Three Elements of Social Work Practice Situation

Answering the three following questions is a critical first step to begin formulating a research to practice question.

- Who is the client system?
- What challenges face this client system?
- What is the context of the planned intervention?

After clearly stating who the client system is, what challenges they are facing, and the intervention context, it is possible to develop a research to practice question that captures these three elements in broad terms.

Who is the client system?

In social work practice, a client system may be an individual, family, group, organization, or community. For an individual, key elements in his or her history are important to identify. Possible key elements for individuals include:

- Gender, age, education level, family history, and mental health history
- Client strengths, capacities, and resources
- Client expectations and preferences for problems addressed, outcomes to be achieved, and modes of treatment

If the client system is a family, a community, or an agency, key characteristics of the group or the type of organization that are critical to the search need to be identified. Possible key elements for client systems that involve more than one individual include:

- Extended family kinship networks
- Organizational structure of client system
- Leadership of client system
- Communication patterns for client system
- Client system strengths, capacities, and resources
- Client system expectations and preferences for problems addressed, outcomes to be achieved, and modes of intervention

For all client systems, factors related to race, ethnicity, and other cultural variables should be considered for their relevance in the search. Possible factors include characteristics associated with social inequalities that may the client system’s present situation (i.e., age, race or ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, income, insurance, etc.), as well as neighborhood context or other community variables.

What challenges face this client system?

This question addresses both what problem may be presented for social work action or response and the circumstances that may surround the presenting problem.
Challenges may range from individual client system issues to structures and capacities of an agency or wider service delivery system. The identified problem may include multiple challenges on many levels. Alternatively, a single challenge can be approached from multiple angles, such as addressing the needs of the individual while also making programmatic changes at an agency level. Identifying core and secondary challenges for the client system can be useful.

**What is the context of the planned intervention?**

It is important to identify what type of intervention is being planned and the intended outcomes. Depending on the challenge or issue the client system is facing, a student or practitioner will intervene at different points along the service continuum. Determining the intervention context will help narrow the search for evidence. For instance, a child at risk for developing a conduct problem or delinquent behaviors may need prevention services while an adult abusing alcohol might be in need of assessment and treatment.

If the client system is an individual or family, intervention can occur at different stages, including prevention, identification, engagement, assessment, intervention, monitoring, evaluation or termination, and follow-up. Client systems that are communities or organizations will have additional factors such as staff and volunteers, funding sources, policies, procedures, laws and regulations.

Interventions also have other characteristics such time-limited or open-ended, group or individually focused, etc. Students need to identify what agency, intervention, or other contextual variables are most relevant to include in the search. These factors can also include the setting of the intervention, type of agency, and type of system. In some cases, contextual factors are dictated by social work setting. In some instances, however, a social worker may want to do initial research into a topic before deciding the type of intervention. The best available evidence will help the social worker narrow her choices regarding the best course of action with the client.