

From Gatekeeper to Guide: An Alternative Paradigm for Social Workers in Singapore

by

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Abstract

This paper discusses two paradigms that social workers may utilize in working with clients in financial distress based on the personal experiences of the writer, as well as the perceived struggles faced by social workers in the field. Social workers in Singapore are often perceived to be employees of the state, and some social workers may indeed adopt the perspective of a Gatekeeper when working with their clients. The Gatekeeper perspective is a philosophy in which social workers align themselves with the dominant views and culture in society and change their clients to fit the social norms defined by the state in the face of clients' request for financial assistance.

This perspective may prove difficult in the social worker's attempts to establish a relationship of mutual trust and collaboration with their clients for effective practice.

This paper presents an alternative view, that of a Guide, in which the social worker aligns him- or herself with the client's system in order to understand not only the forces guiding the client's motivations and beliefs, but also how the current social structure may be maintaining the client's difficult situation. Five principles of practice are also proposed for social workers to move towards the paradigm of the Guide.

Case Example

Jalil approaches the family service centre due to his financial concerns. Being the single income earner in his family, he has been struggling to make ends meet, working as a cleaner, and supporting his wife and three schoolgoing children. His social worker, John, stresses the need for Jalil's wife to start work, with his children being placed in student care, to increase the family's purchasing power. John mentions that he would not be able to endorse Jalil's application for financial assistance unless he agrees on this action plan. Jalil grows increasingly frustrated with his social worker, and claims that formal social service systems are not helpful and empathic towards his situation. John, in turn, identifies Jalil and his wife as resistant and unmotivated to change. John comes to an assessment during his sessions with Jalil's family, that Jalil is unwilling to discuss with his wife regarding her possible employment, and hypothesizes that underlying marital issues between husband and wife may be hindering the family's ability to cope financially in their environment. Attempts to intervene in the spousal system are met with anger and frustrations by Jalil and his wife, and the family drops out after their second session with John.

Introduction

The above case example is typical of the struggles social workers face when working with families in economic distress. Such families may be categorized as 'difficult' clients: Individuals and families who approach the agency to obtain aid to ameliorate their financial difficulties but are unwilling or unmotivated to comply with the protocol and requirements of financial assistance. Sometimes, social workers may

even feel that such clients deserve their difficult economic plight. Such an unethical worldview may in fact be detrimental to the helping process, and also contribute to premature termination of cases. It may also lead to social workers feeling bitter and resentful towards the clients they have been tasked to help and support.

The Gatekeeper approach refers to the position that social workers take when they see themselves as employees of the state, and that they form the bridge between the state's welfare policies and the client's request for financial assistance. Social workers or helping professionals holding such a position may undertake the task of ensuring that clients do not 'cheat' the system. They undertake a strict process of obtaining all the required information and doing the necessary sleuthing to ensure that clients are truly genuine in their request for financial assistance. Social workers may expect their clients to adhere to the goals and action plans demanded of them and their family to gain self-sustainability.

The Gatekeeper approach may prove problematic, however, as social workers taking such a position may be perceived to be directly antagonistic to clients. This paper proposes that social workers explore a paradigm shift towards the Guide perspective, where collaboration is key to meeting the needs of the client and key to an effective intervention process.

Singapore's policy in its social welfare delivery system may explain how the Gatekeeper perspective may have developed as the dominant paradigm of helping professionals on the ground.

The Singaporean Context

In Singapore, Family Service Centres (FSCs) function as one-stop centres catering to the psychosocial needs of the community. Residents in the community

with concerns pertaining to child welfare, financial difficulties, marital issues, management of child behaviour, legal concerns, mental health issues and many more would approach FSCs for information or casework services. Depending on the nature of their cases, these clients would be either referred to appropriate volunteer welfare organizations or government bodies to address these concerns, or taken up as casework by FSC social workers. Financial concerns form the highest proportion of cases handled by FSC social workers, as evident in the case of the Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres (Annual Report 2010/2011).

The case study earlier typifies the experiences of social workers working with clients facing financial difficulties. Such cases may pose a challenge to social workers who face difficulties 'convincing' clients to contract on an acceptable care plan that would enable them to ultimately attain self-sufficiency and financial stability within the framework of Singapore's welfare system.

Social Workers' Position in Singapore's Social Welfare and Social Policy

As highlighted by Ngiam (2004), Singapore is in a unique position of not being a welfare state, but yet, has social policies and programmes in place to ensure that the social and health needs of the population are being met. Financial assistance is disbursed according to care plans contracted with individuals to achieve financial stability through the following goals:

1. Employment for employable individuals who are unemployed.
2. Retraining and education for low-skilled and unemployed individuals to increase their employability and purchasing power.
3. Educational support for preceding generations to break the cycle of poverty across generations.

This philosophy is evident in the setting up of the Community Development Councils, (CDCs) (www.cdc.org.sg) in Singapore, which play the role of the governing body disbursing financial assistance. Implicit in Singapore's social welfare policies is the notion of promoting the self-reliant spirit in individuals and families.

The Self-Reliant Spirit

The issue of individual responsibility has always been the mainstay of Singapore's government policies, as evident in initiatives such as Workfare. A shift in philosophy that favours state welfarism has been strongly rejected by the government on the grounds that state welfarism may cultivate a "crutch mentality," which would be detrimental to Singapore's economic competitiveness within a global environment (Ngiam, 2004).

The philosophy of self-reliance also refers to the idea of community empowerment vis-à-vis the "many helping hands" approach, whereby community organizations and non-profit agencies are supported by public, private and state funds to provide direct assistance to individuals.

Historical Development of the Gatekeeper Perspective

Social workers in the field may refer clients who approach the FSC for financial assistance to CDCs and liaise with CDC officers on the plans that clients have agreed upon. Social workers would also collaborate with CDC officers to review collaborative cases, such as making decisions about the continuation of financial assistance, and ascertaining if families have attained a socially-acceptable level of self-sufficiency in their environment. In principle, FSCs are independent from CDCs and function more like middlemen in referring clients to CDCs for financial

assistance. Social workers may also refer clients to other non-governmental philanthropic institutions and organizations for financial support or other social assistance schemes (e.g., educational support).

As a beginning social worker in Singapore, I subscribe to the idea of self-reliance and personal empowerment when working with clients. Clients who want financial assistance are assessed according to the prescribed standards of means-testing to determine if they qualify for the financial assistance schemes available in CDCs and other philanthropic organizations. Social workers have some measure of influence over the support families in need of financial assistance are able to receive, being key advocates in writing social reports and in direct correspondence with officers who process and administer financial assistance schemes.

The Gatekeeper

Social workers who adopt the perspective of the Gatekeeper (Figure 1) may ally themselves with formal social service organizations that administer local assistance schemes. As Gatekeepers, they assess clients' systems according to the available assistance schemes, and ensure that clients are genuinely in need through a series of investigative interviews and home visits. They also assess clients' level of functioning within the framework of a person-in-environment perspective (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2003), through which they hypothesize their clients' problems within the context of their relationships with their immediate family members and environmental systems. Together with theories of human development and behaviour, they formulate assessments that guide their intervention plans with clients. Contracts are made with clients to address their underlying problems, as in the case of Jalil and his wife.

The ideas and principles of the Gatekeeper perspective are anchored in a modernist approach (Weingarten, 1998), through which social workers observe and study clients against existing normative criteria delineated by social theories. They then use appropriate interventions to fit their clients into these frameworks.

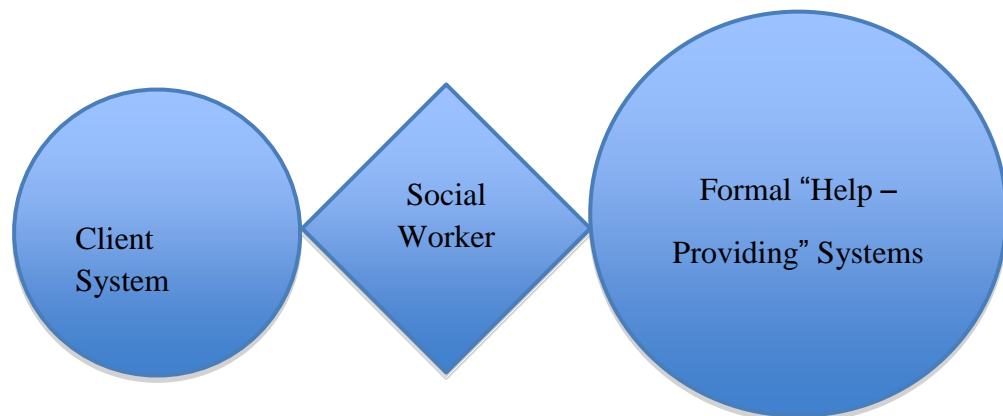


Figure 1. The Gatekeeper perspective.

Challenges of the Gatekeeper Perspective

As a social worker who used to adopt the framework of a gatekeeper to the wider social systems for my clients, I faced two main challenges in trying to fit client situations within the protocols required for assistance by the various help-providing organizations:

Challenge 1: The Difficulties of Using Fixed Frameworks to Assess Clients'

'Suitability' for Assistance

Using fixed protocols to inform our assessment of our client's suitability for financial assistance presents an onerous task for the social worker. Kaplan (1996) postulated that no single practice principle or intervention model is enough to work with every client family. Each family is unique, and goals that are identified by the social worker rather than the client may prove to be a frustrating experience for both. Clients who do not fit the protocols may be characterized as 'unmotivated' within the philosophy of self-reliance. Conversely, clients may not feel that their unique problematic situations are sufficiently attended to or addressed by their social workers, whom they may perceive to be unable to empathize with the difficulties they face, thus terminating their contact with their social workers prematurely.

There may be a further risk of presupposing dysfunctional patterns and pathologies in individuals and family systems when there is a lack of fit between our clients' perceived difficulties and the assistance available to them. Within this perspective, social workers may decide to intervene by way of 'correcting' the family system. In a sense, we attempt to make the family more 'functional' while structural problems that hinder their adaptive ability in the environment still persist. There are hence obvious flaws in this mindset, as pointed out by Cade and O' Hanlon (1993):

...to consider anything, we have to have a framework for thinking about it.

The error is not that we have frameworks, but that we forget that they are only frameworks and confuse them with reality. Once we take a position on anything we begin to close our minds to other possibilities and then tend to

select and interpret data that confirms that position and to not see, ignore or reject what contradicts it. (p. 41)

The use of these preconceived frameworks to categorize our clients' problems and experiences also run the risk of pathologizing their experiences:

...our conceptual frameworks can highlight the similarities between clients and us and humanize our relationship with them or they can highlight our dissimilarities, objectify clients and invite us to treat them as "other"... if we use pathologizing categories to understand families, we run the risk of bringing forth pathology. (Madsen, 2003, p. 47)

Challenge 2: The Difficulties that Arise When Clients Perceive Social Workers as Part of an Oppressive Help-Providing System.

When we place ourselves in the position of the gatekeeper, our clients may then view our role as an outsider trying to diagnose and treat their problems to fit them into acceptable standards of public policy. Social workers would then be viewed as synonymous with the state that imposes rules and jurisdictions as requirements for the help provided.

It positions us as an outsider acting on the system... may provoke a response from families that don't particularly appreciate the experience of being acted upon. We may interpret their response through our perspective as "resistance" or "non compliance", leading us to either pathologize or try to counter that response. (Madsen, 2003, p. 48)

There is a high likelihood that clients may not feel that their situations are being understood by social workers, and thus their relationship with their social worker may be compromised. The client may blame the social worker for not rendering the desired assistance.

Consider the analogy of a child fitting a square cube into a circular mould: How can we expand the perspective such that the child is able to see the presence of other moulds in his map of possible solutions that may be a better fit for the cube? We may also need to be aware that there may not be any available moulds that would fit the cube, and we may need to carve new moulds that may fit, which, in social work case management, refers to the need to look towards structural change.

This paper proposes the perspective of the Guide, with which social workers move towards a collaborative framework of allying with the client system instead. Social workers who adopt this perspective do not perceive themselves as sole experts of their clients' problems and situations. Clients also play the expert role in change, and collaborative work is defined through a focus on clients' strengths and empowering them to achieve satisfying lives (Kim Berg & De Jong, 2003). This perspective is viewed within the lens of social justice, stemming from the ethical principles that guide social work practice.

The Guide

Social workers taking the position of the Guide seek to position themselves as an "appreciative ally" (Madsen, 2003) with whom clients are able to trust and collaborate effectively. We achieve this by replacing value judgments and hypothetical pathologies with principles of respect for clients' strengths (Saleebey,

1992). Social workers would also need to balance such a perspective within the fundamental norms of social justice, where sometimes social workers may have to act in the interests of the state when the client's safety is at risk, as in the case of child welfare, risk of suicide, and family violence.

The key tenets of this philosophy include a) the stance of collaborative ally, b) the position of authoritative doubt, c) the strengths perspective, d) the hat of social justice, and e) reflexivity in the helping process.

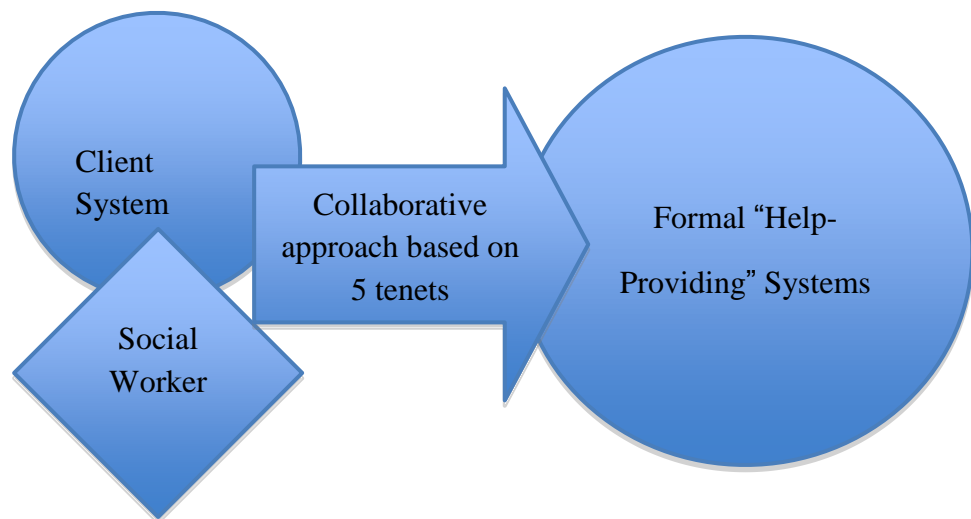


Figure 2. The Guide perspective.

The Stance of the Collaborative Ally

The social worker's first aim would be to establish him- or herself as his/her client's ally in the helping process. The social worker unconditionally accepts the client as a person, and works towards acquiring a mandate for intervention. This means that the client and social worker would have to identify what Korman (2004)

might define as a “common project” for collaborative work. From a goal-oriented perspective, the social worker would pace with the client’s perceptions of the problem, rank the client’s several needs, and then facilitate a process of reflection on possible solutions that would enable the collaborative relationship to take place. The social worker reflects on the immediate needs and requests of the client, and provides information on how feasible the client’s identified solutions are within the sociopolitical context. The social worker also assists the client to gain greater awareness of his/her difficulties and expand the map of possible goals and solutions to his/her troubles and difficulties.

As postulated by Korman (2004), the social worker invites the client into the helping process by finding out current aspects of client’s life experiences that may be bothering him/her. The request is not perceived myopically as one for a specific form of financial assistance, but as a discussion about how the problem of financial difficulty is interrelated with other aspects of the client system. Elements of compassion and empathy to process client’s struggles with the formal systems help establish the social worker as a collaborative ally, and also open up other areas within the client’s life which are within his/her control.

The Position of Authoritative Doubt

Taking on the position of authoritative doubt follows the stance of the collaborative ally, through which the social worker shifts from a position of

authoritative certainty to one of authoritative doubt (Mason, 1993), which is the “ownership of expertise in the context of uncertainty.”

Through a position of possible expertise (authority), the social worker needs to be proficient in the resources, services, policies and information within the environment that may be relevant to assisting the client in making the most effective decision(s) within the constraints of the environment. Taking on the position of authoritative doubt also acknowledges our expertise and knowledge in theories of human development and behaviour, which may be useful to the client. Through the establishment of trust and respect resulting from the collaborative framework of helping, social workers would be able to proffer suggestions congruent to the client’s needs and requests.

In spite of having attained some level of expertise in the knowledge of these theories and resources through social work education and training, the social worker also adopts a position of doubt. He/she accepts that each client’s experience is unique and that there can be no specific intervention plan suited for all clients. Protocols and frameworks serve as a guide to practice, as opposed to being absolute truths. The social worker is curious and attuned to the experiences of the client, and respects clients’ individuality and self-responsibility in trying to resolve their issues.

With increased working experiences, social workers gain awareness of the resources and effective actions that may be useful for clients in similar circumstances. For instance, the client who is facing the loss of his flat due to high arrears may not be aware of possible avenues to advocate for his case. It is only ethical for us to share these ideas with our clients, which would serve to expand our clients’ knowledge of

the resources available in their environment. It is important to note that whilst the social worker may share suggestions and opinions from the position of authoritative doubt, these suggestions and opinions are not to be forced upon the client. The social worker believes in his/her clients' strengths and abilities to take responsibility for their own lives.

The Strengths Perspective

The strengths perspective underlies the belief that clients are ultimately the experts of their lives, and that they have the ability to define solutions that would enable them to attain higher satisfaction in their quality of lives.

Using the strengths perspective, the social worker seeks to identify current and potential resources and qualities of the client within the context of the individual's ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is attained through careful and detailed explorations of the exceptions in clients' lives when they felt that their lives were better, and through understanding how clients have been able to cope before their contact with the social worker. The social worker adopting the person-in-environment perspective would also seek to identify formal and informal resources in the individual's environment that have already been supporting the client, and hence identify potential resources with which to engage to resolve the client's current difficulties.

Although there is a need to focus on clients' strengths and their ability to identify the best possible decisions for themselves, social workers have to work within the limits of our ethical responsibilities, as well as our accountability towards

the community we are working for. The lens of social justice ensures that social workers are able to ensure clients' safety and well-being within the constraints of socially acceptable norms and standards.

The Hat of Social Justice

In general, social workers wear two main hats in practice. The first hat, the client-centered hat, is geared towards engaging the client and promoting self-determination and strengths in casework management. The other is the hat of social justice. The two hats may be complementary—in the case where the social worker works with the family, and also advocates against structures and policies that may promote inequality—or they may be adversarial—where the social worker may risk incurring the wrath of the family in his/her attempt to ensure protection of a vulnerable family member, such as in the case of child abuse and spousal abuse. Whatever the case, the hat of social justice is an essential principle to be aware of in practice.

Social workers need to be aware of structural factors that may play a role in maintaining the client's difficult situations. Structural factors may manifest as unintended consequences of policy delivery. An example in Singapore would be the case of a client with addiction issues who is mandated to undergo multiple urine tests in a week. These tests are designed to ensure that the client does not relapse. However, frequent visits to drug-testing centres may in fact increase the recovering addict's chances of a relapse due to the opportunities to interact with other peers taking the urine tests, who may influence him/her to take substances that the latter

may have access to. Structural factors may also be overtly obvious within certain welfare policies, such as policies that limit the access to financial schemes that unmarried single mothers have, compared with mothers who are married or divorced. Social workers in these two cases would have to advocate for policy change instead of focusing solely on the family as the main unit of intervention.

Social workers wearing the hat of social justice work within the standards of socially acceptable norms of human functioning. They need to ensure safety where situations of risk are imminent. In Singapore, these situations are typified by cases where there may be risks of suicide, violence, as well as risk to a child's welfare, where the protection of minors and safety of clients must take immediate precedence.

The hat of social justice also presupposes the need to ascertain that clients are able to function at the basic level of human functioning where their basic needs for survival are met (Kirkpatrick & Holland, 2009). In any situation of risk, the social worker may need to express his/her concern regarding the client's situation, yet there are still opportunities to steer the client's goals and strengths towards engaging in safer behaviour, as well as towards identifying ways and alternatives to address situations of crises, especially financial ones.

When social workers identify that clients face difficulties with engaging in safer options or solutions, they may need to draw on their professional responsibility towards society, and engage appropriate resources available to ensure clients' safety. This may include involving the police in cases when clients present with suicide risk, or child protective services when the safety of minors is being compromised. As such decisions may be detrimental to the helping relationship, social workers need to

exercise discretion and care in ensuring that clients are empowered to make safer alternatives before such services are engaged as a last resort.

Reflexivity in the Helping Process

The problem of our position as an active observer and helper in the social worker–client relationship is delineated by Michel Foucault’s comments at the end of his book, *The Order of Things* (1966): Man is both knowing subject and the object of his own study.

Foucault’s statement argues how our supposedly objective enquiries, and presence in the helping relationship, inevitably affect the helping process. The helping process is an intersection between the social worker’s own values, past experiences and present worldviews, and those of the client system. Issues pertaining to counter-transference, cross-cultural interactions and relationship with help are crucial issues for reflection.

Bourdieu (1992) presents reflexivity as the solution through which social scientists may gain awareness of their personal biases in their aspirations of achieving some level of objectivity in their practice. For social workers, reflexivity may begin with these two aspects: reflecting on client-worker transference issues, and reflecting on the help-seeking process.

Continual reflection on client-worker transference is imperative, especially in the framework of Singapore’s multicultural society. In a paper presented at the Forum of Ethnic Relations in Singapore (Lai & Ow, 2002), two approaches in social service

delivery in the family service centres were identified: one involves a multicultural approach whereby agencies employ social workers from different ethnic groups, and the other, a “monoethnic approach” whereby agencies formed by religious groups hire predominantly social workers from one ethnic group (typically associated with the religious orientation). Cultural competency amidst reflexive awareness is therefore important since there is a high possibility that helping professionals in Singapore belonging to the ethnic Chinese majority would be working with clients from minority populations, such as the Malays and Indians (Ow & Osman, 2003).

Reflexivity in the transference process also precludes an awareness of our personal biases regarding issues sensitive to our personal selves. The social worker may choose to directly address his/her transference issues through self-talk, or even clear any cultural barriers directly with the client.

Reflecting on the help-seeking process involves being aware of the circumstances leading to the client’s contact with the social worker. These circumstances may have a direct impact on the client’s immediate view of the social worker. For example, an adult client may have had a negative experience with his/her child protection officer, and this view may be expanded to include all helping professionals the client comes into subsequent contact with. Information on previous experiences may also help the social worker identify aspects of help the client has found helpful, and those that he/she may not have found useful, or may have even found to be detrimental to the helping process. Reflexivity involves the application of social work’s creed of unconditional and non-judgemental acceptance of our clients’ experiences or views, with no disrespect meant to previous helpers. Addressing and

exploring the help-seeking process pave opportunities for a more effective and collaborative relationship.

Revisiting Jalil's Case

When utilizing the perspective of the Guide, the social worker would align himself with the struggles faced by Jalil in the process of seeking help, and the difficulties he has experienced when seeking financial assistance. The social worker would assist Jalil to be more aware of his financial difficulties, not only at the individual, micro level, but also in the context of how society is structured. The social worker, with his knowledge of current resources, would provide information to Jalil on how financial assistance is structured within Singapore's philosophy of welfare, and contract to work and collaborate with Jalil to empower him and his family to negotiate the system.

Through a position of authoritative doubt, the worker suspends any judgements and labels that may have been formulated over years of working with clients, and treats each client system as unique. Jalil would then be given the opportunity to formulate and reflect on possible alternatives to address his vulnerable situation from a safe and strengths-focused environment.

The social worker might advocate to CDCs or other organizations for financial assistance for Jalil to enhance his ability to adapt to his situation. Being aware that Jalil's wife has not worked her entire life, three months of financial assistance might not be a realistic time frame to prepare her for full time employment. The social worker might thus advocate for longer-term assistance (and even source for support from other informal sources) so that assistance would be in line with the goals that Jalil has identified for his family.

The social worker would also reflect on how his/her own personal values might interfere with the help-seeking process, and also involve Jalil in this reflection. The social worker would also discuss issues on cross-cultural interactions with Jalil.

Through this perspective, Jalil might feel more supported and derive a sense that his social worker is able to empathize with him throughout the helping process. This might pave the way for more effective collaborative work, and lay the building blocks for more significant social change at the macro level, such as modifying limiting societal structures where social policies were not be able to adequately address the needs of clients such as Jalil. Throughout the process of collaborative help, the social worker would maintain the lens of social justice to ensure that any collaboration is within socially-ascribed standards of safety, where issues of child protection, suicidal ideation, and family violence would not be negated or abandoned in favour of this alliance.

Conclusion

This paper proposes an alternative paradigm for social workers and helping professionals in Singapore's multicultural context. Positioned at the crossroads of different classes, there is a tendency for social workers to be influenced by the perspectives and beliefs of the dominant group, taking a one-up approach and trying to instill these ideas in our clients in the hopes of changing and 'helping' them. Such a stance may alienate social workers from the very people we are tasked to support and protect.

The philosophy of the Guide presents an opportunity for social workers to be able to achieve a more collaborative working relationship with our clients. By positioning themselves as a Guide rather than a Gatekeeper, social workers are better

able to empathize with our clients' daily struggles, and appreciate their resilience. We are also able to attune to their feelings of social injustice, which may limit their mobility within the social ladder.

It is hoped that this philosophical change may form the building blocks for more effective practice among social workers in Singapore.

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