

SOCIAL CASE WORK OR CASE MANAGEMENT? UNDERSTANDING TWO COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES IN ARMENIAN SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between social case work and social case management within the development of social work practice in Armenia. Although these concepts are frequently used interchangeably in Armenian professional discourse, they represent distinct yet complementary methods of intervention. Drawing upon international social work literature and the historical evolution of social services in Armenia, the article analyzes the origins, theoretical foundations, and practical applications of both approaches. The discussion demonstrates that social case work primarily focuses on direct professional engagement with beneficiaries through assessment, intervention, and psychosocial support, whereas social case management emphasizes coordination of services, resource mobilization, and oversight of interventions delivered by multiple providers. The article traces how confusion between these approaches emerged during the early institutionalization of social work in Armenia and explains how the integration of social services has increased the relevance of case management. It is argued that the future development of Armenia's social protection system requires a clear conceptual distinction between these methods while simultaneously promoting their integration. Such an approach would strengthen professional practice, improve service delivery, and enhance outcomes for beneficiaries facing complex social problems.

Keywords: *social case work, case management, social work, social services, social protection, social service integration, Armenia.*

Introduction

The emergence of social work as a professional field in Armenia is closely associated with the social and humanitarian consequences of the 1988 Spitak earthquake. International organizations, local non-governmental organizations, state institutions,



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and universities played a significant role in introducing social work as a profession and establishing educational programs for future practitioners. However, the development of social work in Armenia encountered several conceptual and institutional challenges, including difficulties in establishing professional terminology in the Armenian language.

One of the most persistent terminological issues concerns the concepts of *social case work* and *social case management*. These terms are often treated as synonymous despite representing different methods of social work intervention. This confusion is not unique to Armenia; however, it became particularly pronounced during the early stages of professional social work development when practitioners and policymakers were primarily concerned with responding to urgent humanitarian needs.

As Armenia continues to reform and integrate its social service system, understanding the distinction between case work and case management becomes increasingly important. Clarifying these concepts is essential for defining professional roles, designing educational curricula, and improving service delivery within the country's evolving social protection system.

Historical Development of Social Work and Case-Based Interventions in Armenia

Social work education in Armenia began to develop systematically during the 1990s. The Social Work program at Yerevan State University included courses on case management, while concepts related to case work were integrated throughout the curriculum. Despite this educational foundation, the distinction between the two approaches remained unclear in professional practice.

A significant milestone occurred in 2003 with the implementation of the “Social Worker 2003” training program funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The program focused primarily on social case work and trained social service professionals throughout Armenia. Participants learned a structured intervention process consisting of assessment, intervention planning, implementation, evaluation, termination, and follow-up monitoring. This sequence closely reflected classical case work methodologies described in international social work literature (Hepworth et al., 2022; Shulman, 2019).

The same orientation continued during social worker training initiatives conducted between 2007 and 2009 within regional child protection structures. Social workers were largely prepared to function as direct practitioners responsible for working individually with beneficiaries. However, concerns emerged regarding the feasibility of providing intensive case work to clients residing in geographically distant communities. In such situations, social workers increasingly assumed coordination responsibilities that more closely resembled case management.

The introduction of integrated social service centers in Armenia further highlighted the importance of case management. International consultants involved in social service reforms introduced the concept as a distinct professional methodology aimed at coordinating resources and services across institutions. As a result, professional discussions increasingly focused on differentiating case work from case management.

Social Case Work: Direct Professional Intervention

Social case work represents one of the oldest methods in social work practice. Its theoretical foundations can be traced to the pioneering work of Mary Richmond, whose seminal book *Social Diagnosis* established the principles of individualized assessment and intervention (Richmond, 1917/2017). Case work focuses on understanding the unique circumstances, strengths, and challenges of individual clients and developing helping relationships aimed at promoting positive change.

Contemporary social work scholars describe case work as a direct practice method involving assessment, counseling, support, advocacy, and intervention planning (Gitterman, 2020; Kadushin & Kadushin, 2018). The approach emphasizes the establishment of a professional helping relationship characterized by empathy, trust, and ongoing interaction between the social worker and beneficiary (Shulman, 2019).

In practice, social case work involves:

- Comprehensive assessment of client needs and strengths;
- Development of intervention goals;
- Direct psychosocial support;
- Counseling and therapeutic interventions;
- Monitoring progress toward identified goals;
- Evaluation of outcomes.

Because of its emphasis on interpersonal relationships, case work often involves intensive and long-term engagement with beneficiaries. Such relationships can contribute significantly to positive outcomes but may also increase the risk of professional burnout and dependency relationships between clients and practitioners (Hepworth et al., 2022).

The importance of case work in Armenia is understandable given the country's experience with natural disasters, displacement, poverty, and psychosocial trauma. During the formative years of the profession, direct intervention was often the most appropriate response to beneficiaries' immediate needs.

Social Case Management: Coordination and Resource Integration

Case management emerged later than case work, primarily in response to the growing complexity and fragmentation of social service systems during the second half of the twentieth century (Summers, 2020; Woodside & McClam, 2021). As social services became increasingly specialized, beneficiaries often needed assistance navigating multiple institutions and programs.

The National Association of Social Workers (2013) defines case management as a collaborative process involving assessment, planning, facilitation, coordination, monitoring, and advocacy to meet clients' comprehensive needs. Rather than providing all interventions directly, case managers ensure that beneficiaries gain access to appropriate services and resources.

Case management is particularly important for individuals with complex and multidimensional needs, including persons with disabilities, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, and families facing multiple social challenges (Powell & Tahan, 2023).

Key functions of case management include:

- Identification of available services and resources;
- Coordination among service providers;
- Referral and linkage to specialized services;
- Monitoring service delivery;
- Advocacy on behalf of beneficiaries;
- Evaluation of service effectiveness.

Unlike case work, case management does not necessarily involve intensive therapeutic relationships. Instead, it focuses on ensuring continuity of care and reducing service fragmentation (Ballew & Mink, 2018; Summers, 2020).

The integration of social services in Armenia has significantly increased the relevance of this approach. Beneficiaries frequently require support from multiple institutions, including social protection agencies, healthcare providers, educational institutions, employment services, and community organizations. In such circumstances, effective coordination becomes essential.

Comparing Social Case Work and Social Case Management

Although both approaches seek to improve the well-being of beneficiaries, they differ in their primary objectives, methods, and professional roles.

Social Case Work

- Emphasizes direct work with beneficiaries;
- Focuses on the helping relationship;
- Relies heavily on empathy and interpersonal communication;
- Involves psychosocial assessment and intervention;
- Often entails long-term engagement;
- Reflects therapeutic and counseling traditions.

Social Case Management

- Emphasizes coordination rather than direct intervention;
- Focuses on systems, services, and resources;
- Involves collaboration with multiple service providers;
- Facilitates access to needed services;
- Reduces fragmentation of support systems;
- Reflects administrative and organizational functions.

These distinctions are consistent with broader classifications of social work practice that differentiate micro-level direct interventions from mezzo- and macro-level coordination and service integration activities (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2023; Netting et al., 2021).

Strengths and Limitations of Both Approaches

Neither case work nor case management should be considered superior to the other. Instead, each possesses strengths and limitations that make it appropriate for different situations.

Case work enables social workers to develop a deep understanding of beneficiaries' experiences and to provide individualized support. However, intensive engagement may contribute to emotional exhaustion and professional burnout. Furthermore, beneficiaries may become overly dependent on a particular practitioner.

Case management provides a systematic approach to coordinating services and addressing complex needs. Nevertheless, organizational fragmentation, bureaucratic procedures, and interagency communication challenges may limit its effectiveness. Beneficiaries may also perceive case management as impersonal if coordination activities replace meaningful direct interaction.

Consequently, many contemporary social work scholars advocate integrated approaches that combine elements of both direct practice and case management (Miley et al., 2023; Teater, 2024).

Implications for the Development of Social Work in Armenia

The continuing modernization of Armenia's social protection system is likely to increase specialization within social work. As professional social work expands into healthcare, education, corrections, military services, and community development, the division of labor among practitioners will become more pronounced.

These developments will require educational institutions to prepare future professionals for diverse roles that include both direct intervention and service coordination. Social work curricula must therefore provide students with competencies related to both case work and case management.

Furthermore, policymakers and administrators should recognize that integrated service delivery depends not only on organizational reforms but also on the availability of qualified professionals capable of navigating complex service systems while maintaining client-centered practice.

Conclusion

The experience of social work development in Armenia demonstrates how social case work and social case management became intertwined in professional discourse despite representing distinct methods of intervention. Historically, social case work played a foundational role in responding to the immediate needs of vulnerable populations, particularly during the early stages of professionalization. However, the growing complexity of social service systems has made case management increasingly important.

Rather than viewing these approaches as competing alternatives, they should be understood as complementary methods serving a common purpose: assisting individuals, families, groups, and communities facing difficult life circumstances. Future developments in Armenia's social protection system will likely encourage greater integration of these approaches, combining the relational strengths of case work with the organizational capacities of case management. Such integration promises to enhance professional effectiveness, improve service coordination, and ultimately contribute to better outcomes for beneficiaries.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.