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# Introduction: Social Work and Philosophy

ROBERTA WELLS IMRE, COORDINATOR

Study Group for Philosophical Issues in Social Work

A journal issue unequivocally about philosophical concerns in social work is evidence of the recent progress we have made in the profession in recognizing the importance of philosophical commitments in social work activities. Awareness of the presence of these commitments and dissatisfaction with conventional social work resources for addressing them led to the organization of the Study Group for Philosophical Issues in 1985. The papers presented here have been contributed by members of this group, which is open to anyone interested in joining the conversation.

Social work has always been a complex profession. Throughout its history awareness of human need has consistently exceeded available resources for providing help. Modern manifestations of this dilemma can be seen in the suffering of the homeless and the mentally ill on our streets and in other public places, in the pain of neglected and abused children, and in the distress of so many other people in trouble of one kind or another. In such a world it is appropriate to ask why we should turn to a seemingly recondite subject like philosophy. The answer is that tacit as well as explicit philosophical commitments are integrally involved in everything that social workers do, not only in practice, but also in teaching and research. In addition, such commitments are present in how social workers see the society in which they work, and in how they define their role in this society. In all these areas philosophical commitments are inescapable but, like the air we breath, seldom noted. As with the air, however, when something goes seriously wrong a considerable amount of discomfort ensues.

We believe that something has gone seriously wrong in social work as a result of the failure to attend to these philosophical dimensions of professional activities. The need to understand how this failure came about, to identify the ramifications, and to consider possible remedies, constitutes the basis for the ongoing work of the Study Group for Philosophical Issues. This

concern is reflected in the content of the papers in this special issue. The papers represent a kind of manifesto. This is where we are; this is what needs to be done.

The Study Group officially began in May 1985 when several of us invited a few others, known to each other only through publications, to meet for a weekend to discuss common interests. We convened at our own expense in Connecticut at a retreat house, appropriately called the Mercy Center. Each of us had felt isolated and frustrated and were immeasurably heartened by the discovery that there were kindred spirits out there in the larger world. The fact that Goose Lane led to the Mercy Center on Neck Road made the name Goose Neck Group almost inevitable. Geography and zoology combined to provide a suitable metaphor for a group insistent upon sticking its neck out in the potentially treacherous and largely uncharted waters of philosophical discourse in social work.

To our regret the need to apply for institutional support necessitated a change to a less expressive but more dignified sounding title. For our first three years the renamed Study Group for Philosophical Issues was sheltered by the Rutgers University School of Social Work. When that support was terminated in 1988, sponsorship was accepted by the School of Social Welfare of the University of Kansas and the Smith College School of Social Work. Because of the chronic problem of limited resources, most of our gatherings have taken place in connection with the annual meeting of the Council on Social Work Education. Discourse continues throughout the year, much enhanced by the initiation of a newsletter last year by Stanley Witkin who now edits it from the University of Vermont. I provide overall coordination for our work. When Howard Goldstein, one of our charter members and an author of one of the articles in this journal, received the Adelphi University School of Social Work's Richard Lodge Prize this past April, we saw this honor as well deserved recognition of his personal achievements. In addition we also saw it as a confirmation of the growing importance of our work in which he has played such an important part.

In the history of social work there has been a dearth of articles on philosophy. When the word occurred at all in social work publications, it usually referred to rather amorphous

general beliefs about human values, or was considered to reflect private personal commitments not generally viewed as a fit subject for professional discourse. Not too many years ago it seemed as if philosophical articles were routinely rejected by major social work journals. More recently there has been a veritable spate of such content, as can be seen in the reference lists following each article. Such apparent progress in terms of numbers, however, can be misleading. In the current literature certain themes occur repetitiously even though the vocabulary used has considerably expanded and now often includes references to words like paradigms, epistemological issues, and hermeneutic approaches. Use of terms like positivist, empiricist, or postmodernist, are now commonplace. But how much progress does all this linguistic expansion really represent in terms of philosophical understanding of this profession? This journal issue is a partial answer to that question.

Some of these articles were written five or six years ago when we first projected an edited book or a special journal issue. Others are more recent. However, they all have in common a concern about the need to become more sophisticated about our philosophical suppositions, to question our frequently tacit acceptance of the assumptions implicit in the intellectual heritage we bring to our work, and to explore new possibilities. The issues, present in all our professional activities, are epistemological, ontological, and moral, and point to the integral relationships between and among ourselves, our theories, our moral reasoning and emotional responsiveness.

The reader will find that the authors of these articles often seem to be arguing from a similar position, primarily post-positivist. Each, however, speaks about the meaning of these views from a particular, unique perspective. In our work we have become aware of the value in seeing similar content from a different angle, particularly in a complex subject area like this. We ask your forbearance when you find repetition here. There has been no effort to eliminate such repetition, nor to homogenize the presentations of the material. Experience tells us that some readers may find one article illuminating, while the same or similar ideas presented differently are experienced as impossibly obscure. Rereading this kind of material can often be

rewarding, even though most of us find it difficult to find the time to do this in a culture characterized by a need to hurry on to something else felt to be more urgent.

No claim of comprehensiveness is made for these articles. We are engaged in a continuous process of learning and finding new resources, some in disciplines never before considered relevant by social workers. We invite your participation and hope you will be inspired to add your own insights to the discourse. If you are stimulated, intrigued, or even just aggravated by these articles, we encourage you to correspond with the authors.

### Themes

These papers are situated in a particular time and place. The issues addressed are in many ways defined by our culture and reflected in other areas of our social life. The authors argue from within the frameworks available, reflectively recognizing their inevitable involvement with the materials and not aspiring to a culturally valued but essentially unattainable detachment. In fact, in our eyes what has frequently been viewed as scientific detachment is a largely undesirable goal in much of social work. This issue is an example of the problems we are addressing. The amount of space devoted to discussions of science is a manifestation of the tendency, in our society and hence in academic social work, to value science, and often a particularly limited view of science, over all other ways of knowing.

While, as mentioned above, there is a good deal of overlap among these articles, they are arranged in an order designed to highlight certain critical and interrelated themes which reverberate in the content of all. In addressing science, and the preoccupation with becoming scientific in social work, the papers focus on the need to be explicit about what we mean by science, and to appreciate and seek ways to expand its contributions. Concomitantly, however, there is also a strong protest in the papers against the tendency in social work, as well as in the general culture, to view science as a substitute for humane understandings. The papers point toward the need to expand our view of scholarly inquiry to incorporate more content from the humanities in order to better understand the complexities

of the human situation and the nature of our own work. Primary themes include the following: (a) *Modern Science and Social Work*—(1) the physical sciences and the human sciences; (2) paradigms, their manifestations and significance; (3) limitations and dangers of scientific technology; and (4) research in the human sciences. (b) *The Relevance of the Humanities and the Necessity of Scholarly Inquiry of Different Kinds*.

### The Articles

We begin with Ann Weick's article in which we are given an orientation to the history of science, and a discussion of Newtonian thought, the paradigm primarily adopted within social work research. This is compared with the different perspectives represented by relativity and quantum theory. She discusses Dilthey as a pioneer in early efforts to distinguish between the focus of the physical sciences and what he called the "human studies." The discussion leads us to the importance of understanding, intentionality and meaning-making in human life, and introduces the subject of hermeneutics. These concepts are further developed and elaborated in subsequent papers.

The nature of paradigms and their influence can be seen to be a crucial issue in all of these articles and Glenn Haworth sorts through some of the rhetoric for us. Generally speaking, a paradigm is the conceptual framework within which thinking about the world is organized. Influential paradigms are part of our social history and incorporate certain assumptions about the world—assumptions which in turn determine how this world is to be studied. Much of the current criticism of the philosophy of positivism found in the literature stems from dissatisfaction with its underlying assumptions and particular paradigmatic view of the world.

The social work profession was slow in becoming aware of Kuhn's (1970) pioneering work in the critical study of scientific paradigms, but we ultimately joined the discussion with arms flailing, as Haworth so clearly shows. There are of course risks attendant upon any effort to criticize a dominant paradigm, as belief in a particular paradigm tends to give a sense of security not readily surrendered. From its earliest days the Study Group

has been embroiled in the paradigm controversy in social work and most of us have not come out unscathed.

The Haworth article illustrates just how heated these discussions can become and suggests some of the reasons for this intensity. He continues a discussion started in the previous article regarding different paradigms in science. Readers who find the intricacies of this discussion overwhelming may find the last section of this article helpful. This illustration of what these paradigms might look like when applied to practice is enlightening. It is clear that there are indeed moral dimensions associated with how one acts in relationship to what is accepted as knowledge. Haworth's observation that "social facts are socially created from disguised premises" will be echoed in subsequent articles.

Next Dennis Saleebey focuses on the ramifications of our acceptance of science in terms of a preoccupation with technological answers to human problems. He addresses the addictive aspects of this problem whereby technical expertise seems to promise professional acceptance and power, and individual fulfillment. The unrecognized costs of this fix include the loss of awareness of the poetic and artistic dimensions of human life, as well as a diminution of the sense of community, with its caring and concern for others. Saleebey encourages a critical examination of metaphors such as systems and targets and strategies. He directs attention to the possibilities and potentials of a "fusion of Eros and Techné."

Some of the themes in the proceeding papers are also illustrated and elaborated in Edmund Sherman's work on the use of interpretive approaches in social work. Noting the traditional use of hermeneutics in biblical interpretation, he shows how Dilthey expanded the approach to what he called the human sciences, which he considered to include his own discipline of history. In his studies Dilthey emphasized understanding history in terms of contextual meanings within which the participants are located. Sherman suggests that a history of the Charity Organization Societies viewed from such a perspective might restore a richness of understanding of our own heritage, and include understandings which have been obscured by interpretations made through the lens of modern attitudes and

conceptualizations. It is strongly suggested in Sherman's paper that a hermeneutic perspective applied to practice research would enable us to understand our work better because it allows meanings to emerge in ways largely precluded by conventional research approaches.

This article also notes the relevance of the philosophy of phenomenology to our work and calls attention to ways in which traditional case study methods in social work can be seen to include unrecognized phenomenological and hermeneutic perspectives. Sherman's own work with reminiscence and life review in older people as a meaning-making process is an example of how these ideas might look when incorporated into research studies.

In the next paper Jerome Sachs provides us with an illustration of a phenomenological study of what actually happens in practice. He utilizes a phenomenological analysis of the content of extensive interviews with social workers who are encouraged to explore what contributed to specific social work interventions. The complex meanings involved in these professional actions reflect salient concerns related to agency settings and the broader institutional context, as well as to the persons of the social worker and client. Out of this material Sachs also develops some important theoretical concepts which he has called "operational themes, therapeutic worth of the client, and operational dilemmas."

Howard Goldstein's discussion of qualitative research "as a mode of inquiry in its own right" follows. He joins Sherman and Sachs in seeing this kind of research as more congruent with actual social work practice than the more common quantitative approaches. He emphasizes the importance of seeing the role of the researcher as a reflective inquirer within a situation rather than a detached observer trying to see from the outside. This article is rich with insights gleaned from this kind of research as the author draws upon the work of his doctoral students in their explorations of what can be learned through such methods. A useful discussion of the kinds of discipline this research requires dispels the notion that such approaches are only a temporary substitute for a quantitative design once the problem is deemed to be more clearly defined. Goldstein describes



this research as taking place in a context of lives in process and incorporates narrative concepts in understanding "lived time" as a vital meaning making process in human lives—a concept also very much a part of Sherman's work.

In order to present the ideas found in these articles each author has had to attend to the limitations of the positivist position still so influential in academic social work. This perspective has made it difficult, sometimes impossible, for researchers and practitioners to communicate meaningfully. Limited resources of time, energy and money are wasted when conventional arguments take place within this framework. Changing this situation requires sophisticated study of the nature of science and its paradigms and the critical evaluation of the relevance of particular scientific techniques to social work. This theme is clear in these articles.

Another theme, and potential direction, also emerges in these discussions, however. Recognition of the limitations of science in providing an adequate framework for understanding the dimensions of what is most important in social work points toward the need for other resources. The cultural overvaluing of science, and the prestige and power associated with it, has led to an almost total neglect in our literature of appreciation for the insights to be found in the humanities. The result has been an imbalance in our approach to understanding of how we know about human life and what human beings need from each other. Too much has been excluded from our direct consideration. All of the articles so far discussed have in some way indicated this problem and, while focusing directly on science, technology, or research, have also drawn upon content from humanities disciplines. The next two articles focus more directly on some of this content and illustrate ways in which our understanding can be deepened by the use of these resources.

Drawing upon traditional philosophical content Gottschalk and Witkin analyze the influences in social work of definitions of rationality, particularly the differences between instrumental rationality which is concerned with efficiency of means, and substantive rationality which is concerned with valued ends such as human rights and social justice. Continuing the almost inescapable theme of the influence of science, they focus on the

way instrumental rationality has tended to dominate as part of this cultural scientific orientation. They see a need for "a rationality of ends based on a social ethic consistent with social work values," and find in Habermas an emphasis on discourse appropriate to this effort. This article is an example of how some of these traditional resources of Western philosophy can be utilized to clarify the values and social consequences of social work practice.

A contrasting view is provided by Edward Canda in his article on transpersonal theory in which he questions the underlying assumptions of Western philosophical thought. He sees a need to look critically at the high value placed on rational, linear thinking, on personal autonomy as a developmental goal, and on the primacy of ordinary waking consciousness and the accompanying tendency to attribute abnormality to any other kinds of experiences. He discusses the different perspectives found in Eastern philosophies, as well as in some Western sources which are beginning to receive more attention. These themes emphasize holistic approaches, and an accrediting of other levels of experience including the mystical and various forms of spirituality. Feminist themes of relationship and connectedness as discussed by Gilligan and others are also identified by Canda as one of the streams of thought leading to an orientation to the world quite different from that of conventional Western philosophy.

### Moving On

This collection has been born out of our concern for social work, our convictions about its importance and our uneasiness about its future. It is vital that the place of science in our culture and the reasons for our overzealous pursuit of scientific respectability in social work be understood if our values are to be preserved. In this preoccupation with science we have been neglecting other resources. A wealth of perspectives from the humanities awaits our attention and all that is required is the recognition of our need for this content and a willingness to engage the issues in a disciplined way.

In our culture social work is considered to be a practice, *perhaps* a professional practice. In general it is not viewed as

either a science in its own right or even a scientifically based practice such as medicine is usually deemed to be. On the other hand in the academic world it is certainly not accepted as a humanities discipline. Any claim we might have had to this designation has long since been sacrificed on the altar of science. It is past time we tried to recoup our losses.

For the most part we must approach other disciplines as outsiders. To access this content we need a new openness in our attitudes and a willingness to learn different disciplinary languages and conceptual frameworks. The nature of our work and our broad need also means that we often must cross and recross disciplinary boundaries in our search for understanding. This kind of interdisciplinary approach can be seen in some feminist thought. Feminist critiques of inherited traditions and their assumptions sometimes cause a shaking of the foundations and result in altered views of the world. Similar consequences might result from a new paradigm approach to social work research—an approach drawing upon the humanities and more concerned with meaning than technique. This may sound like a slippery slope, but in learning to traverse it we may well find ourselves. T. S. Eliot's words from *The Four Quartets* are as appropriate now as we found them to be when we began in 1985:

We shall not cease from our exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time. (Eliot, 1943, p. 59)

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