



## **Concepts for Contemporary Social Work: Globalization, Oppression, Social Exclusion, Human Rights, Etc.**

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### **Cultural Values in the Globalized Society**

The 1980s, under the influence of Reaganomics, helped launch a right wing backlash that was to come to fruition under later US administrations. As claimed in a commemorative issue of *Time* magazine, Ronald Reagan “utterly remade the political landscape...It was because of Reagan that Clinton had to promise to end welfare as we know it” (Lacayo and Dickerson, 2004, 51). The legacy was to involve extensive reduction in taxes for individuals at the higher income levels, and for corporations, massive military spending, the decline of real wages and worker benefits, reductions in affordable housing, and the dismantling of the social welfare state. The weakening of trade barriers has created a situation ripe for the demise of trade unions, the loss of U.S. manufacturing jobs, and intense competition among workers throughout the world (Polack, 2004).

Policies and values are intertwined. As the tides of political change come and go, and as the public mood shifts, so do the social policies. And just as values play into the creation of policies, so do policies into values. Change the policies (as happened under Reaganism) and they soon become part of the status quo. The death penalty, corporal punishment of children, restrictions-of-smoking laws are just a few examples of policies that have both influenced and been influenced by the ethos of the time.

Sometimes, however, policies are enacted during a progressive era and a backlash ensues against them. Consider affirmative action laws, which have done much to equalize the playing field in terms of educational and professional opportunities, for example. Today, especially regarding women’s advances, there are strong counterforces at work. A backlash, a counter-assault, which Faludi (1991) convincingly identified from events of the 1980s, the Reagan period, is even more striking now at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The following examples come to mind: attempts to stymie women’s reproductive freedom, new coercive and highly punitive social welfare policies, and the use of anti-conspiracy laws to punish the wives and partners of drug dealers for their role in perpetuating or covering up crime. In the name of equality, gender-neutral sentences have been inflicted upon women who are now confined in record numbers in prisons built and run according to the male model (Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2003). This backlash, I believe, is related to resentment by men who are in positions of power of women’s advances in the professions. Ironically, the backlash is carried out against women who are least able to take advantage of the new employment opportunities, women who get into trouble with the law. Economically, women’s (and minorities’) gains are a threat to white male privilege. As Pharr (2001) reminds us, “We have to look at economics not only as the root cause of sexism but also as the underlying

driving force that keeps all the oppressions in place” (p. 144).

In the bestselling *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Thomas Frank (2004) explains the cultural divide between the two American political parties in terms of a “30 year backlash” against a supposedly liberal establishment. Politicians both promote and respond to this ideology (in which a reaction against same sex marriage plays a prominent role). The end result is the phenomenon of blue collar workers voting with Wall St. business interests. Economics, of course, is the true issue; the study of economics today begins with forces of the global market.

### **Globalization**

The term *globalization* which simply refers to an interconnectedness of persons across the world has both positive and negative connotations. From a positive perspective, one marvels at the technological revolution and the wealth of information at one’s fingertips. From the more commonly articulated negative standpoint, consider the masses of desperate and powerless workers pitted against each other in “a race to the bottom.” Sweatshop wages and working conditions in the Global South are mirrored in industrialized nations in the payment of wages so low as not to represent a living wage and in an ever increasing gap in earnings between the rich and the poor.

The current globalization of the economy requires that social workers broaden their horizons and view many domestic social justice issues within a global framework (Polack, 2004). That this concept is making great inroads in the social work literature is revealed in a search of *Social Work Abstracts*. There are 74 abstracts listed as of February, 2005. (Significantly, practically all the references are negative).

Social workers can benefit from knowing how the issues in their town or nation are played out in other towns and nations. There is so much to learn of innovative practices and of possible solutions to social problems that never would have been imagined without an international exchange of information. Key areas of interest are child welfare policies, AIDS prevention, substance abuse treatment, and health care provisions. An awareness of varying global arrangements reveals not only possibilities but also barriers due to differences in funding sources and cultural attitudes concerning the source of income. Where there is a solid nationalized health care system in place, for example, open-door, harm reduction treatment offerings may be readily available. Emulation may be stifled elsewhere, however, without the necessary government supports.

To study the major value orientation of other lands is to realize the uniqueness of our own—the indomitable American work ethic, the impetus for privacy and individual rights over the public good, the elevation of nuclear family ties far above extended family obligations. And lurking beneath all these issues is a boundless optimism that success is ours if only we try.

Contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) are principles germane to the alleviation of oppression and injustice. These principles provide a template for how the state should treat its citizens socially, culturally, and economically. A proposal for a county-funded, ethnic-sensitive substance abuse program, for example, is in keeping with Article 25, which endorses the right to medical care and necessary social services, Article 27, pertaining to participation in the cultural life of the community and even with Article 16, which is directed toward protection of the family. A proposal to reduce school violence through anti-oppressive education can be guided by the principle found in Article 26, which states that education should be directed to the promotion of tolerance and to the furtherance of activities for the maintenance

of peace. As backing for proposals that challenge economic or social oppression, one even finds an Article of general tolerance.

We are talking here of domestic policy as viewed from the global perspective of international law. Some policy actions, as Healy (2001) suggests, have a direct transnational impact; laws and regulations pertaining to immigrants and foreign child adoptions are examples. Globalization has the potential to transport traditional social policy analysis into an ever-widening international arena, even to the extent, through information technology, of helping people to influence their own governments to consider human rights issues in foreign relations.

### **Oppression**

A search of *Social Work Abstracts* (February, 2005) lists 235 journal abstracts that contain the word *oppression*. This large number of listings is indicative of the popularization of this term within social work. The overwhelming majority of these articles, as indicated in their abstracts, however, only use the term in a descriptive but not a theoretical sense. The dynamics of oppression, in fact, have only rarely been studied in social work literature. (Exceptions are from Britain, Dominelli (2002), *Anti-Oppressive Social Work Theory and Practice*, and from the United States, Gil (1998) *Confronting Injustice and Oppression*; Appleby, Colon & Hamilton (2001), *Diversity, Oppression, and Social Functioning*; and van Wormer (2004), *Confronting Oppression Restoring Justice*). All this may be changing, however, in conjunction with CSWE (2003) mandates to incorporate material on oppression in the social work curriculum. The change from the requirement to offer content on specific vulnerable populations such as racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities in favor of amore generalized approach is significant in that it represents a shift in focus from cultural characteristics to structural factors in group marginalization. Standard 4.2 under Educational Policy 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” (p.35).

The Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (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).

As defined in *The Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 2003), *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” (pp. 306-307).*

Some of the key words used in this definition—“power,” “exploited,” “deprived,” “privileges”—are key variables related to oppression that crop up again and again in discussion. Each notion is ingrained in the institutional arrangements of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, ableism, heterosexism, classism, and sectarianism (Appleby, Colon and Hamilton, 2001). In each form of oppression—economic, racial, ethnic, sexual—a dominant group receives the unearned

advantage or privilege, and a targeted group is denied the advantage (Ayvazian, 2001). Dalrymple & Burke (1995) define oppression as inhumane or degrading treatment of a group or individual based on some defining characteristic. Societies are *non-oppressive*, notes Gil (1998), when all people are considered and treated as equals, and have equal rights and responsibilities concerning their land, resources, politics, and bodies, accordingly. Oppression, like non-oppression, is a word favored by social activists, and 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 (Young, 1990). In traditional usage, the word might be used to describe conditions in a foreign country such as North Korea or pre-occupied Iraq.

Anti-oppressive practice or theory is a term widely used in all the English-speaking countries of the world except for the United States. According to this formulation, the assumption is that society is generally oppressive and that the social workers must do their best to offset this. *Anti-oppressive practice* is about minimizing power differences in society and maximizing the rights to which all people are entitled (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Dominelli, 2002). In her book on anti-oppressive theory and practice, Dominelli perceives the context of social work practice within a globalizing economy. From this perspective, anti-oppressive social work is concerned about the deleterious effects that macro-level forces can have on people's daily lives.

Payne (1997) likens anti-oppressive practice to an empowerment approach because of its attention to power differentials in worker/client relationships and the need to help clients gain control of their lives. Workers, as Payne suggests, can avoid oppressing (and thereby empower) clients through partnership, client choice, and seeking changes in the agency and wider systems that adversely affect clients. Empowering practice begins by acknowledging that structural injustices have prevented many individuals and groups from receiving the treatment and resources to which they are entitled (van Wormer, 2004). Empowerment practice, as Gutiérrez and Lewis (1999) suggest, requires social workers to be agents of change, to help people gain or regain power in their lives, and to work toward social justice at the societal level.

In summary, anti-oppressive and empowerment practice are direct responses to individual and group experiences of oppression. Oppression theory is the guiding framework for such responses. Current trends in economic globalization compel us to address these issues. The incorporation of theories of oppression the social work curriculum entails a shift in focus from race to racism, sex to sexism, ethnicity to ethnocentrism, and from oppressed to oppressor. This shift is far more radical than it would first appear from a quick reading of CSWE's revised curriculum standards because now the focus is structural instead of individual, general rather than specific. The focus is on societal practices that perpetuate oppression rather than on learning about cultural characteristics of a given national group or tribe, and such a focus can be extremely threatening to the status quo. What actual effect the curriculum change will have on the field of social work in the USA, it is too early to tell but it is potentially significant.

### **Social Exclusion**

A closely related concept to oppression is *social exclusion*, a term far less familiar to social workers in the United States than to their European counterparts. A search of *Social Work Abstracts* (February, 2005) produced 19 abstracts related to social exclusion. All the references were European except for one: Finn & Jacobson's article in the *Journal of Social Work Education* on just practice. *Social exclusion* is defined in *The Social Work Dictionary* as the

“marginalization of people or areas and the imposition of barriers that restrict them from access to opportunities to fully integrate with the larger society” (Barker, 2003, 403). Social exclusion applies to both countries that lose out in global competition and to classes of people within nations in the grip of poverty or living with mental or physical disabilities.

The concept of social exclusion goes beyond the mere words “social” and “exclusion” into the political realm. Embodied in this concept is a framework concerning political and economic process. The beauty of this formulation as opposed to the pejorative earlier term, the *underclass*, is its placement of the onus on the people who are doing something to other people. The central tenet of the underclass or culture of poverty argument, in contrast, is that miserable conditions are self-induced—the poor do it to themselves (Byrne, 1999). Subscribers to this theoretical framework acknowledge the influence of global economic transformation on social cohesion at the national level. These impacts vary considerably across class and racial categories. The literature on social exclusion, as Mitchell (2000) notes, highlights the multi-dimensionality of disadvantage on purely economic grounds to include marginalization through the denial of civil, political, and social rights of citizenship.

My prediction is that use of the term *social exclusion* will gain currency on the US side of the Atlantic due to the rapid transfer of information related to the new technologies. We know from past experience that concepts such as *harm reduction*, *oppression*, and *restorative justice*, introduced in one part of the world have been widely adopted elsewhere. With regard to *social exclusion*, the European Union’s adoption of this terminology provides a credibility as well as media coverage that should promote its adoption globally, especially as our interest in human rights expands.

Van Wormer (2004) discusses sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, ethnocentrism, ageism, and sectarianism as forms of social exclusion. Kunstreich (2003) investigated social exclusion of Jews in Nazi Germany and social workers’ complicity in this process. The final part of the article considers North American social workers’ compliance in exclusionary legislation such as welfare reform and mass incarceration of offenders.

### **Human Rights**

A search of *Social Work Abstracts* (February, 2005) produces 131 listings for *human rights*. This high number attests to a serious interest by the profession in this subject area. A content analysis further indicates special concerns in regard to social welfare rights and minority issues. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2004) provides a strong endorsement of human rights as a framework for social work policy. Although NASW (1996) does not yet include the term *human rights* in its code of ethics, the code, as Reichert (2003) indicates, bears an uncanny resemblance to important human rights documents, especially to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Reichert’s reference is to Category 6 of the code of ethics which urges social workers to engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to employment and resources, to expand opportunity for all people with special regard for those who are “disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited” (NASW, 1996, Standard 6.04b). A human rights platform sees welfare aid for the poor as an entitlement, not a privilege; access to education and health care are both listed as human rights in the Universal Declaration. The newly revised IFSW-IASSW Code of Ethics includes a strong endorsement of all the international human rights treaties.

In its most recent manual of policy statements, NASW (2003) declared social work a human rights profession. In all fields of social work practice, according to this statement, whether with individuals, families, or communities, social work must be grounded in human rights. Under the guidelines of CSWE (2003) social work programs integrate concerns of social and economic justice content grounded in “human and civil rights” within the curriculum (Section 1VC).

From a Canadian perspective, Watkinson (2001) argues that the inclusion of human rights documents and legal decisions arising from them are an essential part of social work education. Human rights laws, moreover, as Watkinson indicates, “provide a valuable theoretical and practical base for assisting social change” (p. 271). Because Canada was a signatory (unlike the United States) to the Covenant on Economic, Social and Political Rights, social workers in that country can use the document as a touchstone by which to examine social policy and to hold the government accountable: All the provinces in Canada, as well as the federal government, in fact have human rights legislation that is administered by a Human Rights Commission. For Canadian social workers, as Watkinson argues, human rights laws can be a valuable tool for advocacy for social and economic justice within the era of globalization.

In light of the focus in the international media today on international law and violations at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq, and in light of publicity concerning the denial of legal rights to gays and lesbians, social work’s interest in human rights is timely.

### **Other Concepts Worthy of Social Work Attention**

Harm reduction and restorative justice are two additional concepts that I predict will soon be a part of the U.S. social work vocabulary. These concepts, in fact, are well known to social workers throughout the English speaking world and, increasingly, in the United States. The term *harm reduction* appeared for the first time in the latest edition of *The Social Work Dictionary* where it is defined as “a pragmatic, public health approach to reducing the negative consequences of some harmful behavior rather than eliminating or curing the problem (Barker, 2003, 190).

The aim of harm reduction is to reduce unhealthy practices as much as is feasible in the belief that taking small steps is better than nothing. To prevent the spread of AIDS, for example, treatment priorities may prescribe moderate doses of the drug of choice or of a synthetic substitute; dirty needles may be exchanged free of charge for clean ones. This approach has been considered controversial in the United States where moralism often wins out over pragmatism. Because the philosophy of harm reduction is consistent with the empowerment perspective of social work, however, we can expect that the profession will pay far more heed to its principles and practices in the near future (see van Wormer, 2005).

*Restorative justice* is a concept that still has a way to go in U.S. social work circles although it is widely known to correctional personnel. The fact that no definition yet appears in Barker’s *Social Work Dictionary* is indicative of a lack of broad-based recognition of the importance of this concept to social work. My personal prediction is that in the next edition this term will be included. A search of *Social Work Abstracts* as of June, 2004 produced only six abstracts. Significantly, however, most of them were recent, a fact that is seemingly indicative of a trend.

My prediction that restorative justice is a concept whose time has come is based on three major developments. First, I am anticipating a heightened influence of Canadian social work on the U.S. profession, thanks to a first-ever collaboration between the two countries through joint membership in the North American section of the International Federation of Social Workers (Stoesen, 2003). Canadian social workers are well versed in restorative principles, which they

utilize in practice with youthful offenders and school situations. The second major influence relates to indigenous and international knowledge: family group conferencing is a restorative method from New Zealand that is being modeled worldwide. Thirdly, the most extensive evaluation research on victim-offender mediation is being conducted at the Center of Restorative Justice and Peacemaking, which is housed at the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work. A recent article in NASW News highlighted this research under the headline, "Restorative Justice: A Model of Healing: Philosophy Consistent with Social Work Values (Fred, 2005)."

Because so many in the profession work with persons who are ordered by courts into treatment as offenders, not to mention all the persons victimized by crime who come into treatment to work on issues of traumatization, it is fitting that the Center of Restorative Justice and Peacemaking at the University of Minnesota has a social work connection. Social work practitioners often are trained through field placements for work in juvenile and adult correctional institutions and through coursework to provide counseling for personal issues and substance abuse treatment. Nevertheless, compared to other areas of social work practice, the clash between social work values and societal values is at its most pronounced here, in the correctional system. Whereas the general purpose of the criminal justice system is to punish offenders and deter others from law-breaking behavior by setting a harsh example, social work's mission, as we know, is to help people help themselves and to challenge social injustice (NASW, 1996). Happily, the restorative justice philosophy can form a harmonious link between the criminal justice and social work fields.

### **Conclusion**

That a paradigm shift is occurring and that this shift in ideology and politics is related to economics and social globalization are major arguments of this paper. The present globalization of the economy has profound implications for social work, not all of these are negative, by any means. The positive side relates to the expanded information technologies which bring social work trends and innovations from one part of the world to the doorstep of other parts of the world. For example, consider the rapid spread of knowledge concerning treatments for disease and their ailments.

From a negative standpoint, literature from the social sciences typically points to the impact of global competition on employment conditions and social welfare benefits. The standardization of policies in the global age is such that the harried service worker in rich nations has more in common with the sweatshop worker in poor regions of the world than with the bankers and CEOs in his or her own country. Trends toward privatization and consolidation for greater efficiency are universal trends. Because social work is the profession most closely linked with social welfare and with working with marginalized populations such as immigrants, the unemployed, and families who are homeless, a global perspective on personal troubles is paramount.

For the examination of trends in social work, this article relied on four major sources of information: CSWE's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards*; *The Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 2003); NASWS's *Social Work Speaks*, and *Social Work Abstracts*. The terms I selected were chosen because of the challenge they represent to life in the globalized community. Each concept we examined - - globalization, oppression, social exclusion, human rights, harm reduction, and restorative justice - - is on the cutting edge of social work theory.

Each concept is an active part of the European (and Canadian and Australian) social work vernacular. My prediction is that, due to the global interconnectedness among schools of social work today and because of the importance of such concepts to our understanding of today's world, these concepts will become increasingly familiar to American social workers as well.

The significance of the terminology discussed in this article is its bearing on the social action component in social work. Work is necessary to confront the most onerous aspects of globalization, the oppression of socially excluded populations. Such efforts can be guided from a human rights platform. Harm reduction and restorative justice are two examples of person-centered approaches, the former from health care, the latter from criminal justice that closely resonate with social work values. Through heightened consciousness concerning these concepts, social workers, following the profession's commitment to social justice and political action, can make a difference in both small and major ways. For strategies for influencing government policies see Schneider & Lester, (2001) and van Wormer (2004).

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