AN INQUIRY INTO FEE SETTING AND ITS DETERMINANTS

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ABSTRACT: The professional and psychosocial dynamics of fee setting are discussed from both rational and nonrational points of view. The author notes the current status of social work in relation to that of other health disciplines and comments upon the uncertainty generated by the assignment of a dollar value to an altruistic professional activity. The semantic and social meanings implicit in the fee-setting process are explored with particular reference to the personal and professional power of money within our culture. A three-step framework for the fee-setting process is offered. The author encourages a proactive approach to the currently somewhat passive process of assessing the monetary value of specific work in which the outcomes are themselves value judgements.

The time to talk of certain things, especially of independent vendor-ship and fees with reference to the clinical social worker as a professional human being, is long overdue. At a professional conference, recently, one of my colleagues said, "My time is worth forty dollars an hour." We have all heard these words before, but this time I found myself stimulated by the statement and I began asking myself some questions.

For example: What message is my colleague actually giving us by this pronouncement? Does he mean that his time is more valuable than that of a colleague who charges less? Or, is he perhaps alluding to his estimation of the value of his skills, not his time? Is it true that there is a relationship between our skillful use of ourselves and our monetary re-muneration? In this paper I propose to deal with this question in its several aspects.

A monetary yardstick cannot be used to measure the intrinsic value of psychotherapy. It is like attempting to put a dollar value on being a good wife, husband, or parent. How many dollars is a good mother worth? This is an unanswerable question. Is it reasonable to pay a person a certain amount for the loss of a hand and another set amount for the loss of a foot? The worth of a part of your body, the importance of a relationship or an experience cannot be evaluated monetarily. The same is true about the worth of psychotherapy. No one said it better than Dr. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (1950): "Psychiatric services—that is, the attempt to help a person overcome his emotional difficulties in living—are priceless if successful or worthless if they fail." (p. 67)

Fromm-Reichmann graphically posits the two extremes of the spectrum we, as clinicians, find ourselves in continually. Any attempt to
correlate one's level of skill with its monetary worth to the recipient is impossible. As psychotherapists, our level of competence is not the determinant of our fees as there is no monetary means of measuring the value of our skills. It is not to our credit to pretend there is a relationship between a certain skillfulness and a certain fee. In reality, fees are not determined this way. There is a falseness here, a reluctance to look as closely at ourselves as we look at our clients. Chodoff (1964), in observing his colleagues, also suspected some "uneasiness on the part of the psychoanalysts about the economic aspects of their professional role" (p. 137).

In this paper I plan to explore some of the issues around fees and money that are relevant to us as clinical social workers. There are no predicated standards for fee setting and it is not within the scope of this paper to develop such standards. Perhaps by exploring the underlying dynamics we can achieve a greater degree of self-awareness which will assist us in dealing more rationally with this aspect of our professional life.

Financial considerations can have a disturbing influence on our work. We need to ask ourselves some difficult questions. For example:

1. Does the affluence of a prospective client predispose us to select him as a client and perhaps minimize the contraindications for therapy?
2. To what extent is the treatment plan regarding frequency of appointments affected by financial considerations?
3. Is the termination or continuation of a client in some part determined by the availability of other clients who can pay our fee?
4. Do we sometimes take on too many clients because of financial considerations?

We must know what we are about in this matter of money and the effect it has on our practices. If we seriously examine ourselves and our connections to money we cannot avoid some discomfort. The discomfort is twofold: money is a difficult subject to discuss and examining ourselves is always done with some reluctance. It was recently said: "Money is to our culture what sex was to the Victorian Viennese; that is, ... a taboo exists even in the professional community against free exploration of money matters." (Adler and Gutheil, 1977, p. 71)

Not only are we dealing with a tabooed or indelicate subject, we are talking about ourselves. Freud (1913) pointed out:

No one who is familiar with the nature of neurosis will be astonished to hear that even a man who is very well able to carry out an analysis on other people can behave like any other mortal and be capable of