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CHAPTER 8

SOCIAL WORK FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: STRENGTHENING PRACTICE WITH THE POOR THROUGH CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Julia Pryce

This chapter focuses on the ways by which Catholic social teaching (CST), specifically the CST value of the “preferential option for the poor,” is present in social work education and practice. That this should require mention in a book devoted to Christian social work practice reflects the central argument advanced in this chapter. That is, despite clear calls to both social work education and Catholic social workers to put the needs of the poor in the foreground, the mission of social work practice seems to be partially characterized by viewing poverty as another aspect of “diversity” that, while respected, is not a career focus of social work students or of the programs training them. In this chapter, a brief discussion of the “preferential option for the poor” and its relationship to larger Christian teachings will lead to an analysis of how CST is reflected in the social work Code of Ethics (COE), social work practice, and social work education. Finally, specific examples of ways to better integrate CST into social work practice and education will challenge social workers of all faiths to re-examine their own commitments to practice the preferential option for the poor.

Case Example #1: A Catholic Hospital Adrift?

Helen was a BSW student doing her field placement in the inpatient unit of a Catholic hospital. She loved the work and felt that her calling to be a hospital social worker was validated by the feeling of relief she saw in her patients as she helped them with discharge planning. However, she recently had been troubled by some changes she witnessed at the hospital. Along with her supervisor, she attended a meeting at the hospital where the Chief Operating Officer (COO) discussed the need for the hospital to market their services to potential patients from the newly-gentrifying neighborhood around the hospital. These new neighbors were affluent and represented a stark contrast to the low-income, largely immigrant population that this Catholic hospital served over its 100 year history. During the meeting, the COO invited staff to join in the strategic planning process to “chart this new course” for the hospital. Following the meeting, Helen asked for an overview of the economic pressures facing the hospital at this time and reviewed the particulars with another

staff member. While at Mass in the hospital chapel later that day, Helen found herself wondering about the hospital's new direction and whether she should inquire about her supervisor's intentions in advocating that the hospital preserve its mission and prioritize serving the poor. "Isn't that the role of a Catholic hospital? Isn't that its purpose?" she wondered to herself. Subsequently, Helen considered how to advocate for ways by which the hospital could preserve its mission while responding to the current financial pressures it was facing.

Perspectives on Change from the frameworks of Christianity and Social Work

Helen's experience might resonate with many social workers, whether Christian or not. They may share Helen's concern that the agency or site where they work is failing its patient population. This tension may be particularly strong within students like Helen, given her Catholic beliefs and the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) that informs her concerns. From the perspective of CST, the hospital's "new course" is not just about trying to make a profit; rather, it is about the hospital potentially abandoning a central aspect of its Catholic mission--the preferential option for the poor. As an approach, CST informs social work's core mission and is the basis for considering the intersection of CST and social work ethics.

The profession of social work has historically grappled with the ways by which change can occur at the individual and societal levels. Conversations between some of the mothers of the profession are well known for the struggle to identify the most appropriate way to address issues of justice among marginalized populations (Addams, 1911; 1990; Reynolds, 1934; 1951; Richmond, 1922). In more recent years, scholars have continued to consider the merit of addressing issues of social justice within social work curricula (Brenden, 2007; Longres & Scanlon, 2001; Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Abramovitz, 1998). Debates continue regarding the definition and nature of social justice (Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001; McPherson, Terry, & Walsh, 2010) and the contextual and political influences that contribute to its relevance at any given time.

In the midst of this struggle, the stated value placed by the profession on social justice via its Code of Ethics (COE) remains clear (NASW, 2008). The term "social justice" is referenced multiple times in the COE and is listed as one of the core ethical principles of the document (NASW, 2008). Further, social justice is referenced via a myriad of mission statements, both within secular and religious social work programs. Primary professional conferences, such as the Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting, continue to reference "justice" in their core themes (CSWE 2009).

Alongside the profession of social work, many Christian theologians and leaders have continuously prioritized the role of justice as core to their belief system, although the conceptualization has shifted over time. According to St. Augustine, for example, the source of justice comes from within. In other words, justice is the connection between an internal faith and external action

(Deane, 1963). Martin Luther, on the other hand, often conceived of justice in the context of education (Luther, Pelikan, Poellot, Hansen, Oswald, Grimm, Lehmann, & Hillerbrand, 1955). The social gospel movement, which preceded Vatican II, represents a Protestant Christian intellectual movement that was most prominent in the early 20th century. This movement was based on the idea that justice was critical to facilitating the second coming of Christ. That is, without the amelioration of social ills in the context of social justice, the second coming of Christ will not occur. Although the peak of this movement occurred in the mid-20th century, the principles of this movement continue to inspire more recent Protestant movements. These serve as just a few of many examples of the ways by which the founders of the Christian, and particularly Catholic, traditions have conceptualized social justice as central to the faith.

Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is based on church doctrine and Catholic social movements that have been incorporated into church teaching since the late 19th century (http://www.osjspm.org/social_teaching_documents.aspx, 2008). While all aspects of CST are considered important for Catholics, most scholars and theologians agree that in the approach to social justice, the issue of the Catholic preferential option for the poor represents a central tenet and has been a more prominent focus of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict (Pope John Paul II, 1995; Twomey, 2005).

In concept, the preferential option for the poor was initially discussed over a century ago, in the 1891 papal encyclical, "*Rerum Novarum*: On the condition of workers", by Pope Leo XIII (Pope Leo XIII, 1891). Through this seminal work, *Rerum Novarum* addressed for the first time barriers that separated the church from the common worker. This encyclical's comprehensive treatment of such social issues set it apart from its counterparts. The concept was again prominently articulated as part of the liberation theologies of Latin America and was formalized in the Latin American Bishops Conferences in Medellin, Columbia in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico in 1979 (Twomey, 2005).

In its application, this option for the poor served to organize peasants in Latin America into more self-reliant "Christian-based communities," which began to create solidarity among participants. In the United States, however, consideration of the preferential option did not formally begin until the late 1970s and has vacillated in its doctrinal centrality since then. The approach within the United States differed some from that of the liberation theology movement, focusing more on responsibility to the larger community rather than specifically to that of the poor (U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1986). In other words, while the church is supposed to show a special solicitude for the poor, it should not ignore those who are not poor. This reflects the continuing debate in the laity and institutional church worldwide regarding the role the church should play in advocating for the poor in political and economic terms (Cooney, Medaille, & Harrington, 2002; Twomey, 2005).

When applying preferential option for the poor to real-life situations, roles can become muddled when the people working with the poor view themselves as saviors rather than as partners and fellow travelers. “Bill,” the social worker in our next case example, explores this tension when working with Catholic Charities to deliver mentoring programs to youth living in under-resourced neighborhoods.

Case Example #2: Mentoring At-Risk Youth: Saving or Solidarity?

Bill has recently graduated with his Masters of Social Work from a Catholic university. He is a recent convert to Catholicism, and was raised Lutheran. He was hired by Catholic Charities to provide training and supervision to three mentoring programs for at-risk, minority youth in suburban and rural areas in his region. At his first meeting with mentoring coordinators of each site, the discussion quickly turned to the shared sense of the staff that many of the recently recruited mentors are not following the goals of vocational mentoring in the program. One of the mentor coordinators said, “It’s like the mentors pity these kids and view them as needing a rescue from their families. . . one mentor told me last year that she returns home from her mentoring sessions so sad because she wishes she could adopt her mentee to give her a better life.” Another coordinator, acknowledging that her program serves youth who live in high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods, shared that she is struggling to find ways to get her mentors involved in the community and in the lives of their mentees’ families. “It’s like they just want to come to our building, do their mentoring, and get out of there as fast as they can.” Bill observed that all three of the mentoring programs used the parish house of the local Catholic parish as their meeting space. He made a note to himself to talk to the parish priest and his staff about how they might partner to create some community-focused events to encourage the mentoring programs to become better integrated into the surrounding communities. Additionally, he told the group that he intended to address the mentors’ approach through a revamped training program. The modified program would emphasize the importance of building healthy connections with their mentees by focusing on mentees’ strengths and dignity, rather than focusing only on their problems and perceived dysfunctions of their families.

Social Justice and the Practice of Social Work

As illustrated by the case example above, Bill is a Catholic social worker operating from the CST value of attending to the needs and strengths of the poor. Through this value base, he is actively seeking to make CST come alive in his social work practice by engaging the community and prioritizing its needs rather than allowing it to remain marginalized and misunderstood. However, while Bill should be applauded for these efforts, it is also critical to explore the origins of these values. It is not clear that Bill learned about the importance of CST as part of his MSW program at a Catholic school. As we will see in this next section, the infusion of CST in social work education is hardly a given, even when it involves teaching and learning about the poor.

The mission statements of Catholic schools of social work consistently reflect a desire to incorporate the values of faith and social justice into their curricula (Brenden, 2007). Similarly, scholars often promote the role of spirituality in professional education (Ai, 2002). The relationship between social work and religion is well documented through analysis of the literature (Graham & Shier, 2009), which specifically reinforces the importance of religion and spirituality in assessing the “person-in-environment” perspective of professional social work.

However, the integration of religion and spirituality into professional education has continued to be a struggle (Barker, 2007), as the role of spirituality in formal education remains in tension with more traditional approaches to learning (Cohlic, 2006). Further complicating this struggle is the lack of guidance provided in the curriculum for social work students about integrating professional social work with faith and spirituality (Northcut, 2005, Praglin, 2004). Additional challenges come from others who suggest that preparing students as social workers should not include an explicit focus on faith as part of the human experience (Sheridan, 1994).

In the context of these tensions, I developed, in collaboration with colleagues, a content analysis used to understand what is being taught in Catholic schools of social work (Pryce, Kelly, Reiland, & Wilk, 2011). In so doing, my aim was to understand how students are being prepared to grapple with concepts proposed by CST, particularly the “preferential option for the poor”, as social work professionals. Through this analysis, course syllabi of foundation level MSW courses were collected from 11 of the 12 accredited Catholic schools of social work. In total, 38 (N=38) syllabi were included in the analysis. After developing a coding manual together and employing several additional methods to ensure rigor and trustworthiness (Pryce et al., 2011), the research team coded these syllabi with particular attention to the ways by which course content descriptions, assignments, and themes addressed poverty.

Findings from the analysis suggest that concepts such as “diversity”, “strengths”, and “social justice” are emphasized far more than explicit attention to poverty in the four introductory-level core courses standard to first-year curricula within accredited Catholic MSW programs. Not surprisingly, policy courses attend to economic and structural issues more often than their clinical and practice-focused counterparts, particularly in terms of the kinds of assignments offered to students. Unfortunately, the analysis suggests that students are not receiving the kind of formal guidance and support in addressing issues of poverty in their courses, even in Catholic MSW programs. Instead, findings suggest that at this point, much responsibility is left to students themselves to systematically and critically engage issues of poverty within their education and practice (Pryce et al., 2011).

In this final case example, a group of MSW students at a Catholic institution extend the ideas of social justice and the preferential option for the poor into the vital current national debate about income inequality and its impact on American institutions.

Case Example #3: A Student Social Work Group Responds to the Occupy Wall Street Movement

As co-leaders of their MSW Student Organization, Tammy and Carla were concerned that their student colleagues were focusing their career aspirations too narrowly. In a meeting with other students, they cited a recent exit survey of students as a point of discussion. According to the survey, though many recent MSW graduates from their Christian program found work in government and not-for-profit social service agencies, students' greatest aspirations were to become private practice therapists. As the meeting progressed, the group argued about whether it would be prudent to offer a critique of their fellow students' career goals as part of their student organization.

In an effort to raise student awareness of the larger issues facing society, the group eventually agreed to hold a series of workshops explicitly addressing the issues raised by the Occupy Wall Street movement regarding the acceleration of income inequality in the United States. The workshops aimed to challenge students to examine policy-practice solutions that social workers can integrate into their future work to better address individual and structural issues related to income inequality and poverty. They decided to reach out to the national Catholic Charities Campaign to Reduce Poverty to seek technical assistance and speakers for the workshop series.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The work of students like Tammy and Carla need not be exceptional for future social work students if the profession (and religiously-affiliated schools of social work in particular) takes the initiative to return social work back to some of its first principles. For social work practice and education, I propose the following recommendations to students, faculty, and practitioners to strengthen social work programs and empower students in the efforts to increase attention to the needs of the poor.

1. *Students can attend to poverty explicitly and systematically in their education and choice of social work career path.* Although students bring hope and openness to the educational experience as aspiring social workers, students may not personally come from a lived experience of poverty. This is not meant as a criticism of new social work students as much as a reflection on the reality that Specht & Courtney (1994) identified over 15 years ago: many incoming social work students aspire to work as therapists, and intend to focus on mental health concerns most explicitly, often with clients possessing similar backgrounds to themselves (Perry, 2009). It is critical for social work students to challenge themselves and their peers (as Clara and Tammy did, above) to reflect on their identity as social workers within the historic context of the profession. This attention to the role of economic status seems to be of particular salience at this point in American life, as our country faces severe economic credit and housing crises, as reflected in the

burgeoning Occupy Wall Street movement. One way to engage in this reflection is to initiate action as a student body on behalf of social justice, particularly among the poor. Social work students can lead peers at their college or university to address justice issues. In a study of student writing (McPherson, Perry, & Walsh, 2010), the concept of action emerged as key to student understanding of social justice, despite the fact (according to the content analysis featured in this chapter) that the social work curricula do not seem to engage in this action-oriented framework. One's role and identity as a student may allow social work students the support needed to leverage some of these values in service of the community and profession.

2. *Students might exercise caution in “opting out” of addressing issues of poverty in assignments.* Although the chance to customize an assignment based on personal interests and comfort level is appealing and commonly offered, this approach, particularly within initial social work course work and practice, will likely significantly limit a student's experience with issues of poverty, both in the classroom and in the field. In other words, students can challenge themselves to incorporate issues of poverty into papers and group assignments. In so doing, social work students will gain experience and comfort in effectively addressing these complex issues (as Bill and Helen do in the case vignette above). Issues of poverty and social justice inevitably will be a component of students' future work (Davis & Wainwright, 2005).
3. *Both students and faculty must avoid the diversity trap in dealing with social justice issues related to poverty and the preferential option for the poor.* Based on the content analysis presented above, it is clear that all MSW programs examined are supportive of student interest in social justice on behalf of their clients. The problem, however, is that sometimes social justice is discussed under the concept of “diversity”, which may mask the structural and economic issues most powerful in addressing issues of poverty. While attending to issues of diversity (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race, religious identity) thoughtfully and competently in our practice is critical to the ethics of our profession, we may lose sight of the needs of the poor, who arguably suffer the most serious long-term negative life outcomes (e.g., health, life expectancy, educational attainment, exposure to violence), regardless of their race, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation (Iceland, 2006).
4. *All social workers, students, faculty, and practitioners must consider our commitment to the poor as critical to the future of the profession.* In extending findings from these MSW programs into the larger practice domain, it is important to consider the ways by which the absence of focus on issues of poverty may influence the profession of social work across domains. At the professional level, our ongoing distancing from the needs of the poor place both the profession and the larger society

at risk. If social workers fail to address the needs of the poor, a few questions will linger: can social work claim to be a profession that advocates effectively for the vulnerable when so little of our time is spent preparing new social workers to work effectively with clients in poverty? Without such an emphasis, what ultimately will distinguish social work from other helping professions that tend to offer psychotherapy as the main intervention to address clients' problems?

Broader implications

The complex issues highlighted in these various case vignettes outline some of the important challenges facing the profession of social work. Addressing these issues is imperative for our profession to provide effective service to those in economic need. Poverty continues to be the dominant social crisis in our society, and our current economic circumstances suggest it is of heightened concern. Recent data from the Census Bureau suggest that the number of Americans living below the poverty line reached its highest level since the inception of the Bureau in 1959. Along the same lines, median household income levels in 2010 fell to levels similar to those of 1997 (Tavernise, 2011). These data suggest a lack of growth within the middle class, and an even direr situation for the poor in the United States than previously understood.

In sum, students, educators, and practitioners must consider creative ways to support one another in working with clients impacted by poverty. This support is critical within all social work contexts, including those religiously-affiliated programs that may explicitly identify the unique importance of the poor. Such support can include facilitating collaboration, both at the student and professional levels, between more senior and junior social workers. Social work departments, including faculty and field staff, can work together to identify ways to enhance attention to issues of poverty in and outside the classroom. At a curricular level, improvements to syllabi can be complemented with explicit attention within field education to support students in learning about and contending with issues of poverty among their clients. Further, given the impact of federal and state budget cuts on systems of care, it is critical that social work educators engage students in formal exposure to advocacy (Kilbane, Pryce, & Hong, in press) as a means of addressing client needs within very serious fiscal constraints.

Beyond these suggested changes, it is worth considering ways that religiously-affiliated social work programs can engage issues of poverty explicitly around conversations regarding faith. For many social workers, a faith-based orientation toward working with the poor may prove more compelling than a secular approach. Each faith tradition has stated values regarding the importance of addressing the needs of the poor (Swatos & Kivisto, 1998). Through these traditions, social work students and practitioners may find inspiration or provocation to engage in work on behalf of the poor beyond what they may encounter in a secular framework.

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