **Counseling and Health Promotion:** Social workers provide individualized counseling and facilitate support groups to help clients navigate life transitions, grief, loss, social isolation, and chronic illnesses. They also develop care plans to promote physical and emotional well-being, offering health education and support for healthy lifestyle choices, such as diet, exercise, medication management, and regular medical follow-ups, including home visits (Biegel et al., 2021; Couturier et al., 2023).
3. **Crisis Intervention:** Social workers respond to emergencies and crises such as sudden health changes and declines or elder abuse and collaborate with law enforcement and healthcare providers to ensure safety and well-being.
4. **End-of-life Care Planning and Support:** Social workers assist clients in making end-of-life care decisions, including collaborating with legal teams to develop wills and trusts, discussing advance directives with medical teams, and assisting with funeral planning.

Direct practice in social services agencies requires communication skills, empathy, and knowledge of age-related services. Social workers need to consider their clients' life experiences. Practice in this area is multifaceted and requires that social workers collaborate with communities, agencies, and other interdisciplinary teams regarding the individual's autonomy and dignity.

Direct Practice in Homecare Agencies

Direct practice in homecare agencies with older adults involves providing essential care and support services to older adults within the comfort of their own homes (Ellenbecker et al., 2008). Home healthcare agencies often employ social workers as part of an interdisciplinary approach to servicing older adults. Although the focus is to provide health-related services (i.e., checking blood pressure, monitoring blood sugar, monitoring heart rate, etc.), social workers in this area are essential in assisting older adults with psychosocial needs. For example, if an older adult suffers a heart attack, they may need medication to manage blood pressure, as well as assistance with household chores, shopping for food, meal preparation, and transportation. In this case, the social worker can assist in arranging these services and coordinating an interdisciplinary care plan. Older adults who are homebound because of chronic healthcare issues may benefit from regular phone calls from a call center or a friendly visitor volunteer. This may assist in mitigating loneliness and social isolation. Social workers who work with older adults in these settings often provide supportive therapeutic counseling or may connect the individual to another agency within their community.

Social workers also play an essential role in assisting older adults in addressing financial arrangements related to home healthcare (Couturier et al., 2023). They advocate for older adults to receive the care they are entitled to under private insurance, Medicaid, or Medicare. This may involve a multitude of phone calls that are challenging for an older adult with chronic health issues. When older adults do not qualify or are not entitled to the needed services under existing health coverage, social workers must be creative in locating affordable resources. Although social workers are needed in these most common areas, there is limitless potential for direct social work practice with older adults because of the increasingly aging population (PRB, n.d.). Two specific areas that require social workers are legal and pre-retirement services in both the private and public sectors (Cox and Pardasani, 2017). Key areas of direct practice in home healthcare agencies include assessment, care coordination, and personal assistance. Social workers assess the physical, emotional, and social needs of clients within their home environments, collaborating with families and health professionals to develop personalized care plans. They also coordinate community homecare services to support activities of daily living (ADLs) such as dressing, bathing, cooking, medication management, transportation, health monitoring, and recreational activities to maintain overall well-being.

Direct practice in homecare agencies requires social workers to have patience, compassion, empathy, and strong communication skills to build trusting relationships with their clients and their families. This involves respecting their experiences and responding to their ever-changing preferences as they age.

Direct Practice in Healthcare Settings

The aging population presents complex challenges, as older adults are more likely to experience chronic conditions and cognitive impairments (Prince et al., 2015). Integrated care models, which coordinate services across primary care, specialized medical care, and long-term care, are essential in addressing these needs (Kodner and Kyriacou, 2000). Social work practices within healthcare settings involve collaboration with interdisciplinary teams and community resources to address the complex needs of older adults. Social workers liaise with healthcare professionals, including physicians, nurses, and specialists, to ensure a coordinated approach to care delivery (Nguyen and Martinez, 2017). In addition, they facilitate access to community resources and advocate for affordable healthcare, housing, transportation, and social activities, fostering a supportive environment across the continuum of care (Clark et al., 2019).

Social work practices in healthcare settings are tailored to meet the diverse needs of older adults when addressing their medical, psychosocial, cultural, and spiritual needs (Davis, 2022). For example, a core function of social workers in healthcare settings is facilitating communication among interdisciplinary teams. They are the linchpin between providers, ensuring care plans align with individual values and preferences regarding treatment goals and care plans by liaising between patients, families, and healthcare providers. They serve as advocates and care coordinators and facilitate communication to promote dignity, autonomy, and quality of life by utilizing person-centered approaches, such as advanced care planning (ACP). In this approach, they assist older adults in expressing their preferences for future medical care and ensuring their wishes are respected in cases of severe illness or end-of-life care (Johnson, 2020). This alignment is crucial for older adults facing complex medical decisions requiring input from multiple professionals. Social workers mediate these discussions, clarifying patient preferences and ensuring care decisions reflect individual values. Key areas of social work practice in healthcare include:

1. **Advocacy and Care Coordination:** Social workers play a unique role in advocating for older adults needing long-term care. They assist with applications for health insurance, such as Medicaid or Medicare, and ensure they receive entitled benefits. Additionally, they coordinate care for patients with multiple chronic conditions, managing specialist appointments, follow-ups, and medication regimens to prevent complications.
2. **Biopsychosocial Assessments and Communication Facilitation:** Social workers excel in conducting biopsychosocial assessments to evaluate a patient's emotional, social, and environmental needs. They help the healthcare team understand support systems and barriers to care. Moreover, they play a crucial role in facilitating communication between patients, families, and healthcare providers to ensure treatment options are understood and the patient's preferences are communicated.
3. **Advance Care Planning (ACP):** Social workers may assist older adults in developing an advance directive, discussing their preferences for end-of-life care, and ensuring that their wishes are documented and communicated to the healthcare team, empowering them to make their own decisions and fostering a sense of hope.
4. **Crisis Intervention:** Social workers may intervene when a patient is experiencing a mental health crisis, providing immediate emotional support and connecting them to appropriate mental health services, offering comfort and showing care.

5. **Support and Mental Health Services:** Social workers organize support groups for patients with chronic illnesses, offering a safe space for sharing experiences and coping strategies. They provide individual counseling to help patients manage anxiety and depression related to their diagnosis and treatment, and offer family counseling for those dealing with a terminal illness, guiding them through grief and connecting them with bereavement resources.
6. **Discharge Planning and Resource Education:** Social workers empower patients and families by assessing patients' home environment - before discharge to ensure safety and arrange necessary home health services and durable medical equipment (DME). They also educate patients and families on available community resources, such as transportation, meal delivery, and mental health services, helping them access needed support.

Social workers prioritize person-centered care that aligns with individuals' values and preferences, treating patients holistically rather than focusing solely on medical conditions (Johnson et al., 2020). They collaborate with older adults on advance care planning, emphasizing autonomy and dignity (Lum et al., 2016). Additionally, they address psychosocial needs through counseling, connecting individuals to community resources, and advocating for equitable access to services while ensuring healthcare services are culturally competent, accessible, and responsive to diverse populations, enhancing patient satisfaction (Gehlert and Browne, 2019).

Legal Practice

Social work and legal practice have a long and sometimes turbulent history. Although the professions share a common goal of problem-solving, the conflict between legal and social work professions' focus on finding a resolution to the issues is a significant challenge for both parties to cooperate (Miller, n.d.). Legal practitioners advocate for clients in court, seeking legal remedies and justice. However, social workers may advocate for systemic change and social justice to address the broader issues affecting individuals and communities (Sloane, 1967).

Both professions can collaborate effectively when roles are clearly defined. For example, in areas such as elder law, helping an older adult and their family make provisions for Power of Attorney for healthcare or determining competency in the case of dementia are good examples of the need for social workers and lawyers to collaborate. When an older adult is competent but may need assistance with finances or property management, social workers and lawyers are essential team members who can explain and generate a guardianship plan (Bassuk and Lessem, 2001).

Pre-retirement Planning

Pre-retirement planning is another essential role of social workers who work with older adults. Social workers are essential in assisting older adults in transitioning through this life stage by providing information, resources, and support (Barber et al., 2015). This involves a holistic approach to address various aspects of well-being as they transition into retirement (Rodríguez-Monforte et al., 2020). For example, pre-retirement can include:

1. **Financial planning:** Social workers may assess financial status, providing information on social security, pensions, and retirement benefits.
2. **Health, Social Support, and Community Resources:** Social workers assess mental health, promote healthy aging, and support older adults in building social connections. They assist with life transitions, offering counseling for coping with retirement and other changes. Additionally, they explore housing options, advocate for policies that support older adults, and connect them with community resources and services, collaborating with local agencies.
3. **Legal and estate planning:** Social workers may assist with documents such as estate planning and inheritance and connect them with legal resources.

Social workers often use a client-centered approach when working with older adults and tailor interventions specifically to the needs and circumstances of each individual (Ebrahimi et al., 2021; Sanerma et al., 2020; Washburn and Grossman, 2017). They are essential to enhancing the quality of life of older adults making legal decisions and transitioning to retirement.

Macro Practice

Social work practice with older adults in macro settings refers to broader content or system levels of practice that address issues that affect older adults on a larger scale (Youdin and Brownell, 2014). Social workers in these areas focus on creating social and systemic changes that advocate for the well-being of older adults and policy changes that support them. In the United States, several federal aging services and networks are authorized by the Older Americans Act (ACL Administration for Community Living, n.d.). These include local, state, and regional structures to implement various services to older adults and to systemically plan for their future needs. Some macro settings for social work practice with older adults are:

1. **Community Organizing:** Social workers in macro settings often engage in community organizing initiatives that involve collaborating with community members, stakeholders, and organizations to address the common community concerns that affect older adults and work toward positive change (Ohmer and Underwood, 2013).
2. **Program Development:** Social workers in macro settings design and implement programs that benefit older adults. These may include educational programs or the development of community-based initiatives that help older adults (National Association of Social Workers, n.d.).
3. **Education and Training:** Social workers in macro settings may train community and policy members to help raise awareness about older adults' unique needs and challenges and promote decision-making efforts (Ohmer and Underwood, 2013).
4. **Program Evaluation and Research:** Social workers in macro settings may conduct research that contributes to the best practices and policies that support older adults (SWLM, n.d.).
5. **Policy Initiatives:** Social workers in a macro setting may advocate for policy change. These may involve working with community organizations or government agencies to form policies that address issues such as housing, healthcare, and social services for older adults (Chonody and Teater, 2017; Hughes, 2020; Teater and Chonody, 2017).

In all, macro settings for social workers who serve older adults involve working on a system level to advocate for programs, initiatives, and policies that enhance the quality of life of older adults. These settings often require research, advocacy, community, and ethical leadership skills.

Social Work with Older Adults: Centering Their Voices and Perspectives

Hearing the voices of older adults is a complex process shaped by personal, moral, and political factors (Lloyd, 2006). Moral values play a crucial role in creating environments where older adults can express their needs and perspectives, but this requires active recognition and advocacy for their rights. Fostering unity across age groups and generations is vital for amplifying these voices. When we center older adults' voices, we build connectedness around shared concerns rather than focusing on differences (Lloyd, 2006; Phillips, 2003). This unity adds a civic dimension to care, fostering mutual commitment (Sevenhuijsen, 2000). However, unity must not overlook those with differing or unspoken needs.

Listening to service users' voices is essential for providing competent care and meeting social workers' expectations (Lloyd, 2006). However, assumptions about older adults' readiness for decision-making can undermine their autonomy (Leeson, 2007). Effective care should acknowledge the lived experiences of older adults, giving them the time and space to process their circumstances and recover on their terms. Social workers should listen attentively to older adults and acknowledge and value their unique experiences. Social workers can promote empowerment by encouraging older adults to be active decision-makers in their care and in decisions that influence their lives. Finally, social workers must advocate for policies and practices that promote the inclusion and consideration of the voices of older adults in societal discussions.

Recognizing the importance of older adults' voices in decision-making empowers them to stay involved in shaping their lives. This approach promotes person-centered care, aligns with social work values, and ensures that interventions meet their needs and preferences, especially when working with vulnerable populations.

CONCLUSION

A significant challenge in social work practice in the 21st century is the increasing number of people older than 65 (Gray-Graves, 2010). For the most vulnerable older adults, in particular, older adults of color, the devastating effects of poverty and inadequate healthcare will follow them into old age. However, there is no doubt that the newer generation of older adults will forge new ways to meet the demands of this inevitable developmental stage, post-retirement lifestyle, quality healthcare, and the financial resources that pose as present and future challenges for all older adults.

Social workers are essential in many settings that serve older adults, such as public education, community organizations, local, state, and regional planning settings, and legislative organizations. These settings will require a high skill set in specific techniques for practice and a willingness to engage in self-awareness for professional practice with older adults. In this sense, the future roles of social workers in aging are limited only by the practitioner's creativity and initiative.

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