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TOWARD A RADICAL REASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL WORK VALUES

By

Shimon S. Gottschalk

SYNOPSIS

Social Work's inherited statements of core values are excessively individualistic and politically conservative, posing a false dichotomy of individual versus society. "Maximizing individual opportunities for self expression", is criticized as an outdated, if not dangerous value stance. An alternative position is suggested which sets as the valued aim of all social work practice the enhancement within and among individuals and society of the capacity for sharing and reciprocity. The promotion of a just society and of individual well being are viewed as being inextricably intertwined.

The origins of American social work are to be traced to the Western, predominantly liberal-bourgeois traditions and aspirations of the late nineteenth, and early twentieth century. Social work has grown, and in many ways prospered under this banner. But the society and the world within which Social Workers practice is changing rapidly. Thus, the liberalism of yesteryear may quickly be transformed into the conservativism of today - by means of the simple process of non-change.

This paper is a first effort, a preliminary reexamination of some of the traditions upon which contemporary social work practice theory is built. Its aim is to reinterpret this tradition in the light of insights which, in this latter part of the twentieth century, might be denoted as emerging from a "new-liberal", i.e., a radical perspective. It will conclude with a suggested reformulation of the inherited core values of social work.

By radical is meant, quite simply, a perspective which is committed to the reexamination of the roots, the fundamental assumptions, the inherited wisdom of the past. The purpose is not necessarily to destroy or undermine existing institutions, but rather to critically reevaluate them and to reinterpret them without deference to prevailing arrangements of power and privilege, in order that they may more fully meet the demands of a new era.

The emphasis is on values because social work has constantly viewed itself as a value based profession. Social workers are the "professional altruists", committed to doing "the good", not merely the feasible.
Social work is a profession of "humanitarianism in action".⁠¹ Everything social workers do as professional persons is, ideally speaking, reconcilable with a basic value stance.

Values are criteria for preference or choice. They are judgements, conceptions of desirable states of affairs which serve to justify proposed or actual behavior. As such, the truth or falsehood of a particular value stance is not subject to empirical research. Values are not to be confused with ethics. Ethics deals with standards of behavior or action in relation to others. Ethics tends to be more particularistic than values, applying to specific relationships at specific times, e.g. the relationship between men and women, or workers and clients. Ethics is based, in part, upon values, and it is subsidiary to them. Values, by contrast, involve judgments of ultimate concern which remain unmodified by specific circumstances.

The Core Values of Social Work

During the last twenty years, a number of attempts have been made within the social work profession to identify, if not codify, a statement of core values. In the Working Definition of Social Work Practice of 1958, under the heading of values, one central statement stands forth: "the individual is the primary concern of this society".⁠² As William E. Gordon, in his Critique of the Working Definition, indicated, the other value-related statements included in the Working Definition, do not, strictly speaking, constitute value judgements.⁠³ Gordon subsequently offered the following alternative formulation:

"It is good and desirable for man to fulfill his potential, to realize himself, and to balance this with essentially equal effort to help others to fulfill their capacities and realize themselves."⁠⁴

An international seminar on values sponsored by the Council of Social Work Education in Honolulu, in 1966, came to a somewhat similar conclusion. The participants agreed upon a pair of statements each of which is expressed in the form of a balance:

"1. The worth and dignity of the individual as related to the well being and integrity of the group:

2. The progress and development of the individual and society, as related to the security of the individual and society."⁠⁵

Gunnar Myrdal, in his keynote address to the 14th International Congress of Schools of Social Work in 1968, suggested as a core statement of values, the universality of the "quest for social and economic equality
as the sovereign ideal of all major religions and philosophies." The International Congress, which was largely oriented toward the discussion of the theme of social work values, did not fully agree with Myrdal's statement. Many of the participants felt that this view of basic values was too materialistic; it did not sufficiently take into account spiritual values, such as human dignity and worth.

The United States report to this same International Congress, prepared by Mary J. McCormick, after reviewing a variety of viewpoints and issues, concluded that, "assuring to every human being the opportunity to attain his maximum potential... represents the consolidation of all values - from personal worth to self-determination; from freedom to social experience and social responsibility."

These are only a few of the statements which have emerged during the past two decades around the issue of core values of the social work profession. Of course there are others, such as the statement suggested by, Objectives of the Social Curriculum of the Future and the introduction to Goals of Public Social Policy and the first paragraph of NASW Code of Ethics.

What Seems to Be the Problem?

Reviewing these statements and the discussions which accompany them is somewhat like experiencing a baptism that does not cleanse. We are left with the feeling that personal intuition and conscience remain our primary guide to action. There are too many unresolved problems, among them the following:

1. If Social Work values need to be expressed in terms of a balance between individual and societal needs, then what is the principle in terms of which this balance is to be adjudicated? What are the indicators? What are the weights? In short, in a particular situation, how does one decide between individual good and the good of society?

2. There is elegance in a single economical statement of basic values such as McCormick's idea of opportunity to attain maximum individual potential. The advantage of such a unitary statement lies in the fact that one need not be concerned with issues of priority or of balance. All of the values are presumably subservient to, and derivable from this one. But are they? Does this not simply shift the burden of the question of priorities among values, e.g., the contest between freedom and security, to a different level of analysis?

3. To what degree can and should Social Work values coincide
with the values of the society at large? Werner Boehm, one of the grand architects of the social work curriculum, suggested that the coincidence between the two is not, and cannot be complete. If there are such differences, then what are the principles which underlie the distinction? Or more specifically, under what circumstances can and should Social Workers serve as agents of social control, and under what circumstances shall they act as agents of social change?

4. Of special importance to social workers is the issue of value dissensus between clients and workers. What shall the social worker do when there is value dissensus between him/her self and the client system? This question which gnaws at the very root of the theory of advocacy is not resolved by existing statements of core values. All professions appear to agree that public interest and client interest must regularly precede the interest of the particular profession and of the individual practitioner. But what shall the professional social worker do when he is convinced that what the client wants is wrong, that the client is preparing to act contrary to his (i.e., the worker's) core system of values?

5. What is the significance of values as related to other components of professional practice? For example, which has priority, commitment to social work values, or commitment to knowledge? There are some within the profession, such as Nathan Cohen, who consider values as the fountainhead and root of all practice. Others, such as Specht, appear not to agree. The latter considers an over-concern with issues of social justice to be one of the major threats to the survival of the profession. According to this view, the core of professionalism is not a set of values but specific, finely tuned practice skills.

6. On the day to day level social workers continually face conflicts between practical expediency and principle. Are principled values to serve as the primary criteria for all their actions, or shall the perceived institutional interests of the system they serve (i.e., agencies, professional associations, or society as a whole) be their primary professional guide?

The several issues which have been raised above are largely formal in nature; they deal more nearly with the structure and the internal logic of the statements of core values than with their substantive content. We make mention of them here without laying claim to the hope that they can all be satisfactorily resolved in the discussion which follows.
Individualism Revisited

Having identified some of the formal problems associated with the inherited statements of core values, let us now turn more specifically to a discussion of their substance.

On the whole these statements are highly person centered: the individual is the focus and society serves as the backdrop. Whereas the emphases differ, we repeatedly sense that, implicit within these statements is a view of the individual versus society. This is assumed to be the fundamental contest of life and the aim lies in discovering an acceptable but difficult balance.

Now this is a uniquely capitalistic conception of person and society, scarcely at variance with the views of persons historically as far apart as Adam Smith and Milton Freedman. Each individual is assumed to be in competition with all others and the collectivity exists primarily in order to assure and secure individual rights. The good life is a life of independence and self-sufficiency. The goal of social welfare within such a society is to encourage, promote, maximize self-sufficiency. It is often naively assumed that the sum of individual goods constitutes the good of the whole.

The idea of a dichotomy between the individual and society derives ample support from major traditions within the social sciences. Functionalism appears to have placed a greater emphasis upon society, its institutions, and their need for integration. By contrast, existentialist theory has stressed individualism. But in both traditions the issues are usually expressed in terms of a dualistic struggle.

For example, Talcott Parsons and his followers point to the contest between integration and adaptation. Philip Lichtenberg suggests that this dichotomy is implicit in most contemporary psychoanalytic theories: outer reality is usually viewed as a source of frustrations calling for the renunciation of individual, anti-social tendencies. Similarly, the currently dominant strain in political theory represented by Banfield, Dahl, Lindblom, and others suggests that the public interest is a resultant emerging from the competition of all private interest with each other. Thus, the public interest also competes with every private interest.

Social Workers have rarely challenged the basic value assumptions upon which these contemporary social scientific views are built. They have dismissed out of hand the ideas of turn-of-the-century socialists such as Peter Kropotkin who suggested that the fundamental principle of life and society may well be thought to be cooperation, rather than competition. Instead of having associated itself with this or similar views, the social work profession has increasingly allied itself with theories of competitive individualism, or predominantly system maintaining functionalism, or both.
Thus, social workers have, for example, become champions of equality of opportunity, despite their awareness that in a socially highly stratified society this invariably leads to inequality of outcome. They know that when unequal persons compete, the stronger invariably wins.

The capitalist system and the values which support it have institutionalized a harsh concept of social inequality and the social work profession (though not all social workers) has, in effect, adopted it as its own. Despite all protestations to the contrary, Americans believe in inequality because they assume that this is what makes their system prosper. Social workers in their pragmatic search for legitimacy among established authorities have cooperated; they have not protested this view.

Functional social analysis and its implicit view of the individual versus society, perhaps precisely because of its close parallel with the concept of economic man (sic), is out of tune with many of the basic intuitions of social work practice. Social workers are intimately aware of the destructiveness of excessive individualism. Equally, though perhaps more subtly, they are aware that the most significant exchanges between one person and another, or one person and all others are not functional, not contractual, not material. The rules and principles of economics do not apply because love, and hope, and dignity, and creativity are not limited like scarce natural resources: the more love or hope a person is able to give, the more love and hope exists within the world. There is no necessary and inevitable zero-sum game in the primary relationships among human beings. There is no necessary and inevitable conflict between the individual and society because they compete as little as a flower competes with the soil or the bird competes with the sky.

The individualistic value stance is compatible with present social work practice only to the extent that it consists of a social service strategy. As has now been frequently suggested by scholars, the social services constitute in their essence, methods of social control, meeting the interests of established authorities and of the status quo. Within such a context, to do the good is to help maintain the existing order. In short, social services, though motivated by claims to social idealism and liberalism are, in essence, conservative.

But social work, since its beginning around the turn of the century, has had an additional, a broader vision which extends beyond the provision of social services. To the extent that social workers have been sensitive to the brutalities and injustices of our society they have been impelled to act for societal change. The principles which guide their practice are based upon the recognition that the madness is neither entirely in people's heads, nor totally beyond their (the people's) reach because of inexorable laws of politics and society. It would appear that a new statement of core values for the social work profession must be guided by these latter
insights, rather than by an outdated support of individualism.

The new humanism can no longer be equated with individualism, emphasizing the virtues of self-fulfillment, self-expression, and equality of opportunity. Rather, a renewed emphasis must be placed upon the realization that human beings humanize each other, that consciousness, and knowing, and establishing meaning and purpose in life are all necessarily social acts. There is no dichotomy, no conflict between individual and society in those areas which are of most fundamental concern to social work practice. The new vision of core values in social work must proceed from a conception of the individual inseparable from society.24

Not only as agents of social control, or as agents of individual liberation, but primarily as co-workers in the creation of a just society must social workers find their place. Within such a society (as well as within the struggle for such a society) the individual is viewed as both the creator and the created, the actor is both subject and object (e.g., the caseworker is, in part, client), the process is a part of the valued goal. Individual well being is possible only within a just society, and the just society is possible only where individuals are healthy and personally fulfilled.

The Just Society

While we have rejected the view of individual versus society, it is of primary importance that we not make the opposite error, the error of reductionism which assumes their systematic identity. The relationship between individual and society is one of reciprocity, but they are significantly different types of entities to which entirely different concepts of well being apply.

A group is more than a series of individuals; a community is more than a geographically confined collection of organizations; a society is more than a sum of institutions. The whole is always something more, and something different than the sum of its parts. This basic proposition of General Systems Theory lies at the root of the discussion which follows.28

Let us now return to a point alluded to only in passing above. A just society is not simply one that results from the interactional sum of socially functional, or mentally healthy, or of God-fearing, or self-actualized individuals. The revered American tradition which posits the social ideal of "the greatest good for the greatest number" is, in effect, based upon a false reductionist principle. Social work has in error identified with this tradition. As suggested above, the good is defined, "voted" as it were, as the maximization of individual desires, to the extent that these do not conflict with the desires of others. The just
society, according to this view, is a resultant produced by the expression of a multiplicity of individual desires.

There are at least three difficulties which may be associated with this doctrine. First, since the good is defined by the majority, and since the majority is, e.g., white and middle class, it is their good, not other people's good which will be socially defined as the good. Thus, we have the basis for cultural colonialism. Second, the doctrine is missing a distributive principle. Thus, increasing the total quantity of good available within society as a result of the maximization of individual desires does not guarantee that those who are at the bottom of the system will get their fair share. Social workers are, of course, intimately aware of the fact that an increase in national wealth has not automatically lead to a reduction of private poverty (sic). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this doctrine is one which seemingly inevitably blesses the status quo. What is, is just and good. Given this orientation, it is inconceivable that the greatest good for the greatest number might according to some independent standard be considered "no good".

Social workers have been concerned with these problems for many years but their expressions of core values have provided them with little theoretical guidance. But this is the post-Eichmann, and the post-Mylai era. We know that the ethical standards which govern institutions differ in principle, not only in degree, from those which govern individuals. In their own eyes, both Eichmann and Lt. Calley at Mylai were convinced that they were fulfilling the moral imperatives implicit in their assigned roles. Yet there is no court of law that can properly judge the acts of these individuals in isolation, acting as if these were simply corrupt, morally debased individuals. In some sense we must be able to admit that it is the institutions which they served and the societies of which they are a part that are also evil. By the same token, if racism is a social problem then its solution lies not simply in arresting and reeducating the individual racist: somehow the entire society must also be taken to task.

Again we return to the question, what shall be the nature of a just society? Here the work of the philosopher John Rawls in his recent important contribution to moral philosophy, A Theory of Justice, promises to provide major support to the development of a new understanding of social work values. We will touch only on Rawls' major points.

Traditional moral theory distinguishes between the good and the right. For the 19th century Utilitarians such as Mills and Bentham, the good for society is the greatest net balance of satisfactions summed over all the individuals belonging to it. The right is defined as that which maximizes the good. William E. Gordon, in discussing the working Definition of Social Work Practice makes an analogous distinction. He distinguishes between value (the good) and knowledge (the right). For Gordon, values are
"the preferred", and knowledge is "the confirmed". For both Gordon and Utilitarians, the good is defined independently and prior to the right, which is another way of saying that the ends are defined prior to, and independently of the means.

Rawls disagrees with this view. According to his concept of "justice as fairness", the right precedes the good. Thus, the emphasis is on the structure of social institutions and on social processes rather than on the specification of particular goods. A just social system sets limits, it "provides a framework of rights and opportunities and the means of satisfaction within and by the use of which these ends may be equitably pursued." The central problem in specifying the nature of the just society, therefore, is to identify those social structures and processes which will achieve the good, however it is defined.

Rawls proceeds with this task by imagining what he calls the "original position". This constitutes a conceptual scheme wherein a group of rational persons is asked to decide upon the principles of justice from a position of personal neutrality. That is, none of the individuals participating in the decision has prior knowledge of his own, particular position within the social structure. Thus, he is unable to favor himself, or those who are socially allied with him, in making his judgements. Taking this stance, imagining the original position, Rawls arrives at the following key principles:

1. Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.

2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
   a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, and
   b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

By liberty, Rawls means a certain structure of social institutions, a system of rights and duties which guarantee individual freedom and genuine choices. It is important to note that liberty inheres within the social system, not the individual. But liberty has no practical meaning except when it is utilized by individuals exercising their opportunities for free choice. Rawls suggests that the first principle, the principle of liberty, always has priority over the second principle. That is, liberty may never be sacrificed for the sake of equality.

Rawls's theory of justice offers some important advantages over the inherited theories of social justice with which the social work profession has been identified.
1. What is right, what will lead to the good, is not subject to the "vote" of the majority. In other words, there are important limits to relativism.

2. A distributive principle is explicitly included which focuses upon the needs of those who are at the bottom of the social system, those who are least advantaged.

3. Because of its emphasis on the right, rather than on the good, this theory has the potential of relating directly to social work's primary concern with the values implicit in practice, rather than the goals of practice.

The principles of social justice are here suggested within a non-reductionist formulation: the just society is not simply an aggregate of good people who are considerate of each other. The just society does not compete, need to be balanced with, is not subsidiary to individuals and their desires. Especially important for social workers, professional persons oriented toward the facilitation of individual and social change, is the realization that the just society is not necessarily one which is maximally responsive to the desires of the majority. The standards of justice are established independently of the power of majorities - or minorities, for that matter. From a value perspective, the majority can be wrong and the "greatest good for the greatest number" may be "no good."

If this amounts to intellectual elitism, then let us admit it. Indeed, a certain amount of elitism is implicit in all professional practice. All professionals lay claim to knowledge and expertise which is beyond the ken of the majority. What reason is there to be different when it comes to the issue of professional values?

A New Beginning - Not the End

This paper has viewed social work as an expression and an outgrowth of late 19th and early 20th century Western capitalism. It has helped to sustain and expand the capacities for social control of an expanding, materially prosperous social order. In this sense, its success has paralleled the success of the society as a whole. In capitalism, the major emphasis upon individualism has served as an important foundation for both material prosperity and for a unique concept of personal freedom - freedom distinct from liberty and in competition with social responsibility. The social work profession has, in the main, chosen to ally itself with this view.

But our society is changing rapidly. The profession of social work needs to be prepared to confront the problems of a new society in which growth and progress are not inevitable. One of the major tasks imposed upon
social work and all professions is to fathom the impact upon Western consciousness of a non-growth economy. There are other indicators of change. Our society has moved from collective production to an increasing emphasis upon collective consumption as well. Private entrepreneurship has all but given way to corporate enterprise. The government has become the single largest employer. The service society has arrived, in that less than half of the work force is engaged in the production of goods. Less than twenty percent of the work force is engaged in manufacturing.

In the light of these changes we sense the imminent danger that our highly individualistic value system is leading us in the direction of an ever more fragmented social order, a society in which anomie has become the norm and in which social and economic inequalities are highly accentuated. Perhaps even more threatening is the likelihood that this society will quickly lead to the inauguration of greatly regimented, controlled, planfully totally integrated social order.

The alternative towards which we have been groping in this paper is one which attempts to break down familiar conceptual barriers and views the individual as inseparable from his/her society and world. The individual and society are reciprocally intertwined and the health of one demands the welfare of the other. Such a changed value orientation is more likely to serve the new liberalism of the post-modern era.

It is strangely unfashionable to speak in the language of ideals. Yet it is in the essence of any discussion of values that one must reach for idealized conceptualizations. Finally, valued ideals become criteria for decision making and action. Without further apology, therefore, let us suggest, experimentally, a new statement of valued goals for the social work profession:

The central and valued aim of social work practice is the promotion and enhancement within and among individuals and society of the capacity and opportunity for sharing and reciprocity.

The expansion and the sharing of all those most valued goods, such as love, wisdom, mutuality, beauty, dignity, and joy, etc., for which there is no economic market because there is and can be no scarcity, constitutes the essence of all practice relationships.

The capacity to create and share non-economic goods is intimately intertwined with, and contingent upon, the existence of a just social order and just social institutions within which economic goods are shared equally, which maximize liberty, and which are so structured as to champion the interests of the least advantaged in every social situation.
The next, and truly monumental task is to identify, discover, and invent those social and individual therapeutic methods and those institutional forms which derive from, and most nearly give expression to these valued ideals. There is no reason to believe that the task will be easy. The problems are theoretical, scientific, and most importantly, political. . . . But that leads us to an entirely new level of the discussion.

FOOTNOTES


4. Ibid.


18. This is a Western, not simply an American problem. For Simmel, the German Sociologist, Individual versus society was the central issue, The Sociology of George Simmel, Kurt Wolff, ed., New York, Free Press, 1950. It is a key issue for the Theologian Martin Buber, and has been the subject of numerous contemporary analyses of society. One of the more recent and most readable of these is Philip Slater's, The Pursuit of Loneliness, Boston, Beacon, 1970.


22. This does not mean to say that some very basic questions have not been raised, both from within and outside the profession. Among them, Donald Howard, Social Welfare Values - Means and Ends, New York, Random House, 1969; Bertram Gross, "The Benevolent Fascism," Social Policy, November/December 1970; Galper, op. cit.; Lichtenberg, op. cit.; In related areas see Charles Hampden-Turner, Radical Man, New York, Harper, 1971; Robert Heilbroner, "Economics as a Value Free Science," Social Research, 40:1, Spring 1973, pp. 129-143.

23. Peter Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, Boston, Porter Sargeant, republished 1955.

24. As we shall suggest below, equality of opportunity is meaningful only within a context where basic rights are guaranteed, within a social system that institutionally favors those who are least advantaged.

-138-
25. This paragraph is not to be misunderstood to mean that more equal distribution of material wealth is not important. The basic material necessities of life must be satisfied first.


30. These issues are examined in greater detail by Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, New York: Viking, 1963.


32. Rawls, op. cit., p. 31.


34. Rawls, op. cit., p. 31.

35. Ibid., pp. 60, 83.

36. See especially the Introduction to, Goals of Public Social Policy, op. cit.

37. Bertram Gross (op. cit) fears that this will occur with the explicit help of human service professionals.