

## Knowledge and Social Work

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December 2, 2008<sup>2</sup>

### The Nature of Social Work

Social work is a practice profession that is driven, conditioned, and shaped by intersecting social processes. These include institutional processes of legitimization, sanction and control, discursive processes of values and objectives, the politics of knowledge production and utilization, and the political economy of service resources.

As a profession, social work is part of an institutional system which provides sanction and legitimization. Social work derives its legitimacy from institutions of power, such as government, academia, funders, organized religion, and corporate sponsors. These institutions often control the resources social workers and their service recipients need, as well as access to such resources, opportunities and life chances. These institutions of power, although legitimizing social work as a profession, tend to maintain their privileged voice and status, especially in situations of conflict. As members of a socially regulated profession, it is often difficult for social workers to resist and oppose these institutions of power. In our engagement with these institutions, we need

to maintain a clear sense of purpose and direction in order to utilize the sanction and resources they provide without severely compromising our social work mission and values.

Practitioners of social work often claim to be driven by a set of values, be them humanitarianism, liberal democracy, feminism, anti-racism, anti-oppression, critical theory, pro-family ideology, faith-based ethics, and the like. Social work professional organizations often articulate a unified set of values in their constitution, charter, or code of professional conduct. There is, however, variability in how these values are understood by members of the profession, the people they work with, and the community within which the professional organization is constituted. There is also significant variation in terms of the actual commitment to these articulated values by members of the profession. The idea of social justice, for example, is interpreted and applied very differently by social workers in different jurisdictions, and has variable importance within a social worker's professional value system. There is significant variation in what social workers are willing to commit or give up to uphold this value.

The articulated values themselves, reviewed from a critical discourse analysis perspective, often reflect what are valued by powerful groups in any given society within which social work is practiced. In Euro-American countries, "progressive" ideas endorsed by their social and intellectual elites are often inscribed on to official social work documents. Values espoused by

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<sup>2</sup> This address is written for the Symposium on Indigenous Social Work Practice held on January 3, 2009, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong

marginalized groups are often given secondary reference, such as in the case of cross-cultural practice. Social workers implement policies and programs which otherize and objectivize non-dominant cultures. They try to be sensitive and accommodating, whereas power and discursive control remain among members of the dominant group.

The profession's claim to power, authority, and resources is often based on its knowledge claims. Social work practice is supposedly based on specialized knowledge and skills possessed by members of the profession. Intellectual elites within the profession are in-charge of the production and legitimization of knowledge.

Organizational and institutional elites of the profession, following the directions of major institutions of power, monitor the selection of knowledge to be mobilized or implemented, and the resources required for such mobilization and implementation. In actual practice, however, social workers often combine professional knowledge with personal knowledge, which includes unexamined ideas and practices taken from personal experience and the enveloping social, cultural, and professional environment.

**Our position** is that while we recognize how our profession is conditioned and limited structurally, social work remains a viable process for bringing about personal and social change that we desire. We are motivated to strive for what we believe to be desirable, and we are aware of the contingent nature of our value commitments. We understand that our aspirations and our

methods need to be critically reviewed on an ongoing basis. Such review does not reduce us to skepticism and inaction, but enables us to revise our strategies and practices with due regard to the changing realities around us, especially the desire, needs, circumstances and experience of the people we are supposed to serve. We know that the efficacy and the value of our work are related to the knowledge we possess and mobilize. We wish to remain active in our learning. We recognize that knowledge production is not the monopoly of intellectual elites, and we seek to learn from our clients, and collaborate closely with them in producing and mobilizing knowledge that will work for them.

### Beyond Epistemology: Knowledge is Our Business

#### Neo-Pragmatism and Epistemological Pluralism

Academic social work has not made much original contribution to epistemology. The pattern has been borrowing ideas from other disciplines such as philosophy, social theory, and political science. Prominent examples will include the widespread application of psychoanalytic theory in the 60s and 70s, and the usually unquestioned adoption of eco-systems theory, sometime without thoroughly understanding its core premise and key formulations. In the last three decades or so, social work has gone on a shopping spree and taken a few items on its shopping cart, including post-positivism, constructivism, constructive realism, and an assortment of ideas from feminism, critical

theory, post-colonial discourse analysis, and so on. What we have noted is that most social workers are either uninterested or uninformed with regard to epistemology. Most academics who are engaged with epistemological inquiry tend to believe that a singular epistemological position is sufficient for all their practice and scholarly engagements. Many of our colleagues are comfortable in diagnosing others and themselves as post-positivist, positivist-empiricist, constructivist, and the like. Our position is that the human life-world is too complex to be adequately managed with a singular epistemological position.

Our approach to knowledge is grounded in everyday life, a foundation that we share with the people we serve or work with. Social work is a profession that is concerned with people and their lives, inclusive of their lived experience, and the material conditions that make such experience possible. We negotiate realities and meanings across the physical, material order and the symbolic order of meaning and significance. In the area of family violence, for example, we are simultaneously concerned with whether someone has actually been harmed physically or not, how marriage or parenthood is understood, family and cultural norms, intersecting discourses on the relative value of family integrity versus personal safety, legislation, political economy of service delivery, the victimization of marginalized and underprivileged groups, and so on. It is unlikely that a single epistemological position will provide us and the people we serve with all the knowledge we need.

Given the pragmatic objectives of social workers, that is to bring about desired personal and/or social change in different areas of life, our approach to knowledge should at least recognize the pragmatic aim of any given social engagement. A few of us went to Sichuan after the earthquake on May 12, 2008 to work with the people there. Some of us have to figure out getting enough food and temporary shelter for the people affected, and some of us have to get meticulous on the thickness of the building material and the insulation, the effective temperature range of the insulation, and the straightforward number of cooking pots needed to prepare meals. Other colleagues have to work with emotional trauma of people who lost their loved ones. Some of us work with teachers and people in position of responsibility who blamed themselves for the death and suffering of others. Some of us work with relief agencies and government offices to access resources to support our work. We have applied knowledge based on positivist-empiricist research, critical discourse analysis, symbolic interactionism, social constructivism, post-colonial theory, feminism, and other systems within the same day, sometimes within the same meeting.

### In Search of Our Own Knowledge Base

What is clear to us is that we are not the only people in possession of valid and worthwhile knowledge. The people we work with almost always bring in knowledge that we need in order to do meaningful social work. Being able to listen and to learn from people we work with is probably one of the most important aspects of social work

knowledge and method. This position implies that we do not bring all the knowledge we need to a social work situation. There is always something we do not know; and many important human decisions, including social work decisions, are made on the basis of incomplete knowledge. This ‘not-knowing’ position does not imply that we move on to undisciplined practice based on personal whimsies, but rather a constant readiness to learn through active and purpose-driven inquiry.

The typical academic preparation that social workers go through usually does not include thorough reflection on the issue of knowledge. Our position is that knowledge is central to social work as a practice profession, and deserves more attention by our colleagues. Social workers often have the impression that our professional knowledge is a hodgepodge combining bits and pieces from disciplines such as sociology and psychology. We are sometimes embarrassed about the lack of elegant and well-respected social work theories. Even the ecological-systems theory that is often used to distinguish social work from other disciplines, mainly psychology and psychiatry, was not originally developed by social workers. We suspect some of our social work colleagues are secretly suffering from an inferiority complex. This lack of security, confidence, or pride in our professional knowledge base feeds easily into a special vulnerability to fads that pass as a promise of the much-craved-for knowledge and professional pride. Our fascination with psychoanalysis was one example, and our subsequent embrace of

treatments of the decade such as brief-solution-focused therapy and cognitive therapy is probably connected to the same mental state. For colleagues less involved with clinical practice, we have tried to build systems of practice such as structural social work, and more recently anti-oppressive practice, out of elements adopted from the critical theories cluster, including feminism, anti-racist thinking, post-colonial theory, and so on. The relative lack of development in the practical and technical aspects of such system is partially explainable in terms of where and what we are borrowing from – theoretical systems developed by people who are not practitioners themselves.

**Our position** is that whereas knowledge is central to our practice as social workers, (including how we make sense, analyze, or assess, how we formulate and design strategies for change, and how we execute them systematically), we actually occupy privileged sites of knowledge production. The self-doubt and inferiority experienced by some of our colleagues are tied to our lack of faith and respect both for our own work and the knowledge possessed by the people we work with. Our clients are not passive recipients of the effects of our professional knowledge, but are active agents who can collaborate with us in producing and using knowledge to bring about desired change. Our knowledge and power as a profession is founded on such collaborative knowledge production and utilization processes between us and the people we serve.

The Epistemological Advantage of Social Work

Many social work colleagues are not aware of the fact that we occupy privileged sites of knowledge production by virtue of our extensive and in-depth engagement with human realities. Social workers, probably more than any other profession, get involved in a wide range of challenging human situations, ranging from personal crisis to natural disasters. Social work colleagues around the world work with people displaced and traumatized by war, victims of torture, people with severe mental illness, people living in extreme poverty, communities with various needs and challenges, and we have to interface with a diverse range of systems and institutions.

Our engagement across this wide spectrum is also characterized by depth. The depth of our engagement is guaranteed by our mandate to bring about change. Colleagues from other academic disciplines can be satisfied with an intellectual understanding these human realities, but social workers have to change them. This pragmatic objective demands a working knowledge that corresponds to the empirical realities experienced by our clients and informs strategies and actions that will make a difference. Theoretical formulations, however elegant, are of limited value to the social worker if it is not connected to the pragmatic aim of change.

Not having a clearly demarcated knowledge system of our own can be a blessing in disguise. The need to incorporate knowledge from other disciplines and knowledge systems prepares social workers for active selection and integration of knowledge from diverse sources. It also

requires us to negotiate multiple ways of knowing, and multiple methods of knowledge production.

What is most important for us is the knowledge of the people we work with. Social workers are trained to listen to their clients and to engage with their realities. We have privileged access to their ways of knowing and reality construction, as well as wisdom and insights gained through struggles with challenging circumstances in their lives. Whereas we have valuable lessons to learn from scholars and researchers, we need to guard against the arrogance of elite discourse that may displace the voice and the lived experience of the people we work with. Learning to respect and value our clients as producers of knowledge puts social work in a unique position in the politics of knowledge production and utilization. A major source of knowledge that social workers utilize is the experience of interaction with our clients, through which we negotiate meanings and alternative constructions of reality. In social work practice, it is often the knowledge co-constructed in this site of client-practitioner interaction that leads to understanding, insight, action and change.

Many colleagues in the human service professions, including those in social work, subscribe to a model of expert knowledge. This model imagines knowledge production in the hands of the experts, who produces knowledge through particular research procedures. Such knowledge is then considered evidence, or a superior form of knowledge which is held to be more valid or reliable, and taken to form the base of social

work practice. Colleagues who share this imagination are more likely to assume an instrumental approach to knowledge. The idea is that the practitioner has access to expert knowledge and evidence, which inform their practice. The expert brings such knowledge and practice systems to the practice situation in order to cause change in the client's situation. The drug metaphor is perhaps the best example of this thinking. Social work interventions are conceived as standardized active ingredients causing change in the client's reality. The professional applies scientifically validated knowledge to carefully classified conditions, which are then expected to respond to the treatment in an orderly manner. Whereas this metaphor can be useful in certain types of social work activities, it is probably not applicable to all social work contexts.

It is important for social work colleagues to pay attention to the process of such knowledge production or evidence manufacturing. In the area of clinical practice, for instance, samples selected to test specific treatment methods often do not represent the populations they are then applied to. Ethno-racial minorities, people with multiple diagnoses, people in extreme poverty and those who are homeless are rarely included in those randomized clinical trials. People claiming to use evidence-based practice usually do not provide evidence that they are actually practicing what has been tested in those trials, strictly in accordance to the treatment manuals.

Advocates of evidence-based practice sometimes do not realize social workers are often dealing with situations that have not

been adequately researched, and for which specific professional knowledge has not been developed. Evidence-based knowledge and related theories, if available, may be helpful in such situations in facilitating understanding and analysis, and suggesting possible strategies of intervention and change. The challenge for us is to realize the potentials and limits of our existing body of knowledge when we try to use them together with our clients. We may need to study the situation in a methodical and disciplined manner, often in collaboration with our clients and people in their lives. In a way, social workers are always searching and researching whenever they come across novel and challenging situations. Our theoretical understanding and our empirical knowledge are constantly being tested in our everyday practice. In a sense, knowledge and practice are never separate in our day to day work. We have not done a good job in systematically documenting our experience, including our questions, experimentations, hunches, reflections, lessons learned, discoveries, and insights. Social workers before us referred to this as practice wisdom. There was a time in our professional history that practice wisdom was respected and valued, but increasingly this form of knowledge is giving way to the hegemonic articulations of empirical science.

**Our position** is that formal theory building, empirical research, and evidence-gathering are all important aspects of professional knowledge building. They, however, should not displace the other forms of knowledge building in social work. As a profession grounded in lived realities, social work is in a privileged position to test

multiple forms of knowledge in collaboration with our clients. The discipline of critical inquiry should be brought to all our knowledge production and knowledge mobilization processes. We have always been developing ideas about human realities and change, even when they are not well-articulated. As a professional group, we may want to create and nourish more space for us to articulate these ideas, to share them among ourselves, to examine them critically in a collegial manner, and to revise them with reference to our work with our clients. It is important for us to document both the process and the outcome of such inquiry. Whereas the current body of professional publications is dominated by the conventions of academia, often excluding the voices of practitioners and clients, we need to explore alternative platforms for their input and dialogue. This is what our current forum hopes to provide.