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SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

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Any effort to define appropriate tasks and directions for social work practice must necessarily come to grips with some analysis of the particular social-political-historical situation within which that practice is being formulated. Too often it seems as though we attempt to define practice abstracted from the particular period in which that practice takes place. It is true, on the one hand, that it is important to develop generic principles of practice. Similarly, it is true that the definition of the social work task is not a matter left solely to the discretion of the profession. In fact, the profession may have a relatively small voice, at any moment, in defining its task. On the other hand, the separation of practice formulations from the specifics of the historical moment leads to blind technicism and to the charge of irrelevance which has often and sometimes accurately been leveled at the profession. And, while we may have far from the definitive influence on our own practice, if we are not conscious of directions we value and do not press for them to the extent possible, then we do not act with the fullest responsibility for human service.

We must constantly question and develop practice in the light of our own best understanding of social realities. In a recent essay, Kahn formulated this notion as follows:

Fadism, cultism, controversy, mark all attempts to characterize the social scene, to state how one might look at America today in thinking about the social sector, social welfare, social services, or social work-whatever the political perspective - in the reshaping of a "relevant" and effective social practice. Yet, the advocate of social welfare policies and the molder of social practice must face the contradictions and must decide what to make of it all. Otherwise, ad hoc programming takes over, repeating a periodic history of professional drifting in which service priorities, program philosophies, and manpower strategies are based on inconsistent, or at least on unarticulated, premises and do not come close to solving urgent social problems, coping with serious individual needs or enriching community life.¹

A Dilemma

Any effort to develop an understanding of the context for social work practice in the current period in the United States must face one overriding reality. We are a country with enormous problems. Political corruption, energy crises, gross inequalities, and a general sense of social aimlessness press themselves unavoidably on our consciousnesses. Some may take a more systemic, that is, root or radical, view and see these problems as symptomatic of pervasive structural flaws in the society. Others may see in these problems a series of specific issues to be addressed which do not necessarily support the need for radical change. In either case, the reality of a nation in deep distress has impressed itself on all of us at this time.

The dilemma emerges when we juxtapose social work practice - the practice of a profession dedicated to the furtherance of the well-being of individuals and the society as a whole - against these enormous problems. Social work practice can indeed seem irrelevant, puny, and futile. We must come to grips with the reality that we practice within a society that does not seem to have human welfare as a high priority. As citizens we are aware of, complain of, and suffer from the pain of our society. As professionals, we too often proceed with business as usual. How can we resolve this dilemma?

The various resolutions to this dilemma that we usually seek have not been adequate. One of these is to ignore the societal context, as practice plays out in the specifics of day to day work. We may acknowledge the seriousness of the overall situation, but we proceed with an abstracted formulation of practice devoid of an infusion of purpose and direction from that acknowledgment. This approach leads to practice that is indeed irrelevant to the real issues of our day and to professional cynicism- "doing good" within a framework of despair and resignation, convinced beforehand that practice is merely an exercise. Another resolution is to view the piecemeal efforts of social workers, however small they may be, as somehow cumulative building stones toward a larger solution. Even if the building stones were pebbles, this might be an acceptable view. Unfortunately, the evidence seems to be that we are not making progress - that social work is not making a dent that is noticeable. The primary criticism of incrementalism, as we have practiced it, is that it is not incremental.

A third resolution is to bifurcate the profession. Most of us will practice in conventional ways. A few perhaps in the national NASW office or in special commissions, will prepare position papers, write legislation, lobby, and so on. The shortcomings of this resolution are at least two-fold. First, the kinds of politics the few can carry on in the name of the many are necessarily divorced from the grass roots power that might come from worker and client organization and involvement and are, therefore, constrained in speaking to the need for structural change. Second, this approach proceeds as though the specific day to day work of most of us were not profoundly political in its implications for social conversation or social change. It makes social change a narrow and specialized endeavor separate from the realities of everyday life, where it fully belongs.

Our dilemma, then, is that we practice toward the ends of social betterment in a society organized around profit making, efficiency, and the like, but not around the maximization of human well-being. Social work practice must face the challenge of speaking to large social problems, even if in a small way, as an integral and ongoing part of its daily work.

Toward What Ends?

As there must be efforts to wrestle with the diagnosis of the broad social problems before us, so there must be efforts to discuss the goals we would like to achieve as a society in the long and short runs. It may be useful to suggest some quite broad outcomes as an end point of practice in particular and larger social struggles in general. The value in doing this is to keep before us the largest agendas, the ultimate agendas, as we struggle with the realities of day to day life and with the smallness of what we can accomplish. We social workers cannot be faulted if we cannot bring about the milleneum, cannot bring it about now, or cannot bring it about alone. This is only to acknowledge political reality. We can be faulted if we lose sight of what that milleneum is. And, more often neglected, we can be faulted if we fail to ask ourselves, in each instance of our practice, what is the contribution of this specific of practice, however small, to the coming of the milleneum. Toward that end, would the following five areas of concern, five hoped for outcomes, capture what many of us have in the back of our minds?

1. The inequality in the distribution of the resources of our society, both the distribution among the domestic population and the distribution between the United States and other nations, is not acceptable. We surely have in mind as an endpoint of practice and social evolution far greater equality. In terms of international distribution, the United States is not an innocent actor. It has been a conscious agent of exploitation of the people and resources of other nations. To talk of world wide redistribution is to bring to the fore the problem of American imperialism. To talk of internal maldistributions is to bring to the fore the question of capitalism, to which point item two is more specifically addressed.

2. The system of private ownership of the means of production and, consequently, of privately made determinations concerning the investment of our resources, does not permit us to organize ourselves in a way that maximizes our social potential. In addition to the economic inequalities and hardships to which capitalism gives rise, one must reckon with the negative effect on our social organization and personal lives of accumulation for its own sake, of work that is organized for efficiency and profit and not for the development of the worker, of investments made on the basis of their potential profitability and not on their social utility, of a wealth of privately purchaseable goods and a desparate shortage of funds for the public purposes of education, social services, and other public resources. Social movements in general and social work practice in particular, must express some concern for this society's need to pursue humane social ends with the same logic and vigor we now invest toward the ends of private profit and accumulation.

3. As an overall concern, we must place foremost on our agendas the question of human dignity for all persons. All discriminations and forms of exploitation of any individuals for any reason must be addressed. Presently, this discrimination and exploitation find expression most viciously in the case of black and third world persons, women, gay persons, and the aged, and must be fought on these fronts.

4. Living in some more organic relationship with our physical environment becomes daily more of an obvious necessity. We can no longer see human beings and the human endeavor as a minor activity on a vast, endless, eternally resourceful stage. The concept of spaceship earth, of the human race as potentially capable of ultimately using up and destroying its home, must inform our practice concerns.

5. We seem to lack an overall sense of social purpose capable of guiding the nation as a whole and the individuals in it. No single overall social purpose can be suggested by any one person, with the exception of the general notion that such purpose would surely concern the maximization of the lives of all people. What can be suggested is that no such social purpose can emerge in a way that will have meaning to us all and guide us in a non-coercive way, unless we all participate in its formulation. Toward this end, there must be restructuring of the major institutions of the society in the direction of greater participation in decision making by all of us. This will probably require radical decentralization of social institutions and decision making processes. It will probably require that we move in the direction of shifting the locus of decision making in our institutions and in our society from decision making at the top of hierarchies to decision making at the lowest possible levels in hierarchies consistent with overall concerns for equity and rationality. It will probably require an emphasis on smallness and locality rather than bigness and integration.

Implications for Practice

We have suggested some broad and long term goals. We have said that our society is presently far from achieving those goals. We can also suggest that social welfare is presently under attack and is not in one of the stronger positions it has experienced in the last thirty years. How then shall we avoid despair, resignation, or self-illusion about our work? How can we relate our practice to the social context in a constructive way?

It seems to be the case that people in general, and social workers by inclusion, either resign themselves to lives and practice lived within and serving conservative ends, or pursue extremist actions that tend to be futile and self-destructive. To live and practice conservatively is to make a mockery of the profession's commitment to human welfare, and to destroy ourselves as individuals in the process of accomodating ourselves to a destructive system. To live a totally radical life and to implement a totally radical practice is surely to face political isolation and to risk personal self-destruction.

But there is another position, though it can be suggested only in its broad outlines. We must live in resistance to the existing forms and practice, precisely because they are destructive to others and ourselves, and because we are committed to change. That resistance must be such that it stays as close as possible to a border line - the border line at which to resist less is to accomodate ourselves to conservative ways, and to resist more is to become isolated or to be self-destructive. Too often we do not press close enough to that border line. We fail to do so not because the repression is too great, but because we have not developed appropriate strategies, have not developed the kind of collective support that makes ongoing resistance possible, or have become resigned. Surely there are tremendously powerful external forces which inhibit efforts to create change. But we too often stop in our efforts far short of facing those powers. We stop at the point at which internal pressures and dissension determine our actions. These are real and must be struggled with so we can move closer to the border and stay there more consistently.

With this as a general, and admittedly non-operationalized guide, can we be more specific about practice? If we try to "do good" in the conventional ways, we may do some good and, in fact, help some individuals or modify a system of procedure. But few of us are likely to think that the accumulation of these kinds of efforts makes much of a dent on the very basic factors that create the problems in the first place, or move us closer to the realization of the five values suggested earlier. The question then becomes, how can the small pieces of practice, the concrete and real things that social workers do, be more than isolated efforts? How can they become a contribution to the sorts of structural changes required?

To make a link between the specifics of practice and these larger changes requires that we develop some larger conceptions of how we think profound social changes might occur in the society. We need a theory of social change. Such a theory must be developed by practitioners to help them focus the specifics of practice. It cannot be developed here. However, Andre Gorz and others have suggested the concept of structural, or non-reformist reforms, as an approach to the kinds of specific and concrete activities we can undertake that can contribute to a larger process of change. This notion is potentially highly informative and provocative for a social work practice that must stay linked to the old at the same time that it pushes for and toward the new.

Gorz argues in this way:

A reformist reform is one which subordinates its objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system and policy. Reformism rejects those objectives and demands - however deep the need for them - which are incompatible with the preservation of the system.

On the other hand, a not necessarily reformist reform is one which is conceived not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands.

In other words, a struggle for non-reformist reforms - for anti-capitalist reforms - is one which does not base its validity and its right to exist on capitalist needs, criteria, and rationales. A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be. And finally, it bases the possibility of attaining its objectives on the implementation of fundamental political and economic changes.²

Carroll, Lakey, Moyer, and Taylor, political activists associated with the non-violent Movement for a New Society, have attempted to operationalize this notion in a way that may be helpful to social workers. They suggest that a non-reformist reform has six characteristics. It helps to decentralize power and control and, simultaneously, to restrict centralized power and control; it develops, in the present, some aspects of the social forms and values that might be desired in a radically changed society; it brings about greater people's control of resources; it supplements the resources of people's movements; it erodes the power, privileges, and wealth of the establishment; and, it is located "where the action is," that is, it builds on and facilitates political movements.³ To these criteria, we ought to add that a non-reformist reform also serves as a vehicle for political education and consciousness raising.

Contained within these criteria, obviously, is a theory of change which suggests a profound struggle, from the bottom up, against the existing institutions of society. Obviously, too, tremendous intellectual and practice work is needed to develop the utility of these criteria for the specifics of social work activity. But if we accept the dilemmas before us and the need to be part of the struggle that is required, we will undertake the task.

For example, these criteria would suggest that it might be more important to help organize welfare clients than to work directly for immediate improvements in benefit levels. Improvements in benefit levels are important. In themselves, however, they do not organize the kinds of new power bases that are required, do not raise political consciousness, and may even erode support at the client level for political struggle. On the other hand, when organized clients win political struggles for benefit improvements, and see those struggles in the context of problems of inequitable distribution in capitalist society, they not only achieve specific improvements but also develop their political strength in a potentially important way.

The issue before us, then, in developing a strategy for social work practice, is the issue of connecting daily struggles around a concrete issue with which we come in contact, to the largest agendas and hopes that we have.⁴ The notion of structural reforms may be one way to formulate and begin to play out, in practice, in classrooms, in theoretical discussions, the specifics of that strategy.

FOOTNOTES

1. Alfred J. Kahn, "A Policy Base for Social Work," in Kahn, editor, Shaping the New Social Work (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 5.
2. Andre Gorz, Strategy for Labor (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 7-8.
3. Susan Carroll, George Lakey, William Moyer, and Richard Taylor, Moving Toward A New Society, manuscript, 1974, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Forthcoming.
4. Jeffry Galper, The Politics of Social Services (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., Forthcoming, January, 1975).