

DEVELOPING A COMMON VALUE BASE TO A GLOBAL PROFESSION

Insights from Latin America, Africa and the UK *

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Introduction

This paper starts from the contention that there is a common value base to the social work profession that has global validity. This may be a contentious statement, particularly where values are seen to be culturally determined, indigenous and specific to certain parts of the world – or where globalisation has eroded local diversity, creating a homogenous world culture based on neo-liberal values. Healy (2007) points out that social work values have often been held out as unifying features of the profession – yet from a global or multicultural perspective, values and ethics may be more divisive than anything else.

Yet the search for a global definition of social work and common values has intrigued both social workers themselves and their respective professional international organisations over many years – a process that recently took over six years to formulate and involved the formation of a global task force. The resultant definition of social work has been widely accepted and provides a vision broadly anchoring social work between the individual / clinical pole and that of empowerment and social justice. To some extent this was a compromise, but at least reflected the reality of the uneasy situation that the profession finds itself in today. The article in *International Social Work* reporting on the search for a commonly agreed definition (Hare, 2006) remains that Journal's single most popular downloaded text globally, an indication of its relevance and interest to social workers.

The fact that social work is a value-based profession is clearly stated in the commentary on the definition of social work adopted by IFSW and IASSW in 2001: "*Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action*". This is seen as a primary motivator in "*meeting human needs and developing human potential*" (ISW, 2004a: 6). The jointly (IFSW and IASSW) agreed statement of ethical principles (ISW, 2004b) suggests that in addition to respecting the right to self-determination, participation and empowerment, it is important that social workers treat each person as a whole, within their family, community, societal and natural environment. While most social workers might agree with this, in practice the reality – and the rhetoric – is often far from the high-sounding principles.

Dilemmas facing social workers

Values are central to social work, yet can be quite complex and difficult to resolve. Often social workers either may not be in a position (by virtue of their restrictive employment), or be unable (due to lack of time and resources) to consider some of the deeper implications of the problem situations they come across on a day-to-day basis. However the social work role in essence does require that social workers are sensitised to the wider implications involved in their work. Examples of some of the value dilemmas facing social workers have been identified in the United Nations training manual *Human Rights and Social Work* (United Nations, 1994: 42-43):

- (1) *"Your Government has to service a large international debt and chooses to cut expenditure on social services, including the services you are working with for disadvantaged persons. **How do you respond to this?**"*
- (2) *"You are a social worker in a city project for street children, many of whom have been abandoned or have fled institutions. The police say they are being directed to take action against these children. **What do you say to the police and to the children?**"*
- (3) *"As a social worker with young persons you are told that a young boy in a residential home is having his mail opened by staff because they fear he is planning to flee the home. **What do you do, and what human rights issues do you refer to?**"*

It is clear from these hypothetical, but very real situations that social workers often come across in their day-to-day activities, that the implications of their work extends beyond that of the individual and their immediate problem to other situations that involve value choices and wider concerns.

Empowerment and respect for people

Valuing people involves developing definitions of social work that need to move practice away from theory based primarily upon concepts of individual deficits and toward theory that emphasises individual strengths, and one that is able to focus not just on psychological problems, but on the underlying socio-economic structural factors that are often correlated with social problems. An effective practice model needs to have an "environmental" fit and be founded upon a base of knowledge that is primarily rooted in sociological and political concepts.

One such model, which may have been over-used in recent years, but still bears both promise and the need for greater development, is that of *empowerment*. The rationale for empowerment may be

found in the "appropriateness" argument. Thus, the search for focus or emphasis must include finding new local ways, or revisiting old ideas and processes of problem-solving and service-delivery. This involves understanding and articulating local indigenous resources, relationships, helping and problem-solving networks; and the underlying ideas, rationale, philosophies or values behind these.

Basically, social work must develop processes and procedures that individuals, groups and communities are comfortable with, understand and control, and where they do not feel marginalized and labelled as incapable. There is a need to counter the drift towards authoritarian responses to social need. Thus, empowerment calls for *appropriateness*, which also requires a radical review of social work models and process. While the search for *indigenous* models of social work might be particularly useful in a developing world setting, in developed western countries such as the UK there is a similar conception in the movement towards *service user and carer empowerment*. Both rely on a value-based social work that is respectful of the people it is serving – and ideally that responds to and satisfies the needs identified by the people themselves, rather than just suiting the needs of the authorities or the powerful elite groups in the society.

Latin America: Conscientisation and Reconceptualisation

The underlying notions behind empowerment are rooted in Freire's (1970, 1985) *conscientisation* approach and liberation theology of Latin America. Conscientisation involves working in partnership with oppressed and disadvantaged groups, breaking through the "culture of silence" that prevents people from speaking up for themselves and helping them achieve an awareness or critical consciousness of their situation. Pinto et al. (2007) suggest how an inter-professional team supervised by a senior social worker successfully used this approach in working with an urban community in Brazil in the area of HIV, helping to raise their consciousness of social, health and environmental issues.

Reconceptualisation in the Latin American context is seen as focusing on the reformulation of concepts so that they are in line with efforts to empower marginalised groups in society. In general, practice is to be based on local experiences from which new 'constructs' are then created. This approach emphasises the rethinking, restructuring and strengthening of social work practice, and places social work practice in the context of civic and political society, where the contribution of civil society is acknowledged and valued (Osei-Hwedie, 1993).

Reconceptualisation also calls for the radicalisation of social work and its role in society based on the argument that current social work practice is not relevant, appropriate, or particularly effective. According to this approach, social work must shed its liberal character and adopt a more pragmatic

and radical approach to get away from institutions and processes which cause the social ills that social work is supposed to help eliminate. To this extent a reconceptualised social work is also a more preventive and forward-looking profession that develops a more dynamic paradigm, marking a departure from traditional formulations and procedures. The central element of a radical empowerment approach places emphasis on the desire for the disadvantaged to work collectively towards changing alienating conditions. This orientation means that social work focuses on structural change, inequality and social disadvantage, thereby taking a preventive stance. It also stresses self-reliance and popular participation aimed at enhancing people's capacity to work for their own welfare. Thus, social work is placed in the context of empowerment and capacity-building.

As an example of this Wilson and Hernandez (2007) consider the liberatory tradition in Nicaraguan social work which was influenced by the *sandinista* popular revolutionary movement and the ideas of reconceptualisation which began in the southern cone in the mid-1960s. Following the revolution in Nicaragua the School of Social Work was closed down as it was felt there was no further need for the profession in an egalitarian country and social workers had to find ways to re-frame their identity in the new dispensation. This situation was reversed once the sandinistas lost power and social workers' roles returned to the *asistencialismo* – a focus on the social assistance function of a system that was “*not only capitalist, but also patriarchal and broadly exclusionist*” (Wilson and Hernandez: 2007: 85). Yet the authors point out that for eleven years the liberatory tradition flourished and this led to profound changes in health, education and social services, which were fundamental achievements that social workers in most situations can only dream of.

Values of participation, enhancing capacity and supporting peoples' rights is also outlined within the Brazilian context by Almeida (2008) who considers the involvement of social workers in a human rights programme working alongside a voluntary organisation trying to protect threatened witnesses and victims of crimes. Social workers are involved in this project in trying to help develop a culture of human rights, where citizenship rights are respected and the prevailing culture of impunity is challenged. This required an “*openness to learning, dialogue, the permanent exercise of doubt, and the capacity for a critical perspective beyond the immediate given and apparent reality*” (Almeida, 2008:30).

On the whole, the search for appropriateness and *valuing people* in the context of social work relates directly to the question of control. To redefine social work and chart its course also means determining *who* sets the social work agenda. Social work's legitimacy and appropriateness are tied to the manner in which the agenda is set, who sets it and those interests which it serves.

Africa: Insights from social development theory

In the African context, despite the increased establishment of schools of social work, most social work programmes leave much to be desired, especially in terms of their relevance to the African situation. The curriculum and other vital components of instruction remain largely conservative and undeveloped; there has also been a Eurocentric bias and internalised values and norms of social work education and practice which have been passed on through the colonial legacy. Consequently Rwomire and Raditlhokwa (1996:14) advocate for a radical definition of the social work profession in Africa, drawing on concepts from Latin America. This definition has the following attributes:

"Radical social work attempts to situate the social work profession within the ideology of liberation with the intention of bringing about the political, economic, social and cultural empowerment of its clientele. The goal of empowerment is facilitated by the process of conscientisation through which people in disadvantageous circumstances are helped to acquire a critical and reflexive consciousness".

Gray et al. (1996) explore these ideas further from South Africa. They indicate that although poverty has been prominent on the social work agenda since the early days of the profession, social work approaches to addressing poverty have varied but overall have adopted a consensual and individualistic approach – or as Midgley (1993:2) indicates, a "...remedial-residualist and maintenance-oriented social service approach". Drower (2002) notes that South Africa presents three interrelated challenges to the practitioner – widespread poverty, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and high levels of violence, corruption and crime. These serious social problems have been exacerbated and magnified by the traumatic background of *apartheid* that South Africa recently emerged from and the current reality of first world wealth sitting uncomfortably side-by-side with extreme poverty. She suggests, following Grove (1998:1) that there is need for "action space" – which emphasises that poor people should act and speak for themselves, realise their own capacities and take control of their own lives. Drower (2002:109) concludes: *"given social work's commitment to social justice, democracy and the dignity and integrity of every human being, the profession is potentially well placed to contribute to moral renewal".*

In making changes to improve the quality of life in the African context, many authors have emphasised the importance of a social development focus that impacts social disadvantage and structural inequality (see Ankrah, 1987; Hall, 1990; Osei-Hwedie, 1990). A central element in the process of social development is the promotion of maximum community participation. While many African countries have long employed community development methods such as the creation of village development committees, the process has seldom been one of involving people at the local

level in the identification of their own needs. Rather, the identification of community needs has often followed a top-down form of planning. This type of process only serves to reinforce the oppression of disadvantaged groups at the hands of an "enlightened" few. Even more sinister developments can occur when the political ruling class appropriate the means of production – for example in Zimbabwe where the ruling ZANU (PF) party confiscated all farming land from the mainly white community, with the avowed intention of returning it to the people, only to allocate the land to members of the ruling clique. Although touted as development structural change of this sort often only serves to benefit a particular group or class within the country.

In spite of these tensions, social work is coherent with beneficial social development in terms of values, focus and theory. A significant point of connection is a shared humanistic value base. Both social work and social development recognise that people's interests are of paramount importance and they have a right to participate in their own development. Power structures and policy makers need to be encouraged to be responsive to people's needs, especially where their needs and interests are overlooked for the sake of broader political, economic or social goals. Social justice is a basic goal and social work and social development share a commitment to the eradication of poverty.

Midgley (1991, 1995) sees social development as a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole, while Cox (2006:37) in elaborating what he terms an "integrated-perspectives approach to social work" identifies five basic elements to the concept of social development as it has evolved since the early 1990s. These elements in my view are also fundamental to a value-based social work practice:

- "1. a foundation of principles or values;
 2. a focus on people and human resources through such measures as capacity building;
 3. the establishment of an adequate and appropriate network of national institutions and structures;
 4. a satisfactory system of micro-macro relations, achieved through, for example, the freedom of people to participate; and
 5. the creation by the state of an enabling environment, in economic, political, social, legal, and cultural terms".
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The adoption of this model for practice stresses greater involvement on the part of social workers in the tasks of social policy and planning, social administration, programme evaluation and community organisation. This requires knowledge and skills in working with professionals in the areas of economic development and planning, health, and education. It further requires a sensitivity to socio-cultural and political factors and knowledge of how to engage in effective social action strategies. Mmatli (2008) adds to this list with the suggestion that social workers engage in political activism in the African context, as many of the problems faced by Africans are as a result of political decisions where they are rendered powerless. He feels that social work education should prepare graduates to emphasise the political nature of social work – which should include competencies such as organising and community mobilisation skills. According to Sewpaul and Hölscher (2004:100), this should also involve critical reflection and conscientisation among students who should not “*distance themselves from the power relations that exclude, oppress, subjugate, exploit and diminish other human beings*”.

The UK: dissatisfaction and new beginnings

The developed world context – as exemplified by the UK – provides other challenges to social work values. As Ferguson & Lavalette (2007: 28) note, there is mounting dissatisfaction among social workers in the UK as to what their job has become: “*The lack of opportunities for face-to-face work with clients...the lack of resources to do the job; and a culture which increasingly blames clients over problems which they have little or no control*”. Similar concerns are commonly expressed by service user and carer groups who feel marginalized and increasingly left on their own to cope with serious personal difficulties. Although the government is rolling out a programme of “individual budgets” to enable people to pay for their own care needs, there is concern that the resources are very limited and that government is escaping its commitments by a sleight of hand in the direction of empowerment and choice. As Jones (2007: 194) has noted: “*The same abandonment of social work experienced by practitioners is also central to the experience of users who find services increasingly inaccessible or totally inappropriate. Their stories are often outrageous accounts of state brutality and disdain*”. However Jones also notes a new grassroots mobilisation and confidence to challenge some of these inequities on the part of frontline practitioners, students and users – and a recognition and affirmation of the unique contribution that social workers can make in helping people.

Although social workers are faced with multiple challenges, this is nothing new for the profession, which has always had to function in difficult circumstances, often without the support of other professional colleagues and in hostile conditions. In the UK social workers are often treated unsympathetically by the media which exaggerates and ridicules their efforts,

particularly when situations go wrong – such as in child abuse scandals that have not been properly investigated. Yet increasingly social workers are becoming essential members of inter-professional teams and are working much closer to other central and local government agencies concerned with health and education. Lymbery (2006) suggests the first and most easily identifiable way in which social workers should bring something unique to the multidisciplinary team is through the values and orientation of the social worker – in particular social work's specific commitment to anti-oppressive values. Lymbery (2006: 1129) notes that: *"the broad, holistic perspective provided by social workers is also of great importance; through their education and training, social workers should have the ability to look at people within their family and social contexts to a greater extent than other professions"*. It is the ability of the social worker to work with people in ways that respect and value their contribution that is one of the key attributes of good professional social work.

Since the early 1980s service user and carer participation at all levels has become increasingly part of the modernisation agenda in the UK, and this has translated in government directives concerning "Best Value" regarding service provision. Involvement of service users and carers now also takes place at all levels of social work training. Although it is right to be sceptical and question the extent of genuine respect for the rights and interests of service users and carers, it is important that this trend continues and is reinforced. Parrott (2006) notes that as a first step towards developing empowering practice, the service user's interpretation of events and problems in their lives must take centre stage. He suggests that two key aspects are paramount: control, where people define their own situation and their needs within this; and self-actualisation, which enables service users to *"take power for themselves through developing their confidence and self-esteem, their skills and knowledge"* (Parrott, 2006: 39).

In conclusion...

Although social work has a myriad of different forms, is based on a variety of concepts and is undertaken in multiple situations across the world there is a commonly agreed *definition* to the profession, although this ranges widely from working with individuals to engaging at societal / social justice levels. In tracing some of the concepts and practices from Latin America, Africa and the UK there seems to be a generally accepted understanding that the profession needs to base itself on the realities of peoples' lives, and to work at empowering and extending the control that people have over circumstances that often reduce the quality of their lives.

Ife (2000) has noted that social workers have been able to extend their practice from the individual to the structural (or the personal to the political) in terms of both analysis and action – *"the next*

challenge is to extend it further to the global, and to empower ourselves and our clients to be activists at the global level" (p. 62). With regard to social work education the United Nations advocates that a change in ethos and value is required to permeate all taught courses. A philosophy of people-centred development, reinforcement of the importance of the enabler role, a curriculum with development as the organising principle and a broad knowledge base is proposed (United Nations, 1992). Hutton (1994) advocates the need to move from a focus on ways of working, that is social work *methods*, to a way of *thinking*. Empowerment, education, facilitation, brokering, prevention and policy development are some of the activities that would allow social workers to practice a developmental model of social work that would value clients and pay more respect to their needs and wishes in a wider systemic context.

This orientation is also acknowledged by Banks (2006) following a study of social work codes of ethics from around the world. She indicates that most of the codes emphasise that social workers have a responsibility wider than their own job and following the agency's rules. She notes that "*Codes of ethics remind social workers that because they possess particular knowledge and skills, and work on a daily basis with people living in poverty and suffering crises and problems, they have a duty to inform governments and agencies of inequities, lack of resources or the need for policy changes*".

Midgley (2007) as well indicates that although the profession may not have much direct influence on governments and international bodies, it can form coalitions with and support the efforts of the many international organisations that advocate human rights and social justice.

Ultimately social work needs to respect its own constituency – the service users or clients, the informal and paid carers who provide the bulk of social care in all societies, the marginalised and exploited groups, the asylum seekers and refugees, and many others who seek social work services. Social work practitioners and educators should place the contribution and perspectives of these groups first in developing with them a common value base to a global helping profession.

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