

Columbia University School of Social Work
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SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:
THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL PLURALISM

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SOCIAL JUSTICE IS CENTRAL TO SOCIAL WORK

- Fundamental facts of human life that are unacceptable to most social workers include:
 - Poverty
 - Lack of equal opportunity
 - Discrimination
 - Lack of political power
 - Subjugation
- Reflected in NASW Code of Ethics, which includes a duty to reject social injustice and to pursue social justice.
- Politically diverse society and profession \Rightarrow alternative conceptions of social justice

TODAY'S CLASS

- What does the NASW Code of Ethics require?
- What arguments are made for the duty to pursue social justice?
- Alternative conceptions of social justice and social welfare
- Human rights as a possible basis for a conception of “social justice” that cuts across diverse political perspectives
- A non-utopian conception of social justice and the resolution of differences
- The need for mutual respect of diverse views

SELECTIONS FROM CODE OF ETHICS

- The Preamble: "The primary mission of the social work profession is to **enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society.** Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.
- **Social workers promote social justice and social change** with and on behalf of clients.
- The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of **core values** ... [which] are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective: service, **social justice**, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence."

SELECTIONS FROM CODE OF ETHICS (2)

- Ethical Principle: "**Social workers challenge social injustice. Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.**"
- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to Clients: "Social workers' primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of clients. ... However, **social workers' responsibility to the larger society or specific legal obligations may on limited occasions supersede the loyalty owed clients....**"

SELECTIONS FROM CODE OF ETHICS (3)

- Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society: 6.01 Social Welfare: "Social workers should **promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments.** Social workers should **advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs** and should **promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.**"
- 6.04 Social and Political Action: "(a) Social workers should **engage in social and political actions** that seek 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.** Social workers should **be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice** and should **advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.**
- (b) Social workers should act to **expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups.**

SELECTIONS FROM CODE OF ETHICS (4)

- Social workers should promote conditions that **encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally**. Social workers should **promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people**.
- Social workers should act to **prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination** against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability."

2 LINES OF ARGUMENT FOR SOCIAL WORKERS' DUTY TO PURSUE SOCIAL JUSTICE

- A Moral Reading of the History of Social Work
- Person-in-Environment Perspective

HISTORICAL ARGUMENT

- Terrible living conditions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries
 - Trattner: "American cities were disorderly, filthy, foul-smelling, disease-ridden places. Narrow, unpaved streets became transformed into quagmires when it rained. Rickety tenements, swarming with unwashed humanity, leaned upon one another for support. Inadequate drainage systems failed to carry away sewage. Pigs roamed streets that were cluttered with manure, years of accumulated garbage, and other litter. Outside privies bordered almost every thoroughfare. Slaughterhouses and fertilizing plants contaminated the air with an indescribable stench. Ancient plagues like smallpox, cholera, and typhus threw the population into a state of terror from time to time while less sensational but equally deadly killers like tuberculosis, diphtheria, and scarlet fever were ceaselessly at work."

HISTORICAL ARGUMENT (cont.)

- Social work arises from compassion and the perspective that poverty is not the consequence of personal weakness/sin, natural selection, or divine will but of social circumstances
- During Progressive Era, two major schools of social work—Settlement House Movement and Charity Organization Societies—joined to fight for social change.
 - Deserving vs. undeserving poor: hard-hearted or reasonable?
- Thus social advocacy is one of the major roots of social work.

PERSON-IN-ENVIRONMENT PERSPECTIVE

- Our clients are strongly affected by economic and social circumstances and by the economic and social structure of the society in which they live.
- Changes in their environment could make their lives better.
- Needs of individual clients generalize as social problems.
- Therefore, must work for social change in order to fully address the needs of our clients.

THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL PLURALISM

- There are a number of competing conceptions of social justice even within the field of social work.
 - Conservatives as well as liberals and radicals
 - Republicans as well as Democrats and others
- Code of Ethics does not tell us which conception of social justice we have a duty to pursue.

CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SOCIAL WORK

- Distributive justice is primary focus of social work
- Social Work Dictionary: “Social justice is an ideal condition in which all members of society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits.”
 - Utopian and egalitarian
 - Problems on both counts

UTOPIAN CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

- Unattainable \Rightarrow What step in the right direction should we choose? How can we know that it will be a step in the right direction given the problem of unanticipated consequences?
- Dangerous: Conceptions of ideal societies are among the major reasons for war, empire building, genocide, and inhumanity. (c.f. Isaiah Berlin)

WHAT DOES “EQUALITY” MEAN?

- Common to define justice in terms of equality but “equality” has several meanings.
 - Of wealth and other social goods
 - Of opportunity (vs. outcomes)
 - Of rights
 - Of duties to society
 - Of inherent value as a human being
 - In the eyes of the law
 - All of the above?

CONCEPTIONS OF EQUALITY

- 2 common philosophical conceptions of equality
 - Aristotle: Equal treatment of equals
 - Bernard Williams: Discrimination for relevant reasons
 - **Both conceptions are compatible with disparity.**
- Is material equality possible or desirable?
 - Do you support equalizing wealth?
 - Thought experiment on redistribution

CONCEPTIONS OF DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

- **Liberal**, e.g. Rawls: Fair disparity, i.e. economic growth should reduce disparity over time.
- **Libertarian**, e.g. Nozick: Justice is not a pattern of distribution but a fair process of acquisition
- **Laissez-faire**, e.g. Hayek: Unimpeded market economy results in reduced poverty for all
- **Regulated capitalism**, e.g. Croly: Government as countervailing power for protection of consumers, workers, and the environment
- **Radical rejection of capitalism**, e.g. Marx: Against individual ownership and/or control + Distribution according to need

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL WELFARE

- What should society do help people who are poor and “disadvantaged”?
- Will address conservative, liberal, and radical views.
- Conservative and liberal theories share two fundamental insights
 - Capitalism is the engine of wealth
 - Greater wealth for a society makes it possible for poor people to rise out of poverty.
 - The primary way to address problems of poverty is through economic development rather than through pure redistribution.
- But conservatives: let the marketplace run unimpeded by governmental constraints.
- Liberals: government must restrain businesses and regulate the marketplace. Government is a “countervailing power.”

LIBERAL VIEWS ON SOCIAL WELFARE (1)

- Capitalism is the source of wealth but must be subjected to government controls including:
 - Workplace protections such health and safety regulations, rights to organize unions, and minimum salaries and benefits
 - Assistance for unemployed people including unemployment insurance and job training
 - Consumer protections including assurance of safe food and drugs
 - Environmental protections
- A free, high quality education to equalize opportunity
- Access to quality health care for all preferably with a government-based single payer system
- A safety net that provides more than mere subsistence for individuals who need help, both disabled and not
- Support for families who provide care for disabled and troubled family members.

LIBERAL VIEWS ON SOCIAL WELFARE (2)

- The use of progressive taxation to pay for the benefits that poor people need because charity is far from enough and flat tax is unfair
- Protection of civil rights and affirmative action on behalf of populations that have historically suffered discrimination as measured by data regarding disparities.
- Protection of personal privacy from intrusions by sexual moralists, including freedom of choice regarding abortion.
- Campaign finance controls
- A strong federal governmental role in social policy so as to equalize benefits throughout the country.

CONSERVATIVE VIEWS ON SOCIAL WELFARE (1)

- Capitalism is the source of wealth and is most effective when the market is unimpeded by government regulation. “A rising tide lifts all ships.”
 - Work is the route out of poverty. (Many liberals share this view.)
 - Strong businesses create jobs. (Many liberals also share this view.)
- The first responsibility for people in trouble lies with their families.
- Charity and voluntarism should be **the** major source of aid to the poor.
- Taxation should be kept to an absolute minimum, and the wealthy should not be taxed at higher rates than others.
- Government should provide subsistence income for people with disabilities and others, but poor people who are not disabled should be expected to work.
- Dependency breeds dependency; therefore, welfare benefits create a perverse incentive to remain poor.

CONSERVATIVE VIEWS ON SOCIAL WELFARE (2)

- Immoral sexual behavior results in single-parent families that are less capable, in general, of raising children successfully than are two-parent families. + Usually anti-abortion.
- Government should play a limited role in assuring access to health care and human services.
- Insurance for the most part should be private rather than public including retirement, health benefits, and disability insurance as well as life and home insurance.
- Public education for all should be adequate to create an infrastructure of people prepared to do necessary jobs.
- Not all difference is the result of discrimination.
 - Support equality of opportunity not of outcome.
 - Limit use of affirmative action to prevent reverse discrimination.
- Campaign finance controls violate right to free speech.
- For the most part public policy should be made at the state or local level rather than at the federal level.

RADICAL VIEWS ON SOCIAL WELFARE

- No real difference between liberal and conservative views.
- Not safety nets but massive redistribution of ownership and wealth.
- Not government as a countervailing power to big business but elimination of industries controlled (solely) by the rich.
 - Spectrum from shared leadership of corporations—workers and managers jointly in charge—to government ownership of the major industries.
- Radical social welfare policy includes:
 - Guaranteed adequate income and/or decent living conditions for all
 - Free and equal public education for all
 - Free, equal, publicly provided health care for all
 - Heavy taxation of those who somehow remain wealthy
 - Elimination of racism and discrimination
 - Elimination of exploitation, oppression, and disparities of power

WHICH VIEW (S) OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IS RIGHT FOR SOCIAL WORKERS?

- Language of the Code of Ethics suggests that social workers must be either liberals or radicals.
 - “Vulnerable”, “disadvantaged”, “exploited”, “oppressed”, and victims of “discrimination”
 - Not the language of conservatism
- But open to interpretation
 - E.g., A person paid less than \$1 per day in a “sweat shop” is exploited. Is a person earning \$15 per hour?
 - E.g. A woman subject to capital punishment for sex outside of marriage is oppressed. Is the wife of a wealthy man who lives as she wants but does not fulfill her potential?

**DOES THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN RIGHTS
PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR AGREEMENT?**

A NON-UTOPIAN CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

- Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice* helps to salvage the idea of social justice from unrealistic expectations and utopianism
- The duty to pursue social justice in the Code of Ethics appears to be too extensive
 - E.g. obligation to pursue social justice from local to global levels.
 - Hard to work towards an ideal society even if you think you know what it is.
- Most social advocacy is far less ambitious than creating a just society.
 - E.g., improve conditions for people with serious mental illness
 - E.g., improve the child welfare system
 - E.g., help the homeless
- We need a more modest view ⇒
- Sen: Don't think of social justice in terms of an ideal society
 - Think of it in terms of clear, specific injustices such as homelessness, lack of access to healthcare or education, underfunded mental health clinics, etc.
 - The duty of a social worker is to do something to overcome some specific injustice, not just for individuals but also for groups with a shared problem.

MINIMAL DUTY OF A SOCIAL WORKER

- Friedman's View
 - Pick a cause,
 - Join an advocacy group,
 - Contribute \$,
 - Write when asked,
 - Attend one lobbying event per year.

SEN ON RESOLVING DIFFERENCES

- Don't have to resolve all differences in a pluralistic society
- Try to resolve differences by talking them through, debating, compromising, and ultimately using democratic process.
- RESPECTFUL DISCUSSION OF DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW
- Use democratic process when a decision has to be reached by a governmental group (must include authority of some to make decisions on behalf of the group)

EXPECTATION OF MUTUAL RESPECT AT CUSSW

- Social work is in fact dominated by liberal and radical views. Is there an expectation of being politically correct?
 - George Will attacked social work for lack of political diversity and tolerance
 - Field responded by insisting that it is diverse and seeks and supports diversity.
- But despite the fact that social work professionals are a politically diverse group, it is not clear that there is high tolerance for political difference.
- Students at CUSSW who are different political perspectives have often complained that they fear ridicule if they dare to express them.
- This is not acceptable. This is a setting where it should be safe for everyone to express their opinions and where there should be open and respectful discussion.