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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

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Volume 5  
Issue 5 *September*

Article 9

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September 1978

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### Recommended Citation

Falck, Hans S. (1978) "Social Continuity and Social Discontinuity: Social Work and, in, Against and Separate from Society," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 5 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol5/iss5/9>

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SOCIAL CONTINUITY AND SOCIAL DISCONTINUITY:  
SOCIAL WORK AND, IN, AGAINST AND SEPARATE FROM SOCIETY

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Abstract

The burden of this paper is to clarify social continuity and social discontinuity. Social continuity is related to individuality-groupness (the I-G effect) and its related logic is demonstrated further by a rejection of social discontinuity, i.e. individualism.

The most immediate occasion for this paper is the publication of an excellent and lucid discussion of "Alternative Stances on the Relationship of Social Work to Society" (Cowger, 1977) in which the author presents four conceptualizations of society and social work, their possible relationships to each other, and the advantages and disadvantages of each. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of thoughtful discussions about individualism, of which Cowger's is an example.

A less immediately inspired reason for this article is my own work in this field (Falck 1976, 1977, 1978), largely having to do with how the social and psychological aspects of the concept person ("the individual") and the social network fit together. My own most consistent theoretical guidelines have come from and continue to come from symbolic interactionism and from psychoanalytic object relations theory.

Before I make explicit another option (in addition to Cowger's four) I shall summarize Cowger's alternatives with their advantages and disadvantages as listed by Cowger himself. I shall then introduce a fifth and what I believe to be a more preferable one which is superior to the others in that it repairs what I believe to be a conceptual and attitudinal deficit, highly endemic to Western thought on the subject of individual and group (or society). It leads

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to the suggestion of nothing less than that at least in the theoretical and technical social science literature we ought to drop the use of the term "the individual" because of various implications and new data which point to its inappropriateness.

#### Four Views on Social Work and Society

Cowger suggests that the options social work has in defining its relationship styles to society are social work versus society, social work as a distinct entity independent from society, social work as an instrument of society, and social work as an intermediary between the individual and society.

The significance and the importance of Cowger's discussion is immediately apparent. It is that social work is one of the very major professions that constantly, and to its great credit, means to influence all of society on an issue of the most fundamental of human concerns. This is, how can it help persons cope to maximum advantage in a bewildering and confusing world in which they can do more than survive, and in which it is not at all clear what the proper relationships of persons and society ought to be.

The philosophical stance that would place Social Work versus Society, according to Cowger, emphasizes the major modification or even destruction of society in order to relieve individuals of problems that are not psychological but societal in origin. A major limitation of this view is that the profession would become a social movement, that the position lends itself to much rhetoric and rigid categorizations of friends and enemies (p. 26), and not offering a flexible, dynamic approach to the social work effort.

The stance of Social Work Independent from Society is said to contribute much in its "concern for individuals" (Cowger, 1977, p. 27) but falls short in that it often ignores society as a whole, and especially the worker's responsibility to "the public good" (p. 27).

Viewing Social Work as an Instrument of Society would make the profession a "socialization instrument" (p. 27). While Cowger thinks that the advantage in this stance is that social work "takes seriously the responsibility of the profession to society" (p. 27), the disadvantage is that "the society or public good take precedence over the individual" (p. 27).

Social Work as an Intermediary Between the Individual and Society is the position favored by Cowger as well as by William Schwartz (Schwartz 1963). In fact, Schwartz has developed a whole group work

theory around the worker as mediator (Schwartz, 1961, 1976). Cowger suggests that the three other models are static by nature but that the last one allows flexibility, even on a case by case basis, for deciding what belongs to the individual and what to society.

Thus Cowger enumerates four possibilities regarding the relationship of social work and society. Most noticeable is the absence of a discussion of social work as part of, as a product of, or as contributor to society. There is only a vague hint in this direction in the section on Social Work as an Instrument of Society, where it acts and speaks for society. This is all the more surprising as it leaves out of consideration the fact that all professions view themselves as responding to, as well as representing, the needs and desires of society as the latter views them.

#### Issues and Problems in Either/Or Conceptualizations of Individuals and Society

Any conceptualization that overstates the boundedness of social phenomena vis à vis each other, such as the individual against group, or the individual against society, or the individual as an alternative to society or vice versa, leads to severe distortions of reality on a practice level. The underlying set of assumptions and the use of knowledge regarding how people grow and develop appear to be practically ignored. Yet, intervention methods are only as good as the utilization of knowledge about human functioning and dysfunctioning and even more fundamentally about human growth and development. When one leaves out such considerations in conceptualizations of the relationship between individual and society, one easily slips into the very rhetoric against which Cowger warns us. My reading of psychoanalytic object relations theory, symbolic interaction theories, as well as various systems theories convince me that "the individual" does not exist. There exists, in addition, a considerable literature --ranging from Von Bertalanffy to Piaget--that suggests holistic approaches to human life and development. While it is not necessary to be a systems theory adherent to espouse ecological and holistic views of the human condition, psychoanalytic object relations theory, social network theory, phenomenology, all suggest that holistic approaches offer a great deal in avoiding the logical splits that exist in the Western world as represented by bounding races, institutions, societies, as separate and independent existences. For centuries we have tried to repair the body/mind split of Descartes and his predecessors. This is extremely difficult to do and we have had relatively little success with it. We should not, I submit, worsen that problem by further splits into opposites and alternatives that have little reference to reality.

The problem with which we need to busy ourselves, and to which Cowger's work points so well, may be viewed as the problem of social discontinuity. Social discontinuity occurs when one describes persons, groups, and larger social networks and phenomena as discrete, enjoying an existence of their own, and with language that points to independent reality for each. Most common examples of social discontinuity are "the individual," "the group," "the society" and frequently the language of physicalism.

Social discontinuity occurs in several forms. Each of these can be illustrated with examples and is documentable in a vast variety of literature.

- a. Overdetermined boundedness. Boundedness is necessary and desirable to achieve identity and differentiation between "me" and "non-me." Overdetermined boundedness is suggested by words like "the individual." The assumption here is that the individual is a human being who lives inside his or her skin and relates to other human beings as a unitary person. What is overdetermined is the assumption and implication that basically the individual is described by the person himself/herself as solely an "I." Other people are experienced as similarly unitary and separate individuals. Overdetermined boundedness is manifested by failing to define the individual as irreducibly relational with others. The split between social work and, versus, as intermediary or as independent with or from society is another example of overdetermined boundedness.
- b. Constitutiveness. Constitutiveness is a concept that points to the manner in which most investigators account for the human group. An example of this is the statement "A group consists of individuals." This may be embellished by pointing out that a group is not only an additive of its component parts but also that these components, namely individuals, stand or live in some kind of independent relationship to each other. Since a group, moreover, is frequently described as a collective, it follows that collectiveness is what we mean by constitutiveness, namely that the group "consists" of these otherwise and alternatively totally unique and independent individuals.
- c. Exclusivity. Exclusivity as an aspect of social discontinuity points to the notion that each individual

is unique. In his or her uniqueness there lies hidden a sense of sole ownership of oneself, one's body, of one's feelings, of experiences. Consequently, it follows that one speaks of the individual and the group, the individual or the group, including the implication that one may join or leave a group on the basis of individual decisions or even mediate as a social worker between individual and society (Schwartz 1961).

- d. Reification. Reification refers to the type of social discontinuity that endows collectives with the language of the person. Groups are said to think, act, walk, meet, take in as well as expel other people. The network of relations among persons who in fact are much more than individuals, that is to say are really part of each other, is utterly lost because the group is thought of in collective terms only, and at that described with a language reserved for persons with minds and intentions.
- e. Environmentalism. Environmentalism is another form of social discontinuity. It suggests that individuals may be described as being surrounded by their environment. The implication of being surrounded is not that one is part of something that one experiences as being "outside of" oneself but rather that there is a psychological or spatial discontinuity, as if spatial and psychological discontinuities were the same. This leads to the at least implied inference that being persons is the same as having a body; and overlooks the fact that persons are something larger and other than what they experience themselves to be bodily. Environmentalism's greatest problem is that it confuses psychic and physical phenomena. "... the environment may be considered in its impact on individual behavior" (p. 26).

It may be true that physically one lives in an environment that is outside of oneself, but this is not true psychologically and is certainly not true socially.

- f. Concretism. Concretism is a form of social discontinuity that reduces phenomena of relationship to physical entities. Organic descriptions such as "the body" are used analogously with relational terminology such as person; or group is described in physical terms--cf constitutiveness--or in action language such as "the group met," or "it talked about..."

Social discontinuity then is characterized by overdetermined boundedness, by constitutiveness, by exclusivity, by reification, by environmentalism, and by concretism. What characterizes all of these concepts is that they describe an implicit assumption that there exists psychological and social "space" between persons, groups, environment which, on the basis of our best knowledge, does not in fact exist.

### Social Continuity and Social Discontinuity

An alternative to social discontinuity is social continuity. Social continuity holds that social phenomena are characterized by two simultaneously occurring attributes: separation and wholeness. I have written of these in other papers (Falck 1976, 1977). I shall summarize my position here. It is that the phenomena person is characterized by the fact that he/she has uniqueness (individuation) and simultaneously, and because of individuation, groupness. This I refer to as the I-G effect (individuality-groupness). The I-G effect means that each person is--in a symbolic sense--and psychoanalytically through introjection of others, part of other persons whom he/she has experienced, and at the same time in his/her own way (individuality). The groupness aspect of the I-G effect is achieved through social experience. The child introjects part objects, e.g. messages coming from mother ("you are good, pleasant, bad, painful, anger producing, satisfying") which are laid down in the brain as memory traces and are synthesized in the growing personality in the form of self-representations and which are socially projected to others. What starts out as a social interaction from mother to child is converted into self-representations (from "you are..." into "I am ...") and again given off to others (another social interaction). Thus "other" becomes "self" and "other" once again, and so forth. We are describing in this way a simultaneous social and psychological process in which both depend entirely on the other, with the exception of biological variables such as genetic anlage which exercise influence not yet understood on the conversion and synthesis of other into self. Social continuity may be understood in the sense that we speak of one continuous process, not of two.

Moving the argument to another level of abstraction one might say that social work does not exist separately from society, as if there were two phenomena that can be brought into some relationship with each other. Social work ought to be conceptualized as being an integral part of society, which at the same time affords social work an identity its own. In fact, that identity is a product of its membership in society. Any reader can think of many examples and it is unnecessary to list them, from financing of services, the use of

tax and voluntary dollars, the role of universities in professional education, and so on. Consistent with the principle of social continuity, one would ask "In what way is social work a part of society?" and "How might social work change its characteristics within society?" and "What changes need to be made within society so that the social work part of it would show up more efficiently--or at any rate differently--than it does now?" Terms like versus, independent of, instrument of, and intermediary between have no place in the language of social continuity. The significant advantage in asking the questions I propose rather than continuing the time-honored splits is that social continuity recognizes that the responsibility for social work's sad or happy state is to be found not in social work alone as if it had a separate existence, but in the society of which it is part, of which it is a function, and without which it could not exist in any form--good or bad.

The same principle obtains in the relationship of persons "to" society. All four of Cowger's categories ask questions about this, but always based on the notion of social space (implicit in the connectives and, against, etc.). A far more painful insight as well as a highly accurate one is provided by asking in what way Blacks, the poor, the ill, the unemployed are part of this society. It is not a matter of "them" against society; the tragedy is that they are thoroughly woven into it and in that condition discriminated against, punished and mistreated as if they were outsiders. A much greater tragedy is to find oneself to be a stranger in one's own land, subject to its obligations and not its benefits.

This view, highly consistent with the I-G effect, offers no room for mediators who act between individual or group or society. Instead, the societal obligation for all people rests on common membership and not on unsociological notions of "in" and "out." It is an "in-house" matter and cannot possibly be solved or even alleviated when the very model we utilize seems to say that two groups, basically unrelated to each other, need a social worker in the role of a mediator to bring them together.

#### Discussion and Summary

However noble the sentiment may sound when one reads the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers, the statement "I regard as my primary obligation the welfare of the individual or group served, which includes action for improving social conditions," it also betrays a good deal of conceptual confusion. It is marked by social discontinuity, it reminds one of the myth of rugged individualism, of the false dichotomy of individual, group, and society. Unwittingly

it celebrates a sociological falsehood and, furthermore, manages to confront us with an impossibility. If "the individual" or rather persons enjoy rights and obligations, they must be such because each person is a part of the society from which he/she originated and within which they may be protected and realized.

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