Rationality in Social Work: A Critical Examination

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This paper critically examines the definitions and criteria for rationality in social work in light of western philosophic tradition. Rationality in social work is seen as instrumental (means-oriented) and individualistic rather than substantive (ends-oriented) and social. A set of criteria which expand the basis for making rationality claims in social work is suggested. These additional criteria aim to serve the valued social justice ends of social work practice.

The emergence of social work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be understood as a systematic, secular approach aiming to reduce individual suffering and enhance human welfare. Social work is systematic in the sense that it seeks to maximize efficiency and effectiveness; it is secular to the extent that it was (and continues to be) inspired by the emerging social sciences (Axinn and Levin, 1975; Becker, 1952; Pearman, 1973). The above claims are justified, as was the development of the profession itself, by the assertion that social work is grounded on rational knowledge (cf. Leiby, 1987). Human suffering has specific, identifiable causes that can be eliminated through effective intervention (Orcutt, 1990).

The ideal of rationality goes back at least to the ancient Greeks whose view of reason is embodied in Socrates' famous dictum that "an unexamined life is not worth living." Basically, this meant two things: that reasoning and deliberation are the keys to understanding how to live a worthwhile life, and that a life of reason is the very best kind of life (Nathanson, 1985).

In modern times the rational ideal has come to be associated with science, particularly the methods of science. The emergence of the social sciences, medicine and industrial technology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped to forge the belief that scientific knowledge and methods could serve as standards for rational thought and action. In social work, this merging of rationality and science was first embodied in the model of "scientific charity". Leiby (1987) writes that for social workers being scientific "meant that helpers should base their efforts on the facts of the situation (they were busy fact collectors) and that helping should be rational, with a clear idea of means and ends" (p. 764). This presumption of a rational practice has served as part of the bedrock of the social work profession.

Despite the importance of rationality to social work, there are few critical examinations of the meaning of rationality and its implications for social work practice. This paper attempts to initiate such an examination. In our view, the dominant conception of rationality that has evolved in the modern western world, especially in the social sciences, is based on efficiency of means rather than the value of ends, and an individualist rather than a collective or societal orientation. The implications of this conception of rationality for social work practice is discussed. The paper concludes with an analysis of a rationality of ends and a proposal for the development of social criteria for rationality within social work.

The Meanings of Rationality

The word rationality is etymologically linked with the words reason and reasoning, i.e., thinking. In common usage, rational actions are those performed for good or adequate reasons. What counts as good or adequate, however, has been subject to a range of interpretations.

In seventeenth-century Europe, the "Age of Reason," claims about the superiority of knowing through reason came into conflict with notions of knowledge based upon authority or tradition. The rational ideal of the seventeenth century resembled the mental reconstruction of the universe as a giant, smoothly running machine, e.g., a clock (Descartes, 1948). The new rational science (i.e., knowing) particularly as enunciated by Sir Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes, sought and gained ever increasing legitimacy in its attempt to define and explain human experience in terms of complex causal chains. Only in the twentieth century with the rise of relativity theory, the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy, and quantum mechanics, did physical scientists and others begin to challenge this essentially mechanical concept of rationality (Capra, 1982).

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially as a consequence of the many practical successes of modern technologies, the rationality claims of science gained enormously in their political legitimacy. The economic achievements associated with technologically based industry provided enormous political support for the scientific enterprise (Gagnon, 1990). The image of a science characterized by political neutrality, disinterested objectivity, a commitment to dispassionate, detailed observation, and constant demands for verification became the paradigm for rational knowing. This understanding of science has been idealized, even as it has remained the subject of continued philosophical questioning (Diesing, 1982; Raskin and Bernstein, 1987; Witkin and Gottschalk, 1988).

Consistent with the scientific ideal, human nature itself began to be viewed as nonrational and amoral. According to Morawski (1986) these changes in the conception of human nature "formed the very rationale for the expedient construction of social science because, given the limits of morality, religion, and philosophy, scientific rationality appeared to be the only guarantee of social order" (p. 51). Thus, the social sciences sought to emulate and benefit from the allegedly more objective physical sciences.

The sociological discussion of rationality was framed, in large part, by Max Weber (1968) in his discussion of social action. While Weber's use of the word "rational" varied (Brubaker,

1984), his primary definition of rationality (or rational action) proposed the distinction between *Zweckrational*, usually translated as purposive or instrumental rationality, and *Wertrational*, value-laden, substantive rationality. Instrumental rationality is associated with the selection of correct means for the attainment of calculated ends, and substantive rationality with action in accordance with valued ends (independent of its prospects of success). The overarching trend of modernity, according to Weber, has been in the direction of subjecting ever greater aspects of life to the kinds of calculation which are demanded by instrumental rationality. Efficiency and effectiveness increasingly become the criteria for determining rational thought and choice (see also, Mannheim, 1936). The model for such choices is the idealized market, the "most impersonal" of all social relationships (Weber, 1968, p. 636). For Weber (1964), bureaucratic social organization served as the institutionalized expression of instrumental rationality by structuring behaviors and roles within organizations with the goal of maximizing desired outputs.

Weber (1968) warned that an extreme, narrow and exclusive implementation of instrumental rationality can lead to the construction of an "iron cage of rationality." Under such circumstances the interpretation of human action is reduced to that of automatons. Similarly, Simon (1957) viewed the pervasiveness of instrumental rationality in modern society as a sort-of-disease.

Proponents of instrumental rationality are critical of action based on values (substantively rational action). In an oft-quoted statement, the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume (1911) proclaimed that "reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of passions." What Hume meant was that reason (rationality) could only be employed to achieve desired ends ("passions"); the ends themselves are chosen extrarationally. Rationality is concerned solely with what must be done in order to achieve a particular end irrespective of what that end might be. Such logic allowed Hume (1911) to state that "it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger."

This belief that there are no rational criteria for choosing ends has led to charges that substantive rationality invites

cultural relativism and historicism (Mannheim, 1936). There appear to be no clear and objective criteria for distinguishing between rational and irrational ends because what is good and desirable in one social setting is not the same in another. Under these circumstances, substantively rational action may become that which reaffirms socially established norms and values. Dramatic illustrations of this position are seen in varieties of twentieth-century romantic absolutisms such as extreme nationalism, racism, and dogmatic political ideologies. National Socialism (Naziism), for instance, sought to provide a single and allegedly rational standard of thought and action for the German Volk.

Because the kind of certainty and the sense of security that was once offered by tradition is no longer easily available in the modern, secular world, a demand for a kind of "rational uniformity" has emerged (Gerth and Mills, 1953). Rational uniformity demands of each actor maximal conformity with societal norms in the interest of survival and mutual benefit. This kind of substantive rationality readily becomes synonymous with the often arbitrary dictates of established power, sometimes even when that power has the appearance of benevolence (Gross, 1982).

The members of the Frankfurt school of "critical theorists," most of whom had personally experienced and suffered under the Nazi regime, were acutely aware of the limitations and the dilemmas associated with both instrumental and substantive rationality. For instance, Marcuse (1964) and Habermas (1971) view "purposefully rational" (instrumental) thought as a politically potent approach toward social domination and as having the value laden human purpose of gaining ever increasing control over nature. They interpret the purposefully rational relationships of technical production, as found in the factory or in the bureaucratic work place, as the dominant metaphor for all "rational" human interactions in the modern world. Thus, rationality is understood to perpetuate the domination and oppression of those who are relatively powerless. In short, definitions of rationality are seen as serving political ends.

According to this view, the priority granted to instrumental rationality, and expressed in traditional social science, has fostered a conceptual orientation that invites mechanistic thinking.

Such conceptualizations permit humans to be thought of as objects. Considerations of human initiative, will and desire, social creativity, meaning construction, and most importantly, human liberation are subverted because they are beyond the purview of instrumental rationality (Dallmayr, 1981).

To counter these trends, Habermas (1971) suggests promotion of human understanding through the establishment of shared meanings, rather than social control, as an alternative purpose of the social sciences. In the interactional realm, rationality can only emerge as a result of discourse within what Habermas calls, an "ideal speech situation". This is a situation in which, ideally, all forms of inequality resulting from power differentials among actors are eliminated. The goal becomes mutual understanding among thinking, feeling and acting human beings within the context of a just social order that aims for coherence. Rational action, from this perspective, is that which promotes the ends of human equality and social justice (White, 1983).

The multiple meanings of rationality—and especially Weber's distinction between instrumental and substantive rationality—have important implications for social work. As a profession anxious to demonstrate its claim to a scientific (rational) foundation, social work has been influenced strongly by the standards of instrumental rationality. This influence has contributed to a focus on method, rather than social theory or values.

Social Work and Rationality

Within contemporary social work this conception of rationality is seen in attempts to extrapolate methods of research to practice, or what Schon (1983) calls "rational technology." From this perspective, issues of efficiency and effectiveness are the primary determinants of action. Rational technology in social work is illustrated by a popular version of the "problem solving process," a series of sequentially ordered activities designed to culminate in the resolution of a specified problem. The steps of this process are considered analogous to the activities of (scientific) researchers in their pursuit of truth. The process is claimed to be rational, relatively objective and atheoretical (Bunston, 1985). Ideally, social work practice should be

structured to conform to this process and practitioners should follow the steps of the problem solving process in their work with clients (Grinnell, 1988).

Grinnell and Siegel (1988) define the problem-solving process as "a rational, orderly, planned, systematic series of steps directed toward a goal" (p. 17). This implies that what is rational is the process of reaching a goal rather than the goal itself. This position is echoed by Smith (1988) who, in a discussion of research problems and goals, concedes that "unfortunately, there is not a single rational process by which we can select a specific problem area for study" (p. 93). In other words, the selection of problems and goals is extrarational; only the methods for solving problems or reaching goals are based on rational criteria.

Claims that the problem solving process is rational are based on its systematic quality, presumed effectiveness and similarity to empirical research. While problem selection and goals are integral phases of the problem solving process, their rationality is a by-product of their "fit" with the process, i.e., their facilitation of effective problem solving. For example, the evaluation of a goal is based primarily on whether it can be measured easily rather than on its worth. In other words, the rationality of the problem-solving process has more to do with form than substance. Bunston (1985), for example, emphasizes operationalization and specificity in problem assessment and setting objectives, two steps in his version of the problem solving process. Thus, a problem or goal stated in a form that does not conform to the requirements of the problem solving process is, ipso facto, not rational. This limitation is acknowledged implicitly by Hallowitz (1979) in his discussion of problem solving theory in social work:

> . . . there are two kinds of problem solving work: that which is overt, tangible and conducive to rational solution; and that which is intangible and subject to the coming-to-grips with, and resolution of, inner conflicts and resistances toward achieving maturational growth and change (p. 95).

Recognition of only "rational" problem solving leads practitioners either to ignore other types of problems or transform them

to fit the dictates of their model (cf. Wood, 1990). Defining problems and formulating goals in accord with their conformity to the dictates of a method, makes the method itself a constituent of the ends. The rationality of ends, to the extent they are rational, is dependent on their fit with the problem solving method (i.e., means). Thus, instrumental rationality determines substantive rationality.

Towards a Rationality of Ends

Equating rationality with a particular method, as in the problem solving process, deemphasizes the importance of ends and restricts their range. For instance, if the requirements of the problem solving process restrict problems to overt, "countable" behavior, then the range of human experience that can be addressed by practitioners is severely truncated. Conversely, if goals (ends) are primary, then the means for achieving them will have to be adapted to their requirements. An analogous situation in education is the application of a generic method of instruction to all students versus the development of individualized learning goals. Theoretically at least, the latter approach should lead to a greater variety of methods and goals.

A rationality of means is cognitive; it deliberates about matters of information. A rationality of ends is evaluative; it is concerned with matters of value (Rescher, 1988). A rationality of ends is concerned with how people ought to act or reason rather than how they do act (Nathanson, 1985). From this perspective, if an individual's goals are inappropriate, then even the most efficient means to that goal cannot rescue him or her from irrationality. This position does not deny the importance of means, but rather elevates the importance of ends.

The instrumental rationality of science contrasts with that of social work which, at least in its rhetoric, claims to be "goal-driven," that is, not based on a particular method, but on value-laden ideals about human rights and social justice. While the choice of ends does not have to be "some kind of blind existential leap into the darkness" (Anderson, p. 10) an immediate problem is to come up with acceptable, rational criteria for determining ends. The philosopher Nicholas Rescher (1988)

suggests two such criteria: (a) whether the ends are cost-beneficial, and (b) whether they are in the best interests of the individual.

The criterion of cost-benefit asks: Are the ends worth the expenditures of the means? From this perspective, a rational analysis of ends includes an assessment of their true value and an appropriate balancing between costs and benefits.

In a strict economic sense, a cost and benefit analysis makes sense. One does not spend $1000 to earn $100. However, in many situations costs and benefits are not as easily defined. For example, how does one equate the psychological costs associated with a particular action with the material benefits an individual might achieve from completing a task? Or how does one calculate the cost-benefit ratio in adult, intimate relationships in which outcomes for one's actions may depend not only on direct benefits to one's self, but on the other's outcome as well (cf. Kelley, 1979)? In many such instances cost-benefit ratios could only be calculated *after* the action had been completed and the goal reached. At best, one could say that an individual has rationally chosen a goal (in the cost-benefit sense) if he or she believed that the benefit would outweigh the cost.

Rescher's (1988) second rationality criterion for assessment of ends is that a goal must be in the individual's best interest. "Best interest" in this situation is defined as that which a person ought to want. What someone should want is determined by three subcriteria: (a) general human needs such as health and companionship, (b) the demands of one's role such as parent or social worker, and (c) by individual want-related interests. A want-related interest, according to Rescher, is rational only if it can be subsumed by a universal interest. For example, we want to publish this paper because, among other things, it will enhance our feelings of competency and enhancing feelings of competency is in anyone's interest, In other words, one engages in a regress of reasons (why does X want A?) until one reaches a universal desideratum, something everyone, not just X, would want.

These three parts of the "best interest" criterion for choosing rational ends have implications for social workers. The notion of common needs is relatively unproblematic. There is rarely

any conflict when social workers pursue ends that meet ba-
sic human needs such as food and shelter. However, rational
action based on social workers' role demands may conflict with
the role demands and interests of the individuals they serve.
For instance, it is in social workers' interests to have coopera-
tive clients; however, it may be in individuals' interests to re-
sist what they consider to be an unwanted intrusion into their
lives. In a sense, social workers want the individuals they serve
to subsume their individual want-related interests to the re-
quirements of their role as a client, a role largely defined by
professionals.

As representatives of a professional group, social workers
may view themselves as having an obligation to pursue goals
consistent with the broad mission of the profession. In some
cases these social goals may conflict with the individual goals of
clients. For instance, social workers may find that their concern
for the welfare of the community conflict with the individual
self-interest of clients. Since individual preferences in them-
selves are not necessarily rational, there is no compelling reason
for social workers to accept all client goals. And given the asym-
metrical power relationship between workers and clients, it is
the social worker, not the client, who decides on the rationality
of the client's goals (i.e., whether they are in the client's best
interests) (Martin and O'Connor, 1989).

The conflicts depicted above are difficult to resolve because
each position, depending upon one's focus or model of rational-
ity, can be portrayed as rational. The inability of purely rational
criteria to adjudicate rationality claims stem in part from the
ethical presuppositions that underlie different models of ratio-
nality. For instance, the model described by Rescher implies that
individual wants are more important than group wants. Other
models of rationality are linked to utilitarianism, the greatest
good for the greatest number (Kent, 1986). Thus, judgments
about which ends are more rational are often implicit statements
about the moral desirability of those ends.

Social workers operate within a prescriptive moral context;
they need always be concerned about the effects of goals on
others. A parent who starves his child because he determines
there is not enough food for both of them would invoke the

moral assault of social workers. (This example also illustrates how an action could be considered rational, in the sense of being in the individual's interest, but immoral.) Less obviously, when social workers judge some ways of acting as rational and other ways as irrational, they often are making moral distinctions between "good" and "bad" ways to act. For instance, morality disguised as rationality sometimes is found in practice situations where clients' actions are considered rational when they conform to certain moral precepts of values. Since most situations will involve a blending of rational and moral elements, the critical assessment of ends must meet criteria for rationality and morality.

Social workers are not only interested in individual benefits, but in the collective (i.e., societal) good. In our view, a basic limitation of Rescher's (and others') criteria of rationality is that they are based on what is good for the individual. This view has been associated with a utility maximizing model of rationality whereby a person is acting rationally if he or she acts to maximize his or her utility (i.e., ends). A major limitation of this model is its inability to explain adequately why people would ever rationally engage in collective action for the common good, also known as the "free rider" problem. Simply stated, if an individual believes that the contributions of others will be sufficient to a desired end (e.g., a clean environment), then his or her efforts would be wasteful. However, if all individuals think this way (that is, act rationally), no one will benefit (Holmstrom, 1986).

While the individual perspective has gained prominence in western society (Gauthier, 1975), it is not the only perspective from which to understand rationality. If, for instance, the individual is viewed as primarily social in nature and interdependent with other people rather than independent, an alternative view of rationality emerges. This view sees rational ends not only in terms of individual interests, but as a "feature of society" (Holmstrom, 1986, p. 69).

This social perspective suggests a third set of criteria for rational ends. These criteria derive from traditional economic theory and have been applied in planning theory (Mayer, Moroney, & Morris, 1974). An end may be viewed as substantively

rational if it (a) produces desirable public goods, (b) reduces negative externalities, or (c) produces merit wants. We will review each of these categories separately.

Public goods are desirable human benefits which are indivisible. Clean air, safe streets, and public parks, although generally desired by individuals, can be achieved and maintained only by collective action. One person cannot have them if all do not have them; only informed and concerted effort can produce them. If they are subdivided they cease to meaningfully exist. Social workers' commitment to racial equity and sexual equality, the promotion of public health measures and the concern for community (not only community based) mental health activities fall into this category.

Negative externalities are the indirect and usually unintended side effects of the actions of individuals or groups pursuing their self-interest. Factories create wastes, mental hospitals add to the numbers of homeless, some types of social benefits increase dependency, overuse of scarce resources now, will produce privations in the future. A concern for the reduction of negative externalities requires not only focus on the goals of action, e.g., the protection of children from abuse, but also on its side effects, e.g., possibly excessive governmental intervention in the lives of families.

Merit wants are perceived needs of society which are not desired by any individuals, sometimes even opposed by individuals. Yet all people ought to want them because they will benefit the whole. Tax increases, sewage plants, and the construction of half-way houses in residential neighborhoods are the kind of actions that fall into this category.

What all three types of collective goods have in common is that they are not the sum nor product of individual desires, They give expression to essentially social concerns from what might in brief be called an ecological perspective. They represent criteria for substantive rationality because a failure to consider them, in the moderate or long run, leads to a contradiction inasmuch as they make the social survival of human beings an impossibility.

Conclusion

We have proposed a series of criteria for rationality in the selection of ends for social work action. We propose these criteria with the aims of expanding the basis for making rationality claims and to reestablish social work's important and essential relationship to valued ends. In our view the rationality claims of social workers need not (and should not) depend on method-driven models of rationality derived from traditional science, but on a rationality of ends based on a social ethic consistent with social work values. Adopting such a model of rationality encourages analyses of how society itself fosters or impedes rationality.

Habermas (1979) has suggested that rationality of the sort that we are seeking can emerge only as a result of discourse. Thus, this effort to establish criteria for substantively rational action in social work is only a beginning. For instance, we have not suggested a way in which the variety of criteria might be rank ordered and prioritized. What ends shall be selected when the application of the criteria appears to be in conflict? These and other questions require further analysis and development.

Finally, if social work is to be serious about its commitment to human welfare, its rationality claims must go beyond matters of form or individual preference to broader issues of social concern. For instance, social workers' understanding of rational ends must extend to a consideration of how their actions affect the least well off in our society (Rawls, 1971). Social work goals must be assessed relative to their ability to emancipate people from the restrictive social arrangements that make both instrumental and substantively rational action difficult. A renewed interest in professional goals and a rebalancing of emphasis from instrumental means to valued ends, can facilitate constructive dialogue and more meaningful claims to rationality.

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