Class Activist Lens for Teaching about Poverty

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The mission of social work is to serve the poor and oppressed and engage in social reform. This article proposes a conceptual framework, and teaching and practice strategies to equip students to understand poverty from a class perspective. The action component is to politicize practice and become allies with the poor in resisting injustice and promoting their social and economic development.

Key Words: Poverty, Classism, Social Change, Activism, Human Rights, Economic Justice, Development

Introduction:
Charity vs. Development

The nature of charity forgoes an egalitarian relationship between the giver and the receiver. The power is unequal in that the giver is voluntarily deciding whether to give, how much, to whom, how often and under what conditions. The giver deems who is worthy and deserving of receiving their largesse. There is a notion of the receiver's dependency, neediness and perhaps inferiority on the part of those providing the charity. Donors are regarded as having higher status and can relish in their good feelings of being altruistic (Trattner, 1989; Tropman, 1979). The conservative political paradigm proposes that people are responsible for their own fate and that they should be coerced to look after themselves; thus they must take responsibility for their own lives and be grateful for whatever charity

may be bestowed upon them (Mullaly, 2007). The "culture of poverty" theory proposes that the poor are the cause of their own problems. Consequently, systemic change is unnecessary. In contrast to the culture of poverty theory and charity perspective, this manuscript focuses on the theme of development. Development entails a more egalitarian relationship between social workers and those who have been disadvantaged because it suggests mutual respect and joint efforts between the "givers" and "receivers." Development involves recognition of systemic forces that exploit and oppress population groups and the responsibility to make changes in these institutionalized forces (Dominelli, 1997; Midgley, 1997). The class activist framework presented in this article is founded on these ideas of development. Social work students and persons living in poverty, who gain greater awareness of macro factors maintaining poverty, will see the need for socio-economic development to occur and will be motivated to improve the quality of life of the poor. Social work students with this developmental perspective will learn to acknowledge the expertise of persons trapped in poverty, inspire hope in the possibility of change, and strategize with them about how to redistribute and develop resources, power and opportunities.

Need for a Class Activist Framework

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics declares that social workers need to "engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully" (NASW, 1996, p. 27). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandates a competency for students to advance human rights and social and economic justice (CSWE, 2015). Clearly, social work has a mission to serve poor and oppressed people.

Social workers regard external factors as the primary causes of poverty (Bullock, 2004). Nevertheless, they also give credence to psychological and moral issues (Robinson, 2011). Reeser and Weinger (2012) found that students who support structural solutions for poverty hold biases about the poor, including a

belief in a culture of poverty. Students agreed that counseling is a route to poverty reduction.

The social work profession needs to prepare students to fulfill its mission. Social work literature critiques individual models of practice and calls us to move towards a structural model. Yet very few articles recommend how to add this to the curriculum (Fisher & Karger, 1997; Gasker, 2003). One article provides a "poverty awareness" framework for practice, but does not include social change principles nor methods for teaching about working with low-income clients (Krumer-Nevo, Weiss-Gal, & Monnickendam, 2009).

Schools have a mixed record when it comes to teaching about poverty. Some studies show that social work education influences students to attribute structural causes to poverty (Clark, 2007; Weaver & Yun, 2011). However, many students change from their initial desire to work with the poor to a preference for higher income clients by graduation (Limb & Organista, 2006). A study of Catholic MSW programs found a lack of reference to issues of poverty and low-income clients in syllabi (Pryce, 2010). In another study, this lack of content was found in Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) (Lehning, Vu, & Pintak, 2007).

Social work curricula emphasize diversity but may overlook the significance of classism (Pryce, 2010). When diversity is regarded as multiculturalism, it is likely to lead to a focus on culture and by extension the "culture of poverty," in spite of scholarly evidence that debunks the "culture of poverty theory" (Faver, Cavazos, & Trachte, 2005). Popular books that tout this theory are used as texts in some schools of social work (Osei-Kofi, 2005). Due to these gaps in social work education, the literature suggests helping students to overcome their biases and learn strategies suitable for low-income clients (Gasker, 2003; Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009; Staudy, 2011).

This article proposes a conceptual framework, methods for teaching about classism, and collaborative strategies for working with low-income clients. It is an "aware, reflect and act" paradigm (Abram, Slosar, & Walls, 2005; Freire, 1968). The framework should enable students to critically examine the societal construction of class, reflect about their personal biases and ideological perspectives, and discover their visions for a just society. It will allow them to share experiences and dialogue with

low-income people to acquire an awareness of everyday realities of poverty. A key principle of the framework is to place macro contextualization at the base of all social work practice (Fisher & Karger, 1997). A study of the use of power, its inequities, and methods to change the distribution of power is fundamental. The action component is to politicize practice and become allies with the poor in resisting injustice. Students should be critical co-investigators with the teacher and persons living in poverty to expand their knowledge, and rename reality according to their experience (Freire, 1968). New models for internships, social change projects and a community encounter are suggested.

Principles for Class Activism

Environmental forces. We must provide students with a conceptual grounding so that they can analyze the environmental forces in the lives of their clients that serve as barriers to improving their quality of life and entrap them in poverty. It is important to expose students to policies and practices that lead to structural inequality, leaving some people bereft of resources and those at the top of the wealth distribution enriched. For example, the policy of devolution entails the federal government delegating spending power to state and local governments, allowing them to by-pass federal standards and decide whether to decrease resources and services for low-income persons (Jansson, 2017).

Culture of poverty theory. The culture of poverty theory helps us understand the prejudices against those with severely limited resources. Proponents and critics of this theory include Payne & Krabill (2002), Payne (1995) and Gorski (2006). The culture of poverty blames the victim and absolves society from any responsibility for ameliorating poverty. It portrays those with low income as being deficient and carrying this deficiency through the generations. The implications are that individuals and families need to change, not that society needs to redistribute resources, reform the tax system and provide liveable wages. In addition to theoretical instruction, poverty simulation exercises could expand students' understanding of what it is like to be poor and challenge them to recognize barriers to class mobility.

Philosophical approaches and theories of justice. Students need to engage in critical analysis before they are able to formulate their vision of a just society and engage in social change. This vision will provide professional goals to strive toward and the passion to direct their energies. Theories of justice, such as Rawls (1971), would permit students to consider how they would distribute resources. Rawls' theory asks what we would consider a fair and just distribution of resources if we were poor. Utilitarianism, in turn, proposes that we should assess consequences of actions based on the greatest good for the greatest number of people. As an alternative philosophical position, deontology (Friedrich, 1949), espouses that there are certain universal rules we need to follow since everyone needs to be respected, no matter what the consequences are for the majority of people. This and other philosophical approaches and theories can help students use critical thinking skills to develop their vision about what is fair and just in structuring society and distributing resources.

An experiential exercise to help students think about fairness and justice in the distribution of resources involves assigning students to groups and providing some groups with abundant resources, others with average resources, and others with hardly any resources. They are asked to complete a project and those who complete it first are labeled "winners." A little more time is allowed until more people can complete the project, and those who finish last are labeled "losers." Then students can dialogue about how resources are distributed in society at large and what is just and unjust, e.g., affirmative action policies.

Critical analysis of power. Students learn how the concentration of wealth allows the few to have inordinate power to set policies and structure the economic and political systems. The intersection of wealth and power in the political system creates a power elite that excludes the vast majority of the population. Students examine the policies, practices and political processes that stratify society, disadvantaging middle and low-income people and bestowing major advantages on the 1% (e.g., union busting, inequitable income tax structure, the personhood status of corporations, gentrification and Citizens vs. United). As a result, the rest of the population often feels powerless and fatalistic about changing the system. This critical analysis helps students appreciate the roots of the oppression of low-income

people. The rich can exclude low-income people from having any influence, even to the extent of disallowing their vote and invalidating democracy. In 2013, the Supreme Court eliminated the formula which mandated that states with a historical record of voter discrimination to be monitored by the federal government to be in compliance with equal voting rights (Caldwell, 2015). This law favors those who wish to lessen the voting power of the poor and persons of color, hence increasing the power of the wealthy. Experiential scenarios of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal & McBride, 1979) can help students visualize and symbolize misappropriation of power and give students an opening to step in, break up that power, and redistribute influence more equitably. Students see the oppression up close and see themselves as actors capable of creating change.

Historical perspective. A historical perspective enables students to have a contextual view of the treatment of the poor, the successful and unsuccessful attempts to ameliorate or eliminate their hardships, and the barriers and strategies used by those with a vested interest in perpetuating poverty. The adoption in England of the 1601 Poor Laws led to greater community responsibility and pejorative labeling. Our treatment of the poor has varied from forcing low-income people into poorhouses (Day & Schiele, 2013), to the War on Poverty effort to give low-income people money directly from the government to decide for themselves how to solve problems related to poverty. Students study the history of social movements, legislative reforms, and social action efforts. Social movements may include unionization, particularly the Rank and File movement led by the social worker Bertha Capen Reynolds (Reisch & Andrews, 2002). The Occupy Wall Street movement sought to raise consciousness about the inequality in society (VanGelder & Staff of Yes! Magazine, 2011). The Kensington Welfare Rights Organization focused on raising awareness, engaging in subversive action (e.g., taking over abandoned housing), and developed a poor people's university to educate leaders to end poverty (VanWormer, 2004). Legislative reforms during the Great Depression such as Social Security, reduced poverty dramatically (DeWitt, 2010). Past and current social movements, social actions and reforms can help students see that decreasing poverty is realistic and that we can learn from the past to set directions for future change.

In addition, students could learn about the struggle of the social work profession over focusing on service provision or on becoming a political force in the country. Studying the Code of Ethics would reveal the social work profession's aspirations to engage in social and political change domestically and globally. It demonstrates the unique paradigm of social work, the person-in-environment framework.

Political practice. Political practice requires an understanding that the oppression of individuals, families and groups is rooted in the societal context and requires critical analysis and actions to change the status quo. This type of practice does not necessarily require engaging in political activities with the government, such as voting or working in elections. It requires engaging in policy-sensitive practice (understanding how policies or lack of policies impact people) or policy-related practice (advocating for clients under the existing policies) or policy practice (developing, proposing, or seeking changes in policy), or any combination of the three (Jansson, 2014). For students concentrating in clinical work, it may mean sensitizing clients to the injustices of policies and empowering them to engage with others to create change.

Students analyze the interventions, policies and practices of their internship and work settings, for their potential to reinforce or challenge oppressive systems. In turn, they learn strategies to challenge systems that are insensitive to the needs of the people they serve. It is important to sensitize students to the need of balancing meeting clients' needs with working for systemic change to better meet those needs.

Personal is political. Students, by reflecting on their own lives, can recognize how they have been influenced by the socio-economic-political context and the privileges and/or sanctions/barriers incumbent upon their status. By analyzing the environmental context of their own lives, they are better able to directly understand the impact on their own lives and that of their clients. The dialectical relationship between people and society is explored to assess the influences that community/society has on us and the impacts that people can and have had on it. This dialectical process can be shared with clients to help them feel more powerful and see their problems as societal issues. The woman's movement serves as a powerful example of

consciousness-raising that assessed the given "reality" and re-
placed it with a reality more true to women's own experiences.
This renaming led to actions creating greater equality for wom-
en (Bricker-Jenkins, Gottlieb, & Hooyman, 1991).

Reflection/Action. Students' consciousness is raised by study-
ing theories of poverty and justice, the historical context in the
U.S. and in other countries, and the principle that the personal
is political. This heightened consciousness enables students to
examine the current meta-messages and so-called reality. The
often harsh light shed on what is actually occurring creates a
desire to be a catalyst for change. The goal is to link reflection
and action (praxis). For example, consider the culture of pover-
ty theory that stresses the immutability of poverty and places
blame on low-income people for their plight. Students whose
consciousness is raised recognize these myths and are more
prepared to assist clients to debunk these assumptions and
deal with their internalized oppression. Just as students become
aware of the larger picture and take action, similarly a parallel
process may occur for clients. Students may then assist clients
to associate with or form action groups of like-minded people
to channel their awareness and anger into action.

People power to create change. Students learn that their clients
(and they themselves) can bring about change through collec-
tive action. Conventional wisdom says that ordinary people
must persuade those with formal decision-making power to
make change. However, for progressive change to occur, it may
need to come from the bottom up, with ordinary people chal-
lenging and resisting the ideas and actions of "leaders." It is
empowering to provide examples of people power in the United
States and globally so that students do not despair, mistaken-
ly believing that they and their clients are powerless to bring
about change. Examples from history and current affairs can
help to illustrate this to students (e.g., deposing Marcos in the
Philippines, overturning apartheid in South Africa, passing
the Americans with Disabilities Act, the civil rights movement,
the passage of the Violence against Women Act). A list of local
people without formal authority who are making a difference
in their own community could be provided to students who
would then choose one to interview. From these natural lead-
ers, students could learn what they have done and the length of
time it has taken to accomplish their goals.

Strategizing to democratize power. Students identify groups in power, the strategies they use to stay in power, and what can be done to redistribute power among the population. The studying of social movements is an excellent way to inform students how to get their ideas on the public agenda, delegitimize existing pronouncements from power-holders, reframe the debate, and persuade the public that alternative ideas are more in line with the best values of the country than are those of the power holders (Moyers, 1990). For example, the "right to work" is a misnomer, obfuscating that it is really about busting unions rather than workers' rights. Once students can see through deceptions such as this one, they can provide the facts to refute the arguments and compose alternative proposals. The strategy would be to take back the values of security and family well-being that the other side is falsely claiming to uphold and show that their own ideas truly protect workers' rights.

Debunking powerlessness. Students need to believe in their own efficacy in order to bring about social change. Lerner (1986) created the concept of "surplus powerlessness," to explain people's feelings and beliefs that they have much less power than they actually have. They act on the basis of that belief and create a self-fulfilling prophecy that no matter what they do, they cannot effect change. For this reason, they believe they should not try. Lerner (1986) states that we learn from a young age and throughout our lives that we need to obey authority and do what we are told to do. If we are idealistic, we risk being chided for naiveté and immaturity. The authority structure is maintained by teaching values of being a team player (i.e., not going outside the standards or group norms), not rocking the boat if you want to be successful, and minding your own business. Students could reflect upon how they have internalized these messages to follow authority and conform to cultural norms. They can do critical self-reflection to determine when such conformity is necessary for their own and the collective well–being and when it is not. They can also reflect the payoffs of powerlessness for themselves (e.g., unaccountability and lack of responsibility for one's own choices and inaction in the face of injustice). Students could also respond to such questions as, "When have you ever challenged someone in authority who was committing an injustice against someone else?" "How have you ever stood up to people who are making a prejudicial joke?" Alternatively, they

could perform role-plays about how they would respond to an unjust situation.

Community Encounter

Students need to build relationships with people living in poverty to be comfortable in their presence, appreciate their humanity and multidimensionality, and develop a strong commitment to fight the ravages of poverty. Students need more than knowledge about the structural causes of poverty to make a commitment to work with and for persons living in poverty. They can read about poverty and understand the dynamics of inequality and still unconsciously hold on to myths about those who are poor. Personal encounters, direct exchanges, and hearing the stories of real people struggling to survive help students internalize the injustice of being poor in America and empathize with their plight. We propose a one- to two-week long encounter that orients students to the hardships of people living in poverty. Below are some options for encounters with low-income people.

- Students would go into middle and high school class-rooms in public or charter schools and tell students about the profession of social work. Then they could engage in a dialogue to elicit students' dreams for themselves and their communities, asking such questions as, "What do you want to be or to do when you are older? What would help you to achieve your dream? What might be the barriers? What do you think should be improved in your community and how could that happen? Do you know people in your community who could make these things happen?"

- Go to neighborhood centers and mill about casually seeking out conversations with diverse people and volunteering or participating in activity groups. Students can share what they are studying, why they are in the neighborhood, and their motivations for going into social work. Students need to open up a dialogue and not carry out "interviews."

- Dialogue with homeless persons who are in the library, park, fast-food restaurants, agencies that provide emergency

services, drop-in centers, and/or shelters. Students need to figure out an entry to talk to someone who is homeless, perhaps inviting the person to have a cup of coffee or a meal.

- Contact a neighborhood worker or center director to help organize a story-telling event in a park or other venue. Both students and persons living in poverty could tell a story related to their own lives without passing judgment or asking intrusive questions.

- Go up to a person who is homeless, carrying a sign and strike up a conversation about their sign. Bring a couple of signs and discuss that if you were homeless you would think of carrying these signs. Then ask the homeless person what they think of your signs. If the person appreciates the signs, the student could offer the signs to him/her. This idea is adapted from a documentary in which the filmmaker portrayed this activity (Bogusky, 2012).

Social Change Projects

Requiring students to do a social change project would allow application of the principles for class activism and fulfillment of EPAS competencies prescribed by CSWE (2015). The proposed social change projects involve more than case advocacy. They require engaging in political practice geared toward removing barriers to human rights and promoting quality of life. They necessitate reflection about the structural roots of problems followed by action to decrease injustice.

Social change projects may take place in field placements, but could also be carried out through masters or honors theses, independent studies, and a sequence of coursework such as research and policy. Below are examples of possible social change projects.

- Develop a poor peoples' conference to raise consciousness about poverty from the experts who live it themselves. Students in tandem with low-income persons, and in collaboration with faculty and possibly field instructors, could institute a conference in which people who live in poverty tell their stories and give their ideas about poverty eradication.

Low-income people are the key presenters to teach social work practitioners, community members, students and faculty about poverty and their visions for change.

• Work with organizations in low-income neighborhoods to show films illustrating neighborhood actions to fight poverty, as a precursor to discussing what community members wish to do for their own locality. Films such as "Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street" can be used as a vehicle to create hope and motivation about the possibilities for social change (Lipman, 1996). Students would work with these neighbors to select which issues to work on and collaboratively implement strategies for change.

• Students could survey low-income residents of a community to discover their strengths, abilities, and those of the local organizations according to "assets-based" community organizing methods (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1990). To gain information and engage neighbors, students would do door-to-door canvassing. The goal would be to put all this information in a "community bank," so that they can match people's needs with the resources and expertise available in the community. This could create and strengthen bonds between members of the community and the institutions located there. Although this self-help organizing might not seem like social action, a stronger community can be more easily mobilized and empowered to act for change.

• Students could survey social workers to determine the unmet needs of their clients. A group of clients with similar needs for services and resources could be invited to come together to discuss their perspectives about unmet needs, barriers and injustices preventing these needs from being met, and visions for themselves and their community. From these student-facilitated discussions, participants' consciousness may be raised about the realities they face and lead them into constructive action to create social change.

Field Practicum Projects

Principles of class activism can be applied in field education sites. We must go beyond teaching principles and make sure they are internalized by the students. Students who know the causes and solutions to poverty, but do not implement strategies for change, may end up feeling incapable and powerless. The acquired knowledge and values will not fully prepare them to engage in activism. For this reason, it is unlikely that they will become activists after they graduate. We must provide field placement experiences to students that prepare them to engage in social and political action, consistent with the expectations of the social work code of ethics.

We need to have new models for field placements. Right now many schools are split between direct practice and macro course work and field placements are similarly divided. We propose that both micro and macro concentrations need a macro contextualization of people's issues. This means a critical analysis of power, including social and economic forces that are central to people's problems, e.g., C. Wright Mills' statement that most people's problems are labeled as their "private troubles" rather than "public issues" (Mills, 1959).

Many agencies focus on providing micro-services to individuals, groups and families. Hence, we need to reform field placements so that even micro tracked students spend approximately half of the time in field helping clients see their true power in the social economic context. Field coordinators and faculty liaisons need to prepare field instructors and students to develop the macro change component of field practice. The field coordinator could work with field instructors to encourage them to brainstorm about macro activities that could be helpful to their clients and community. Field liaisons in their seminars should prepare for direct practice students to integrate the micro and macro components of practice. It cannot be assumed that macro students engage in activism in their field practicum or in their employing organizations serving low-income clients. Thus, students need guidance about politicizing practice so they can use their leadership and administrative skills on behalf of clients, rather than maintaining the agency's status quo.

The following are possible field projects that can be incorporated into micro or macro field placements to politicize practice in an effort to create social change. Part of the field projects can be carried out in the classroom and other parts in the internship.

- Engage in community based participatory research. A macro field placement in an advocacy research agency, such as the Michigan League for Public Policy, may focus on a research project conducted by providers and users of services. A research committee of providers and service users could meet regularly to learn about appropriate research methodologies for investigating poverty and about firsthand knowledge of the realities of poverty. Out of these meetings could come strategies of how to study poverty that would combine tough realities with academic knowledge. In such a project undertaken by Jacobson, Pruitt-Chapin and Rugeley (2009) the research committee decided to have two separate focus groups, one with persons living in poverty and another with providers; however, persons living in poverty were the facilitators for both groups. Ideas from each group were shared, resulting in a reconceptualization of poverty, mutual understanding about the barriers that persons living in poverty and service providers confront, and innovative solutions for poverty.

- Students who work in direct service could add a project outside of their direct service responsibilities that may have positive influence on the societal context for their clients (Beasley & Hager, 2014). Students, in tandem with the clients, could develop a creative art project aimed at raising consciousness to counter stereotypical poverty identities, as well as any other stigmatized identities that relate to the clients' reasons for seeking services. This project could involve varied art forms such as theater, art murals, individual art projects, storytelling, or performing music. For example, there could be an exhibition of drawings and the artists or other community members could tell their stories that connect to the art. This art and commentary could reflect their struggles, realities, strengths, and visions of their future and that of the community. To have political impact, the audience would include political leaders at various levels and

journalists from traditional media outlets. The community members and clients could use social media, such as twitter, to give an accounting of the event.

- Direct practice students may offer consciousness-raising groups to clients with the intent to have an action component addressing the issues raised. The nature of the group would be one in which, in addition to doing individual healing, clients' issues would be politicized (Woodward, 2014). They would realize that their individual problems have roots in the larger socioeconomic political system. Ultimately, their awareness would lead them to actions addressing structural forces that oppress them. They could develop a feeling of efficacy and hope by channeling their grief and frustrations into actions to bring about social change.

- Field students could receive special instruction in financial literacy delivered through a community workshop or the university. With this knowledge, they can offer instruction to clients in their practicum. Clients can learn about exploitive business practices such as payday lenders and credit card companies. In addition, they can learn how to open up a savings and checking account, etc. In one study, survivors of domestic violence felt more empowered by such training than they did from receiving welfare benefits (Heitling & Postmus, 2014).

- An advocacy program could be developed in practicum sites so that clients and community residents could learn advocacy skills. This training could be geared toward a specific issue or organization about which community members have concerns. For example, in a low income area, field students could help parents learn to advocate with the school system to be more responsive to their children and the concerns of the parents, and provide an education more equal to what students in higher income neighborhoods receive.

Conclusion

We need to be aware that inequality is at a highpoint. For this reason, we must raise consciousness about the existing

class struggle. Class blindness disguises this struggle and makes the American dream seem real for everyone. This distorted thinking can influence social workers to collude with the few in power by helping clients cope with the oppressive system rather than working to change it to improve the quality of life for all. The framework presented in this article acknowledges the political nature of social work practice and confronts the powerlessness that students feel in their ability to effect change.

Even though this framework concentrates on students during their social work programs, practitioners may also benefit by augmenting their education in regard to working with low income people and recognizing the need for social workers to engage in political struggle. Continuing education requirements for licensing should require hours of training in understanding poverty, working with low-income populations, and applying social action strategies. This would help change our profession's priorities.

The framework takes seriously the aspirations expressed in the NASW Code of Ethics for social workers to engage in social and political action to remove exploitation and oppression. The knowledge and skills that students receive via the classroom, community encounters, social change projects and field practica will equip them to do this. They will embrace being political actors and direct service providers or administrators as an integral part of their professional identity. Consequently, they will feel empowered to confront injustice because they have already practiced it in their formal education.

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