



Comments on Receiving the Distinguished Career Achievement Award of the Society for Social Work and Research

Michael Sherraden

CSD Founding Director Michael Sherraden accepted the Society for Social Work and Research's 2023 Distinguished Career Achievement Award in a ceremony at the society's 2023 annual meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, on January 14, 2023.

Thank you. One never expects an award like this. There are so many excellent careers in social work and research. Many other people, including people in this room, deserve this award. Also, an academic career is not built by an individual, but by a team. The research team at the Center for Social Development (CSD) at Washington University, along with many research partners, deserve this award. I gratefully accept it on behalf of all my colleagues.

While many other people should be acknowledged at a time like this, our timing is tight, so I will give a special acknowledgement to two key people. The first is my wife and colleague Margaret Sherraden, who is also a social work researcher and partner in every part of my life. And I want to thank former Dean Shanti Khinduka, who guided the George Warren Brown School of Social Work over three decades, bringing it to a high point in national leadership. Margaret and Shanti have been invaluable colleagues and supporters across my whole career. I would not be here without them.

I also owe my appreciation to dozens of former doctoral students, so bright and capable, who have extraordinary careers—and in the process make me look good. A recent graduate, Sicong (Summer) Sun, is receiving an award from the Society for Social Work and Research today for her outstanding dissertation. She is now on the faculty at University of Kansas. My former doctoral students are defining new directions in social change and building substantial bodies of research evidence. They are leaders in social work education. I would not be here without them.

Allow me to put in an enthusiastic word for applied social research. As we have discussed elsewhere, humans are highly

social, and social is fundamental (Sherraden et al., 2013a). For us, the theory of social change starts with evidence-based scholarship. By far the strongest strategy for this scholarship is specification and testing of structural and sustainable solutions. High-quality experimental tests of solutions—beyond problem-related research and documentation of “disparities”—can “get us to the table” in high-level policy discussions, with a chance to inform social change (Sherraden et al., 2019). This is a high bar in applied social scholarship but worth the effort.

Historically, social workers have been exceedingly good at bringing evidence to sustainable social change. A short list includes major deinstitutionalizations (poor houses, institutions for people with disabilities, orphanages, mental health institutions, and now, perhaps, prisons), financial payments (“outdoor relief”) to the disadvantaged, maternal health, many protections for children, healthy youth development, voting rights and access, retirement security, safe and humane working conditions, and Whitney Young’s vision of a domestic Marshall Plan that contributed to the “war on poverty” and civil rights movement in the 1960s. Indeed, social workers have led in many transformative social policies. Frances Perkins was architect of both the Social Security Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act—the two most important social policies in the history of the nation. This is a social work history that we can be very proud of—and should be more vocal about.

Looking ahead, social work is constantly reinventing itself to meet new challenges. We are in a time when social work can contribute more strongly to racial equity and social justice. In this regard, I have been pleased to be part of the Grand Challenges for Social Work, an initiative that puts new social



challenges on the table. The Grand Challenges project, like everything we do, is far from perfect but always open to renewal. We should aim—each of us in our own time—for as much social justice and positive impact as possible. The Grand Challenges initiative is uplifting the core values of racial equity, social justice, and full inclusion and participation.

We have good reason to be positive about social work's past and future contributions, though this work has never been easy. The challenges are structural. Social work is not playing on the side of money and power. Social work is playing on the side of the people—all of the people. These simple words define the key dynamic in U.S. political and social history, and indeed, human history. Our enormous challenge is to create social institutions and relationships that work effectively for everyone. This is fundamentally social, and it requires work.

The pathway can be long and rough. As Grace Abbott, social work scholar and architect of the U.S. Children's Bureau, once observed that social work is "uphill all the way" (2015, p. 4).

Along with Abbott and other social work leaders across more than a century, we also can cheerfully lace up our boots and keep going.

There are unfinished social innovations ahead. We can help to define, inform, and create them.

Thank you again for this career award. I am truly honored.

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