

Confronting Oppression Locally and Globally:

The Role of Social Work

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## **Confronting Oppression in the Social Welfare State: The Role of Social Work**

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Oppression of vulnerable populations is a worldwide phenomenon. Research from social psychology reveals that without external intervention, the strong will come to dominate the weak and then blame the weak for their wretched states. Research from biology (primate studies and brain studies of dominance) is chilling as well (Wrangham and Petersen, 1996). We see psychological and biological focus coming into play as strong children attack their weak peers while in the absence of adult supervision. The bullying of the children on the schoolyard, we can view as a microcosm of the bullying that occurs at the macro level, in the global economy. Rich countries assert their power and dominance over poor countries through the world banks and military might. Actions to offset some of the most ruthless aspects of capitalism and the impact, such as through the “structural adjustment” requirements of the world banks on state welfare systems, also rely on global organizations and the new technologies.

What is needed, as critics of the global market economy argue, is sustainable development and a redistribution of economic resources away from military industrialism into public welfare spending. At present, increasing militarization, including unprecedented military spending, is the major threat to social welfare standards. In the U.S., war on terror, like the war on drugs before it, has diverted national attention away from serious social problems such as homelessness and declining standards of health care.

Social work, however, has not forgotten. They are no more able to forget than are the persons living in the throes of poverty, homelessness, or mental illness, the persons with whom and for whom social workers work every day.

In this paper, we will examine the nature of oppression in terms of its roots and consequences. We will consider the challenge to social work in confronting injustice and oppression—social workers play a dual role in helping people hurt by the system negotiate the system and in working toward progressive policy development and change. Our journey in this paper will take us to look at the U.S. and Canadian codes of ethics and then for a template of universal qualities of the ideal social welfare state to a review of relevant sections (articles) from the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Finally, our journey will take us to some promising new developments in the spirit of restorative justice. *The focus of this paper is not on interpersonal oppression but on oppression at the macro or societal level. However, as we will see, the personal and political are invariably intertwined.*

### **The Nature of Oppression**

*Oppression takes many forms. It can occur when one race or group of people exploits and suppresses another race or ethnic group; it can affect whole families and classes of people who are economically oppressed by the system; it can occur within the family, taking the form of gender violence as well as child abuse and neglect. Membership in a disempowered group has personal as well as political ramifications. As defined in The Social Work Dictionary, oppression is:*

*The social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group, or*

institution. Typically, a government or political organization that is in power places these restrictions formally or covertly on oppressed groups so that they may be exploited and less able to compete with other social groups. The oppressed individual or group is devalued, exploited, and deprived of privileges by the individual or group who has more power (Baker, 1999, p. 339).

Some of the key words used in this definition – “power,” “exploited,” “deprived,” “privileges” – are key variables essential to a conceptualization of oppression.

Oppression, loosely speaking, can be defined as inhumane or degrading treatment of a group or individual based on some defining characteristic. The word “oppress” comes from the Latin *opprimere*, which means to press on or press against.

Oppression is a word, as Iris Young (1990) argues, favored by social activists, a central term of political discourse; it would not ordinarily be used by the mainstream and is inconsistent with the language of individualism that dominates U.S. politics. In traditional usage the word might be used to describe conditions in a foreign country such as Iraq.

Sometimes the meanings of words can best be known through their opposites. Societies are nonoppressive, notes Gil (1998), when all people are considered and treated as equals, and therefore, have equal rights and responsibilities concerning their land, resources, politics, and bodies.

In each form of oppression – economic, radical, ethnic, sexual - - there is a dominant group that receives the unearned advantage or privilege, and a targeted group - - the one that is denied the advantage (Ayvazian, 1995). And how is oppression kept in

place? As Ayvazian indicates, oppression is kept in place by ideology or the propagation of doctrines that legitimize inequality or violence or the threat of violence.

Just as economic forces in the global market shape ideology so ideology shapes the economic structure. Some of this ideology, at least, serves to justify the inequality in society to the extent of blaming the recipients of aid. “What is the role of social work in this context?” asks Gutierrez and Lewis (1999,xii). “How can we take an active role in confronting and immobilizing the forces that conspire to increase inequality while removing the tattered remnants of the safety net?” (p. xii). We will return to the social work role momentarily.

### **Cultural Values and the Arrogance of Power**

The North American stress on independence and individualism militates against the provision of “cradle to grave” social services. Moralism is another primary American value; this one derives from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan creed. Moralism dictates that persons dependent on welfare suffer certain discomforts. When discrimination (on the basis of ascription) against minorities, women, aged and disabled persons, becomes played up as discrimination against the poor, or non-achievers in society, it is hard for the social welfare system to get the public support to expand substantially. In the United States, as Tropman (1989) indicates, there is no mass political movement of the poor, and no labor political party with a strong working class allegiance.

As the tides of political change come and go, and as the public mood shifts, so do the social policies. Social values such as the religious belief in hard work and frugality can promote economic investment and growth; economic growth can reinforce the Protestant work ethic. Simultaneously, the religious value of compassion can influence a

willingness to pay more taxes (economic consequences) in order to introduce programs to provide shelters for the homeless. Charity and philanthropy which are institutionalized in tax write-offs and deductions probably help assuage a sense of guilt on the part of the rich in a capitalist society.

Not only do values play into policies, but policies once ingrained, play into values. For instance, American means-tested programs associated with the poor and minorities generate more opposition than support. As Piven and Cloward (1993) correctly note, the effects of segregating programs for the poor are far-reaching – dampening support for other welfare state programs. Citizens resent paying taxes for services from which they themselves receive no benefits. The value of providing social welfare is diminished when fragmented programs reach only narrowly defined groups. Some affirmative action programs, limited as they are in magnitude, have created resentment and hostility. The cycle is now complete with values shaping policies and policies values and so on.

While the United States prides itself on being one of the most generous nations, it provides its citizens with the lowest benefits of any industrialized society and has the highest gap between the rich and the poor. Most other advanced societies, in fact, place social rights obtained through welfare (tax) adjustments on equal footing with political rights as an essential feature of social justice. This right of economic security is included as a basic right in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Social work educator and former labor organizer, David Wagner (2001) in his book aptly entitled, What's Love Got to Do With It? makes a convincing case for the fact that philanthropy actually provides a cover for the dark side of the free-market economy.

Organized charity has done more to benefit the rich (and make them feel better) than the poor, as Wagner contends.

But maybe, on the other hand, people's motives and rational actions are less rational than they seem. Especially when they concern power. During the writing of this paper, there were several establishing big news events. One was talk of changing regimes in Iraq, not by the people of Iraq, but by a coalition led by the United States. The estimated cost would be \$50-100 billion, according to unofficial estimates (Cochran, 2002). The cost in loss of civilian lives was not given. Another news event concerned the International Criminal Court. The U. S. under President George W. Bush's leadership, "unsigned" the United Nations Treaty establishing the International Criminal Court. Special arrangements were then made with the United Nations to protect U.S. "peacekeepers" from accountability this international court. Meanwhile, non-citizen "enemy combatants" were being detained indefinitely both within and outside of the United States. Although questioned in some legal quarters, the suspension of civil liberties for suspected terrorists was widely accepted as the price we must pay to combat terrorism..

Almost as if compelled, I went to my bookshelf and picked up a book I had not looked at since the 1960s: The Arrogance of Power. William Fulbright (1966), who was then a U.S. Senator and chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, had written the book to express his distress at American foreign policy. My eye hit upon passages I had underlined some 35 years ago before. I then reread how America, caught up in the mire of the war in Vietnam, was in danger of losing its perspective on what exactly is within the realm of its power and what is beyond it. Above all, as Fulbright noted, America was

showing signs of that “arrogance of power” that had destroyed nations in the past. Lack of assurance tends to heed an exaggerated sense of power or need for power, he explained.

But the part that really took me aback was his review of the history of war and his surprising conclusion:

Many of the wars fought by man - - I am tempted to say most - - have been fought over such abstraction (Who has the best religion? To prove they are bigger, better, stronger,). The more I puzzle over the great wars of history, the more I am inclined to the view that the causes attributed to them- - territory, markets resources, the defenses or perpetuation of great principles - - were not the root causes at all but rather explanations or excuses for certain unfathomable drives of human nature. (p. 5)

What this explanation says to me now is that there are psychological motives that underlie much of this international competition and rivalry that have more to do with irrational aspects of human behavior than with the control of the market or balancing the national budget. I’ve always thought the amount of oil consumed in warfare, supposedly to gain access to oil, was far disproportionate to any possible gain. Fulbright’s study of power is an important reminder to search for the irrational as well as the rational motive in human affairs.

Whether or not we accept Fulbright’s arrogance-of-power thesis, we can certainly make the case that capitalism and militarism are often linked. Perhaps we can label this the “culture of affluence”. Value orientations central to people who subscribe to the “American dream” generally are agreed to include materialism, status seeking, independence, and individual competition, and above all moralism.



To my way of thinking, transformation of unjust and oppressive practices would require a shift in the priorities - away from values of independence and individual competition in the direction of egalitarianism, cooperation, and faith in the system for ensuring a balance in the distribution of resources. (For a summary for Scandinavian and other European value orientations see van Wormer, 1997). The popular assumptions accepted by most Americans that just, non-oppressive, egalitarian, and nonviolent societies cannot and do not exist is an assumption in need of re-examination according to Gil (2002). In his book, Confronting Injustice and Oppression, David Gil chides the profession of social work for buying into the system and system's values in "its dependence on powerful social elites" and failure to confront "the realities of injustice and oppression" (p. 77). As social workers increasingly gravitated toward practice as therapists, as Gil further suggests, sociology has come to have far less influence on social work practice and theory than psychology and medical models of disease and cure.

### **Impact of Globalization**

The backdrop for any discussion of oppression must include, to quote Bishop (1994), "the amazingly powerful and well coordinated web of control the multi-national corporations and financial institutions have woven around the world" (p. 35). Political, military, and ideological power all come together in the service of global economic integration. The communications revolution enhances the political, military, and ideological power of globalization. Admittedly, life in the global age is not without its advantages. A surfing of the Internet and a hook-up to satellite TV links us instantly to a recent issue of the Irish Times, Norway's Aftenposten, or a session of the British Parliament. Transfer of knowledge perspectives, and direct communication through

urgent e-mail announcements to persons thousands of miles apart can help popular social movements gain momentum.

Relevant to oppression, global communication helps inform people everywhere about conditions of oppression and bring pressure to bear on foreign government to curb at least the appearances of mistreatment as of women and minorities. Also relevant to oppression is of course the impact of the global economy on the social welfare of the world's people. The link between globalization and inequality and the escalation of violent conflicts within and between countries is readily apparent (Torczuner, 2000). Disparities in wealth, whether within nations or between nations, are associated with greed, resentment, and war. Refugees created by bombings and warfare migrate from the poor countries into the wealthier ones, joining the already large number of immigrants who cross borders for economic reasons. This is only one way in which wars in one part of the world invariably involve nations from another part.

War and violence, in turn, are associated with ecological destruction as witnessed in the anti-capitalist attacks on the Twin Towers World Trade Center but also in the retaliatory bombings by the U.S. on Afghanistan. War and violence, moreover, are associated with the erosion of the rights of dissenters, minority groups, and women. In a national military crisis, military spending takes precedence over all other spending.

Social policy is subject to controls and whims of the global market. The neoliberal agenda is advanced through structural adjustment programs. These programs generally involve cuts in government spending, strong promotion of exports and free trade and flexible wages to deal with international competition (Wilson and Whitmore, 2000). Corporations today can actually sue nations for lost market opportunities of the

nation's policies cut into the corporations' potential profits. Free trade has thus become monopoly trade, as Parenti (2002) suggests. The cold war focus on Third World development is no more. There is no longer the incentive to enhance the social development of people to keep them from going Communist. As Parenti, in his radio broadcast, tells us, "capitalism with a human face has become capitalism in your face."

These trends are enforced by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank inevitably lead to a retrenchment of social services. Emphasis has been placed on economic growth at the expense of sustainable development and the well-being of human communities.

In a major contribution to social work literature, Economics for Social Workers, Arline Prigoff (2000) spells out the social consequences, the increasing social problems stemming from the new economic realities. The rapidly growing gap between the rich and the poor (within and among countries) continues to widen while the degradation of the environment advances to threaten the life and livelihood of many of the earth's inhabitants. Because under chapter 11 of the free trade agreement, corporations can sue governments to recoup their losses if environmental restrictions impinge on their profits ("Trading Democracy," Public Television, 2002), the impact on individuals, families and communities is profound. Accordingly, as Prigoff indicates, it is important for social workers to understand the theories and methods of the field of economics as they pertain to our clients and ourselves. Knowledge of such economic truths enables us to tune in to the experience of oppression and to help raise the consciousness of our clients and of the general public. In the current context of serious economic constraints and welfare cutbacks, social workers should support and join with the growing coalitions of labor,

religious, and non-government organizational groups that are working toward global social justice and human rights. In Seattle, Washington social worker involvement in the anti-World Trade Organization project was palpable. Until public consciousness is raised, notes Judith Lee (2001), the real welfare culprits – corporations which receive very costly tax breaks and subsidies – will continue to exploit the American economy and poor workers while unemployed mothers will continue to be blamed for the public debt.

In 1996, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics was revised to include a global mandate. Social workers are now enjoined to “promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels” (section 6.01). In light of the current globalization of the economy, social workers inevitably will be working with persons who are unemployed because of outsourcing or downsizing or technological advances or who are exploited due to free trade competition from abroad.

### **The Role of Social Work**

Unique among the helping profession, social workers are trained for and engage in policy development and policy practice. This is appropriate, because of all the professions social work is the most closely bound up with the social welfare system.

Relevant to globalization, the profession of social work with its person-in-the-environment perspective is far more attuned to the needs of the people than to the interests of the major corporations. Unique among the helping professions, social work singularly moves beyond civic intervention to the environmental factors in the crisis, moves beyond stress management to the structural causes of the stress, moves beyond family therapy to advocate for family-friendly governmental policies.

Teaching social work is more than teaching listening skills for human interaction with society's victims. It is the teaching of empathic listening at the individual level and the grasping of collective pain. Teaching social work, therefore, is more than working one-on-one with the sick, the poor, the drug addicted. It is about developing an awareness of the need for social actions, the urgency for change. For this reason, schools of social work in the world over emphasize policy analysis, social advocacy, and policy change.

Because of its uniquely political emphasis, Popple and Leighninger (1998) refer to social work in the title of their book as the "policy-based profession." Similarly, the NASW Code of Ethics describes the focus of their profession as to help vulnerable and oppressed people; to emphasize respect for ethnic diversity in the U.S. and globally; and to promote social justice and social change. In the 1996 version, standard 6--Social Worker's Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society – was expanded to include a global awareness. As stated in Standard 6.01

*Social Welfare:*

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.

And with special relevance to challenging oppression, Standard 6:02 *Public*

*Participation:* "Social workers should facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions."

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (1994) states in their Section 10 “Ethical Responsibilities for Social Change”: “A social worker shall advocate change for the overall benefit of society, the environment, and the global community”. And 10.6: “A social worker shall promote social justice.”

In both Canada and the U.S., national education policy statements follow the goals laid out in the profession’s Code of Ethics and provide accreditation for academic programs. The CSWE (The Council on Social Work Education) (2001) approved the new Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for U.S. departments and schools of social work. Among the purposes of social work education as spelled out in this document is to: alleviate poverty, oppression, and other forms of social injustice; promote the breadth of knowledge and critical thinking; prepare social workers to recognize the global context of social work practice; and to formulate and influence social policies and social services.

New to the accreditation standards is the change from the requirement to offer content on specific vulnerable populations such as racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities in favor of a more general approach. Section C under Foundation Curriculum Content states, “Programs integrate social and economic justice content grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of oppression.” The inclusion of course content on international issues in social welfare policy is also required.

The Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) (2000), similarly, ensures that the student acquire “preparation in transferable analysis of the multiple and intersecting bases of oppression, and related practice skills” (Section 3.4.3) and more

specifically, “an understanding of oppression and healing of aboriginal peoples and, implications for social policy and social work practice” (Section 5.10 L).

If we listen to David Gil (1998), if we agree with him that a major goal of social work education is to prepare students to work toward transforming “unjust and oppressive social economic, and political institutions into just and nonoppressive alternatives” (p.1), then we need to embrace a framework for teaching and learning that relates personal troubles to societal oppression. Professional social work ethics require competence to influence social policy consistent with the promotion of equality and social justice.

The principles of social and economic justice, as enunciated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights closely, somewhat remarkably, parallel the values espoused by the founding mothers of social work and codified in the social work code of ethics (I refer here not just to the U.S. variety but to the codes used throughout the world). Unique to social work among the helping professions is the emphasis on social justice in the social environment. Merely putting band-aids on clients is never, can never be, enough. Because the personal is political, and the political personal, the artificial split between macro and micro is just that—artificial.

American social work education has been remiss in its failure to integrate human rights content into the curriculum and to prepare students for the kinds of ethical dilemmas they may face when a client’s rights are being violated. Only since 1996, in fact, has the word *global* even been included in the American social work code of ethics. This inclusion today is most striking in Standard 6:01:”Social workers should promote the general welfare of society from local to global levels.”

We can begin to develop appreciation for the global perspective by studying various forms of justice as practiced throughout the world. One that has been widely used by indigenous groups of people and in early European religious traditions is the practice known as restorative justice.

### **Restorative Justice**

Both an ideal principle - - providing justice to the offender, victim, and community - - and a method of dispensing justice when a violation has been committed, restorative justice can be considered a form of social justice because of its fairness to all parties. Although this evolutionary development has important implications for social work practice because they work closely with victims and offenders, the social work literature has not devoted sufficient attention to restorative initiatives. The majority of these initiatives are geared to implementing much needed change within the halls of justice. The opposite of restorative justice is the traditional form of confrontational courtroom ritual in which one person emerges the victor and one the loser.

A highly effective means of settling disputes and providing for victim compensation, restorative justice offers a strong antidote to the political ranting and raving that seems to get votes. In bringing criminal and victim together to heal the wounds of violation, the campaign for restorative justice advocates alternative methods to incarceration when the offender=s behavior can be controlled through close supervision. These methods include victim-offender reconciliation programs, victim-offender mediation, and community diversion programs. The impetus from these humanistic trends is enhanced by the victim=s rights movement, which continues to gain strength and momentum across the country and which is at a threshold of a focus more on healing



than on revenge. Meanwhile, forgiveness has become a hot research topic, which has received a lot of media attention (Golden, 1999; van Biema, 1999). Through restorative justice, the effort is made to restore what the victim has lost, while at the same time requiring offenders to face up to the consequences of their act or acts and the personal pain caused to the victim, victim's and offender's family and the community.

The initiatives taking place, such as in the juvenile justice system, exemplify social change that has evolved through strong grassroots efforts. Another significant fact about restorative justice is how the idea has swept across the world, especially in English speaking countries such as New Zealand, Australia, and Canada where this approach is closely associated with indigenous populations.

Imko Bae (2002) makes the case for the form of restorative justice called simply "mediation" to be applied to meet the needs of Korean society in meeting the needs of Korean youth in trouble with the law. There is a definite need, Bae argues, to find "an alternative or a practice method for social workers to facilitate better understanding" and reduce anti-social attitudes among Korean young people (p. 80). Social work and mediation are congruous in terms of values, roles played by professionals, and community involvement. (For more on the natural affinity between restorative justice and social work, see Van Wormer, 2002).

The criminal justice process has limitations not only in the youth crime arena but also when it comes to the suffering of a people due to subjugation. Wartime persecutions, rape of the land and of the people, slave labor, and mass murder are forms of crimes against humanity that demand some form of compensation for survivors and their families, even generations later, as long as the wounds are palpable. The truth

commission held in South Africa to address the wounds inflicted by Apartheid is one of the most powerful examples. Compensation came in the form of public testimony and apology. Reparations often involve monetary exchange in addition to public acknowledgement of responsibility for the crimes against humanity. Demands for compensation by African Americans for the cruelty inflicted upon their ancestors through the slave trade and subsequent slavery, have received much attention in recent years but the wrongs done have not been redressed. Similarly, the Australian government continues to deny reparations to the aboriginal people for their “stolen childhoods,” a reference to the earlier policy of removing the children of mixed blood and placing them with white families. Reparations have also been denied to the Korean relatives of innocent civilians slaughtered during the American-Korean war.

Successful examples of reparations are U.S. compensation to families of Japanese-Americans held in concentration camps during World War II, and German compensation to survivors of slave labor camps.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I started this paper as description of the impact of globalization on growing inequalities caused in part by the dismantling of social welfare programs that previously helped shield people from poverty. As responsibility for the well being of people has reverted from the state to the private market, many groups have become socially excluded from society. There are many aspects of structural violence in a highly competitive market economy. Much of the power imbalances that ensue – exhausting working environments (especially in the U.S. and Japan), the harsh learning environment for

children (in which Japan and Korea are clearly culpable) – the brutal punishments (in most countries) are not restorative in nature, but sow the seeds of destruction.

Even in the global economy, however, tendencies toward the worst aspects of competition can be curbed. The Scandinavian countries, especially Norway, seem to manage quite well, as their values of equalitarianism continue to triumph over modern trends toward privatization and consolidation. To match the internationalization of corporations and resources, we must work toward a world social consciousness – fighting oppression, restoring justice – and a world in which universal interests supersede narrow national interests.

What is required is a global redistribution of economic resources away from military industrialism (under the guise of a war on terror) into public welfare spending for a sustainable future. Bolstered by new technologies, the world grows ever smaller, and although nations have their unique cultural practices, these are international values as set forth in documents, such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that transcend these cultural norms. This paper described the movement for restorative justice as an incorporation of transcendent values that can unite us all. Social workers share that global mission.

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