Values Classification through Science Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the use of science fiction in social work education as a mechanism for values clarification for the student social worker. Both personal opinions and values, and those stereotypes to which we have all been socialized, can be brought to awareness as reality separate from fact or knowledge by discussion of the alternate futures and societies presented in the analogic reality of science fiction. A partial bibliography along with suggestions for use are given, and an informal study of student levels of values, clarified by LeGuin's story "Those Who Walk Away from Omelas," is reported.

Analogic and Values

A major task for the social work educator is that of helping students to clarify their own values about self, the practice of social work, and society in general. It is imperative that such basic ideas and opinions be investigated so that, at the very least, the student will be aware that much of what is "known" about self, life, and others is not fact but value—

> ...a type of belief centrally located within one's total belief
> system about how one ought or ought not to behave, or about some
> end-state of existence worth or not worth attaining (Rokeach,
> 1968:124).

As educators we are all aware that to question deeply embedded beliefs and values is problematic because of the resistance such probing may cause, and that it is usually ineffective to try to teach values. Because of our own ethics we cannot impose our values on students, nor can we simply direct them to open their minds. Moreover, a confrontation about personal opinions or beliefs about society often will be perceived as an attack on the American way of life, our government's political or economic system, or, worse, an attack on the student him/herself.

The use of science fiction in the social work classroom is one way to help resolve the dilemma. According to Milstead (1974:xii),

> To the development of sociological consciousness...science fiction
> is particularly well-suited...The societies described can generate
> serious inquiry into the nature of contemporary society.

The situations and societies in science fiction are not threatening to students because they are not "real." Though the students may be puzzled or angry at being required to read fiction as preparation for a career, they apply the ideas to social

work through appropriately led discussion and, in the process, become aware of how the stories reflect our society. The stories provide a testing ground for inquiry, and the leap of logic to our time-space is accomplished easily. Moreover, analogic, according to Lewis (1978) "fixes" new concepts in the mind quickly and makes the concepts immediately available for recall and application. Thus science fiction provides not only the learning experience for a most important issue but the means to make it useful in future work.

Generally, students choosing social work as a career are from middle-class white conventional families. They bring to the educational experience a whole array of stereotypes of social work and societally determined values about other people and ways of life—ideas they have never had occasion to question. Coming from a society which is accustomed to labeling, they already "know" social work terminology—culture of poverty, black matriarchy, welfare cheaters, neurotics, and so on. With no hesitation they place people in categories and accept as typical the set of connotations of these diagnostic "boxes." They are idealistic concerning their capabilities for changing others, and often see clients as raw materials which they can mold into new patterns. They are naive about the bases of social problems, and, believing in a benevolent society, are socialized to an "organization is right" perspective, one often reinforced by the market orientation of many programs of social work education.

Social work is itself admittedly a value-laden profession, with bases in the ideas of the morality of work, the labeling process as an appropriate means for therapeutic diagnosis, conformity to the system, and the benevolence of society and its welfare institutions (Rein, 1972). These values, unrecognized as such and carried to extremes, may be detrimental to clients. Another set of values, those upon which professional ethics are based, include respect for the individual and for different patterns of life, belief in human worth, individual freedom, and so forth. This last set requires also that a practitioner's values must not be imposed upon clients. Taken all together, as values often are when we are unaware of their existence or the depth to which they influence our lives, the values are often conflictual, often antithetical, and may cause actions which are inappropriate and/ or harmful to clients. Good social work education demands that the issues and conflicts fostered by values must be brought to light, to awareness, so that they may be dealt with.

Science fiction is a valuable tool for this purpose on at least two levels. It can help the student differentiate his/her values from what in fact is knowledge, and it can provide examples for a more objective analysis of society and social welfare institutions. As Goroff (1977) states

> It is in failing to recognize that all social work practice is
> political practice that we [fail to recognize] some of the
> paradoxes in [social welfare institutions]...these institutions
> are designed to provide services so that the existing social
> arrangements and social order may be maintained.

The utopias and dystopias of science fiction become powerful analogies with which to deal with sensitive issues of status quo. The analogic reality provides the spark which causes students to question what they have learned is reality in our society.

The Omelas Story

As an example of the use of one such story to bring to awareness both students' lack of differentiation of value from knowledge and the rationalizations we make our society in terms of inequality, I present to my students Ursula LeGuin's "Those Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1975). This four-page story, which students read in class, deals with a utopia where all citizens are happy, productive, and all needs are met. The price for the utopia, however, is one child kept in a dark closet, deprived of even the essentials for its short life. and mistreated by all who see it. The terms of the bargain are clear. If the child is saved, not only will utopia disappear but the evils of the world will fall upon Omelas. Students answer the question "Would you stay or walk away? Why?" In class discussion following the exercise, we deal with such problems as saving the child and having the utopia brought down, and with the rationalizations the people of Omelas, and the people in our society, give for keeping certain people and groups in deprived situations.

There are three perspectives students take. The first is the idealistic view of self and social work. They see the problem as one of child abuse, and would rush to save the child without regard to the rest of the community. They look at social work through rose-colored glasses and work from the heart rather than reason. From the second perspective, they try to deal with the system, to cure the evils of a society which appears to them as conscienceless. They are somewhat more realistic in that they see the necessity of systemic action. but they ignore the political reality which allows no change. They are idealistic about their abilities to produce reformation in a recalcitrant system.

The third perspective is more abstract. Students recognize the story as analogic and see the rationalization of inequalities as pertinent to our society. Comparisons to racism, to poverty, to treatment of disadvantaged groups such as those with physical or mental handicaps or the aged are perceived. More importantly, there is recognition that our society may perpetuate inequalities in the same way as do the citizens of Omelas, and for the same reasons. The leap of logic is made—one cannot live in Omelas without knowling the price that is paid, nor can he/she solve the problem without compromising basic values and principles. By further extrapolation the students see that one cannot work in human services organizations without being aware that principles and values are often the price of one's own security, and that the maintenance of inequality for certain groups may be the principle involved. They become aware of their own idealism and value stances regarding clients, society, and inequality and see the hard choices they must make in recalcitrant systems in which they will become employed. Finally, they see that there are some compromises one must not make—that one may work in and make use of a system for the benefit of clients, but to forget that inequality is part and parcel of the system is to compromise one's values unforgiveably.

An informal study concerning this story was conducted to assess whether exposure to our program of social work education had resulted in values awareness. Two sets of students were given the exercise (an essay on staying or walking away from Omelas). Those students with no exposure to the program (naive students) were about evenly divided among choices of saving the child, changing the community, or walking away, though a plurality would save the child. Students with some

exposure to the program (advanced students) were asked to respond both before and
after class discussion of the story. More than half of the advanced group chose
the "walk away" perspective at first test, with the percentage rising to nearly
two-thirds after class discussion.

Table 1

Perspectives of Naive and Advanced Students

	Save child	Change system	Walk Away
Naive students (N=43)	37.4%	30.2%	32.6%
Advanced (N=33)			
Before discussion	24.2	24.2	51.6
After discussion	15.1	21.2	63.6

Those students in the naive group come from a variety of academic concentra-
tions, such as home economics and primary education, as well as social work. How-
ever, as Table 2 shows, there was not much difference among concentrations except
that home economics students were more likely to walk away that were pre-social
workers, and that most pre-social workers chose either the first or second per-
spective. This might indicate a more idealistic bent for the pre-social work group
than for others.

Table 2

Perspectives by Concentrations

	Save Child	Change System	Walk Away
Pre-Social Work (N=18)	44.4%	33.3%	22.2%
Others, primarily home economics (N=24)	29.1	33.3	37.1

It seems apparent, then, that the Omelas story serves as an indicator of value
perspectives, and that discussion surrounding the dilemma presented by LeGuin helps
students to become more aware of the realities of situations they must face in
social work practice.

Using Science Fiction as Analogic

The procedures for using science fiction for values clarification will vary
with the instructor, with class composition, and with course content. Instructors
should be aware that, aside from the purely adventure type of story, science fiction
is primarily social criticism—an attempt to emphasize by exaggeration the problems
and ills of our society and the values on which those are based. Therefore, almost
any good story will provide material for values clarification. However it is used,
open class discussion which relates the fictions to our own reality is essential.
Students have found different meanings, values, and issues in the stories, and can

light sparks of imagination and realization for each other. Moreover, imagination is a difficult task for some students, and without well-led class discussion some may simply not get the point at all.

If the instructor is willing to make a week-by-week commitment to discussion, one procedure is to make use of short stories taken from the several good anthologies suggested below. These stories are keyed to specific problems and values with which social workers come into contact. They can be assigned as complementary readings on course topics. Marriage and the Family Through Science Fiction (Clear et al., 1976) has sections on the nature of family organization, alternative family forms, courtship, marriage, and family dissolution. Greenberg et al. (1975), Social Problems through Science Fiction, deal with population problems, race relations, alienation and urban society, drug use and abuse, sexual deviance, education, economics, welfare, poverty, and medical care. Greenberg et al. also have a criminal justice anthology (1977), and Milstead et al.'s book Sociology Through Science Fiction (1974) has more general stories concerning social class, age, social institutions, population and urban life, and self and society. The Sociology of the Possible, by Richard Ofshe (1970) provides a collection of readings dealing with social possibilities ranging from Plato to modern writers, including science fiction authors. Above the Human Landscape, by McNelly and Stover (1972), has stories about drugs, urban decay, ecology, generational conflict, sexual identity, individualism versus collectivism, and the technological threat.

For the instructor wanting to test the value of the science fiction approach without such a week-by-week commitment, the assignment of one or two books which supplement regular readings, with class discussions at limited intervals, might be most useful. As one example, in a course on the social welfare institution, one might assign as a regular reading Piven and Cloward's Regulating the Poor (1977). As excellent as this is in providing an understanding of the political and economic bases for welfare, many students will discount it as polemic because it lacks congruence with what they "know" about welfare. Give them in addition the same situation in a far future or alien society—Busby's Rissa Kerguelen (1977), which depicts a society in which the poor are enslaved by "welfare workers" in service to industrial conglomerates, or Stableford's Realms of Tartarus (1977), where social stratification is portrayed by a two-level society in which those "less than human" have been banished to life underground by the "elite." Students do not "know" these societies, and therefore have no value biases about them. In class discussion, ask what the stories have to do with our society, or with social work. Ask how they compare with Regulating the Poor or other readings on poverty or stratification. From that point the instructor should relate and extrapolate values in the fictional society to our own. Students can compare the analogic social criticism with the reality of their own views and biases.

Among useful books for values clarification are the following, presented in synopses. Topics include mental health care, social stratification, class inequalities, labeling, questions of the worth and uniquity of every human being, sex role stereotypes, overpopulation, and even the dangers of too great reliance on the systems perspective.

A book highly recommended for its careful attention to the powerlessness of the poor and for the treatment accorded patients in mental hospitals is Marge

Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (1976). Goffman, in "Moral Career of the Mental Patient" (1961:125-140), describes commitment as due to a situation of contingencies rather than a set of illnesses, and the "funnel of betrayal" by which a person sees successive persons or agents as betraying one into institutionalization. Piercy shows this graphically, a woman betrayed because of her belief in the helping nature of social systems and her own powerlessness in the face of human service professionals. Read along with "Moral Career..." and Perrucci's Circle of Madness (1974), Piercy's book helps to demonstrate many values of which social workers should be aware.

The Realms of Tartarus (Stableford, 1977), mentioned above, gives us a society stratified into upper and lower realms, and deals with the attendant problems of inequality and the rights versus the obligations of majority society. In this two-level world, conformity from members of both levels is the price of happiness. Where conflict occurs, it can alter the "plan of existence" and throw the world into chaos. The extrapolation shows members of the elite society, who are of human stock, living in a kind of cloud-world surrounding the planet. They have cut all ties from the planet's surface, and have covered it so that the dwellers there have no access to light, to freedom. The dwellers of the lower level are people who have evolved into reasoning and intelligent beings from non-human stock, "men" by their own definition. Stableford takes us through the struggle of these lower level people to be recognized as humans, to find freedom and light, and the problems of upper level dwellers who cannot understand why these changes are occurring. The story gives us insights to the multitude of ways we rationalize inequality in our society and set others apart because they are different. It demonstrates consideration of what is humanity, or by extrapolation what one must do to be considered an equal participant rather than a "they" in the we-they dichotomy often typical of service organizations (Blau, 1969) and the practice of social work. Finally, because many students have not considered the dangers of social control and conformity. discussion of the story is enlightening as to the power of the government and manipulation of citizen. Falling through a sewer to the underworld in Tartarus is indicative of how we ourselves, or our clients, may fall through our society's trapdoors.

The film Star Wars (1977) provides an interesting look at comparative governments. As we recall, in the film there is a rebellion underway against an empire which, through repressive measures, institutes formidable control over personal lives. While this may seem a far cry from social work at first glance, our human history shows that the form of government must influence society's system of social welfare, and the way in which any society provides for its dependents is indicative of social control. Even the most benign governments require standards for dependents which are not demanded of the rest of the population. A case in point, for example, is the set of regulations controlling sexual morality for women on welfare in our own society (Day, 1979). Having had some discussion of social control, students are asked the implications of a government like the Empire for social welfare programs. Some results in discussion are the comparison of the likely tight control of the Empire's system to our public assistance program; economic control of the low wage labor force, as in Regulating the Poor; the right to rebel against an unjust system and the activity of the National Welfare Rights Organization; and so forth. A most unexpected comment in our class discussion was that some students saw

Han Solo, the mercenary, as comparable to a social worker, selling his/her services without regard to principle until, in the final analysis, loyalty overcomes greed. Though loyalty to clients may never overcome the need for job security, the point about the mercenary nature of social work may be well taken. It certainly will lead to lively discussion.

Beginning social work students often come to education with stereotypes as to personal deviance of people who will be their clients. That is, they are already attuned to diagnosing and labeling, often according to naive problem definitions. Although they may have heard of the dangers of labeling in terms of self-fulfilling prophecy and loss of self-image to clients, they are beguiled by the ease with which certain appearances lend themselves to categorization. Ray Bradbury's "Messiah" (1978) is a story about labeling. Here we are shown a being who responds to others' perceptions and beliefs to the extent of "becoming" the belief--a son, a daughter, whatever the perceiver needs. Loss of identity and the physiological responses are draining and can be destructive. As Bradbury's story opens, the being has taken refuge in a church, where a priest longing to see Christ returned is serving. He sees the being as Christ resurrected, and the being bleeds from and begins to die from the wounds inflicted during crucifixion. Though the being begs to be freed from the priest's needs and delusions, and though the priest becomes aware of the agony he is causing, he is unable to free the being. In class discussion it becomes evident that even the most caring social workers, if they label, may make clients into images which they believe and which society connotes as symptomatic of various diagnoses. We do see crime, for example, as almost synonymous with broken families, and the poor and black. We see welfare mothers not as women struggling to stretch an inadequate income but in stereotypes as lazy, cheating, promiscuous (Day, 1979). More importantly, we may react in practice to the stereotypes rather than the reality. Moreover, clients often partake in the image--they become what we see. In mental hospitals, for example, patients act as expected by authorities, often increasing bizarre behavior (Perrucci, 1974). As with the Messiah, as they are perceived so they become.

Philip K. Dick's The Preserving Machine (1969) is a set of vignettes about human behavior viewed to greater or lesser degree through a systems perspective. Of particular interest is the title story in which a scientist tries to preserve great works of art by encoding their significant components for reproduction through a kind of computer--for our social work students, read that as treating unique individuals with stock diagnoses. The results when run through the machine are new creatures which are supposed to preserve the beauty of the original. What happens, of course, is that the machine turns out parodies of art, since there is no way in which all elements can be encoded. In class discussion, point out that unique individuals cannot be so encoded either, despite the easy by which we fit them into categories. There are unique and uncodable aspects of creation--spirituality, intelligence, love--which cannot be processed through the bureaucratic machine without losing beauty.

The World Inside (Silverberg, 1972) shows a society where overpopulation has created new forms of belief about sex, sex roles, and human behavior. People live in vastly overcrowded urban monads, where privacy does not exist and individuality, or being different, is so threatening that therapeutic brainwashing or death for the deviant is accepted societal behavior. The major value here is that different

needs require different patterns of life, and that no pattern is wrong or immoral in itself. The story also stresses the danger of lock-step conformity, and can be used to point out that without realizing it we may conform more than we know.

A final selection, Ursula LeGuin's Left Hand of Darkness (1976), posits a society in which people become male or female alternatively over their lives because of body chemistry. The story, narrated by a human visitor, brings to light and emphasizes our stereotypes about sex role norms. Perhaps most importantly it demonstrates the qualities of masculinity and femininity present in us all as part of human rather than sexual nature. The book is especially good for clarification of sex role values and would be a good supplementary reading for content of women in social work education.

Conclusion

Hunter and Saleeby have identified an awareness of self and society which they call "transforming knowledge"--that knowledge which

> ...seriously and responsibly urges us to examine some of
> the basic assumptions of life in our society--the respectable,
> the permissible, and the familiar, as well as the dis-
> reputable (1977:64).

There is no question as to the importance of values clarification as a part of social work education, for through such clarification comes the transforming knowledge so essential to self-awareness. When we are aware that some of our most potent beliefs about self and society are centered in values rather than fact, we can become more effective in our helping roles.

Yet we tread on dangerous ground when we seek to accomplish this vital task, for we are working with facets of thought and behavior most integral to self-identity. Using the alternate futures and societies of science fiction as analogic to our own society, we overcome the threat posed by such teaching efforts. Discussion and comparison can lead students to new ideas and more objective analyses of society and its problems. With science fiction, students go beyond the limitations of their accepted reality to question what they have been taught about self, others, and society. Rather than being a theoretical exercise, science fiction becomes a basic and practical method for helping students to attain self-awareness, growth, and their own transforming knowledge.

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