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# A Continuum Theory for Social Work Knowledge

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*Relativist approaches, to knowledge, suggested by some social workers as alternative to the predominant scientific logical positivistic approaches to knowledge, suffer from serious flaws. Between the poles of objectivism and relativism exists a third and more useful approach to knowledge in social work. This approach is presented and developed based on recent sources from the philosophy of knowledge, the philosophy of science, and metatheoretical developments in the social sciences. A continuum theory of knowledge, between objectivism and relativism, is suggested for social work. The continuum theory narrows the gap between research and practice and between the scientific side and the artistic and value laden aspects of social work.*

The dichotomy between research and practice, and the scientific side and artistic and value laden side of social work, thought by some to have been caused by the introduction of positivistic science into social work, led some writers to adopt relativism as an alternative approach to knowledge. (See, for examples of relativism in social work, Boehm, 1961; Vigilante, et al, 1981, 1982; Brunswick Heineman, 1981; Goldstein, 1982, 1986; Haworth, 1984; Hofstein, 1964). This paper demonstrates that relativism is a weak and insufficient alternative to logical positivism and the objectivist tradition. A study of the criticism of logical positivism in the philosophy of knowledge, philosophy of science, and metatheoretical developments in the social sciences, suggests a third approach — between objectivism and relativism. This approach is presented and developed and its implications for social work are examined.

### The Limits of Relativism

The main idea of relativism was first expressed by Protagoras, the Greek philosopher, in the fourth century B.C.: man is the measure of all things. Just as what tastes good for one, Protagoras said, is not tasty to another, so what is true for one is not necessarily true for another. Protagoras limited the value of all affirmation to the one who makes it (Gallagher, 1982, p. 11).

The relativist sees the objectivist as mistaking what is at best historically or culturally stable for the eternal and permanent. Bernstein (1983, p. 8) says:

In its strongest form, relativism is the basic conviction that when we turn to the examination of those concepts that philosophers have taken to be the most fundamental, whether it is the concept of rationality, truth, reality, right, the good, or norms — we are forced to recognize that in the final analysis all such concepts must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society or culture.

Today relativism is supported by conclusions drawn from research in the history of science. Some historians of science contend that the history of science does not demonstrate a cumulative character of theories. Major scientific theories have been replaced in the history of science and many abandoned theories left little of themselves behind. Kuhn (1970, pp. 121–149) sees, in the systems of Aristotle, Newton and Einstein, no coherent direction of ontological development. He sees major steps in scientific progress as involving paradigm shifts — replacement of the whole conceptual framework used by the former paradigm. To Kuhn, competing paradigms lack a basis of comparison. They reflect divergent conceptual orientations. Proponents of competing paradigms see the same types of phenomena in entirely different ways.

The idea that major concepts of today's scientific theories will be replaced by entirely different concepts presented in the scientific theory of tomorrow, challenges the ability of these concepts to refer consistently to reality. Concepts are seen by relativists as temporary tools, relative to a time and culture. The many concepts which have been used by science to describe the same phenomena may be said to represent many private relative experiences (Lauden, 1984, pp. 218–249).

Current relativist theory emphasizes private subjective experience as the source for rationality. Relativists say that what we call rational ideas fit our preferred, basic intuitions about reality (Lauden, 1977, p. 161). We may have the notion that these ideas are universal because they are accepted by most of the scientific community, but even if this is so, the ideas represent just another private experience — the consensus that was attainable by one group of scientists, members of one community in a certain time.

Social workers, such as Hofstein (1964, p. 46), influenced by this relativistic philosophy, have called upon us to abandon certainty “either in actuality or as a goal toward which to strive”. Heineman-Pieper (1985, p. 4) suggested giving up certainty as a goal for knowledge in social work. She wrote that “the attempt to recognize and allow for bias is of much greater value than the attempt to eradicate it”. Social workers who accept a relativistic barrier to knowledge focus on attempts to find situational knowledge rather than to pursue universal laws. Without the ability to achieve some certainty to lean on,

methods of data collection are to be chosen not by the application of judgmental criteria, but for their applicability to a particular problem or for their ability to provide a different slant on a given problem. (Heineman-Pieper, 1985, p. 8)

Heineman-Pieper’s relativism leads to a focus on the private subjective experience. The unique becomes more important than the common.

From an objectivist point of view relativists might be seen as prisoners of their subjective experience, unable to communicate their knowledge and experience to people who have different subjective experiences. The relativist sees no problem here. From a relativistic perspective, knowledge is not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but rather, something people do together, a shared activity. The creation of language, according to the relativist, is a shared decision by a certain community to see things in a certain way. In this community, objects will be regarded as existing in the way it has been decided that people will refer to them. The attempt to know is seen as a *shared* act of creation (Gergen, 1985, p. 270; Gergen, 1986, p. 158). The

concepts that we use to describe human beings do not refer to existing entities but may actually create them:

Children are, or become, what they are taken to be by others, and what they come to take themselves to be, in the course of their social communication and interaction with others. In this sense, I take, "child" to be social and historical kind, and therefore also constructed kind rather than one given, so to speak, by nature in some fixed or essential form . . . such cultural constitution or construction and self-construction, is not simply a matter of reflection in thought, but also of the whole range of practices, interactions, and institutions that comprise the social and historical life-world. (Wartofsky, 1983, p. 190)

Relativists seem to achieve a sense of freedom by their position. They are allowed to listen to and respect their inner subjective voices. But an over emphasis on this ability seems to lead to an exaggerated sense of freedom, almost total freedom. Individuals, as relativists, become their own creators, and the only guidance they use in their new role is their intuition. Bernstein (1983, p. 18) described the tendency to extreme objectivism as a response to emphasis paid by the relativists on the private subjective experience. He called it the "Cartesian Anxiety": "*Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos*".

Bernstein (1983, p. 9) pointed out that ever since Plato, objectivists have argued that relativism, whenever it is clearly stated, is self-referentially inconsistent and paradoxical:

For implicitly or explicitly, the relativist claims that his or her position is true, yet the relativist also insists that since truth is relative, what is taken as true may also be false. Consequently, relativism itself may be true *and* false.

Modern relativists do not seem impressed by this ancient argument against their philosophy. They suspect that objectivism is actually motivated by and representative of a private subjective preference, similar to their own knowledge but without the relativist honesty to admit that. Objectivism is accused

of offering values and norms in the name of knowledge (See, for example, Haworth, 1984, pp. 343–357).

One can see how objectivism and relativism developed in response to each other. The objectivist is responding to the relativists' emphasis on their private subjective experiences by proposing fixed universal foundations. Relativists see theories with claims to universality as threats to their uniqueness:

Why have relativists been unconvinced when objectivists argue, as they almost invariably do, that relativism is self-referentially inconsistent, self defeating, and incoherent? Why have objectivists been unmoved when time and time again it is shown that they have failed to make the case for the objective foundation for philosophy, knowledge, or language, and that the history of attempts to reveal such foundations must be judged thus far to be a history of failures? (Bernstein, 1983, p. 15)

Bernstein (1983, pp. 1–3) thinks that the structuring of the contemporary debate on knowledge within the traditional extremes of objectivism and relativism is happening because of the seductive power of both of these extremes. Summarizing Gadamer, Bernstein (1983, p. 37) noted that relativism is not only the dialectical antithesis of objectivism, it is itself parasitic upon objectivism. Both may share the tendency to offer final solutions. Objectivism in its current manifestation in scientific empiricism offers a plan for knowledge and with it control over nature and ourselves. Relativism offers freedom by adherence to one's inner subjective voices, or by emphasizing one's ability to realize himself the way he chooses.

Richards (1987, pp. 217–224) sees in the philosophy of the natural and social sciences two dangerous tendencies — to believe in empirical science as a final authority about knowledge, or to reject it as relative. Currently, this struggle seems to be in progress and undecided. Bernstein (1983, p. 49) noted a third approach: "We are witnessing and participating in a movement beyond objectivism and relativism".

### The Third Approach: The Continuum Theory

In a recent book on methodology for the human sciences, Polkinghorne (1983, p. 13) wrote:

All of our knowledge is conditioned knowledge, constructed within our conceptual systems, and thus knowledge is a communal achievement and is relative to time and place. One need not retreat to a complete relativism, however, just because a perspectival or context-bound aspect of knowledge is recognized. Between the extremes of absolute certainty (with no relativity) and absolute uncertainty, statements of knowledge can be judged against each other, and some of them can be accepted and used as the base for action while others can be rejected.

Beyond objectivism and relativism exists a third approach. Its proponents accept the relativist rejection of the objectivist's claim to have a fixed foundation of truth, but, as we saw in the previous section, proponents of the third approach also accept the objectivist's criticism about the self-contradictory nature of relativism — relativism's inability to prove that objective knowledge is unattainable.

Current development in scientific realism, an approach emphasizing that scientific concepts have some referential ability to real entities, seems to belong to the third approach, beyond objectivism and relativism. McMullin (1984, p. 26) stated that "the long term success of a scientific theory gives reason to believe that something like the entities and structure postulated by the theory actually exists". Leplin, summarizing the basic theses shared by the new realists, wrote that "The history of at least the mature sciences shows progressive approximation to a true account of the physical world". He added to that, "The (approximate) truth of a scientific theory is the only possible explanation of its predictive success". Leplin (1984, p. 1) described Putnam as having inaugurated a new era of interest in realism with his declaration that realism is the only philosophy that does not make the success of science a miracle. One should note the difference between this version of realism and orthodox objectivism. The new realists do not claim that concepts in scientific theory represent things as they are, but that concepts in a successful theory seem to have the ability to refer to things as they are. What we have is not final truth but some contact with things as they are.

Modern relativism contends that scientific concepts and theories are just successful tools to manage some reality or to achieve a practical goal, but do not contain any referential ability

to true entities. Entirely different concepts may be used to refer to the same reality at different times. Concepts and what they refer to are not necessarily related. Levin (1984, pp. 124–139) refuted this distinction between the practical and the referential. He held that it is only because certain scientific concepts and theories have some referential connection to real entities, or an ability to relate, represent or express things as they are, that they can be used as practical tools. Their practicality is embedded in the extension of their truthfulness.

The new realistic approach to knowledge offers an alternative, beyond objectivism and relativism. McMullin (1984, p. 35) clarified the distinction between the new realist and the objectivist or the relativist: "The realist would not use the term 'true' to describe a good theory. He would suppose that the structure of the theory gives some insight into the structure of the world". The objectivist and the relativist differ from the new realist. The objectivist thinks that a good theory is true or represents things exactly as they are, while the relativist thinks that the structure of a theory has to do more with the knower and his culture than it has to do with the structure of the world.

Another perspective on the connection between a theory and what it describes which rejects the dichotomy between objectivism and relativism, is found through hermeneutics, the study of the methodological principles of interpretation. Bernstein (1983, p. 228) quoted Habermas as showing how deeply embedded the claim to communicate reasonable messages is in our everyday forms of social life and reproduction, "how it develops a stubbornly transcending power even when it is violated and silenced again and again". Objectivity from a hermeneutical perspective might be the goal we strive for, but are unable to achieve. We can sense the potential existence of knowledge of things as they are, and by this knowledge be motivated in an attempt to know, but final knowledge as the objectivist philosophy describes it is beyond our reach.

The notion that we can get in touch with things as they are is what motivates attempts to know, what explains our efforts, what transcends our differences, and what eventually can explain the successes of some of the theories we regard as 'knowledge'.



Meehl (1986, p. 322) summarizes the continuous tension between the objective world and our relative efforts to know it as it is:

So I begin with the presupposition that the external world is really there, there is a difference between the world and my view of it, and the business of science is to get my view in harmony with the way the world really is to the extent that it is possible.

Objective knowledge is the goal and what gives meaning to the efforts to know, the "extent that it is possible" hints that what we get is always somewhat less than an objective knowledge, a product of a subjective mind.

Acknowledgment of the inability to free ourselves completely from our subjective limitations combined with the goal to raise ourselves to some contact with the objective led hermeneutical writers to see our attempts to know as a dialogic process. They gave language a speculative character — dialogical attempt between human beings to refer, express, get in touch and agree upon the nature of some aspects of reality (Bernstein, expressing Gadamer's ideas, 1983, p. 224). This perspective sees knowledge as developing in a continuous process. What we 'know' is always one stage in this process. What we know may be objective for today.

A potential of utilizing subjective mental processes in order to know more intimately the essence of phenomena was noted in social work by the Adelphi Study Group which suggested adoption of phenomenological methods for the study of the meaning of subjective experiences (see Vigilante, et al., 1981, p. 40; for the definition of phenomenology, see Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 296, note No. 9). Phenomenology is a method to investigate the invariant structure which phenomena may take as contents of consciousness. Understanding the structure and meaning of a subjective experience becomes a way to know things as they are — the attention to the subjective leads to some objectivity.

Acknowledgment of our limitations to know taken together with our abilities to achieve some limited certainty are leading to a narrowing of the targets of inquiry. Popper suggested that good scientific work is not a search for the "true" theory

but a process of selection of “better” theories. The process requires creation of many theories and refutation or rejection of those that are clearly false. The accepted theory is one that was relatively less falsified than others and this theory itself will be rejected as soon as another theory is able to stand longer and holds in more aspects of the test of falsification. The falsification test requires a very narrow hypothesis. Richards (1987, p. 55) noted that Popper’s philosophy of science, “By making only limited claims about the world it actually excludes most of what could possibly occur, and is itself excluded if what it excludes occurs”. D’Andrade (1986, p. 27) reminds us that good science exists where the scope of the generalizations fits the extent of regularity found in the phenomena. He suggested that the social sciences should try to achieve limited generalizations.

We are closer to knowing things as they are when we try to find universal laws while eliminating claims to universality from our findings. The efforts to find universal laws are bound to fail, but it is this process that improves our knowledge about important contextual regularities. Attempts to find the universal characteristics of intelligence led the field of intelligence studies in psychology into a vicious cycle: intelligence was defined as what intelligence tests measure. Sternberg (1984, pp. 307–334) wrote that only the metatheory of contextualism has given research in intelligence the solid grounding that it generally lacked. In the contextualist view, intelligence is judged with respect to some context — culture, setting, adaptation needs, etc. Understanding knowledge as limited in its validity only to a narrow context, may save its ‘objectivity’. It is the attention to the unique, the limitation, the private, that raises knowledge from a low subjective state and gives it more contact with things as they are.

The way to knowledge leads from the objective to the subjective, and from the subjective to the objective. Attempts to find universal objective laws lead to acknowledgment of the contextual, subjective nature of our findings. Attention to the particular contexts in which knowledge seems to be valid gives it a greater contact with objective reality. Shweder (1986, p. 178) wrote of the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity and proposed a “science of subjectivity”:

The real world, it seems, is populated with subject-dependent objects and objectlike subjectivity . . . . Subjective phenomena can be studied objectively, and objective study always extends beyond the evidence in hand to the unseen and is never free of a subjective perspective.

Noting the limitations and abilities to achieve objective knowledge and its interrelatedness with subjectivity is not a new idea. Some of its roots can be found in Aristotle (Bernstein, 1983, p. 38), in the Kantian tradition (Rorty, 1979, p. 163), and other philosophical traditions. Modern science seems to express, based on its experience, a new refined understanding of the limitations and ability to know.

#### Pragmatism: Methodological Problem Solving

Acknowledgment of the inability to achieve final objective knowledge of reality and an understanding of human knowledge as a subjective perception of things as they are, raises a question: how can we distinguish between knowledge statements that are closer to expressing things as they are and those that are relatively far from reality? Pierce suggested replacing truth with method: "Truth is whatever is in the end delivered to the community of inquirers who pursue a certain end in a certain way" (See, for a short discussion on Pierce's ideas on methodology, Hacking, 1981, p. 131). What we call truth is just the best that we can achieve using our methodologies for generating knowledge.

Lakatos (see Hacking, 1981, pp. 131–132) added an attention to growth of knowledge as a sign of movement toward greater contact with the objective. The theory that should be preferred is the one that generates the growth of new knowledge. A degenerating theory is the theory that gradually becomes closed on itself. One may note that knowledge is understood by Lakatos as a result of a conscious contextual process. The preferential theory is not the one that produced the 'final truth', but the one that continues to develop in explaining new contexts. Knowledge is the product of the specific scientific community. Pierce and Lakatos, as noted above, do not say if this knowledge is objective or subjective. This knowledge is a result of an effort to

reach objectivity, within the subjective limits of the specific community. The concept 'methodology', the study of the methods used to employ for achieving some end, as explained by Pierce and Lakatos, can support the continuum view of the relationship between the subjective and the objective. The methods are designed to give the closest contact with things as they are, but the methods are our human methods with our limitations.

Emphasis on the methodology that will generate continuous development of contextual knowledge is replacing the claim for 'truth'. McMullin (1984, p. 35) wrote that scientists accept theory, they do not believe it to be true.

Scientists are very uncomfortable at this use of the word 'true', because it suggests that the theory is definitive in its formulation. As has often been pointed out the notion of *acceptance* is very complex, indeed ambiguous. It is basically a pragmatic notion: one accepts an explanation as the best one available; one accepts a theory as a good basis for further research, and so forth.

Understanding knowledge in the continuum between the subjective and the objective is tied with a change in the meaning of concepts in a scientific theory. Kuhn (1970) emphasized the centrality of the paradigm, the general conceptual framework of a scientific community, and noted that paradigms are used as long as they can explain most of the phenomena that scientists are interested in. Looking at Kuhn's observations from the objective-subjective interrelatedness perspective, this means that concepts in scientific theory are neither objective nor subjective. They are the successful timely subjective ways of a certain scientific community to relate to the objective.

Motivated by the will to know things as they are, we are trying to find the final causal structure of a relevant phenomenon. But what we may find, between objectivism and relativism, are the causal powers — the tendency or potential of certain entities to be causes. Secord (1986, p. 200) wrote that "the structure and properties of an entity, under the appropriate conditions, give it the power or capacity to act in a particular way." Secord (pp. 202–203) noted that an emphasis on causal powers shifts the causal focus to the structural natures of entities or processes with contextual conditions as a background factor.

In observing the presence of certain causal powers, we may be in touch with some objectivity. But, we never know the final causal structure. Holzman (1986, p. 348) wrote that in the social sciences, as in the natural sciences, we are dealing with relevant causes, not with necessary or sufficient causes. We may know that some causes seem to be related to a certain entity. We can not know if they are always related to this entity or if they are all the causes that effect this entity.

Between relativism and objectivism, science is seen as a pragmatic problem-solving activity. Laudan (1977) saw scientific progress as achieved when theories display increasing problem-solving effectiveness. This increase in problem-solving effectiveness is what qualifies, according to Laudan, as rational. Wimsatt (1986, p. 295) described the heuristic nature of science. Heuristics are aids for learning, discovery or problem solving which generate knowledge without claims for its validity. Heuristics make no guarantees that they will produce any solution or even a correct solution to a problem, they are chosen because they are pragmatic and parsimonious. Wimsatt saw science as a combination of learning aids, rules of thumb and trial and error methods. Mullen (1985, p. 13) may summarize the trend for us: "Scientific work is reconstructed as a form of problem solving in which 'satisfying heuristics' are used, principally for pragmatic reasons of efficiency." The problem-solving perception of science ties the relative and the objective. Problem solving scientific theories seem to relate to some objective reality by responding to a need to solve a problem and by their ability to offer some solution, to create some change. The problem solving scientific theories are relative because they can only be proven able to relate to a specific problem in a specific context. They are objective and relative for the same reason.

### Conclusion: The Continuum Theory

Emerging from this discussion is a theory of knowledge as a continuum between the poles which objectivist and relativist philosophies have marked. The continuum theory is based on an acknowledgment of our inability to achieve final objective knowledge of reality and an understanding of human knowledge as a subjective perception of things as they are. The

continuum theory sees the way to knowledge as leading from the objective to the subjective: attempts to find universal laws end in findings which are limited and contextual. But the continuum also moves from the subjective to the objective pole: attention to the particular context in which knowledge seems to be valid gives a greater contact with objective reality.

The continuum theory sees concepts in scientific theory as neither objective nor subjective. Concepts are the successful subjective ways of certain scientific communities to relate to the objective at a specific point in time. The subjective and the objective are also tied together in the continuum theory by its understanding of 'methodology': methods of acquiring knowledge are designed to give the closest contact with things as they are, but the methods themselves are human methods with human limitations. Emphasis on the methodology that will generate continuous development of contextual knowledge is suggested as a replacement for methodologies that claim they will reveal 'truth'.

The continuum theory accepts objectivist attempts to find the final causal structure of a phenomenon, but only as a way to find relevant causes, not necessary or sufficient causes. An emphasis on identifying causal powers, or entities with potentials to be causes, shifts the causal focus toward contextual conditions.

The continuum theory sees science as a pragmatic problem-solving activity in which 'satisfying heuristics' are used. The problem-solving nature of scientific inquiry implies that scientific theories are objective and relative for the same reason. Scientific theories seem to relate to some objective reality by responding to a need to solve a problem and by their ability to offer some solution, to create some change. They are relative because they can only be proven able to relate to a specific problem in a specific context.

### Implications: The Continuum Theory in Social Work

Some social workers are trying to make the profession an objectivist science while others stress the relativist ethical and artistic dimensions. The continuum theory of knowledge, as existing between the poles of objectivism and relativism, may

narrow the gap in social work between what is regarded as its scientific or knowledge side, and what is called its artistic or value dimension.

Converse (1986, p. 45) noted that each science has its own "intellectual texture". Each science has its own particular and subjective way to deal with the objective. D'Andrade (1986, pp. 29–30) described how different professions work successfully with different understandings of science. Adopting an existing scientific model may not make social work scientific. Nor is there a necessity to give up the profession's aspiration to be more scientific. An understanding of its relative and unique situation may be of more help in the attempt to find what can be scientific in social work.

Social work knowledge, it seems, will have to include, unlike, other sciences, more of the relative, ethical and intuitive in its framework. Frankel (1986, p. 357) indicated a need, in the social sciences, for consensus based regulative principles that recommend different methods of knowing for different contexts. Following this recommendation, we may suggest another understanding of the knowledge base in social work. It is not just an accumulation of empirical or theoretical products. It is the current stage in the process of fitting methods of knowing to contents of social reality and the accumulated results of this process. For example, the knowledge base may tell us that the best way to compare between two existing programs is with empirical research. This knowledge base may also include a recommendation to use intuitive methods of knowing as part of a first attempt to contact a resisting client. It may add that certain theoretical frameworks were found helpful for conceptualizing ongoing relationships with clients.

Meehl (1984, p. xiii) described the movement away from naive objectivism as a process in which theories that were regarded as general and universal are not thrown away but seen as limited to a particular context. Leplin (1984, p. 5) noted that in the process of scientific development, successful theories of the past do not completely lose their referential ability but are incorporated in limited ways into successor theories. The continuum theory of knowledge implies that there is no place for the question: which social work practice theory is ultimately true. No practice theory knows or will know fully the nature

of human development, psychosocial pathology or helping relationships. We may ask what specific context of human development, psychosocial pathology, and helping relationship each practice theory seems to know well. Or, we may ask which theory seems to know the context that our clients are in or we are in with them.

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