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Structuration Theory and Critical Consciousness: Potential Applications for Social Work Practice

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Anthony Giddens' structuration theory provides concepts that can be used to think differently about oppression and consciousness raising. Structuration sees society as being recursively created through its members' social practices, and oppression as being but one of these social practices. Consciousness raising, then, is recognizing that a given social practice is oppressive, and then deliberately working to change the practice. This is done by altering one's social performance and disrupting the recursive process that maintains the oppressive practice. Implications follow for empowerment-oriented social work practice and narrowing the gap between clinical and community social work practice.

Key words: Structuration theory, empowerment practice, consciousness raising, critical consciousness, Giddens

Introduction

The agency/structure debate

In the field of sociology, theorists have traditionally focused either on issues related to social structure or issues related to human agency, leading to much disagreement about the most fruitful path for explaining society. Those theorizing agency, Garfinkle (1967) and Weber (1925/1962) most prominently, have typically been concerned with issues surrounding the capacity

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to act, and the way people make meaning in their life-world. In this tradition, social structures are believed to create context for and set limits upon the meaning people create in the world (Giddens, 1987; Ritzer, 1992). Structural theorists, on the other hand, are concerned with how social structures impact human consciousness and behavior (Durkheim, 1893/1947; Marx, 1964). Their primary argument has been that human actors are always responding to or resisting social systems and institutions, and their focus of study is how social life and awareness are impacted by these institutions (Giddens, 1987; Kondrat, 2002; Ritzer, 1992). This difference parallels, or perhaps forms the foundation for, a similar divergence in social work theory and practice.

The micro/macro division

A long standing issue in social work has been the divide between micro and macro practice perspectives. Micro practice can be understood as “activities that are designed to help solve the problems of individuals, families, and small groups” (National Association of Social Workers, 2003, p. 272), while macro practice is commonly thought of as “practice aimed at bringing about improvements and changes in the general society” (National Association of Social Workers, 2003, p. 257). The differences between these two perspectives springs in great part from varying positions about social work’s primary mission and the types of practice activities in which social workers should engage. While sociology’s theoretical work has advanced within its distinct yet related avenues of inquiry, social work may be better served by conceptualizing interventions in ways that more explicitly incorporate both micro and macro concerns. After all, social work is practical as well as theoretical, and we have work to do with our clients. Generalist social work practice models’ emphases on multi-level intervention across fields of practice have attempted to address the separation of clinical and community work. Another promising development in overcoming this bifurcation has been the emergence of empowerment as a widely recognized practice modality.

Empowerment

Empowerment practice with an emphasis on consciousness-raising has contributed greatly toward bringing these perspectives together. Consciousness-raising has long been an important activity for social workers engaged in social justice and community organizing with disenfranchised populations. It was first introduced to mainstream social work practice by social workers who practiced with marginalized groups (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986; Gutierrez, 1990; Solomon, 1976), and who advocated for empowerment as an orientation to practice that should be used in both micro and macro settings. Most empowerment theorists, however, retain some concept of an Other: society, the patriarchy, capitalism, etc., which is external to the client and responsible for their oppression. Although empowerment perspectives have greatly reduced the gap between micro/macro and agency/structure, they have not overcome it.

Structuration

Anthony Giddens (1984) developed structuration theory as a way to bridge the agency/structure division in sociological theory, and his work holds promise for social workers seeking to devise practice methods and philosophies that are holistic and consider all dimensions of a person. With its conceptualization of society as a phenomenon that is recursively created and recreated through the social practices of its members, structuration theory suggests that there may be alternative understandings of consciousness-raising that can positively impact empowerment practice.

Discussion

Consciousness-raising

Paulo Freire (1970) was one of the first to identify and discuss critical consciousness through his popular education work with Brazilian peasants. The peasants were struggling within a politically, economically, and socially oppressive system, and over generations had become resigned to their circumstances. Freire held "culture circles" in which peasants met to discuss their lives, learn from one another, and develop

a political analysis of their situation. He called this process consciousness raising, the ability to challenge the prevailing hegemony, critically perceive the root causes of one's oppression, and to act in one's self interest to confront the oppression. The process is the transformation from an acted-upon Object to an acting Subject who can "...perceive the causes of reality" (p. 131).

Jane Mansbridge (2001), a social movement theorist, uses the term "oppositional consciousness" to discuss the development of liberation movements within subordinated groups. She defines it as "...an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination" (p. 4). In order for a person to begin developing oppositional consciousness, he must (1) identify with an unjustly subordinated group, (2) recognize the injustice of the mechanisms oppressing the group, (3) oppose the injustice, and 4) see that others within the subordinated group also wish to oppose the injustice. In Mansbridge's conceptualization, a person with fully developed oppositional consciousness is able to identify a specific oppressor who benefits from the oppression, and understand that the oppressor is part of a system of domination that pursues its own interests to the detriment of the oppressed.

In social work, Piven & Cloward's (1964) classic *Poor People's Movements* explored the development, achievements, and duration of a number of social liberation movements. In discussing what is required for a movement of poor people to begin, they conclude that a "transformation of consciousness" (p. 3) must occur within each individual who is contemplating participation. First, the system that oppresses her must lose legitimacy in her eyes. After this has happened, she can shift from a fatalistic belief about the situation, begin to assert her rights, and develop the self-efficacy required for successful movement participation. When enough people experience this transformed consciousness, a social movement to challenge the prevailing powers can be born.

Empowerment perspectives

Empowerment theorists, including Solomon (1976), Lee, (2001), and Gutierrez (1990), have brought consciousness-

raising from community organizing, social action, and social movement theory into the mainstream of social work, developing practice approaches to facilitate critical consciousness without being part of a social liberation movement.

Solomon (1976) was the first in social work to explicate empowerment, and although she did not address consciousness-raising in depth, her theoretical work provided the foundation for the more definitive empowerment practice models that would follow. She described empowerment as "...a process whereby the social worker engages in a set of activities with the client or client system that aim to reduce the powerlessness that has been created by negative valuations based on membership in a stigmatized group" (p. 29). The goal of these activities is locating and addressing direct and indirect power blocks that inhibit opportunity and skill development among powerless groups.

Lee (2001) utilizes Solomon's concept of power blocks, but her discussion of empowerment is more explicitly political. Drawing heavily from Freire and a variety of liberation movements, she develops a method of empowerment practice that sees the social worker's role as facilitating critical consciousness, praxis, and changing "oppressive, unjust structures" (p. 47). Oppression manifests both internally and externally, and has its origin in the social system that denies opportunity and resources. Central to Lee's perspective is "multi-focal vision" (p. 94) which the social worker utilizes to gain the fullest possible understanding of clients' lives and past experiences, especially those of clients experiencing multiple oppressions.

Building upon Gutierrez's (1990) earlier writing on empowerment and the work of Lee (2001), Solomon (1976) and others, Parsons, Gutierrez, and Cox (1998) offer one of the most thoroughly developed models of empowerment practice. They envision intervention occurring across four dimensions, with tasks particular to each. As the client and social worker move through the individual, group, local environment, and socio-political dimensions, the client builds relationships, participates in group activities that reduce isolation and self-blame, learns skills that will help him participate in political work, and begins the consciousness-raising process. He also learns how to influence institutions, locate resources in his local commu-

nity, and engage in political action to press for social change.

Parsons, Gutierrez, and Cox developed this approach based on four important themes they identified in the empowerment practice literature: (1) Developing positive attitudes, values, and beliefs about self-efficacy and power; (2) Validating personal experience through collective experience; (3) Developing the knowledge and skills necessary for both critical thinking and action; and (4) Taking action following reflection. These themes are not steps that must be approached one at a time or in a particular order, but processes that take place organically and fluidly over the course of the client's and social worker's time together.

A common element among these consciousness-raising and empowerment perspectives is that the oppressed and marginalized are seen as recipients of ill treatment by an Other who is separate and apart from them. The oppressed are dominated by the Oppressor, the System, the Patriarchy, or the larger Society, and an important step in working toward critical consciousness is claiming the right and the power to resist being oppressed by the Other. In the final analysis, these perspectives maintain the notion of separate personal and social spheres, and so do not entirely solve the problem of micro and macro division in social work. For help in addressing this dilemma, social work can look to Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (1984), particularly his proposal that social structures are recursively created phenomena held together through social relationships.

Structuration Theory

Few American social work scholars have used structuration theory to inform a research problem or theoretical exploration. Kondrat has used aspects of structuration theory to consider new ways of thinking about professional self-awareness (1999) and person-in-environment (2002), and Tangenberg (2005) has applied Kondrat (2002) to working with faith-based human service organizations. Stoddard (1992) explored the potential for using structuration in community practice and theory. European social work researchers including Ferguson (2001, 2003), Garrett (2003, 2004), and Roberts and Devine (2004) have

written about Giddens in greater numbers, but tend to focus on his *Third Way* political work (Giddens, 1998) which was the foundation for welfare reform in Britain and the United States.

Major principles

Giddens (1984) contends that theorists of social structure have tended to provide unsatisfactory explanations of human agency, while theorists of agency have paid insufficient attention to the development and persistence of structural arrangements. After considering the limited explanatory ability of both schools he developed the theory of structuration to explain the dynamic relationship between the two, and thus gain insight into the ongoing relationship between human beings and social structures.

Recursive processes. Structuration examines the recursive practices that create and re-create the social world, emphasizing that society and its structures are both conditions and outcomes of the actions of human beings. Structuration is the process of configuring social relations, usually called "social practices." As human agency and social structure continuously influence and co-create each other, social practices, the points of mediation between them, are born (Cohen, 1989, Giddens, 1984). Society, therefore, is not a static entity, but a social construction created and maintained by social practices.

Levels of consciousness. This understanding of society raises two important questions for Giddens. First, how aware is the average person that social structures and social arrangements influence his consciousness and behavior? Second, how aware is the average person of the way his daily activities create and recreate social structures? In response to these questions, Giddens proposes that human beings have three types of consciousness, or knowledge, which order their experience and interpretation of the world around them: practical knowledge, discursive knowledge, and mutual knowledge (1987). They are nested, with mutual knowledge being comprised of practical knowledge and discursive knowledge. Practical knowledge is tacit, an inextricable component of a given community's social practices. It is "what actors know or believe about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own

actions, but cannot express discursively" (Giddens, 1984, p. 375). Practical knowledge is accepted or assumed by the actor with little thought unless it is somehow challenged. This challenge forces the actor to bring his assumptions to a higher level of consciousness for examination, the discursive level. Discursive knowledge, then, is being aware of one's own actions and being able to describe the reason for engaging in them. It is knowledge that can be used for discussion, "what actors are able to say, or to give verbal expression to, about social conditions, especially the conditions of their own actions" (Giddens, 1984, p. 374). Mutual knowledge is the highest level in Giddens' schema. It is a "common sense" type of understanding, the knowledge of important day to day information that is held by all members of a given community. It is "the knowledge of convention that we must possess in order to make sense of what we do and what others do during the course of our social lives" (Giddens, 1987, p. 65). Mutual knowledge, this knowledge of convention, is what holds social practices together.

The knowledgeable agent. The concept of the knowledgeable agent is the linchpin in structuration theory. The social actor is an agent because she always has the capacity to act, and she is knowledgeable because she has a tremendous amount of social information in practical, discursive, and mutual forms. Even though most of her knowledge is practical, and therefore difficult to articulate, if pressed and given the opportunity to reflect, she is able to provide an explanation for her action or belief (Giddens, 1982). Although social location certainly determines what and how much one knows, every social actor still acts knowledgeably since she is always aware, on some level, of her actions in the recursive performance that creates society. And, most significantly, she is capable of reflecting upon her performance (by bringing it from practical consciousness to discursive consciousness) and deciding to alter the performance (Giddens, 1987). For Giddens, the true measure of a knowledgeable agent is that she "...could have acted otherwise" (1982, p. 9). That is to say, her course of action was of her own choosing, a performance based upon her social knowledge, rather than being determined by social forces (Cohen, 1989).

An Alternative Conceptualization of

Critical Consciousness

How might social work think about and pursue critical consciousness if society were perceived as a dynamic social process or recursively created phenomenon, rather than a static structure to be fought and overcome? According to structuration, oppression is a social relationship, a set of social practices maintained by members of society who participate in the relationship. Consciousness-raising, then, would not involve identifying an Oppressor who is separate from the oppressed and then rising up against that Oppressor to stop what is being done. Rather, it would entail an individual recognizing that a relationship is oppressive, and consciously working to change the social practices that maintain the oppressive relationship. Applying structuration's concept of a recursively created society provides tools to reconsider the dichotomy of oppressed and Other, allowing us to extend empowerment theory and think of social justice and social work practice in new ways.

Individual and social change

The consciousness-raising and empowerment literatures often address actors' personal experience in oppressive situations through the concept of internalized oppression, but this may not be adequate. Internalized oppression can be described as bringing into our own consciousness (internalizing) the negative and hurtful attitudes of the Other (oppression). The Other's oppressive acts and attitudes are put upon the oppressed, who, before experiencing critical consciousness, are passive "acted-upon Objects" (Freire, 1970, p. 131). After their consciousnesses are raised, the oppressed are imbued with insight and ability that can be used to recognize the source of oppression and take action to end it.

Structuration, in contrast, argues that individuals always have agency and knowledge, and actively co-create all of their relationships, even those that are oppressive. Critical consciousness, then, is being actively aware of one's agency and the role one has in creating social practices. This is simultaneously disheartening and liberating. It can be disheartening because actors bear greater responsibility for

their present status or situation, whether they are oppressed, oppressor, or someone who has not moved beyond practical consciousness to an understanding of their place in the social system. It is liberating because each actor has greater opportunity and ability to recursively influence social processes with which she is unhappy. Possessing critical consciousness and believing themselves to be agents of change gives actors the ability to influence their own lives and the very structure of society.

Implications for Empowerment Practice

Structuration theory provides a way for empowerment theory and practice to move beyond the concept of an Other who oppresses from outside the sphere of the oppressed, a dichotomy that has been theoretically problematic. This dichotomy can be replaced with an expanded understanding of human agency in which individuals are knowledgeable, powerful, and able to change social structures through their action. Such an understanding encourages an integrated form of social work practice that addresses the structural and political realities of clients' lives as well as their beliefs about themselves. Two implications for practice follow the incorporation of this idea.

First: The social practice should be the focus of intervention

If social institutions have no existence apart from the human actions that constitute and re-constitute them, society is not an oppressive entity that must be overcome, but a social construction that can be shaped through our actions. Given this, an important practice implication for social workers employing an empowerment framework may be to shift the focus of intervention from the structure/situation or the individual to the relationship between them. The goal would be for individuals to bring existing social practices to higher levels of consciousness for examination, and then alter performance within the social practice to create a new relationship pattern.

As an example, let us consider the experience of a Puerto Rican community struggling to resist the effects of gentrification. To meet the demand for upscale housing in

their city's downtown, real estate development companies purchased residential buildings that were vacated as older residents died and young people moved away. Over time, the developers transformed these residential properties into lofts and single family homes that local residents were unable to afford, and young professionals who were not Puerto Rican began to move in. Restaurants and businesses opened to cater to the tastes of new residents rather the people who had lived in the area for many years.

When this process began, a handful of residents had attempted to outbid the development companies when properties were available for sale, and held protests outside the companies' offices on several occasions. However, the residents had neither the finances nor the political power to keep ownership within the community and stop the block by block gentrification. Resigned to their relative powerlessness and unhappy with the changing character of the neighborhood, Puerto Ricans continued to move away in high numbers. These vacated properties were also purchased, remodeled, and sold by developers, continuing the cycle.

A turning point occurred when a group of local leaders convened a series of community meetings to discuss the neighborhood's situation. People attending the meetings realized that they had been reactive to the developers' actions and paralyzed by the belief that they could not stop what was happening. Through their discussion, they became convinced that gentrification could be halted if they were proactive rather than reactive in their approach, changed the way they were responding, and drew upon how important their neighborhood and culture were to them.

A plan of action emerged that included strengthening individual residents' identity and pride as Puerto Rican Americans, re-building the sense of community that had been lost, developing ways for the neighborhood to retain its residential and business properties, and encouraging the neighborhood to support locally owned businesses. A Puerto Rican Community Center was created that sponsored traditional celebrations and block parties, taught culture and history classes in local schools, developed an elder day program, and offered affordable family counseling to residents. A Puerto Rican

Business Council was established to nurture existing local businesses, assist others in starting new businesses, and provide job training for residents who wanted to work in a local business but lacked the needed skills. To address the loss of housing stock, the Community Center and Business Council together created a program to develop affordable rental housing for seniors and a program to purchase and rehabilitate properties to be sold to local residents.

After a time, the Community Center and Business Council approached two of the larger real estate developers the community had protested against. They requested technical assistance with an aspect of the rehabilitation program, and asked if the companies would be interested in discussing the development of mixed-income housing in the neighborhood. To their surprise, the companies agreed to both requests. These firms and the Puerto Rican community have worked on collaborative projects for the last several years, with each developing a better understanding of the other's motivations and goals. They have not always agreed or done what the others have wanted, but the pace of gentrification has slowed noticeably.

The community's process illustrates moving from an understanding of oppression based on identifying and challenging an oppressor to one that addresses social practices, as advocated by structuration theory. Initially, residents attempted to compel the real estate developers to stop purchasing property by publicly protesting, but their efforts were ineffective. They were not organized, were small in numbers, and significantly, did not evaluate their own beliefs and behavior that betrayed a lack of confidence and sustained interest. The social practice that they had recursively created with the developers was oppressive and further solidified with each interaction in which they reacted in a reliable fashion. However, when they began to examine this relationship and discuss it among themselves, their understanding of their own beliefs and behavior moved from a practical level, at which they were unaware of their role in the social practice, to the discursive and mutual levels. At these levels, they were able to share their beliefs about themselves, the community, and the ongoing relationship with the real estate companies. This led to a more complex view of their role within the social practice, and the realization that they, as

individuals and as a community, could select new ways of interacting, thus changing the relationship. Because they persistently and deliberately changed their social performance, the real estate companies had no choice but to change their performance as well, and a new social practice was developed.

Second: Individuals must act to change an oppressive social practice

A second practice implication of applying structuration theory to critical consciousness and empowerment practice is that individuals (or groups of individuals) in an oppressive social relationship must act if they want the relationship to be altered. Giddens (1984) argues that before social practices can be transformed, they must be dispassionately examined so that all parties' performances may be more fully understood. Once a thorough assessment is done, it will be possible to specify which aspects of the relationship must be different to reach the desired end. Although oppressor and oppressed jointly maintain the oppressive social practice, in all likelihood, significant change in the relationship will only be initiated when the oppressed alter their attitudes and social performances. This must not be construed to mean that the oppression they experience is their fault. It is simply acknowledging that the more powerful agent in the relationship is benefiting in some way from the current social practice, and has little incentive to pursue change that might decrease their power or introduce discomfort. If the less powerful, oppressed actor wishes for the situation to be different, they will need to begin the process by altering their performance in such a way that the more powerful will need to modify their performance as well.

For example, members of the Puerto Rican community recognized that they needed to take action to stop their neighborhood's gentrification. The real estate companies were making a profit and had few connections with the neighborhood or its residents, so they had no motivation to change the way they were doing business. After the community began its internal change process, it developed the ability to initiate change in its social relationship with the companies. Responding to the community's new pattern of interaction, the companies re-evaluated their situation and decided that it was in their interest to work collaboratively on some projects rather than

fight. Although the new relationship is still undergoing change, community members are happy to have a measure of control in their neighborhood's direction.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that many social work clients will have difficulty initiating this process and will benefit from support and guidance as they begin. The models of consciousness-raising and empowerment practice described earlier have emphasized the importance of group work in providing support and facilitating critical consciousness, and applying structuration theory does not change this emphasis. Structuration does, however, suggest that the group's focus should be identifying oppressive social relationships and devising ways to change them, rather than identifying the outside oppressor and developing ways of overcoming that oppressor. An ideal group environment would ease the stigma and shame that often accompany oppression, serve as a forum for exploring actors' social performances, and provide encouragement and support as group members pursue more equitable relationships. Advocacy organizations may be able to initiate change in oppressive social practices for the most vulnerable client groups who are less able to engage in this work on their own.

Limitations

Blaming possibility

A primary concern when applying structuration theory to social work and critical consciousness is that if taken to its logical conclusion, the theory can be used to blame people for the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves. If every person is a knowledgeable agent who "could have done otherwise," how is society to respond to people who are poor, homeless, unemployed or underemployed? Welfare policies in Britain and the United States were transformed through the Third Way, Giddens' most fully developed application of structuration theory (1994a, 1994b, 1998). The Third Way argues for a participatory democracy that would be dialogically created by society's individuals and groups. The constructed democracy would be situated between left and right political traditions and bestow both rights and responsibilities

upon its citizens. Britain and the United States have been quick to embrace personal responsibility (grounded in Giddens' description of the knowledgeable agent), but less willing to consider citizens' right to employment, housing, and a minimum standard of living. If structuration is to be a viable theoretical tool for social work, the profession will need to fully address structuration's association with Third Way politics and press for adequate emphasis upon the rights portion of the right/responsibilities equation. An additional strategy for social work may be to develop new practice models utilizing the alternative conceptualization of critical consciousness. Grounded in a commitment to social justice and informed by a deep understanding of the challenges oppressed people face, it will be important that these practice models strike a balance between agency as opportunity and agency as responsibility.

Privilege and disadvantage

A related concern is that structuration theory does not more explicitly address the problem of entrenched privilege and disadvantage. Although Giddens (1984) acknowledges that access to knowledge and opportunity varies with social location, and that social location may be affected by discrimination and power, he does not offer a solution to this problem. Garrett (2004) attributes this to Giddens' reluctance to recognize that social class is an influential, if often unacknowledged force in industrial societies. Gledhill (2001) joins Garrett in observing that the restricted range of choices available to society's less powerful members is only narrowly acknowledged by Giddens and the political elite to whom he provides consultation. Structuration's foundational concept is the knowledgeable agent who can always choose to do otherwise, but it is unclear how this notion of agency can be applied fully to agents with significantly limited choice or no choice at all. While a choice made from a limited range of options is still a choice, it is not as satisfying or powerful as a choice made from a wider range of options. For example, two 18-year-olds, one from a low income family and poorly financed schools and one from an upper middle class family and high quality schools (and perhaps private schools) may both choose which career to enter, but their range of choices and actual degree of agency

differ significantly. People whose social identities place them in a position of relative disadvantage are of special concern to the social work profession. Structuration theory needs to more fully account for the lives of these populations and the lack of agency they experience.

Conclusion

Structuration theory has strong concepts that would seem to have potential for positively influencing social work theory and practice, and yet it has been utilized very little. It is significant that Kondrat (1999, 2002), Stoddard (1992), and Tannenber (2005), the only American researchers to apply structuration to social work, have not published further in this area. It could be that although the approaches they explored seemed to hold promise in the abstract, they did not easily translate to practice situations.

Another possible reason for structuration's lack of purchase in the social work literature may be that it has been overshadowed by Giddens' writing in his Third Way political philosophy. The Third Way has been viewed negatively by welfare state advocates (Garrett, 2003, 2004; Gledhill, 2001), especially following its use in radically restructuring the welfare systems of the United States and Britain. Perhaps, by association, structuration is perceived as an instrument of neo-liberal politics instead of a useful practice theory.

By considering how recursive social practices and the expanded understanding of agency can be used to change oppressive social relationships, structuration can be distanced from Third Way philosophy and politics and seen as a tool for thinking more expansively about social work. It is a framework social workers can use to develop an integrated, holistic form of practice that focuses on all dimensions of their clients' lives. Utilizing structuration theory, community-oriented social workers may be reminded of the importance of attending to the inner lives of the people involved in community organizing and development activities, and clinically-oriented social workers may be more attuned to the political and social implications of their clients' intrapsychic and interpersonal troubles. Giddens' effort to mediate the agency/structure

debate in sociology gives the social work profession a tool to overcome our micro/macro practice division.

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