

Answering the Critics: The Inherent Value of Social Work

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Birthered in the squalor and hardship of the late 19th century ethnic slums of Chicago and New York, social work has struggled since its inception. This struggle has been on two fronts: first, social work has struggled to make a difference in the lives of the destitute; and secondly, social work has struggled to develop a self-confident professional identity. Nearly a century since Abraham Flexner's denial (1915) of professional status to social work, these struggles have yet to be clearly resolved.

The struggle to make a difference in the lives of the destitute often conflicts with the struggle to develop a professional identity. Critics of the profession (Specht & Courtney, 1994; Wagner, 1990) argue that the professional status of social work has been closely tied to the exaltation of psychotherapy at the expense of a focus on social justice. As this tendency has become normative, it has become more difficult for the profession to defend itself against the charge that social work has become the mechanism for social control of the destitute (Piven & Cloward, 1971). Epstein (2006) summarizes that "social work may have survived precisely because of its weakness of intellect and purpose, performing in social roles as a public works project that provides easy status positions" (p. 239).

More contemporary critics question the sustainability of the profession. Stoesz (2002) calls social work education "over-organized, under-whelming in its expectations, and inferior in product" (p. 21), based on an industrial model ill-equipped to deal with the pace of change in the 21st century or to compete effectively with nascent alternative human service professions. In like fashion, Kreuger (1997) proclaims that new computer technologies undermine the information and referral functions of traditional casework; the collapse of Marxist and Freudian meta-narratives disrupts the profession's self-concept and unity of purpose; and the impending

totalizing of corporate forces threatens federal and state funding for social services. Kreuger contends that these changes presage the end of the profession.

Even those more optimistic about the profession's future note substantial challenges. Daley (2005) emphasizes that new skills are required for social work to effectively engage the increases in need, multiculturalism and globalization, implementation of evidence-based practices, competition from other human service professionals, and the pace of social change. To Reisch and Jarman-Rohde (2000), these challenges facing social work can only be met if the profession is willing and able to embrace change. It is the profession's capacity to change by borrowing theory and technique from other disciplines that gives hope for the profession's future.

To meet the needs of the poor in early 20th century Chicago, the profession borrowed theory and techniques from sociology. Mary Richmond's diagnostic was more than a veneer of professionalism; these techniques paved the way for social work to use psychological theory to help reconstruct damaged lives. Even the radicalism of the 1960's that is so cherished in the macro literature (Netting, 2005; Wagner, 1990) can be seen as a loan from political science. Perhaps even today's evidence-based practice (Cournoyer, 2005) can best be understood as yet one more case of social work borrowing to attain dual goals: professional stature and client assistance.

Contrary to Kreuger's (1997) lament that meta-narratives have fallen and Stoesz's (2002) critique that the profession has "retreated to postmodernist relativism" (p. 22), the profession's capacity to reconstruct itself by borrowing from other disciplines is its strength. At heart, social work is not a theoretical exercise, but an applied practice. Any theoretical perspective and any methodological approach that enhances the social worker's capacity to effect positive change on behalf of the client will find a constituency within the profession. Fence-straddling may be academically uncomfortable, but this trans-discipline and trans-methodological reach (Kindle, 2004) is what sustains the profession's capacity to adapt.

Ginsberg (2005) notes that the number of practitioners has never been larger and continues to increase with more than 750,000 currently employed in human services. Of course, all are not trained social workers, and even those who have earned social work degrees may not have the skills required to deal with 21st century challenges (Daley, 2005; Kreuger, 1997; Stoesz, 2002); however, to conclude that social work does not retain the capacity for reflective renewal is to deny both the profession's history and core values. To a profession such as social work, that is, to a profession that purports to find its sense of identity in a cluster of idealized values (Reamer, 2005) rather than in specific techniques, skills, or knowledge, change is inevitable.

A reason to hope in the profession's future is not always easy to find. One recent volume purporting to guide graduate students in social work through their education does not even mention social justice (Sowers & Thyer, 2006); the institutional obstacles to change are formidable (Stoesz, 2002); the quality of incoming students continues to decline as measured by GRE scores (Karger & Stoesz, 2003); and competition for human service funding continues to escalate (Stoesz). Nonetheless, Beck's (1981) summation in an early consideration of social work's future is as timely today as it was when first written:

The flame of social reform that is such a proud part of social work's history and that somehow continues to flicker in its professional organization and in its schools is probably a more precious contribution to the well-being of the people than the skills and knowledge social workers can sell in the marketplace to assist society in dealing with problems of social function and social stability (pp. 371-372).

It is this flicker that gives the profession of social work a reason to exist. It is the promise of flaming once again that motivates the profession to continue to adapt to new social realities. If social work has anything to offer other professions, it is the passion this flicker promises.

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