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# New Communitarian Thought and the Future of Social Policy

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*Communitarian thought is an emerging force in American social policy in the 1990s. Communitarians see the breakdown of community and morality as the major problem of our society. They conclude that rampant individualism is the cause of this breakdown. Communitarians propose reforms that will limit rampant individualism and restore our communities and institutions. In these proposals are threats to social justice, as well as positive elements that social workers can endorse. This paper reviews and critiques the communitarian position and suggests ways that social workers can use this new force to advance the cause of social justice.*

New Communitarian thought represents a major emergent force in both academic discourse and the evolving dialog about social policy (Winkler, 1993; Etzioni, 1993a; 1995; McNutt, 1994). Policy makers, academics and social critics from a wide variety of orientations have embraced the communitarian cause (Winkler, 1993). Both of the Vice Presidential contenders in the 1996 election have strong ties to the new communitarians. New communitarian ideas about welfare reform, national health care, crime and justice, education, national service and the survival of entitlement have surfaced in the policy debate and even in proposed and enacted legislation.

It is critical that those involved in creating and analyzing social policy understand this emergent intellectual force. Some new communitarian policy ideas will promote social justice, other ideas are not so positive. Moreover, since the new communitarian agenda is not completely formed, there is an opportunity for social workers to participate in the way the new communitarian

position develops. This paper will discuss new communitarian thought as it affects the policy debate about poverty, work and social justice.

### The New Communitarian Position

The liberal and conservative social policy positions share a common heritage that places greatest stress on the individual and on individual rights and welfare. The new communitarian approach rejects the individual-centered analysis of both positions and argues for a position that emphasizes the common good, community, public morality and virtue (Etzioni, 1995; 1993; 1991). The new communitarians represent a slight departure from past communitarian thinking (Etzioni, 1995; Cochran, 1989).

New communitarians consider the breakdown of community and morality to be one of the central problems of our time and point to the perceived growth of individualism as the primary cause of this situation (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985, Etzioni, 1995; 1993; 1989; Lasch, 1986). A similar conclusion is reached by the declining social capital critique (Putnam, 1993; 1995a; 1995b; 1996) and the civil society school (Sievers, 1995; McNutt & Byers, 1996; Van Til, 1995). The liberal and conservative schools are seen by communitarians as promoting individualism at the expense of community, morality and civic virtue.

Some new communitarians argue that liberal thought, and to a certain extent conservative thought, has led to a "proliferation of rights" without corresponding responsibilities (Etzioni, 1993) that has accelerated the impact of individualism on society. Etzioni (1993, p. 263–264) asserts that this reciprocity is the primary principle of social justice from a new communitarian standpoint and that balancing rights and responsibilities will ensure the survival of community.

This reciprocal set of rights and responsibilities puts the new communitarians at odds with both conservatives and liberals. Conservatives argue that individual economic actors have a right to control societal resources and make a profit, but rarely talk about the responsibilities that business has to society (Friedman, 1962). The conservative position argues that the only responsibility an economic actor has is to maximize his or her self interest.

The liberal perspective defines a set of individual rights for all persons. Rawls' (1971) thinking on social justice develops a series of rights without context and without responsibilities. Context and responsibilities can lead to unfairness. Against the background of personalistic justice and unjust use of authority, this emphasis on stripping away context is not surprising.

New communitarians argue that the extension of rights without responsibility, and ignoring context has led to the breakdown of community and the creation of a nation of alienated, isolated individuals (Etzioni, 1993; Bellah, et al., 1985). Etzioni (1993), for example, has called for a moratorium on the creation of additional individual rights. New communitarians also advocate for policies designed to reverse this community destruction process and nurture and support the community and its social institutions (Bellah, et al., 1985; 1991; Etzioni, 1993).

The family as seen as the most critical institution. New communitarians have advocated a wide range of measures to support the family, including family leave, adequate wages for family breadwinners, child support enforcement and laws to make divorce more difficult (Etzioni, 1993; Elshtain, J. Aird, E., Etzioni, A., Galston, W., Glendon, M., Minow, M. & Rossi, A. 1993). While the new communitarians advocate stable families, they suggest that they are not pleading for a return to the authoritarian families of the past. They prefer two parent families because such a family offers a better chance for proper child rearing and moral education.

Moral and civic education and renewal of religion are also seen as important, as is community service (Etzioni, 1993; Coles, 1993; Bellah, et al., 1985; 1991). These are institutions that promote public morality and virtue and teach citizenship.

New communitarians are concerned about the decline of political participation and the reduced credibility of the governmental system (Elshtain, 1996; Etzioni, 1993; Bellah, et al., 1985; 1991; Barber, 1984) and favor reforming the political system to make it more participative and restore its moral authority. They identify corruption, special interests and lack of morality as major problems. Etzioni (1991, p. 37–38) argues for the elimination of political action committees and advocates public campaign financing. Barber (1984) goes further and proposes "Strong Democracy," a more participatory alternative that requires considerable citizen

commitment to the affairs of the community. New communitarians are supportive of majority rule, with varying degrees of concern for minority rights (Barber, 1984; Etzioni, 1993). This issue has created a rift within new communitarian circles (Winkler, 1993).

Many social control issues are taken outside the legal system and handled by more informal control methods. Etzioni (1993) talks about the "Moral Voice of the Community" as a means of dispelling hate speech and other social ills. New communitarians also advocate for mutual aid (Etzioni, 1993; Bellah, et al. 1985) rather than formal social welfare programs.

There is limited recognition (by the new communitarians) that some of their ideas can have negative consequences. Mainstream community values can create problems for oppressed groups. Etzioni (1991) suggests that mass media and other protections will prevent communities from becoming oppressive. Recent history suggests that this is not altogether true and not all new communitarians (Benjamin Barber, for example—see Winkler, 1993) are convinced. Some new communitarians evade this issue by specifying that communities must be "responsive." What a responsive community consists of is not clearly defined and what one must do to have a responsible community is not well developed.

One difficult issue is the proposed moratorium on new rights that Etzioni (1993) has promoted. It is difficult to see how even a marginally responsive government can agree to such a plan. It is also unclear how we will differentiate new rights from existing rights in changing social systems. How civil rights legislation might fare under a communitarian system is also problematic (Walker, 1993). Some determination of how a responsive community would protect such rights (absent the legal system) and how we can assure that all communities are responsive will be difficult, but essential issues to deal with (Walker, 1993).

Derber (1994) and Walker (1993) argue that new communitarians have failed to deal meaningfully with the economy, poverty and inequality. Walker (1993) observes that new communitarians have failed to deal meaningfully with the destruction of community that is often caused by economic restructuring and plant closing. Derber (1994) calls Etzioni's approach to communitarianism "Professional Middle Class Communitarianism" and charges

that it is biased toward middle class concerns and away from the needs of the poor. Sawhill (1992) makes a similar point with regard to poverty and policies toward the poor:

While the new communitarians have reached consensus on some issues, not all things have been decided. Still, the new communitarians have made considerable progress in refining their agenda and getting it accepted into public discourse. This means that their ideas will have an impact on the social welfare system.

### Social Welfare Policy

The new communitarians have defined a number of ideas about social policy (McNutt, 1994, ). There would be a balance of rights and responsibilities. The Clinton administration's original proposed policy to make AFDC short term, but couple it with enhanced job training, education and day care, is one example (Office of the Press Secretary, 1993, February 2). On balance, the current welfare reform legislation that does not include these services should be attacked by communitarians as being punitive. The National Service plan for higher education aid is another illustration of new communitarian thinking. The right to aid balanced with the responsibility for service. A renewed commitment to collect child support would also be a policy of choice (Elshtain, J. et al., 1993). Wolfe (1991) and Shapiro (1992/93) argue that those with higher incomes have a responsibility to take less in terms of entitlement programs, a proposal consistent with taxing social security and higher Medicare fees for upper income recipients. The Administration's abortive National Health Plan included penalties for people making more risky lifestyle choices (like smokers or problem drinkers, see White House Domestic Policy Council, 1993, p. 3). It should be of interest to social policy scholars that the logical outcome of the new communitarian position is an affirmative defense of blaming the victim

New communitarians would argue for programs administered at the local level, but strong norms of participation also would be included. Communitarians favor active local government (Ostrom, 1993) and mutual aid (Etzioni, 1993). Implied in new communitarian thinking is a preference for local, rather than national policy making.

New communitarians endorse policies that support family life, such as flexible time, family leave, child allowances, using schools to instill family values and the provision of family life education to potential parents (Elshtain, et al., 1993). New communitarians also advocate tightening divorce laws and changing other laws that (in their view) have a negative impact on the family (Elshtain, et al., 1993). There is a preference for two parent families and, therefore, any policy that encouraged such families would be looked upon favorably.

### New Communitarians, Poverty and Social Justice

If the new communitarian position is likely to gain significant support as the decade continues, it is also likely that their ideas will influence social welfare policy. This will have implications for social and economic justice?

Social workers have espoused (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) a commitment to social and economic justice (Reeser & Epstein, 1987). It is, therefore, appropriate to ask what impact communitarian thought might have on this important set of values. Many social workers rely on John Rawls' (1971) theory of justice or similar formulations by Beverly and McSweeney (1987) or Goulet (1971). These theories represent the liberal approach that the new communitarians (especially Walzer and Sandel) oppose as being without grounding in community. Since the basic issue appears to be community versus individual rights, the literature suggests that we can identify four positions along a continuum (See George & Wilding, 1976). These positions are displayed in figure one.

The *Community Reigns Supreme Position* is one where community rights are superior in all respects to individual rights. In reality, there are no individual rights. This is the situation that existed in the feudal period of Europe prior to industrialization. At this extreme, the common good is the only good. Etzioni (1990) charges that MacIntyre (1984) takes this position. Social justice is sacrificing oneself to the common good. There is some room to speculate that the New Christian Right might support such a position. A theocracy could also be placed in this category.

The *Community and the Common Good Position* is taken by most new communitarians. The analysis of Walzer (1983), Sandel (1983)

Figure 1

*The Community Vs. Individual Rights Dimension in Social Policy*

<i>Community</i>		<i>Individual</i>	
Community Reigns Supreme Position	Community and the Common Good Position	Individuals Need Community Position	Individual Reigns Supreme Position
Feudalism	New Communitarians	Liberalism	Conservatism
All individual rights are unimportant if they interfere with the needs of the community. Social Justice is community.	Individual rights must be balanced with community needs. Social Justice in community	Individual rights are of primary importance but the needs of all must be considered. Social Justice with community	The individual must come first in order to have an efficient society. Self interest is the key to social justice. Individual justice is social justice

and Etzioni’s (1989) “I and We Paradigm” fits within this category (Etzioni, 1990). This conception of rights links individual rights with community rights (and therefore individual responsibilities). It also has a strong conception of a common good.

The *Individuals Need Community Position* is next. This is the traditional liberal position. It defines a free individual with rights to certain benefits in society. In terms of social justice, this position relies heavily on the theories of Rawls (1971), who develop a view of the individual without regard for social context and reject the idea of a definable common good independent of the well being of individual (Mishra, 1984; Beverly & McSweeney, 1987; see also Etzioni, 1990). This is not to say the liberals do not work for a common good—a common or public good is central to the idea of state intervention and planning. The common good is defined in terms of what will benefit all individuals and that the market cannot deliver. The connection between rights and responsibilities is thin and social justice is assured by state action (George & Wilding, 1976; Mishra, 1984).

The *Individual Reigns Supreme Position* is taken by libertarians and conservatives. Good comes from free individuals operating



in a free economic market. When each person maximizes his self interest, optimal well being will result. This definition of social justice equates individual self interest with the common good. A government that intervenes on behalf of another standard of the common good will decrease welfare for everyone by creating economic inefficiency (Friedman, 1962; Popple & Leighninger, 1990). Economic actors are responsible only to optimize their own self interest.

These four positions are, of course, ideal types and do not exhaust all the possibilities, although they do define the range. Bearing that in mind, it is still possible to use them for illustrative purposes. Most social policy thinking within social work falls into category three. This is not surprising, given that much of the thinking behind the welfare state (particularly the efforts of John Maynard Keynes and Lord Beveridge) comes from this line of thought (Mishra, 1984). Liberals are usually seen opposing conservatives (position four), rather than the other two positions.

New communitarian thinking would be attractive to those who pursue a centrist position. It is not conservatism and rejects the view that individuals are responsible for their own fate and society ought to only intervene in exceptional circumstances (Friedman, 1962; George & Wilding, 1976). It also rejects many of the assumptions of the welfare state, such as legal rights to assistance without corresponding responsibilities, unlimited entitlements and national social programs (Mishra, 1984). One way to envision the uniqueness of this position is the rights and responsibilities issue and the problem of context in social justice.

The question that separates liberals from the new communitarians really is not whether those who benefit from social programs should have responsibilities. The issue is how those responsibilities will be applied and who will have discretion. This is a reflection of the issue of community Vs individual rights. Much of our policy-making over the past fifty or so years has been aimed at minimizing the system's capacity to treat the individual unfairly and this has translated into techniques designed to minimize discretion (such as regulations, due process procedures, impartial hearings, civil service and so forth) Most of these methods require stripping away any context from the decision

(see Rawls, 1971) so that unfairness will not occur. Any power that can be abused will be abused.

New communitarians argue (as do feminists, see Hekman, 1992 and others) that the context is not only important but essential. It is the major link with community. When context is not considered, the community is ignored and possibly damaged. This limits the ability of the community to provide informal aid and disempowers the community. There are consequences to weakened communities.

The debate over social policy boils down to our willingness to trust our communities. There are reasons not to trust. The history of local administration of human services and civil rights has provided abundant cause for concern. On balance, the destruction of community and social fabric has also taken toll (see Putnam, 1995; 1996; Elshtain, 1996). Social workers have a great deal of experience with the breakdown of community and know that the costs can be terrible (McNutt & Byers, 1996). Damaged communities provide impaired informal helping systems and place additional stress on the formal system. The ecological model well illustrates the importance of these community systems (Germain and Gitterman, 1980). The new communitarians are not wrong about the need to preserve and protect communities but they may not understand the ability of even well functioning communities to do damage to individuals.

The communitarian quest for stronger communities is social work's quest as well. We must find ways of building communities so that they are willing and able to both support all of their members and, at the same time, protect their rights. This means building functional communities with appropriate safeguards. The new communitarians have done little to explain how this might be done, so social workers can make an important contribution. Much of the group work and community organization technology that we have developed is appropriate to this problem (McNutt & Byers, 1996). Specht and Courtney (1994) offer suggestions about how communitarian thought might contribute to developing community-friendly service delivery systems. Swenson (1994) suggests ways that clinical practice can promote community. Social workers also have experience in identifying injustices and protecting the rights of individuals. These advocacy and

analysis skills can be used to counter those who argue for a rebirth of community at any cost. Gilbert (1992/93) provides an excellent example of the latter effort when he points out that the communitarian effort to build responsibilities into welfare programs is built on an incomplete understanding of who benefits from social welfare. Along the same vein, Sawhill (1992), cautions that middle class assumptions may not meet the realities that the poor face in their daily lives.

Policy could be framed in such a way that rights can only be fulfilled within the context of a community. For example, we might say that children have the right to stable families and nurturing communities and that it is the responsibility of the local, state and national government to provide conditions favorable to their development (see McNutt, 1991). This must also include protection of minority subcommunities from discrimination and oppression. This would clearly put new communitarians at odds with an economy that often sees communities as expendable (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982; 1988), but it might prevent a host of actions that destroy communities.

The debate between new communitarians and others promises renewed opportunity for social work involvement because these are issues with which our profession has long struggled. While the new communitarian agenda is still somewhat mutable, it appears to have gathered considerable political support. Social workers have superior understanding of some of the issues that the new communitarians are exploring, so our contribution is both needed and timely.

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