



International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW- AIETS)

Definition of Clinical Social Work

For

The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW-AIETS)

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Prepared by the IASSW-AIETS Clinical Definition Taskforce

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Definition of Clinical Social Work

Clinical social work is a specialized area of practice within social work. It aligns with the Global Definition of Social Work as it promotes human functioning and well-being, which are critical for achieving “social change and development, social cohesion, and empowerment and liberation of people.” (IASSW/IFSW, 2014).

Clinical social work is practiced primarily at the levels of individuals, couples, and families and may extend to groups, such as therapeutic groups and collectives at the mezzo level. The primary targets of change are the people served. In this regard, clinical social workers engage primarily in direct, face-to-face practice at a micro level rather than practices explicitly aimed at promoting change at organizational, community, societal, and international levels.

Clinical social workers conduct diagnoses and/or assessments and deliver therapeutically oriented or social-pedagogical interventions. At its core, their clinical intervention addresses mental health, emotional, and behavioral issues, including issues related to alcohol and other drugs. Depending on factors such as the theoretical orientation of the practitioner and the practice context, they may also provide clinical services to individuals and families experiencing crises and relationship issues and intervene in aspects of environments, including systems affecting the lives of the people they serve. Some practitioners engage in clinical work as part of their social intervention efforts to influence larger economic, political, and social structures and processes.

Training and Education

Clinical social work preparation emphasizes specialized knowledge and skills to conduct diagnoses or assessments and deliver therapeutically or pedagogically oriented interventions. It requires advanced education and training beyond the baccalaureate degree. In USA and Canada, practitioners obtain master’s degrees in social work, specializing in clinical practice, from social work educational programs providing clinical specializations. In countries like Australia, the Master of Social Work degree is the initial qualifying degree. Additional studies and practice experience must be completed to be credentialed as a clinical social worker. Social work education programs in other countries typically do not provide clinical specializations. However, in some, such as Finland, all social workers must have a Master’s degree to be licensed and practice as social workers. They may be employed in settings addressing mental health and substance abuse issues.

A myriad of theoretical perspectives inform clinical practice. At least in the Anglo-American contexts, many of these approaches originated in other professionals and disciplines. They include systems and ecological perspectives, psychodynamic theory, attachment theory (Howe, 2013, p. 417), cognitive-behavioral theory (Teater, 2013a, p.423), EMDR (Bisson et al., 2013), crisis intervention model (Skinner, 2013, p. 428), task-centered model (Marsh, 2013, p. 492), motivational Interviewing (Teater, 2013b), strengths/empowerment perspective, feminist perspective, trauma-informed approaches (Levenson 2020; Bent-Goodley,2019) as well as structural and critical perspectives, which encompass anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices (Burke, 2013; Payne, 2014). Other approaches, such as narrative therapy (Madigan, 2013, p.455) and solution-focused therapy (Theater (2013c.), originated within social work. In the European context, much of direct social work practice is informed by social pedagogy, which emphasizes educational rather than psychological focus for intervention (Payne, 2014, p. 212).

No general agreement exists on which theoretical perspectives should be prioritized in informing clinical practice. Practitioners select theories based on factors, including those they learn in their educational programs, their values and personal or professional preferences, their job requirements, and the practice standards set by regulators. Some of these perspectives, models, theories, and approaches provide psychological explanations, while others emphasize structural and systemic explanations for the difficulties that people experience. The *Clinical Social Work Journal* (Springer, 2023) provides in-depth clinical theory, research, and practice coverage.

Since the theories informing clinical practice are grounded primarily in Western cultures, it is incumbent upon clinical practitioners to ensure that these theories are adapted for practice with other cultures. In addition, Indigenous knowledge and other culturally appropriate theories should be incorporated into practice with diverse populations, including local populations of different cultures, immigrants, and Indigenous peoples. Moreover, regardless of the origins of the theories informing practice, clinical practitioners are ethically obligated to ensure that the approaches used uphold social work values and ethical principles and are supported by existing evidence. Their obligations include promoting and protecting the rights of their clients (or service users) and ensuring that their voices, lived experiences, needs, and aspirations are accounted for in practice decisions and interventions.

Context of Clinical Social Work

As with all other practice areas, sociocultural, economic, and political contextual factors influence clinical social work education and practice. This specialization is readily available in higher-income countries identified with or influenced by the Anglo-American culture. The US has the highest number of Master of Social Work (MSW) degree programs with clinical specializations. Clinical specialization is available in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Israel. It also exists on a smaller scale in other countries, such as South Africa, Chile, and Poland, either as part of a Master's degree or through a post-qualification process. The nature of clinical social work education and practice varies from country to country, depending on professional regulations and educational contexts.

In countries where clinical social work education is readily available, the specialization is recognized as a health-related profession, and practitioners can find jobs specifically designated as clinical social work positions. Moreover, unlike other areas of social work practice, clinical practice may be highly regulated. Some clinical social work positions, especially those in institution-based health and mental health settings, require clinical social workers to be registered or licensed. To be registered or licensed, practitioners obtain advanced education in clinical social work from accredited educational programs, complete many hours of supervised clinical practice, and pass their clinical social work examinations.

Regulatory and accreditation bodies serve several functions, including ensuring that practitioners meet established requirements in relation to education and practice competence and follow the profession's code of ethics. They ensure that the regulated practitioners engage in ongoing professional development, including emerging research evidence, to keep up with new developments and integrate them into their practices. The regulatory bodies may also discipline practitioners found guilty of practices violating the code of ethics and other standards and guidelines for practice.

Employment settings.

In countries where clinical social work is an established occupation, practitioners find employment in various settings. For instance, they may hold clinical social work positions in hospitals, mental health organizations, and agencies delivering services related to loss, trauma, domestic violence, and substance use. Some clinical social workers are self-employed. Private practitioners deliver services to their “clients” for a fee. Some are also reimbursed through public and private insurance schemes.

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Electronic resources

<https://www.socialworkers.org/Practice/Clinical-Social-Work>

<https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/adult-social-care-workforce-data/Workforce-intelligence/publications/Topics/Social-work/Approved-Mental-Health-Professional-workforce.aspx>