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Charles D. Cowger
University of Missouri, Columbia

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Clientilism and Clientification: Impediments to Strengths Based Social Work Practice

CHARLES D. COWGER

University of Missouri, Columbia
School of Social Work

A strengths-based practice perspective is, at best, weak and, perhaps, irrelevant in social service structures that are powered by social control values, driven by the market economy, and protected by professional self interests. This paper proposes that the relationship between the patron and the client, as expressed by the metaphor "clientelism" in the development literature, and "clientification", as described by Habermas, are informative as significant obstacles to the implementation of strengths-based social work practice and social service delivery. The paper argues that for strengths-based practice to be viable, it and its advocates must confront more fundamental change by becoming more policy focused and implementing action strategies to overcome fundamental barriers while generating empirical evidence of its efficacy.

During the past decade there has been an increasing social work interest in strengths and a strengths based, social work practice perspective (DeJong and Miller, 1995, Goldstein 1990, Kisthardt, 1993, Rapp et. al. 1994, Saleebey, 1996). This perspective was developed for and has been primarily intended for those personal social services whereby the helping process principally relies on interaction between a worker and a client. While obstacles to the implementation of this perspective have, on occasion, been casually referred to by these writers, the impediments are far more fundamental than have been indicated. A strengths-based practice perspective is, at best, weak and, perhaps, irrelevant in social service structures that are powered by social control values, driven by the market economy, and protected by professional self interests. This paper proposes that the relationship between

the patron and the client, as expressed by the metaphor "clientelism" in the development literature, and "clientification", as described by Habermas, are informative as significant obstacles to the implementation of strengths based, social work practice and social service delivery. Indeed, clientelism and clientification are associated with dependency, the antithesis to the purposes of strengths-based models. Vital change in how "clients" are viewed and encountered is not possible without essential transformation that reflects new power relationships in the structuring of professional roles, the organization of services and social policy choices. Finally, the paper will argue that for strength-based practice to be viable, it and its advocates must confront more fundamental change by becoming more policy focused and implementing action strategies to overcome fundamental barriers while generating empirical evidence of its efficacy.

The paper is based on the notion that the purpose of social work is the expansion of choice with "choice" referring to the range of social and economic alternatives available to individuals and collectives. As such, choice provides people with control over existing problem situations and, in turn, their own lives. For people to be able to make choices, they must have viable options available. Therefore, social work is also about the distribution of resources and the promotion of social and economic justice. Maximizing choice is a job left undone for social work, social services, and, indeed, for the welfare state. The welfare state and its two institutional instrumentalities that are of concern in this paper, social services and the social work profession, evolved as a response to social upheaval brought on by free market economics and economies during the waning years of the industrial revolution. While they have experienced some growing pains and periodically faced opposition from the political right, social services and the profession of social work are essentially resilient, and with proper direction, will likely live to a ripe old age. They have been and will continue to be resilient because they receive their nourishment from the excesses of "free" markets, and it appears that "free" markets will be around for a long time. Part of the job left undone, and the concern of this paper, is for social work and the social services to come to terms with the issue of dependency, wherein dependency is related to the worker/client relationship.

The potential for social work and the social services to create dependency has been neither sufficiently considered nor fully debated as a critical factor in the development of social welfare policy. Proponents of the welfare state have found it necessary to defend social programs on this matter from both the right and the left and have not done so in a convincing manner. In the United States and Western Europe and in many other parts of the world, welfare reform, based on notions that the welfare state creates dependency, has become a popular agenda of the political right during the last two decades. Coincidentally, advocates of practice models based on notions of empowerment and strengths that have become prominent during this same time period are also concerned about dependency (Kondrat 1995, Hanna and Robinson 1994, McKnight 1995, Penderhughes 1994, Saleebey 1996). However, it is important to differentiate between the dependency concerns of the political right and the dependency concerns of those who promote a strengths-based social work practice. There are many differences between these two groups, though both are concerned about "choice." It seems apparent that the political right is most concerned that the welfare state will hinder the health of free markets and economic choices assumed to be available to all its citizens in a capitalist society. In particular they are concerned that government involvement in income distribution, housing, health care, and employment will create dependency. In contrast, the typical dependency concern for those who promote strengths-based practice is that deficit and pathology based models of practice utilized in personal social services will lead to dependency. Those who support strengths-based practice assume and/ or support the notion that income distribution, decent housing, adequate health care, and the right to a job are basic rights of all citizens and represent essential responsibilities of government (Saleebey, 1996).

Clientilism and Development

During the decades of the 70's and the 80's, various critics of international development programs used the metaphor of "clientilism" as having special meaning related to what was wrong with development programs instituted in third world

countries (Randall and Theobald, 1985; Legg and Lemarchand, 1972; Cammack, 1982; Clapham, 1982; Cardoso, 1973; R. Theobald, 1982). The central idea of this criticism was that development programs, whether initiated externally or internally, had the common characteristic of fostering dependence. This, of course, was troubling to those who believed the the primary concern of social welfare policy and social development to be the expansion of choice.

The concept "clientelism" was part of the nomenclature of "dependency theory," a popular theory of development that grew out of the 1970's. This theory was a response to the prominent "modernization" theory, a romantic notion of development of the previous decade that had associated development with progress. Modernization theory fostered the establishment of networks and institutions in developing countries that were similar to those of advanced industrial societies and was built on a belief system that free market innovation, increasing productivity, and growth would result in integrative change, more and better jobs, and greater choice, (Rustow, 1967; Coleman, 1960; Apter, 1965; Huntington, 1971; Almond and Powell, 1966). The assumptions of modernization theory were severely criticized on a number of grounds and from various perspectives, including severe criticism by a number of writers associated with or identified as "dependency" theorists. Their criticisms described the theoretical and empirical contradictions of growth such as class conflict and the changing composition of social classes, growing inequality, compensatory political controls, the "marginalization" of the labor force through capital-intensive industry, the rising social overhead costs such as higher crime rates, family breakup, pollution, and the fact that there are insufficient natural resources to facilitate or sustain world wide development at a level experienced by the West.

While dependency theory has a number of analytic and prescriptive limitations (Apter, pp. 29–31; Randall and Theobald, pp. 99–136), its basic criticism of modernization theory and its description of the process of clientelism essentially have been unchallenged. Central to the idea of clientelism is the patron-client relationship characterized by; 1) a distributional system of goods and services based on an unequal or asymmetrical relationship

between a superior patron and an inferior client or client group, and 2) an exchange between patron and client that does not allow the client choices (Randall and Theobald, 1985). The metaphor, "clientelism," was initially used by anthropologists studying tribal societies. When kinship alone was unable to guarantee the necessities of existence for peasant cultivators, their critical situations were alleviated by their attachment to wealthy and powerful individuals (Powell, 1970). Clientelism may take the form of exchange of material goods for labor, votes and or informal support. Ultimately, it limits people's choices and makes them dependent on the patron. Frank (1969), in his study of Brazil, and Cardoso and Faletto's (1976) Latin American work, argue that the interrelationship of the international economy, the nation state and the alliances of social classes within the states perpetuate an international third-world dependency, and, in turn, a patrimonial relationship within the state.

Developing countries are particularly vulnerable internally to a patrimonial system in that they tend to have a large political, economic and social gap between those who run them and their citizens. They must maintain themselves by extracting resources from the domestic economy, and they must provide benefits for their citizens. The people who run the state and provide the services are drawn overwhelmingly from the most educated and articulate sections of the population. In their hands the state becomes not only a benefit in itself but a means to defend itself against domestic discontent. The gap between the government and the citizens is bridged through a patron-client relationship which provides a political security for those in power (Clapham, 1955). Social workers often play similar roles in low income neighborhoods in this country. While clientelism has something to offer both parties, it does not allow for choices. Since it is founded on the premise of inequality, the benefits between patrons and clients are unequal. In addition, Clapham has argued that clientelism serves to intensify ethnic conflicts, is inefficient in allocation (the wrong persons get the job) and encourages corruption. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the modernization theory has been revived, with free markets becoming even more central in the ideology of development theory.

Clientelism and Clientification in Personal Social Services

The concept "client" and the actual existence of clients in the human services are a twentieth century phenomena arriving concurrently with the development of personal social services and the advent of helping professions to staff those services. In the modern welfare state, particularly in personal social services, this dynamic is exacerbated by the rising professional class of experts (i.e., helping professions including social work) who have high investment in their own status in the society and are able to institutionalize their increasing status through legal and bureaucratized instrumentalities. "Client" can only be understood in the context of a professional helper who has a particular kind of expertise that is to be applied to the "client's" problem. The description of the actors, their objectives, and their roles in a typical social worker-client interview will illustrate an unequal or asymmetrical relationship between a superior patron and an inferior client or client group. The paradigm that has helped perpetuate clienthood is a social political phenomenon (Holmes, 1996, p 151).

Clientelism represents a unique type of labeling in a professionalized and specialized society whereby people receive the label and social role of "client" and, in the process, forfeit a degree of power and independence. Habermas (1974) argued some 20 years ago that a product of the welfare state, as it was being developed in Western Europe, was a "clientification" process whereby the citizen was being relegated to a new status of "client." In the process, his or her "life world" was being colonized, depriving the individual of his or her social competence. Clientification represents a phenomenon similar to clientelism but with a greater emphasis on the process involved and the personal effects the process has on the individual. As an example of Habermas' notion of the expansion of client status in the welfare state of the developed world, in Illinois, as in many other states, all children who are wards of the state must have a DSMIV designation in order to receive service. Holmes (1996) describes how professionals make clients from people through a process of substituting, revising, and influencing the "client's" story until the meaning the client ascribes to it is replaced with an "official" story, which is then

supported and reinforced by existing professional, cultural, bureaucratic and economic factors.

The Relationship of Clientilism and Clientification to Powerlessness and Dependency

The significance of clientilism and clientification to a strengths-based practice is related to issues of powerlessness and dependency. As indicated above, the role of client is a role of powerlessness. Clientification and powerlessness are also cyclical in nature. People become clients because they are powerless and become powerless because they are clients. The importance of powerlessness is found in the social sciences under a number of rubrics representing different theoretical perspectives (Mirowsky and Ross, 1989, p. 132). The literature on learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975); locus of control (Rotter, 1966) in cognitive psychology; "fatalism" by anthropologists (e.g. Madsen, 1973); and personal efficacy (Kohn, 1972), self-directedness (Kohn and Schooler, 1982), and mastery (Pearlin et. al., 1981) in sociology, all provide research evidence on the importance of people believing they have control over their own lives. Mirowsky and Ross' review of research of a sense of "mastery" (1989), and their own research (1983) found that a sense of mastery is associated with "achievement, status, education, wealth, and work . . . whereas fatalism and a sense of powerlessness are associated with failure, stagnation, dependency, poverty, economic strain, and work that is simple, routine, and closely supervised". The sense of powerlessness not only is depressing and demoralizing in and of itself, but, worse, it can "undermine the will to seek and take effective action in response to problems (Mirowsky and Ross, 1989)." Powerlessness and being a client are both related to dependency, whereby a person or group is relegated to a social role and is perceived by all parties (including the 'dependent') as being solely a recipient with little of value to contribute. The dependent thereafter habitually survives by meeting minimum requirements of disequal exchanges. The dependent in this context has little power as he or she is reliant on more powerful external resources. The exchange is an unequal or asymmetrical relationship between a superior patron and an inferior client or

client group. Clientification is problematic because it is associated with a decrease in the client's sense of control, and concomitantly, a sense of powerlessness. Dependency and a sense of powerlessness become mutually reinforcing, whereby the person has the expectancy that his or her own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of future outcomes beyond those that are prescribed by more powerful outside forces.

There are various manifestations of this patron-client relationship in Western societies. One example would be the local machine politics of U. S cities whereby family members become dependent on political structures as precinct captains deliver jobs and services and become a resource for family problems in exchange for votes. In the modern welfare state it may be a "contract" between a worker and a low income single parent who has been accused of neglect and must perform certain identified behaviors in order to have a child returned; a mental health "patient" who must perform "life skills" and/or "behavior objectives" in order to receive additional services and or emotional support from the worker and the program; a public aid recipient who must attend employment socialization classes in order to continue to receive assistance for her children; or a mental health patient who must know and follow the rules, be contrite and be well socialized to his/her appropriate client role, give proper respect and homage to his or her "workers," and behave as if the agency and/or the worker knows best.

Declientizing Social Work Practice

Practice models founded on notions of empowerment and strengths provide great potential for social services to provide people with more viable and additional choices. Indeed, such models typically promote notions of mutuality, collaboration, and partnership (Penderhughes, 1994; Saleebey, 1996; Kisthardt, 1996). However, with few exceptions these models are presented in the context of personal social services, providing guidance to the worker while assuming the worker has practice prerogatives in how he or she views and interacts with clients. An appropriate next step for advocates of this approach would be to become more focused on the fundamental structural and institutional changes required to support and nurture practice.

Few realize how radical-strengths based practice is, if taken seriously. A fundamental change in the worker-client relationship requires a paradigm shift that would truly be a professional revolution. There is ample evidence that the profession has been moving in the opposite direction with its obsession with status (Specht and Courtney, 1993). Change that would declientize would require major shifts regarding notions of mission and purpose of the social services and support from professional groups that are willing to give up power and assist clients to acquire power.

Continuing the Agenda for Strengths Based Practice

Where do we go from here? For a strengths-based practice paradigm to have significant impact, declientification must occur. For that to occur a number of alternatives appear necessary. The models and perspectives of strengths-based practice must become conceptually more holistic to include the political, structural, and organizational ramifications of the approach and move beyond the narrow focus of promoting client strengths in direct practice perspectives to critical analysis and action at the institutional, organizational and policy levels. For social welfare policy to address this problem, it is crucial that policy choices are promoted whereby exchange between the providers of services and recipients is directed toward alleviating unequal power relationships, maximizing recipient choices, and maximizing recipient control. Strategies developed to this end have been utilized in the past.

Some have argued that the label of "client" in and of itself is depreciating and should be changed (Sanders, 1989. Falck, 1988). Dunst et. al (1994), after much deliberation, agreed to refer to their "clients" as "help seekers." Others have argued for the use of "consumer" while still others have used "co-producers" (Abrahamson, 1989). Changing nomenclature is not fundamental change. However, the use of the word "client" creates a dilemma as there does not seem to be an alternative word that is sufficiently descriptive while at the same time broadly applicable. Minimally, it would seem that the word "client" should only be used to represent a voluntary relationship whereby an informed person voluntarily enters into a relationship with a professional. Such a

relationship assumes choice and provides a better opportunity for choice to be viable in the interaction between the worker and the "client." When the purpose of social work practice is clearly social control, such as working with involuntary people, strengths-based practice is particularly important as the implementation of choice is hindered by the involuntary nature of the relationship. Unthinkingly, calling these people "clients" in the same manner as referring to other people who voluntarily utilize the services of the social worker would suggest a more generalized acceptance of the client-worker relationship as representing social control and unequal power. In resolving this dilemma, the choice of a name for those whom we have traditionally called "clients" should be carefully considered, but should not be a distraction from more fundamental change that would equalize the power relationship between social workers and those with whom they work; that peoples' strengths may be utilized and dependency alleviated.

To maximize choice is to give up power. The strengths based practice literature is clear about that reality in the description of direct practice with individual families and groups. However, for strengths-based practice to become viable it must be dogged about strengths, empowerment, and action at all levels of practice. It may require joining with clients, social workers and others in social action to influence the profession, social policy and/or service delivery. Collective action is an obvious instrument for the utilization and realization of peoples' strengths and therefore a deterrent to dependency. Self interest motivated by the promise of free market rewards is more powerful than impressive ideas. Strengths-based practice is not going to win people over or influence policy on the basis of its values or theoretical foundation. Without collective action a strengths perspective doesn't have a chance against managed care and other recent changes in the delivery of social services that are now driven by market forces.

Finally, in the absence of empirical evidence of effectiveness (i.e., that strengths-based practice really does empower and decrease dependency), the richness of the ideas of strengths-based practice is incomplete, inadequate, and naive. While ideology is important and, indeed, powerful, if people believe it, social work practice is increasingly influenced by empirical evidence demonstrating effectiveness. The epistemological debates that

have occurred in social work over the last two decades have little relevance to, and even less impact on, decision making in the policy and planning world of social services where empirical evidence is increasingly valued. Strengths-based models of practice and new understandings of the relationship of workers to clients must be tested. The work that has been done is promising (e.g. Chamberlain and Rapp, 1991; Parsons and Cox, 1994; Rapp, 1996), but has just begun.

In the United States we went through a stage of "maximum feasible participation of the poor." In the United Kingdom and the United States we have written about, experimented with, and argued over issues of residual versus universal services, the means test, client vouchers, clients as consumers, clients as co-producers, and client rights. Yet, clients are still clients with their status, control, and power relationship to the body politic and institutions of social provision remaining essentially the same, if not deteriorating, over the past two decades. Dependency is a difficult issue and perhaps more complex than is indicated herein. However, if one is to confront the problem of dependency, minimally the role and status of the client as such relates to control, choice, and empowerment, is crucial to the analysis, development and implementation of social policy. In fact, in the absence of such an essential consideration, social policy and provision will continue to benefit the providers and assure that clients will remain clients.

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