

SHOULD SOCIAL WORK HAVE A DEFINING IDENTITY?

By

Michael B. Friedman, LMSW
Adjunct Associate Professor
Columbia University School of Social Work

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Some members of our profession believe that social work needs to have a defining identity so as to avoid its being an amorphous amalgam of diverse practices that are difficult, or even impossible, to distinguish from other professions—or, woe is us—from non-professions.¹ Other members of our profession, however, (I among them) do not think that it is necessary for social work to have a defining identity.² We believe that social work is a pluralistic profession made up of people who do many different things to help other people and who have many different beliefs and values. We pluralists believe that diversity and lack of definition are two of the great strengths of the profession of social work.

The debate about identity is not new. In fact, since its organization as a profession, the field of social work has been troubled by questions about whether it is really a profession and, if so, how it should define itself so as to be distinct from all other professions.

For example, in 1915 when the progenitors of social work were creating the new field, Abraham Flexner, who had previously helped to shape the profession of medicine, asserted to their great dismay that social work could not be a genuine profession.³ It lacked, he said, an identity that distinguished it from other helping professions, and it lacked a body of knowledge that was distinctively its own.

You would think that by now Flexner's critique of social work as a profession would be a dim memory. After all social work has successfully established itself as a profession. It has its own system of education. People known to all the world as "social workers" engage in a broad range of practices to help individuals, families, groups, communities, and societies. And governments recognize social work as a profession whose practitioners need to meet criteria regarding education and knowledge in order to be authorized to practice.

Nevertheless, many people in the profession continue to worry that social work may not be a *real* profession like medicine or law. Maybe it is a "quasi-profession," as Ronald Hall calls it in an article entitled disparagingly "The Warmth Profession."⁴

And many more people in the profession believe that even if social work has successfully established itself as a profession, it is not a highly regarded profession in our society. To achieve greater respect and to function more effectively as a profession, it needs, they argue, to coalesce around a clear, unique, defining identity; and it needs to develop its own knowledge base.

For example, as the 20th century came to an end, Stanley Witkin, former editor of the journal *Social Work*, asked, "If there is nothing about social work practice and research that distinguishes them, then how do we justify our profession? ... We need to say how we are different and why the difference is important."⁵

In response Deborah Lee commented that she was, "baffled by the social work profession's continuing need to contemplate its collective navel through debates on how to 'define ourselves'! ... It is high time that NASW stopped agonizing over 'whither goeth social work?' and started celebrating the diversity of interests and talents encompassed within the sphere of our profession."⁶

Thus, the issue is joined. Witkin tells us that we cannot justify ourselves as a profession if we cannot define ourselves. "Cannot justify ourselves as a profession!" That's powerful stuff.

But Lee tells us that we are a wonderfully diverse profession that should celebrate its pluralism rather than trying to build an impossible unified identity. That has a very nice ring to it, I think. Let's take pride in our diversity.

But Witkin has a response. He asks, "How do we know what to do, how to do it, and who to do it with unless we have some clarity about who we are? Social work is a profession of tensions and contradictions arising out of its strong value orientation, breadth of interests, and location between the mainstream and margins of society. These tensions and contradictions ...create a situation in which [social work's] identity is never stable and is always being negotiated. This is not a bad thing." But, he continues, "Social work may be many things, but it cannot be everything. It must have boundaries. Part of our identity is deciding the location of these boundaries and their permeability. ... "For example, should social workers serve all people or only those who are 'disadvantaged and vulnerable'? Is it legitimate for social workers (as social workers) to be in private, for-profit businesses?"⁷

These are very tough questions, and they bring us to the heart of the discomfort that permeates the profession of social work today. On the one side are those who would argue that social work's special, and only legitimate, social role is to serve those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable and to work for social changes for their benefit. On the other

side are those who believe that it is entirely legitimate for social workers to provide psychotherapy and other services not only for the poor but also for the middle-class and even the very wealthy. In fact, there are social workers who have themselves become very wealthy doing social work through such ventures as training institutes, private clinics, employee assistance businesses with multiple corporate clients, and managed care enterprises. Social workers were not only the founders of such remarkable social efforts as the settlement house movement; they were also among the founders of employee assistance services in the workplace⁸ and of the managed care industry, and some became very wealthy in the process.

Of course, some members of our profession would drum out of our profession those who serve the wealthy and those who make a profit. Those of us who are pluralists about social work would not.

But I've gotten a bit ahead of myself. The Witkin-Lee debate highlights a very important issue. Is it possible for social work both to have a defining identity and to allow the diversity of practice that characterizes what social workers do, and—for that matter—what they are taught to do in schools of social work today?

There are three candidates (sometimes conjoined) to be the defining characteristics of social work while also allowing adequate leeway for the vast differences within the field. One is the view that all social work practice must draw on the "person-in-environment" perspective.⁹ Another is that social work practice is rooted (a) in efforts to help people who are disadvantaged and vulnerable and (b) in the pursuit of social justice.¹⁰ Another is that the fundamental goal of social work is "empowerment".¹¹

The phrase "person-in-environment" refers to a seemingly simple understanding that all human beings are multi-dimensional. Each of us is an individual. But each of us is also part of a family; part of a number of communities; part of a people, a nation, a society; part of a world composed of diverse peoples, societies, and nations; part of a global economy; part of a species with powerful biological imperatives, and part of a global environment. Those who are religious would add that those who choose—or are chosen—are also part of a religion and that each of us, whether we believe it or not, is part of a spiritual whole.

In addition to its implicit respect for human complexity, this perspective makes clear that for social work there are multiple possible points of intervention to help improve the lives of people. Individual psychotherapy, family therapy, building social skills, acting in *loco parentis*, helping those who attend to physical needs, negotiating social systems on behalf of individuals and families, community development, working for social and political change, humanizing the workplace, seeking economic justice,

protecting the environment, and helping people confront their spiritual challenges—these are all roles that social workers play.

This diversity of possible helping interventions creates certain unavoidable tensions because it produces diverse understandings of what contributes to the well-being of human beings; it produces diverse methods to promote well-being; and it produces diverse values.

Convictions clash and feel powerfully contradictory. Are these contradictory convictions somehow reconciled through an agreement that all social workers share a person-in-environment perspective? Does this perspective wash away differences regarding the centrality of social vs. individual change, differences about human psychology, differences about the kinds of social changes we should be seeking—structural transformation vs. incremental social change vs. return to traditional community values, differences about gender dominance in the profession, differences about whether improvements in the human condition are rooted in faith and salvation through God, and so forth?

The second possible defining identity is a shared commitment to people who are poor, disadvantaged, vulnerable, or victims of discrimination—a shared commitment, that is, to pursue social justice.

Many social workers, I think, have been called to the profession by their sense that the world is composed of haves and have-nots, of people with great opportunities and people who are fundamentally estranged from social and economic opportunities, of people with an excess of power and of people who are virtually powerless. For them the very essence of social work is to do something to rectify these injustices.

But not everyone is called to social work by this vision. Many are drawn—as I was originally—to a profession that enables you to provide treatment for people with mental illnesses or to assist people with physical illnesses get good care from hospitals or to serve people with profound disabilities, etc.

One could argue that helping people overcome mental and physical illnesses or live decently despite their disabilities makes the world a better place and in this sense amounts to pursuit of social justice. Jerome Wakefield tried to resolve the apparent tension between clinical social work and social advocacy by arguing that the pursuit of social justice is the mission of social work and that psychotherapy is not fundamental to social work. He continues, however, to argue that psychotherapy is a useful tool in the effort to achieve social justice. (1) Mental illness, he says, is a barrier to getting a fair share of social goods. Overcoming mental illness contributes to social opportunity. (2) Wakefield also maintains to good mental health is part of the minimal state that human beings would have in a just society. And (3) he maintains that mental illness reflects historical deprivation, injustice of

early life as it were, and that psychotherapy is an after-the-fact effort to overcome the consequences of social injustice.^{12,13}

Maybe, but there are very different images at work here—transformation of society on the one hand vs. helping someone lead a better life on the other. Does calling both of them “social justice” reconcile the differences?

In addition, there are very different views of what social justice is.

For example, John Rawls, who is often cited as the spokesman for a liberal view of justice, takes the position that justice is inequality that is fair. Essentially Rawls maintains that in a capitalistic and democratic society, disparity is inevitable and economically beneficial, but that it is possible to shape disparities such that everyone has equal opportunity to benefit and such that inequalities benefit the poor as well as the rich.¹⁴

A myriad of radical critics of Rawls jump all over him, as I’m sure you can imagine, as a sell-out to capitalism and to the illusion of democracy. They believe that a society dominated by large corporations cannot be just. They believe that a society in which the social hierarchy is defined by wealth cannot be just. They believe that a society that relies on elections funded by the wealthy cannot be just.

And from the right Rawls is attacked by conservative libertarians such as Robert Nozick and conservative communitarians such as Michael Sandel.

Nozick takes the position that a just society is one in which government plays a minimal role. Helping the poor, he maintains, should be purely a matter of philanthropy. And unequal distribution of wealth is fair so long as people didn’t break the law to get what they have.¹⁵

Sandel takes the position that justice and all other values are rooted in, and grow from, small communities and from so-called “civil society”, the mediating structures between individuals and big government. A just society cannot be pre-patterned. It must emerge from the workings, from the values, of specific communities.¹⁶

So, if the defining identity of social work is the pursuit of social justice, which version of social justice are we to pursue? Or does that not matter so long as we are pursuing our own vision of social justice?

How about the concept of empowerment? Can we find unity in it?

When it is used with meaning rather than as an idle utterance by people who have grasped no more than the sound of it, I like the concept of empowerment. It makes clear that there are two fundamental dimensions

of social work. One is the effort to help people—especially people who are poor and are at the low end of the social totem pole—become strong enough in themselves to flourish in the world in which they find themselves. The second is the effort to change the world, to reduce the obstacles strewn in the paths of people who struggle to make life more than mere survival, the effort to create opportunities where now there are barriers of disadvantage and discrimination.

Empowering individuals, families, and communities to pursue their well-being more effectively while at the same time loosening the biases and constraints of hierarchical societies so as to give people social and political power—this is an idea with great power.

But I'm afraid, as a defining characteristic of social work it is a non-starter. Barbara Simon, who has written a brilliant book explaining and advocating for the idea of empowerment, draws a sharp contrast between empowerment practice and various "paternalistic" practices as she calls them.¹⁷

So, unless we are prepared to drum the "paternalists", who undoubtedly would use other words to describe their practice, out of the profession of social work, empowerment just won't work as a defining characteristic of the field.

For example, Prof. Simon insists that social work practice should be "strength-based" in stark contrast to psychodynamic psychotherapists who believe that individuals' problems can only be resolved through the exploration of intra-psychic conflicts.

Should we declare psychodynamic clinical social workers *persona non grata* in our profession? Some people think we should. I disagree. Even though I am not a great fan of psychodynamic psychotherapy, I think that these clinical social workers are an outgrowth of the history of social work, a product of our schools, and an important part of our profession.

So, empowerment just doesn't work as a defining identity for social work.

Let's return now to the positions that social work can and should be defined using the person-in-environment perspective and/or the commitment to pursue social justice. Do these concepts adequately create a defining identity for social work?

It appears that the officialdom of the profession think so. They are melded together in the preamble to our code of ethics.¹⁸

"The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people,

with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.

"Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. 'Clients' is used inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems."

This is a great statement. I read it and I feel proud to be a social worker. It is a statement that is designed to be inclusive. Social workers serve "all" people, but with an emphasis on those who are poor, etc. Social workers do "direct practice", including clinical practice, and social workers take political action. This is a statement designed to get past the "either-or" of social work debate and to move to a position of "both-and". (You must read a wonderful article by Karen Haynes called "The One-Hundred Year Debate: Social Reform vs. Individual Treatment"¹⁹ to get a sense of the very important shift from debating which is the real social work to acknowledging the quite apparent truth that they are both the real social work.)

But I worry that The Code of Ethics doesn't really produce the sort of reconciliation of views among social workers that it was designed to produce. It is the product of a committee; and it is, therefore, a product of negotiation. I've done a lot of negotiating over the course of my career, and I've learned that sometimes raising the level of abstraction is a way to get past differences. But sometimes raising the level of abstraction produces an illusory agreement, which collapses as soon as we get back to specifics.

Does the mission statement of the Code of Ethics bring us together by taking a both-and rather than an either-or approach? I have my doubts because I don't think it can quell the anger that emerges in exchanges between devotees to various views of social work.

Think of just the variety of political views.

There are a great many politically radical social activists who want, and work for, social transformation.²⁰ They don't want just societal accommodations. They believe that society is rotten to the core, that it has been constructed by rich people for the benefit of rich people with occasional droppings from the table for the poor, particularly when their numbers become dangerously large. They believe that the consciousness of people lowdown on the social hierarchy has been warped by ideologies, which blind them to their personal and economic self-interests. They believe that democracy is a false promise, that the political process in the industrialized world is controlled by the rich, who essentially buy power. They believe that the economic, social, and political structure of the industrialized world is inherently unjust, oppressive, racist, sexist, etc. They believe that it is a structure that ultimately may result in the destruction of our planet either through nuclear holocaust or decay of the global environment.

In contrast, liberal social activists like myself experience considerable disenchantment with society as it is but tend to believe that capitalism is the source of the kinds of beneficial material comforts which became widespread in the industrialized world over the past century and have been slowly coming to some parts of the poor world over the past quarter century or so. We tend to believe that democracy provides a framework through which the interests of people who are poor and out of power can be represented—even though they often are not. We believe that we can effect significant social changes within the framework of a democratic, capitalistic society even though such changes often take a very long time.

There are also social workers who are compassionate—dare I say it—conservatives.²¹ They tend to believe that social services need to be embedded in religions and to offer faith and salvation. They also believe that becoming a successful human being depends to a great extent on people having or developing a strong sense of personal responsibility. Many supported the change in the American social welfare system enacted through the Personal Responsibility Act,²² the change that set time limits on the receipt of welfare benefits and insisted that people who are not disabled work for a living. Many also support traditional sexual values—which they tend to refer to as “family values”—and many oppose abortion.

In addition, there are a great many clinical social workers who do not regard social change as part of their job as social workers even if they support it personally. Professionally they tend to be apolitical, to believe that inner, personal transformation is the path to well-being and that the need for such transformations is not limited to people who are poor or disempowered. They just do not buy the view that we have a responsibility as social workers to devote ourselves solely to the lower end of the social hierarchy. Our responsibility is to promote healthy human development and well-being among all people who experience personal suffering.

These perspectives are different. Each, I think, brings a profound and powerful insight to the pursuit of human well-being. The variety of these insights should cause us all to waver in our points of view and to have some humility about what we know and do not know.

Maybe social work's mission statement reconciles them in some way, but I am not convinced. I think this degree of diversity of opinion makes social work a pluralistic rather than a unitary profession, and I think its pluralism strengthens social work, makes it resilient and adaptable to the tensions and contradictions of pluralistic societies and to the diversity of the people and communities that we serve. And its pluralism is part of my source of pride in being a member of the profession of social work.

¹ Witkin, S. (1998). "[Is Social Work an Adjective](#)", *Social Work*, November 1998

² Lee, D. (1999). "[Define Ourselves' Debate](#)" Letter in *Social Work*, 44(4) July 1999.

³ [Flexner, Abraham | Encyclopedia of Social Work \(oxfordre.com\)](#)

⁴ Hall, R. (2000). "[The Warmth Profession: Societal Perceptions of Social Work Practice](#)" in *Professional Development*, 3(3) Winter 2000.

⁵ Witkin, S. (1998) op.cit (SW Nov 1998 p.483)

⁶ Lee, D. (1999) op.cit (SW July 1999 pp. 398-399.)

⁷ Witkin, S. (1999) "[Identities and Contexts](#)", *Social Work*, 44(4)July 1999

⁸ [About Us | Workplace Center \(columbia.edu\)](#)

⁹ Rogge, M. and Cox, M. (2008). [The Person-in-Environment Perspective in Social Work Journals: A Computer-Assisted Content Analysis: Journal of Social Service Research: Vol 28, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

¹⁰ Marsh, J. "[Social Justice: Social Work's Organizing Value](#)" in *Social Work*, October 2005.

¹¹ Simon, B. (1994) [The Empowerment Tradition in American Social Work: A History](#), Preface, Chapters 1 and 4. Columbia University Press, New York, 1994.

¹² Wakefield, J. (1988) [Psychotherapy, Distributive Justice, and Social Work: Part 2: Psychotherapy and the Pursuit of Justice | Social Service Review: Vol 62, No 3 \(uchicago.edu\)](#)

¹³ Wakefield, Jerome. "Putting Humpty Together Again: Treatment of Mental Disorders and Pursuit of Justice" in *Mental Disorders In the Social Environment: Critical Perspectives*, Edited by Stuart Kirk. Columbia University Press. New York, 2005.

¹⁴ [A Theory of Justice: Original Edition on JSTOR](#)

¹⁵ Nozick, R. (1974). [Anarchy, State, and Utopia](#). Basic Books.

¹⁶ Sandel, M. (1996). [*Democracy's Discontent: America In Search Of A Public Philosophy*](#). Harvard University Press

¹⁷ Simon, B. op.cit.

¹⁸ [NASW Code of Ethics](#) (1999)

¹⁹ Haynes, K. "[The One-Hundred Year Debate: Social Reform vs. Individual Treatment](#)" in *Social Work*, 43(6) November 1998

²⁰ [The Radical Voices of Social Workers: Some Lessons for the Future: Journal of Progressive Human Services: Vol 13, No 1 \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

²¹ Olasky, M (2000). [Compassionate Conservatism](#) The Free Press.

²² Nathan R. and Gais T. (1999). [Implementing The Personal Responsibility Act of 1996](#). The Nelson Rockefeller Institute of Government.