

Community Social Work Guided by a Psychodynamic Approach in the Community of Long-Term Israelis Aged 60 and Above

Noga Levin Keini

ORCID: 0000-0002-8292-5255

Ashkelon Academic College,

School of Social Work, Ashkelon, Israel

Amit Helper

Ashkelon Academic College

ABSTRACT

The strengths and advantages of the psychodynamic approach in community social work include the ability to provide insights into complex emotional situations, the enhancement of community self-awareness, and the empowerment of change processes. Social work guided by this approach will focus on understanding the psychological forces at play within the community, while utilizing the principles of dynamic therapy to achieve deep and lasting change. In this article, we will propose an activity framework that combines community social work with the psychodynamic approach aimed at veteran Israelis, although this framework also allows for community activities targeting various and diverse populations.

Keywords: Community, Psychodynamic approach, Community awareness, Social work, Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Community social work typically focuses on the welfare of the entire community. It involves efforts to achieve social change, raise awareness of community needs, strengthen community ties, and increase awareness of the problems and needs of its members . (Sadan, 2009) (Weiss-Gal, 2007)

Community care includes key components such as: (Sadan, 1997) (Itzchaki & Bustin, 2012)

- **Empowerment:** Encouraging and assisting community members to take an active part in community activities, fostering a sense of belonging and involvement among community members .
- **Needs Identification:** Collaborative efforts with community members to identify their specific needs, as well as the challenges they face.
- **Program Development:** Creating programs designed to assist community members, such as infrastructure rehabilitation projects, workshops, support groups, and more.
- **Collaborations:** Working with various community stakeholders, such as local authorities, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations.

Community social work can contribute to building stronger, healthier communities that provide support for their members and offer solutions to various problems affecting the community as a whole.

Psychodynamic social work (Gunter & Bruns, 2013) focuses on the psychodynamic understanding of human behavior. This approach includes individual or group therapy, emphasizing the connections between early childhood experiences, unconscious processes, and interpersonal dynamics. Practitioners working within this framework aim to identify and analyze their clients' internal conflicts, assisting them in gaining better self-understanding and thereby improving their quality of life.

Community social work guided by a psychodynamic approach (Gunter & Bruns, 2013) seeks to understand the psychological forces at play within the community while utilizing the principles of dynamic therapy to achieve profound and lasting change. The psychodynamic approach, rooted in psychoanalysis, primarily focuses on exploring the unconscious, internal dynamics, and emotional connections between individuals and their environments (Sandler, Dare, & Holder, 1992). When these principles are applied to community social work, they enable a deeper examination of social processes, group dynamics, collective identity, shared traumas, grief processes, guilt, and more (Caputo & Manuela, 2020). Dynamics of transference and counter-transference between community members and professionals will also be analyzed and understood with their help.

Several foundational principles of the psychodynamic approach are highly relevant to practitioners in community social work: (Gunter & Bruns, 2013)

- **Exploration of the Collective Unconscious of Community Members:** Identifying traumatic and repressed content shared among community members (e.g., memories, immigration, discrimination, war, etc.).
- **Transference and Counter-Transference Between Social Workers and Community Members:** Understanding and analyzing how past emotions are projected onto professionals in the present, complicating efforts to achieve change and progress (e.g., past negative experiences with authority figures that led to disappointment and failure).
- **Containment and Holding:** Creating safe and protected spaces for community members to express difficult emotions, frustrations, and disappointments.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Responsively tailoring any psychodynamic intervention to the religious, cultural, and social contexts of each community. (Korin-Langer & Nadan, 2012)

As is well known, there are now many modern approaches alongside the psychodynamic approach in social work. Social workers are trained and skilled in various approaches that assist them in achieving change (Weiss-Gal, 2007). In this article, I will examine how the psychoanalytic approach aligns with modern approaches, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), in the clinical work of social workers in the field.

Aspect	Psychoanalytic Perspective	CBT
Central Focus	Unconscious drives from early childhood, defense mechanisms.	Current thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors shaping present issues.
How the Patient is Viewed	Issues arise from unresolved internal conflicts and repressed emotions.	Issues arise from distorted thinking patterns and maladaptive behaviors.
Therapeutic Goal	Insights into unconscious processes, aiming to change personality.	Symptom relief and behavior modification.

Techniques	Free associations, dream analysis, exploration of transference and counter-transference.	Reconstructing behavioral experiences, exposure therapy, providing homework assignments.
Time Structure	Traditionally long-term treatment, although modern treatments are shorter.	Generally short or medium-term, ranging from 8 to 20 sessions.
Role of the Social Worker	Interpreting unconscious materials and bringing them to consciousness, exploring interpersonal dynamics.	Coach or mentor providing structured tools for coping and strategies for action

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF PSYCHODYNAMIC SOCIAL WORK IN COMMUNITY PRACTICE

There are several practical applications, informed by psychodynamic theory, that can be implemented by community social workers adhering to this approach (Zemors & Mahong, 2025).

For instance:

- Establishment of Emotional Support Groups: Addressing the needs of community members while processing collective emotions such as grief, anxiety, anger, and trauma.
- Providing Psychodynamic Counseling, Support, and Guidance to Community Leaders: Aiming to understand the emotional dynamics within the community and offering assistance and responses while maintaining focused awareness.

In this article, I propose an activity framework that integrates community work with a psychodynamic approach. The target audience chosen for this integrated activity is the community of long-term Israelis aged 60 and above, long-term residents of the country. Based on this framework, community activities can certainly be offered to diverse populations according to their various needs.

1. Activity Goals: Emotional processing of significant life experiences (e.g., war, immigration, social changes, aging, etc.) .
 - Duration: Approximately 30 minutes .
 - Content: Presentation of meeting goals, initial trust-building, brief emotional sharing (e.g., a childhood memory that accompanies you to this day).
2. Group Emotional Processing:
 - Activity Name: "Layers of Memory"
 - Duration: Approximately 60 minutes.
 - Activity Content: Working in groups of 4-5 participants. Each participant shares a significant personal story (e.g., immigration, military service, difficult loss, success).
 - Psychodynamic Facilitation: Identifying emotions, transference, emotional resonance among participants.
3. Therapeutic Creation:
 - Activity Name: "My Inner Portrait".
 - Duration: 45 minutes.
 - Content: Creating a personal or group collage that expresses emotions, memories, and identity. Discussion about emotional choices in life and their interconnections.
4. Intergenerational Dialogue:
 - Activity Name: What will we choose to pass on to future generations?

- Duration: 60 minutes.
- Content: Meeting with youth in the community. Open dialogue about experiences, values, fears, and hopes.

5. Summary and Containment:

- Activity Name: Closing Circle.
- Duration: Approximately 30 minutes.
- Content: Summative emotional sharing, a brief writing exercise: What do I take away from the meeting?

POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS OF COMMUNITY SOCIAL WORK WITH A DYNAMIC APPROACH

Several practical applications informed by psychodynamic theory can be implemented by the community social worker. For example, collective emotional support groups can be established and guided according to the psychodynamic approach. In such groups, it is advisable to process emotions, memories, and experiences that trouble group members. Counseling, guidance, and support can also be offered to community leaders, while attempting to trace the emotional dynamics within the community and tailoring selected activities to the community, alongside unique awareness of its needs. (Rupp, Bhalia, & Lee, 2025)

CONCLUSION

In this article, as I have shown above, I chose to propose a framework for community activities based on the psychodynamic approach for an audience composed of long-term Israelis aged 60 and above. This community consists, as mentioned, mostly of retirees or those nearing retirement age. Of course, needs assessments can be conducted for various and diverse communities, but in this article, I will focus on an activity framework for this population.

IN COMMUNITY WORK BASED ON PSYCHODYNAMIC PRINCIPLES, PRACTITIONERS WILL BE GUIDED BY UNIVERSAL PSYCHODYNAMIC PRINCIPLES

Understanding the psychoanalytic theory that emphasizes the fact that most human behavior is influenced by drives, desires, and unresolved internal conflicts. This is true for both individuals and communities composed of individuals.

Defense Mechanisms: Defense mechanisms that assist the individual often also serve entire communities. Repressions, denials, projections, rationalizations—these all significantly ease a community's functioning under stress. Community social workers' recognition and understanding of such mechanisms will greatly aid in addressing resistance and guiding community members toward healthier strategies and more effective coping mechanisms.

Transference and Counter-Transference: Community members may project their past pains, frustrations, and unresolved issues related to authority figures onto the social worker. This can significantly hinder the community worker's ability to gain the trust of community members and may delay desired changes. It is highly advisable for the community social worker to be aware of these potential transference processes and to learn how to address them.

The strengths and capabilities of the psychodynamic approach applied in community social work include the ability to provide insights into complex emotional situations, enhance communal self-awareness, and empower processes of change.

The limitations of this type of community work primarily stem from the fact that this approach is "time-consuming," costly, and may diminish the importance of social, cultural, and structural factors that activate the community if applied rigidly. Therefore, I would argue that despite the presence of innovative theories and approaches employed by community social workers, psychodynamic theories remain fundamental and relevant. It is essential to remind community social workers that behind every issue presented to them in one community or another lies a deeper story shaped by history, contexts, connections, and unconscious processes, both of the individual and the community as a whole.

Statements & Declarations

Conflict of interest statement: The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Competing interest: The author has no financial or non-financial interests that are directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication.

Funding: Not applicable

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable

Authors' contributions: Noga Levine Keini is the only writer.

Ethics approval: This is a theoretical paper. No personal data is included.

Consent to participate: I agree to participate.

Consent for publication: I agree to publish my paper.

References

Caputo, A., & Manuela, T. (2020). Discovering the Unconscious in Community Work. *Community Psychology*, 48(6).

Gunter, M., & Bruns, G. (2013). Psychoanalytic Social Work and Mediation. In *Psychoanalytic Social Work*. London: Karnac Books.

Gunter, M., & Bruns, G. (2013). Psychoanalytic Theories Methods and Concepts. In *Psychoanalytic Social Work*. London: Kranc Books.

Itzchaki, H., & Bustin, E. (2012). Community Social Work in Israel: Between Past and Future. In M. Hovav, A. Luntel, & Y. Katan, *Social Work in Israel* (pp. 213-237). Tel Aviv: The United Kibbutz.

Korin-Langer, N., & Nadan, Y. (2012). Social Work in a Diverse and Multicultural Society. In M. Hovav, A. Luntel, & Y. Katan, *Social Work in Israel* (pp. 526-506). Tel Aviv: The United Kibbutz Publishing.

Rupp, L., Bhalia, S., & Lee, D. (2025). Community Engaged Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. In *Violent and Fireman Crime*.

Sadan, A. (1997). *Empowerment and Community Planning: Theory and Practice of Human Social Solutions*. Tel Aviv: The United Kibbutz.

Sadan, A. (2009). Community Work: Methods for Social Change. The United Kibbutz Publishing.

Sandler, J., Dare, C., & Holder, A. (1992). *The Patient and the Analyst*. London: Karnac Books.

Weiss-Gal, I. (2007). The Person in Their Environment and Its Expression in the Professional Ideology and Practice of Social Workers in Israel. *Society and Welfare*, 27(4), 567-596.

Zemors, S., & Mahong, E. (2025). Giving and Receiving Helping the Contexts as Predictors of Alcoholic Outcomes. *The American Journal of Community Psychology*.