

## Just Practice

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# JUST PRACTICE: STEPS TOWARD A NEW SOCIAL WORK PARADIGM

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The 21st-century challenges to social justice, human rights, and citizenship posed by transnational capital, growing global inequality and social exclusion, and multiple forms of violence confront the limits of the social work imagination and call for creative and critical interventions that focus on social justice. In this article we contend that the dominant theoretical approaches to social work practice are inadequate, and we consider the possibilities and limitations of alternative approaches informed by critical social theory. We argue for the Just Practice Framework, a social justice-oriented approach to social work, as a corrective to current models.

SOCIAL WORK is at a critical juncture. Scholars, practitioners, and policy makers are engaged in debates over the epistemology, theory base, priorities, and general relevance of the profession. These debates are fueled by external forces such as increasing economic globalization and inequality (Korten, 1995; McMichael, 1996; Piven & Cloward, 1997), social exclusion and dislocation (Lyons, 1999; Ramanathan & Link, 1999), advances in information and communication technologies (Harvey, 1989; Kreuger, 1997), continued trends toward devolution, privatization, and profitability in the human service sector (Ewalt, 1996; Franklin, 2000), and the precariousness of basic human rights (Lyons, 1999; Witkin, 1998). The predominant theories that currently guide the practice of social work, formulated alongside the profession's emergence as a critic of, palliative for, and, some would contend, servant to 20th-century capi-

talism, appear increasingly anachronistic in the face of the shifting transnational logic of late capitalism (Korten, 1995; Lowe & Lloyd, 1997; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). As Harvey (1989) contends, the hallmarks of capitalism since the 1970s include the increasing concentration of capital in the hands of the few (primarily multinational corporations), the growth of flexible and mobile labor markets that have weakened unions and placed greater pressures on workers, the decline of older industries and a surge in the service sector, patterns of uneven development, and the emergence of new forms of production and marketing that shape new kinds of workers and consumers (see Stephens, 1995, for a concise overview).

A new social work paradigm is needed to confront these challenges, tensions, and contradictions and to address human concerns that transcend national, geographic, and cul-

tural borders and domains of practice. Social work scholars contend that we need an integrated approach grounded in the context of critical community practice (Johnson, 1998; Schorr, 1997), a greater emphasis on internationalism (Briar-Lawson, Lawson, Hennon, & Jones, 2001; Hokenstad & Midgley, 1997; Lyons, 1999; Ramanathan & Link, 1999; Sarri, 1997), the incorporation of a political dimension in practice and the preparation of social workers to serve as interpreters of environments for policy makers and the public (Reisch, 1997), and an engagement with critical postmodern theories that envision social work as an emancipatory project (Leonard, 1997; Pease & Fook, 1999). These issues call for approaches to thought and action that challenge our certainties, acknowledge our partial and positioned perspectives, and enable engagement with radically different ways of interpreting and acting in the world (see Reed, Newman, Suarez, & Lewis, 1997, for a discussion of positionality). They offer opportunities to transform social work as we know it into *social justice work* through the democratization of the processes of knowledge development and the promotion of new forms of partnership and participation. In short, we need a fundamental rethinking of the nature and direction of social work practice as we come to grips with the rapidly changing environment in which we live and work.

In this article, we take steps toward a new paradigm of integrated social work theory and practice that is grounded in the profession's commitment to social justice, informed by its historic possibilities, and responsive to these 21st-century challenges.

We argue that the predominant theories and perspectives that inform contemporary social work are inadequate for meeting the current issues that we face. We then examine promising intellectual and political interventions that are being articulated by a range of critical social theorists and consider their value for social work. In particular, we address the important work of contemporary social and cultural theorists who have been articulating a theory of practice which attends to the dynamic, power-laden interplay of structure and human agency (Bourdieu, 1977; de Certeau, 1984; Giddens, 1979; Ortner, 1989; Sewell, 1992). These practice theorists are interested in how existing social, cultural, and political orders constrain human understanding and action while people simultaneously create these very structures through their actions, either reproducing or transforming them (Ortner, 1989). We contend that this practice theory has relevance for social work, particularly in regard to the ways in which we construct knowledge of social problems and modes of intervention.

Finally, we outline the *Just Practice Framework*, which is structured around five key themes—*meaning, context, power, history, and possibility*—and discuss its potential for transforming social work thought and practice by providing the basis for critical questions (see Finn & Jacobson, 2003, for a book-length explication of the Just Practice Framework). How do people give meaning to the experiences and conditions that shape their lives? How do we apprehend and appreciate the contextual nature of human experience and interaction? What forms and relations of power shape social relations and experience? Who has the

power to have their interpretations of reality valued as “true”? How might a historical perspective provide us with a deeper understanding of context, help us grasp the ways that struggles over meaning and power play out, and enable us to appreciate the human consequences of these struggles? How do we claim a sense of the possible as an impetus for justice-oriented social work practice? By examining the relationship among these key themes, might we be able to conceptualize a shift from social work to social justice work? The Just Practice Framework articulates a linkage of epistemology, theory, values, and practice. It is grounded in a critical understanding of social practice and a political and ethical commitment to social justice. It represents a significant shift in how we think about and practice social work; this shift is necessary for the promotion of social justice in the (post)modern world.

### **Contemporary Social Work Thought and Its Discontents**

In contemporary U.S. social work, systems, strengths, and empowerment approaches rule the theoretical domain. Structural approaches, although less prevalent in the United States than in other national and political contexts, have also influenced social work thought and practice. We will briefly address these approaches, their contributions and limitations, and their impact on our conception of social justice work. We also acknowledge that a range of narrative, constructionist, and postmodern ideas have been expanding the discourse of contemporary social work (see Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999; Hartman, 1992; Laird, 1993;

Pease & Fook, 1999). Our approach has been informed by these critical interventions, which we discuss briefly in a later section.

### **Systems Perspectives**

For the past 25 years, systems or ecological perspectives have dominated social work. These approaches argue that individuals are complex living systems and that human behavior therefore needs to be understood in its broader systemic context. The language of systems theory—boundaries, hierarchy, transaction, homeostasis, feedback, and entropy—has become a key metaphor for conceptualizing human relationships and social work practice. Systems theories were readily adopted into practice with families, groups, and communities in the 1980s (see Hartman & Laird, 1983; see Germain, 1994, for an exploration of the different influences of social systems and general systems theory).

By 1980, systems theorists had begun to use the language of human ecology to more specifically conceptualize dynamic exchanges between people and their social and physical environments (Germain, 1979, 1983; Germain & Gitterman, 1995). As Greif (1986) noted, “ecology focuses specifically on how things fit together, how they adapt to one another” (p. 225). According to the emerging *ecosystems* perspective, “persons and environments are not separate but exist in ongoing transactions with each other” (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 1998, p. 32). By the mid-1980s, Whitakker, Schinke, and Gilchrist (1986) proclaimed that social work had a new paradigm: the ecological approach.

Since the 1980s, this ecological or ecosystems paradigm has powerfully shaped social



work thought and practice in the United States. The various articulations of the ecosystems approach have pointed to the fundamental importance of context and have drawn attention to the person–environment relationship. They provide a theoretical basis for social work’s uniqueness that is predicated upon the profession’s grasp of this relationship. They challenge understandings of social problems based on a medical or personal-deficiency model that emphasizes individual problems or deficits, and they look beyond the individual person when designing solutions. Furthermore, ecosystems approaches have pointed to social work’s historic concern for environmental conditions, as evidenced in the Settlement House Movement and its attention to issues of housing and public health (Addams, 1910).

Despite its continued prominence in the field, the ecosystems perspective has been criticized on a number of fronts. Some critics see the perspective as broadly applicable but so vague and general that it gives little specific guidance for practice. Social workers have borrowed the language of systems, as noted above, from complex fields of study such as cybernetics and ecology. However, while the language offers a metaphor for conceptualizing the person–environment relationship, the translation to practice is not so clear (Gould, 1987, Rossiter, 1996). For example, as feminist scholars have noted, its application has often been guided by certainties about boundaries, roles, and balance that implicitly encoded rather than explicitly challenged the gender stratification of the larger society (Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstein, 1988). The approach’s focus on the here-and-

now situation and possibilities for intervention has contributed to a neglect of history. The emphasis on the “fit” of individuals within a social context tends to support rather than question the dominant order and often accentuates strategies for adaptation instead of the transformation of existing structural arrangements (Coates, 1992; Gould, 1987). In fact, the ecosystems metaphor serves to naturalize ideas of hierarchies among systems and subsystems rather than addressing the forms and relations of power through which social hierarchies and structured inequalities are constituted, maintained, and justified. The ecosystems perspective is reliant upon an uncomplicated view of both the person and the environment, assuming that both are stable, knowable, and non-problematic concepts (Rossiter, 1996). This approach adheres to liberal assumptions of the person as an autonomous individual and assumes a fundamental distinction between the person and society rather than acknowledging the dialectical, mutually constituting relationship between individuals and society (Rossiter, 1996).

In short, systems and ecosystems perspectives offer little basis for critical engagement with questions of power. They tend to naturalize arbitrary power differences, and they assume rather than question the dominant social, political, and economic order. These approaches are premised on the positivist view of the social world as a single, objective, and ultimately knowable reality. They offer no epistemological base through which to consider multiple constructions of social reality and the power of thought, language, and structured social interactions that

shape those constructions. Systems and ecosystems perspectives focus on extant, "observed" relations and practices rather than on a critical analysis of how these relations and practices have come to be constructed in a particular manner and at a particular historic moment.

### **The Structural Approach**

The structural approach to social work, also referred to as the political-economy or conflict perspective, is part of a larger radical social work movement. Structuralists view the problems that confront social work as a fundamental, inherent part of the present social order, wherein social institutions function in ways that systematically maintain social inequalities along lines of class, race, gender, sexual identity, citizenship, and so forth (Mullaly, 1997). Informed by Marxist theory, structuralists place questions of conflict and exploitation at the center of social work theory. They see personal problems as the consequence of structural injustice and the resultant unequal access to means and resources of social and economic production. Structuralists raise questions about the historical and material conditions through which inequalities are constructed and experienced. They view clients of social welfare systems as victims of unequal social relations and advocate for systems-changing interventions (Bailey & Brake, 1976; Coates, 1992; Galper, 1975).

Advocates of the structural approach have critiqued systems models for their neglect of power relations and inequality and their emphasis on the maintenance of the established order, rather than its transforma-

tion. Structuralists argue that systems approaches assume that the system itself is functional and that people can be aided in their adaptation to existing social arrangements. They contend that systems perspectives view conflict and resistance as deviant, rather than as legitimate consequences of systemic inequalities. Further, structuralists argue that interventions informed by these systems perspectives seldom call for more than the fine-tuning of the liberal, capitalist, democratic, and patriarchal social order (Coates, 1992; Mullaly, 1997). The root causes of social problems go unaddressed.

In contrast, structural social workers start from the assumption that the dominant political and economic order directly contributes to social problems. Thus, the goal of social work practice is the transformation of existing structures into a new order grounded in social justice, egalitarianism, and humanitarianism (Bailey & Brake, 1976; Coates, 1992; Galper, 1975). Structural social workers challenge the ecosystems assumption that the social environment is a neutral concept. Instead, they attend to the ideological underpinnings of the social order and its relationship to social and material conditions (Carniol, 1992; Moreau, 1979). Structuralists argue that ecological models emphasize stability over change, ignore the conflicts of goals and interests among different groups, and consider existing power inequalities to be the norm (Pease & Fook, 1999). In short, structural social work has made power a central theme and has placed questions of social justice in the foreground.

While structural social work has been a prominent voice in diverse international con-

texts of social work theory and practice, it has largely been marginalized in the United States. Structural social workers have been criticized for being too political in their sympathies for a socialist alternative to the dominant order and for being unrealistic about the possibilities of achieving structural change. This approach has also been critiqued for its emphasis on persons as "victims" of structural inequalities rather than as actors capable of participation in the processes of personal and social change. Structuralists have largely embraced a historical materialism that has left little space for the appreciation of human agency, creativity, and the capacity for giving meaning to experience. Ironically, this approach has also been criticized for its failure to recognize the need for person-changing interventions to heal the damage inflicted by systemic inequalities.

### **The Strengths Perspective**

In recent years the strengths perspective has gained prominence in social work in the United States as a corrective to the profession's problem-focused approach. The strengths perspective argues that, to be true to the values of the profession, we need to begin our work by recognizing people's capacities and the potential of their circumstances. It calls for a shift from problem- to solution-focused processes that stem from the "client's values, hopes, and desired goals" (Saleebey, 1997, p. 35). Social workers are encouraged to explore the resource potential of their environments and to appreciate the human capacity for resiliency and creativity in the face of adversity. Working from a strengths perspective, the social worker seeks to identify, facilitate,

or create contexts in which people who have been silenced and isolated gain an understanding of, a voice in, and influence over the decisions that affect their lives. This approach promotes belonging, healing, and relationship building through dialogue and collaboration. Rather than asking, "What's wrong?," the social worker asks, "What's possible?" (Cowger, 1994; Saleebey, 1997).

Proponents of the strengths perspective point to its compatibility with an ecosystems approach. Rather than challenging the fundamental tenets of the ecological model, the strengths perspective offers an enhanced lens through which the person-environment nexus can be viewed. The strengths perspective has been praised for recognizing human meaning, agency, and capacity, and it draws attention to possibility. It has been criticized for underplaying the constraints and the often-overwhelming struggles that poor and oppressed people face in their everyday lives (Barber, 1995; Coates & McKay, 1995; Fisher, 1995; Howe, 1994; Margolin, 1997).

### **The Empowerment Approach**

As Simon (1994) has addressed, social work has a strong tradition of empowering praxis—the mutual interplay of action and critical reflection—that merits appreciative inquiry. However, an empowerment approach to social work has only been gaining prominence in the field during the past decade. A number of new social work texts articulate this perspective, which is premised on the recognition and analysis of power, group work practices of consciousness raising and capacity building, and collective efforts to challenge and change oppressive

social conditions (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 1998). This approach seeks to articulate the linkages between the personal and the political and to build on the traditions of self-help, mutual support, and collective action. Empowerment theorists frequently speak of personal, interpersonal, and political levels of empowerment and advocate forms of practice that engage all three. Some have drawn on both feminist and critical race theories to critique the limitations of competing approaches and to articulate an alternative direction for social work. For example, Gutierrez and Lewis (1999) argue that social work can strive toward greater social justice by simultaneously promoting individual and social transformation. They recognize both the possibilities of human agency and the significance of cultural and political knowledge and history. Similarly, Simon (1990) asserts the importance of considering local knowledge, of contextualizing experience, and of attending to the microprocesses of power that shape worker-client relationships.

Empowerment approaches have been praised for bringing questions about power to the center of social work theory and practice and for recognizing the mutual constitution of the individual and society. Interestingly, advocates have also asserted that the empowerment approach is compatible with an ecological approach (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999). This raises questions about the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of empowerment, given the critiques of ecosystems theory discussed above. Concepts of empowerment have also been criticized for being so broadly applied to such diverse aspects of practice

that the term becomes meaningless. Further, the language of empowerment has been appropriated at times to describe punitive practice. For example, the time limits imposed by welfare reform under Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programs have been described by proponents as "incentives" that "empower" poor people to get off welfare. Critics have argued that this use of the term masks the power relations in the politics of welfare and makes poverty a personal problem that can be ameliorated through "self-help" and without structural change.

Other detractors have argued that social workers may be more likely to embrace the language than the practice of empowerment. For example, Margolin's (1997) insightful and unsettling critique of social work cautions that the discourse of empowerment is deceptive at best because it mystifies or obscures the controlling, silencing, and productive power of social work practice. He points to the ways in which the language of empowerment is deployed to mask practices through which social workers "stabilize middle-class power by creating an observable, discussible, write-aboutable poor" (p. 5).

### **Expanding the Theoretical Possibilities**

We have highlighted some of the possibilities and limitations of dominant social work theory. As we have discussed, systems approaches have drawn attention to context. Structuralists have critically attended to power, conflict, and the "order of things." Advocates of a strengths perspective have drawn attention to human agency, creativity, and capacity. Empowerment approaches,

along with a number of narrative, social constructionist, and "postmodern" approaches, have variably addressed questions about meaning, power, and knowledge in social work. Some of these approaches have emphasized questions of meaning, others have addressed relations of power and inequality, and a few have attended to questions of history (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Laird, 1993; Leonard, 1997; Mullaly, 1997; Parton, 1996; Payne, 1997; Pease & Fook, 1999; Rossiter, 1996; Swigonski, 1994). However, we contend that none of these perspectives have articulated an integrated approach to social work that theoretically and practically links themes of meaning, power, and history to the context and possibilities of justice-oriented practice. They do not prompt us to systematically address questions regarding the production of meaning and difference, the construction of social subjects and structured inequalities, the intersections of multiple forms and relations of power and domination, and the possibilities and constraints of historical conditions. The terrain of discourse and practice circumscribed by the dominant models largely excludes questions regarding the tensions between economic globalization, civil society, and the role of individual states and the ways that these tensions are manifested in people's everyday experience. These issues are fundamental to any grounded discussion of social justice in the 21st century (Briar-Lawson, et al., 2001).

In contrast to the United States, these questions are central to the social work imagination in other national and political contexts. For example, the Comité Mercosur de Organizaciones Profesionales de Trabajo

Social y Servicio Social (Committee of Social Work and Social Service Professional Organizations of the Southern Cone of Latin America, 2000; Mercosur refers to a regional trade pact among member countries Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay, and associate member, Chile) has put forth a political and ethical statement regarding the practice of social work that calls for social workers to: (1) defend the expansion and consolidation of democracy, (2) promote the creation of new spaces of public participation and real access for all persons to socially-produced material and cultural goods, (3) reject the transference of state responsibility for social support to civil society and voluntary philanthropy, and (4) contribute to maintaining the collective memory of the people. The concerns expressed in these principles reflect these countries' recent political histories and contemporary struggles. Unfortunately, within the dominant constructions of social work in the United States we seldom grapple with the underlying epistemological, ethical, and political issues regarding how we create knowledge of the social world and how we employ that knowledge in social interventions. We may address questions of meaning and interpretation, yet we tend to operate from assumptions of persons and society as knowable, separable entities. Little attention is given to the politics of knowledge production through which particular understandings of social problems and interventions, informed by certainties imbricated in the dominant order, constitute the terrain of what can be discussed or accomplished in social work. In practice, strategies for personal or interpersonal change tend to overshadow the struc-

turalists' interest in institutional transformation (Witkin, 1998). What are some possibilities for challenging the limits of theory and practice and realizing the potential of social justice work? We turn to the diverse and challenging field of critical social theory to address this question.

### Understanding Critical Social Theory

Over the past 2 decades there has been considerable attention devoted to the "crises" of theory throughout the social sciences (Agger, 1998). Critical social theorists have questioned the ideology of scientific objectivity and have explored the social construction of knowledge. They have challenged notions of deterministic, universal social laws and pointed to the possibilities of changing history. Some of these theoretical debates have filtered into social work, as evidenced by the increasing attention given to narrative, constructionist, and "postmodern" approaches (Laird, 1993; Leonard, 1997; Pease & Fook, 1999). In this section we explore some of these contributions and point out ways in which they have shaped our development of the Just Practice Framework.

The concept of *critical social theory* as used here encompasses a range of perspectives, including feminist, poststructural, and critical race theories. The significant differences among these perspectives are beyond the scope of this article, and they have been addressed elsewhere (e.g., Agger, 1998; Dirks, Eley, & Ortner, 1994; Figueira-McDonough, Netting, & Nichols-Casebolt, 1998; Hill Collins, 1990; Lemert, 1998; Weedon, 1987). These approaches have in common a critique of positivism (a worldview based on the assumption

that the social world exists as a system of distinct, observable variables, independent of the observer), a concern for questions of power, difference, and domination, attention to the interplay of structure and human agency, and a commitment to the transformation of structures and practices into more just social arrangements and relations (Agger, 1998). Critical social theorists are particularly concerned with the relationship between knowledge and power, questions regarding whose truth counts, and understanding how particular worldviews and interests come to dominate "common sense" (Foucault, 1977, 1980; Gramsci, 1987).

Some critical theorists have focused on questions of language and discourse in the construction of social reality (Derrida, 1976; Weedon, 1987). The concept of *discourse* refers to methods of constituting knowledge as well as social practices, forms of subjectivity, and relations of power. French philosopher Michel Foucault defined discourses as "historically variable ways to specifying knowledge and truth—what is possible to speak at any given moment" (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). For example, as Pease and Fook (1999, p. 14) note, social work itself is a discourse that "defines what a client is and what a social worker is. It also lays down rules for how they are to interact." Other theorists have pursued the relationship between practices of knowledge production, the making of social subjects, and the logic of capitalism (Harvey, 1989; Rouse, 1995; Williams, 1977). They have drawn from the work of Antonio Gramsci as they explore the role of cultural and economic systems in producing particular kinds of social subjects, shaping these subjects' dispositions and de-



sires, and engaging people as participants in hegemonic systems that continue to oppress them (Gramsci, 1987). More recently, theorists have shifted attention to questions concerning late capitalism, which is characterized by the global reorganization of work and the creation of new social subjects and strategies of resistance (Harvey, 1989; Rouse, 1995). They have drawn attention to globalization as both an ideology and a political strategy, and they have recognized the transnational penetration of neoliberal economic politics and practices as a driving force in the production of new forms of social exclusion and political conflict (Alvarez, Dagnino, & Escobar, 1998; Lowe & Lloyd, 1997; Piven & Cloward, 1997). These themes and concerns have informed the foundation of our thinking, but a more in-depth exploration is not possible in this introductory presentation of critical social theory (for more on discourse, domination, and globalization, see Finn & Jacobson, 2003). In the following discussion, we summarize some specific ideas from the work of feminist, critical race, and practice theorists that have influenced our development of the Just Practice Framework. We find this material both "hard to think" and "good to think;" that is, we argue that engagement with ideas that push us out of our comfort zones is part of the process of social justice work.

### **Feminism and Critical Race Theories**

Feminist perspectives have made important contributions to critical social theory, social work practice, and our thinking about just practice. Feminist movements have challenged the political, social, and economic

marginalization of women and the systems of thought and practice that have informed and justified gender inequality. Feminist theorists and activists have addressed the connection of the personal and the political and have critically examined the politics of family and everyday life that have contributed to women's oppression. In social work, feminist scholars have explored assumptions about gender, women, marriage, and family that have informed and continue to inform social welfare policies (e.g., Abramowitz, 1998; Gordon, 1990). In their discussion of the integration of gender and feminist thought into social work practice knowledge, Figueira-McDonough et al. (1998) have articulated a set of intellectual and practical guidelines that reflect the principles of feminism and critical theory. Some of these guidelines include the recognition of gender as a complex social, historical, and cultural product; attention to particular histories, contexts, and social formations that challenge universalist assumptions; and the awareness that the end of subjugation, not difference, is the goal of action. These principles undergird our thinking about just practice.

Critical theorists have also challenged *scientific racism*, which is the body of knowledge about race produced within the biological and social sciences that is designed to "prove" the inferiority of people of color. These theorists have addressed the social construction of race, ethnicity, and racist ideologies; the processes of *racialization*, which is the assignment of racial meaning to a previously neutral event; and the practices of everyday racism as well as the social and institutional structures of inequality. They



have examined the mutually constituting relationships between race, difference, discourse, and inequalities (e.g., Gates & West, 1996; Gilman, 1985; Marable, 1997, 1999; West, 1993). Important linkages between race and gender theories have been addressed in the work of “third-world” feminists, women of color, and other critical race theorists (e.g., Hill Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1991). These critics have also emphasized the importance of examining the specific historic, economic, and cultural contingencies and gendered strategies when responding to social problems rather than falling back on simple generalizations about ethnicity, class, and gender.

### Theories of Practice

The Just Practice Framework is grounded in a reconceptualization of practice that is informed by critical social and cultural theory. The term *practice* in contemporary social theory does not have the same meaning as *practice* in the traditional social work sense that refers to a series of planned interventions. Rather, practice refers more broadly to human action in the world as a process wherein we are both shaped by the prevailing social order and are active participants in the creation of that order (this idea of practice is informed by a range of contemporary anthropological and sociological inquiry, see Bourdieu, 1977; Dirks, Eley, & Ortner, 1994; Giddens, 1979; Ortner, 1989, 1996; Sahlins, 1981; Sewell, 1992). Practice theorists have attempted to place human agency and social action at the center of new social theory. They are responding to what they see as overly deterministic structural approaches that ig-

nore human actors, and overly “actor-oriented” approaches that neglect attention to the structural forces that shape and constrain human action (Giddens, 1979). They appreciate both the human capacity for making meaning and the lived, material reality of human pain and possibility. As anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1996) describes, “within a practice framework, there is an insistence, as in earlier structural-determinist models, that human action is constrained by the given social and cultural order (often condensed in the term ‘structure’); but there is also insistence that human action *makes* ‘structure’—reproduces or transforms it, or both” (p. 2). Practice theorists, such as Dirks, Eley, and Ortner (1994), also attend to questions of power and argue that

all relations of everyday life bear a certain stamp of power. . . people acting as men and women, parents and children, teachers and students, doctors and patients, priests and penitents, can no longer be regarded as performing functionally defined “roles.” Rather, these terms define relations in which the parties, whatever else they may do, are constantly negotiating questions of power, authority, and the control of definitions of reality. (p. 4)

Practice theorists are concerned with the interplay of culture, power, and history in the making of social subjects and in the processes of social reproduction and change (Bourdieu, 1977; Dirks, Eley, & Ortner, 1994). For example, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu asks how it is that we come to naturalize the arbitrary and internalize the external. He in-

terrogates the patterns, practices, and routines of everyday life through which we reproduce the divisions, distinctions, and inequalities of society as a whole. He uses the concept of *habitus* to describe the socially acquired, internalized, and durable generative principles that dispose us to think, feel, and act in particular ways (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu contends that *habitus* is both a product of our acculturation into certain social groups and a generative source for action in the world. We acquire modes of emotional expression, styles of social interaction, notions of "taste," beliefs about difference, and so forth in the context of social groups, and we internalize these dispositions such that they largely "go without saying." At the same time they are generative schemes, that is, they form part of our creative repertoire for interpreting and acting in the world. For example, we are shaped by our class, gender, and race-based experience, and we bring these dispositions and schemes to bear in our experiences as social workers (and clients) as both resources and constraints. Further, we are shaped by the language, practices, and meaning systems of social work itself, which offer particular schemes for making sense of problems and strategies for helping with them. The practice perspective offers a "both and" approach that acknowledges the very real experience of human suffering and struggle while simultaneously insisting that human experience is never outside of our socially constructed systems of meaning and power.

A number of practice theorists have drawn on the work of Foucault in thinking about the disciplinary practices at work in the shaping of social subjects, discourses, and relations.

Foucault paid particular attention to localized, institutional contexts, such as clinics and prisons, where one could witness the power of "disciplinary practices" that contributed to the production of particular kinds of social subjects, such as patients and prisoners. He was concerned with the discursive power of modern scientific reason and practices of measurement and classification, to "produce" particular kinds of subjects in need of treatment or containment (see Foucault, 1977; Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999, Pease & Fook 1999). Foucault argued that power is not ultimately in the strong arm of the state, but rather it is a productive force exercised through relations between people (Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1980). Rose (2000) translates these ideas about power into the context of social work. He describes his interaction as a young, white, middle-class male social worker meeting with Michael, an angry young black man. Rose (2000) examines the power of social work thought and practice as it "produces" Michael as a particular kind of client at the same time that it negates his social reality:

Professional language and its interpretive scheme, with terms like "acting out," or "decompensation," reproduced the received reality of Michael's life. . . . Michael lived a reality that had no legitimation in a world that granted my agency, my profession, and my professional identity both status and delegated power. I learned, too, that this received power and status carried limits. I was confined to reproducing contained identities (roles and the assumptions that rationalize them) that fit into prevailing functional relationships,

their rationalizing social structures (institutions such as work and the family, the dual ethos noted by Mimi Abramovitz) and norms.

The theory for practice that I had learned and its derived practice skills were dependent on the validity of these identities and their seemingly functional reciprocity in contained dominant relationships and structures. These identities, structures, and the social context for their development were all subtly communicated as foundation assumptions in my social work education. Normative models of human development confirmed this in the form of trained perceptions of deviance and ownership of the right to classify it. I acted to reproduce these assumptions, through a knowledge base gained in graduate study and field work, at the expense of people who were barred from access to define their own lives—as I was. (pp. 405-06)

Rose's personal account reflects the interplay of structure, power, and human agency central to practice theory. In sum, practice theory considers the ways in which people internalize constraining social forces, the creative human actions that expose the gaps and challenge the wholeness of the existing social systems, and the making of social actors as they both reproduce and change these systems (Ortner, 1984, 1996). Although the language of practice theory may sound unfamiliar to social workers, we argue that the issues practice theorists are grappling with go to the theoretical and practical heart of the profes-

sion, as Rose's example illustrates. Working from a practice perspective, we are challenged to consider the cultural and political processes and historical contexts in which we construct social problems; imagine "clients," "helpers," and their respective roles and relationships; and develop social policies and intervention technologies. The practice perspective makes power, inequality, and transformational possibilities the foci of concern, thus offering a theoretical bridge between the concept of social justice and the practice of social work.

Our abbreviated discussion does not do justice to the richness and complexity of this theoretical terrain. Our purpose in this section has only been to point to some of the important influences on our thinking and to offer readers some theoretical benchmarks. We turn now to the Just Practice Framework.

### **Introducing the Just Practice Framework**

These significant, critical interventions have posed challenges to the dominant modes of social work theory and practice. We reflected on these epistemological and theoretical issues in light of our own practice and questions of social justice which stemmed from this experience. We began to build our own critical thinking around the five key themes of just practice: *meaning*, *context*, *power*, *history*, and *possibility*. What were we pulling from these influences that helped us envision social justice work? Could these five themes provide a framework for critical reflection and action? If we connected these independent ideas to one another, what new possibilities for thought and practice might emerge?

In the following paragraphs we develop our thinking on the five key themes.

*Meaning.* Meaning is often defined as the purpose or significance of something. All human beings are meaning makers. We engage in the practice of cultural production and make sense of the world and our experiences through lenses shaped by our location in the world. Meaning as a key concept brings attention to interpretive processes and to the partial and subjective nature of our understanding of the social world. An integral part of the ability to create culture is the capacity for the production of "difference" (Turner, 1997). Thus, our capacity for interpretation is also always a capacity for misinterpretation.

The process of engaging with others develops, recreates, challenges, negotiates, and affirms meaning. Therefore the search for meaning requires reflexivity, a process of self-reference and examination. It calls for questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about reality and for the consideration of multiple and contested interpretations. It is through dialogue about difference that we can begin to explore possible patterns that connect disparate perspectives and concerns.

*Context.* Context can be thought of as the set of circumstances and conditions that surround and influence particular events and situations. Fundamental to social work's claim of uniqueness is its understanding of individuals, groups, organizations, and communities as always existing within a larger framework of social, political, and economic relationships and interactions. Attention to context entails an appreciation of the emotional, cultural, and physical surroundings of our work. Context structures the meaning

and feelings through which we make sense of people, events, and circumstances. If we ignore context, our interpretation is myopic and we miss intricate connections, patterns, and relationships. Context pushes us beyond generic discourses of "structure" to the specific examination of the micropractices, schema, relations, resources, and discourses through which structures translate to practice (Ortner, 1989)

*Power.* Power has been defined in varying ways that range from the abstract to the practical. Wrong (1995) defines power as the "capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others" (p. 2). Others view power from the standpoint of domination, exclusion, and repression. As we mentioned above, Foucault (1980) describes the relational, productive nature of power. Bourdieu (1984) writes about the importance of symbolic power, which he describes as the power to impose the principles of reality construction on others. He argues that this is a key aspect of political power. Others have pointed to the power of language and rhetoric, the power of emotion, and the power of collective memory as sources for resistance and motivations for action by those people who are in less powerful positions (Freire, 1990; Gramsci, 1987; Kelly & Sewell, 1988; Tonn, 1996). Based on the experience of poor rural women in Mexico, Townsend, Zapata, Rowlands, Alberti, and Mercado (1999) have conceptualized four forms of power: (1) power over, (2) power from within, (3) power with, and (4) power to do. They describe *power over* as personal and institutional forms of oppression that inflict these individuals as poor women. As these women came together to

share their struggles and their hopes with other Mexican women, they discovered *power from within*. They encountered *power with* others as they organized to confront the conditions of their lives. And they addressed *power to do* in concrete terms, such as developing and sustaining community projects and making money. We find each of these perspectives informative in grappling with multiple forms, practices, and relations of power. Social justice work calls on us to ask how power is created, produced, legitimized, and used and to understand how relations of power influence the nature of social work practice.

*History.* It is through attention to history and to historical contexts and narratives that we can appreciate the dynamic interplay of social structures and human agency (Ortner, 1989) and the socially constructed nature of knowledge (Gergen, 1999). Attention to history moves us beyond here-and-now pragmatism and creates spaces for the examination of the structures, practices, and assumptions that have shaped our present circumstances. Carr (1961) writes that "the facts of history never come to us 'pure,' since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form; they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder" (p. 16). Tuhiwai Smith (1999), writing from an indigenous perspective, points out that history has largely been told from the perspective of the colonizers. She asserts the importance of understanding the history of specific modes of oppression, of impoverished social conditions, and of institutionalized forms of inequality, and she advocates for the reclamation of histories as a critical aspect of decolonization.

Freire (1990) contends that we are historical beings. History is a human creation and

we are continually making history and being shaped by history. This idea opens up spaces of possibility and hope as people actively seek to create history and be created by history. Looking back enables one to see what Reisch (1988) calls the "connective tissue": the interplay between everyday means of being and relating and the institutional forces that have helped shape them.

*Possibility.* A sense of possibility enables us to look at what has been done, at what can be done, and at what can exist. Possibility draws attention to human agency, which is the capacity to act in the world as an intentional, creative, meaning-making being, whose actions are shaped and constrained but never fully determined by life circumstances. We can think of possibility as a challenge to fatalistic thinking wherein "that which has been will always be." As historian E. P. Thompson reminds us, it is possible for people to make something of themselves other than what history has made of them (Thompson, 1963). Tuhiwai Smith (1999) describes possibility as imagining alternative metaphors for human engagement. Rose (2000) contends that by letting go of assumptions about intervention and the interpretive themes of expertise, we as social workers can open ourselves, enter our client's worlds, and recognize the client as our teacher. Australian social work educators Anthony Kelly and Sandra Sewell (1988) write about "a trialectic logic," or a logic of possibility, as a key aspect of practice:

the task of a trialectic logic is to grasp a sense of wholeness which emerges from at least three sets of possible relationships among factors. . . it is out of the context of

their interdependent relationships that new insight into social realities can emerge, and hence new ways to solve problems. (pp. 22-23)

Kelly & Sewell use examples such as the relationship among "head, heart, and hand" and "being, doing, and becoming" to illustrate this logic of possibility. As we expand our possibilities for thinking, we may change the way a problem is perceived and therefore envision new possibilities for action. It is this spirit of hope and sense of possibility that we wish to infuse into the thinking and practice of social justice work.

The five key themes addressed here provide a foundation for posing critical questions and for imagining other possible realities and pathways for practice. We offer two concrete illustrations of the interplay between meaning, context, power, history, and possibility in practice. First, consider a situation in which fundamentally different conceptions of health and illness collide. In her thought-provoking book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Fadiman (1997) tells the story of a Hmong child, Lia Lee, who is diagnosed with epilepsy. Cultures collide when her family and her U.S. doctors seek to treat and give meaning to her illness. Lia's newly arrived refugee parents understand the illness as "soul loss," and they seek aid from Shamans while also trying to incorporate some "American" understandings of the body, illness, and healing. Lia's doctors understand her illness through the belief system of Western biomedicine and intervene based on their own expertise. Although both the family and the doctors want the best for the

child, the lack of understanding and the power differences between them have tragic consequences. As Fadiman explains, Lia's illness and the possibilities for intervention needed to be understood in the context of Hmong cultural and historical experience and of the political and economic realities of recent immigration. Likewise, the situation needed to be understood from the context of Western medicine, and adequate time and space should have been provided for effective interpretation and advocacy. Instead, the power of the doctors' medical expertise coupled with the power of the child welfare system imposed the "American" view of the problem and the correct intervention on the family, curtailing possibilities for discovering a more just approach in the process. Imagine yourself as a hospital or child protective service social worker. Can you see how the five key themes might serve as a guide for critical reflection and action in this complex situation?

Now let us consider an example of social work practice in the context of welfare reform. Imagine yourself as a social worker employed at a state-funded family-service agency. Your job includes such tasks as determining clients' eligibility for benefits, enforcing sanctions in response to noncompliance to policy directives, and addressing the barriers that prevent a single mother with two children from participation in the workforce. How might the Just Practice Framework guide your thinking and practice? We pose some sample questions prompted by the key themes and suggest that, taken together, these themes enable us to grasp a more critical understanding of the situation and of possible courses of action.



*Meaning.* What are the meanings of *family*, *dependency*, and *self sufficiency* that inform current welfare policy and practice? How do these meanings fit with your own understandings of these terms? How might these meanings differ from the experience and understanding of the *client*, a single mother of two seeking assistance? How does she make sense of her situation? How might you validate her views and acknowledge your own perspectives as well?

*Context.* How does the organizational context shape your interaction with this single mother? How might class, race, or gender-based images both inform your agency's policies and practices and shape the interaction between you as a social worker and the single mother? How might you discuss these issues while addressing the immediate circumstances of her life?

*Power.* How do the power relations that shape public policy impact this interaction? Who has the power to make and enforce decisions that affect this woman's life? What power do you have in this situation and how can you share it? What power does the mother have and how might she exercise it? Is it meaningful to speak of empowerment here, and if so, what specific forms might it take? How might you make power a theme that can be discussed?

*History.* How have past experiences and circumstances shaped the way you perceive this mother and her situation? What prejudices may be involved? What past events and circumstances have shaped the mother's perceptions? How do broader histories of racism, sexism, heterosexism, or classism infiltrate the relationship?

*Possibility.* What are the possibilities for renaming and reframing the encounter? How might the mother's view and voice be validated? How might she be brought in as a meaningful participant in the decisions that affect her life? How can you best practice advocacy within the time, resource, and policy constraints of the position? How might you challenge the limits of those constraints in the process?

### Conclusion

The Just Practice Framework challenges us to examine how we give *meaning* to people's experiences in the context of social work and how certain assumptions gain currency at certain moments in time. It guides us to look at the *context* of social problems and question the relations of *power*, domination, and inequality that shape the way knowledge of the world is produced and that decide whose view counts. It pushes us to recognize the importance of *history* for providing insight on how definitions of social problems and the structuring and shaping of institutions and individuals are time specific and contextually embedded. Finally, this framework opens up the *possibility* for new ways of looking at and thinking about programs, policies, and practices, and for envisioning ourselves and the people with whom we work as active participants and co-learners in the process of change. We posed the question of whether the five key themes can provide the necessary elements of a new foundation for social work thought and practice. We argue that these principles are essential, however, it would be contrary to the view presented here to suggest that they are sufficient. In this discussion we are proposing steps toward a new paradigm,



one that embraces an emergent, dialogical approach to knowledge development and practice. This objective calls for a recognition of the partiality of our knowledge, an openness to alternative perspectives, and a willingness to rethink the processes, roles, and relationships that define the predominant approaches to social work. By addressing these issues, social workers will be better prepared to address the 21st-century social challenges posed by economic globalization, growing inequality, and social exclusion.

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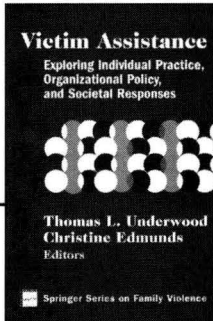
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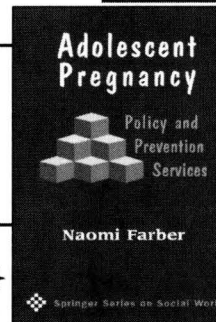


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