

Your Philosophy of Social Work: Developing a Personal and Professional Definition to Guide Thought and Practice

Paul Force-Emery Mackie, MSW, Ph.D., Minnesota State University, Mankato
Department of Social Work, Mankato, Minnesota

Key Words: Philosophy of social work, personal, professional, definition

Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 4, Number 1 (2007)

Copyright © 2007, White Hat Communications

This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of White Hat Communications.

Abstract

Social work as a discipline focuses on theoretical and philosophical positions such as social justice, equality, and empowerment. Whereas these can be described as “philosophies of social work,” we should ask ourselves, “What is our philosophy of social work?” This paper provides a personal interpretation of a personal philosophy of social work, how it was constructed, and why social workers should engage in this exercise. The final goal of this paper is to provide a thoughtful discussion that encourages other social workers to investigate their own philosophy of social work and define what a “philosophy of social work” means to them.

1. Introduction

Recently the question, “What is your personal philosophy of social work?” was raised, and I was asked to provide a response. It seemed an interesting query, and one that I was surprised to find ill-prepared to readily answer. I contemplated the predictable and logical responses--my philosophy of social work has something to do with systems theory, person-in-environment, and

professional and personal ethics. Given my professional commitment to macro social work, it would also be laden with community organization theories and concepts. Being a student of Foucault's (1980, 1994) and Gutierrez's (1994) works, my philosophy would include a discussion about issues associated with power differentials and empowerment. These are always a part of my thought processes and weigh heavily in how I interpret the dynamics of human interactions. I am also a supporter of Foucault's concept of "Fearless Speech" (2001), both as an applicable instrument and set of techniques useful to facilitate social change. Regardless of how much I thought about the question, it became immediately clear that my responses were as fragmented in my mind as they appear in this paper. My response was, sadly, "I think I know, but I don't know how to articulate it."

This question stimulated thoughts of what comprises a "personal philosophy of social work" and what this meant to me, even if I was unable to sufficiently articulate my response. I asked myself--are these in fact "philosophies of social work" or theories and concepts that guide the field, actions, and behaviors? There is more than a subtle difference between concepts. I concluded that ultimately this was a question of definition – how do I define the fragmented concepts that seem piled up on each other without any real order? Being a deconstructionist by nature, I decided to begin with investigating and identifying definitions of the terms that had emerged.

I sought the counsel of a colleague, and an important discovery was made. We hold degrees in social work, but readily lack a functional, personal definition of what it means to us. We could, jokingly, discuss at great length what the degrees we hold *do not* mean – taking classes, writing term papers, practicum, and paying tuition again. More seriously, a contemplative expression crossed our faces. What is *our* philosophy? We have an education that implies that we should know. Facing this conundrum, I challenged myself to define my philosophy.

After an exhaustive review of the many definitions available, I settled on two that captured how I interpret the term *philosophy*. The first states that philosophy is "The study of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, or conduct" (Quartz Hill School of Theology, n.d.). The second defines the term as "a belief (or system of beliefs) accepted as authoritative by some group or school" (Princeton University WordNet, n.d.). Applying these definitions, it is clear that the concept of "philosophy" is grounded in the understanding that there are truths and principles of our existence and that these truths are accepted by us as well as others. Given this information, we can have a set of truths and principles that guide us in how we conduct ourselves and define what we expect from others. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that as social workers, we have a responsibility to be able to define our "philosophy of social work" and not deny ourselves the opportunity to engage in a spirited pursuit of how we define what we perceive as "philosophy."

2. Literature Review

Conducting a literature review on this topic proved challenging. A variety of information about philosophy and social work was identified, but little was found addressing the question of defining ones' own philosophy of social work. Two searches were conducted. The first was among scholarly books on the topic of philosophy of social work, and the second centered on publications in social work and social welfare-focused professional journals.

The searches for texts addressing "philosophy of social work" were found to focus largely on social work theory (Elliott, 1999; Payne, 1997). While informative, most discussed the variety of theories applied to social work and human welfare concerns, but theories of social work differ from the philosophy of social work. The *philosophy of social work* resides deeper in the consciousness of the social worker. While much of the literature focuses on theory, Timms and Watson (1978) present several essays discussing philosophical positions that guide social work practice and to a lesser degree, research. The topics of *moral principles, rights and duties* of the social worker, and *non-judgmental attitudes* are discussed. While these are important elements within the philosophy of social work, little is made available to encourage individuals to develop their own philosophy of social work.

In *The Philosophical Foundations of Social Work*, Reamer (1993) goes into considerable depth discussing political and moral philosophy as well as logic as it applies to social work. The author presents an arrangement of compelling arguments showing how social work is grounded in a set of deep-seated, philosophical issues such as distributive justice and the duty to provide aid. However, it would be difficult for the reader to be able to tease out a sense of what *their* philosophy might be, based on the information presented. Although these scholars present definitions about the philosophy of social work, none focus on developing a philosophy of social work by and for the individual. This appears to be an area in which social workers can strive to enhance their own understanding of themselves and their philosophical position.

A review of the professional literature using the databases *Social Science Abstracts*, *PsycINFO* and *Sociological Abstracts*, and using the keywords *social work, philosophy, personal, professional, and conceptual* revealed nominal information. Among the peer-reviewed journal articles located, one discussed the conceptual framework used in a course focused on the history of philosophy of social work (Desai, 2000). This paper outlines the emergence of social work philosophy from a historical perspective. Desai defines the term *philosophy* as "a study that seeks to understand the mysteries of existence...and examines the

relationship between humanity and nature and between the individual and society” (224-225). The author addresses the history of the philosophy of social work first from the medieval time period to the era of industrialization to post-modernism. The argument follows that to adequately understand the philosophy of social work, we must first understand how oppression and systemic marginalization evolved from hunter-gatherer societies of the past to the post-modern societies of today, and understand how discrimination and biases we observe today are interconnected with perceptions still lingering from the past.

The next paper addressed the philosophical nature of social work from a historically religious perspective ([Cnaan, Boddie, & Danzig, 2005](#)). The authors explain that religion has been unnecessarily removed from the philosophy of social work, and encourage social workers to consider the contributions made to the discipline by religious thought and the tenets of caring for others as prescribed by different spiritual viewpoints. While I found this interesting, I couldn't help but conclude that this may be an effective way to interpret one's philosophy of social work provided that the person also holds a religious belief system. However, because this does not include all people, I felt I must look elsewhere for more inclusive understandings. In another article, [Vijayalakshni \(2004\)](#) addressed issues pertaining to indigenous social work knowledge, arguing that the social work profession has failed to develop a knowledge base around the philosophy of social work by not including an understanding of all human lifeways. This piece supported my questions associated with the Cnaan et al. (2005) paper, but moved me no closer to the goal of defining my philosophy of social work.

An article was located that shares some similarities with the question of what is a social worker's philosophy of social work. [Towle \(1930\)](#) discussed the nature of those identified as “adequate” providing care for societal members considered “inadequate” and therefore, paternal. The author discusses how over time, the philosophy of social work writ large shifted from the notion of differentiating between deserving and undeserving receivers of social welfare services and the responsibility to care for others. However, it is recognized that across time there has been considerable vacillation between more conservative and more liberal approaches to caring for others.

Based on the information found, it seems reasonably safe to state that at least in the literature, the question “what is your philosophy of social work” has yet to be adequately investigated. Therefore, this paper serves to present an example of a statement of philosophy of social work from an individual perspective. Ultimately the goal is to offer an example of a statement, not as a template but as a guide.

3. Statement of Philosophy of Social Work

What is the essence of my philosophy of social work? Is it well or poorly defined? Is it flexible or rigid? Does it rest within definitions provided by others, something I read once and thought “I agree with that,” or is it unique to me and how I perceive the world?

My philosophy of social work is grounded upon the concepts of social justice, empowerment, and equal access to all societal members. I often hear statements similar to this – the “I want to promote social justice and equality for all” claim we as social workers universally make. But what does this really mean? Do we *hope* for justice and equality, or are we *working* toward justice and equality? In accordance with my philosophical position, I *work* toward justice, empowerment, and equal access. But to do so, I need to employ effective knowledge, techniques, and strategies.

To help process and understand these concepts, I am guided by [John Rawls' \(1971\)](#) theory of justice, specifically, the concept of the *veil of ignorance*, [Askheim's \(2003\)](#) discussion on empowerment, and the works of [Michel Foucault \(2001\)](#), especially his discussions pertaining to *parrhesia*. These works are applied based on my personal beliefs, interpretations, and ultimately, my philosophy. Whereas other philosophical influences could be infused, these three concepts represent the core foundation for where my philosophy rests.

3.1. Rawls' Theory of Justice

Beginning with Rawls' justice theory, the veil of ignorance argues that we should make moral decisions affecting the lives of others without owning the properties of knowledge of others or ourselves. Because we know no discriminating information from under the veil, we would choose two central principles of justice – that all people are entitled to basic rights, and it is unjust to maintain inequalities between people. Therefore, without the knowledge of an individual's personal characteristics (ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, or disability), we as moral agents would choose “justice for all” by default, as this is the minimum expectation of any agent who might have the same decision imposed upon them. Clearly, this is easier said than done. I cannot deny the reality that justice does not appear to apply to all, and the veil of ignorance has not been broadly cast or evenly distributed across our society. In fact, the place where the veil is most needed is often where it is least likely to be found. Those who hold power over others are the same people who both need to deploy the veil, and all too often, do not. The worst reality is that the application of the veil would create a level plane for diverse societal members, if only those who oppress would apply it.

If we as moral agents individually and collectively will not or cannot apply the veil uniformly, then this is where I feel I must begin my work. I labor to maintain a philosophical code that incorporates the veil in such a way as to be socially moral and responsible behavior. I ask myself, what would be a socially just approach to meeting the needs of people worst-off among us? How do I create equality? How do I foster understanding and acceptance?

Abstractly, I work to incorporate the concepts of justice and equality into my works from a position of thought. I then work to incorporate these ideals into practice from a position of action. At this praxis intersection, I am now free to claim that some actions are unacceptable, and ought not to be tolerated. Here, oppression, discrimination, and hate toward others can be faced directly, and solutions formulated. But having a sense of what social justice is and how to promote it still fails to provide those in need of a mechanism to facilitate power within and among them. There needs to be a process whereby action can be taken.

3.2. Askheim's Empowerment

[Askheim \(2003\)](#) raised the question, "What is empowerment?" Given the common use of the term, it seems that this is a reasonable question to address, especially among those who apply the concept into their philosophy. One definition of the term comes from [Gutierrez \(1994\)](#), who define empowerment as the "process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations" (202). However, other social scientists have concluded that given the complexity and abstractness of the concept, it may be easier defining what empowerment is *not* rather than what it *is* ([Rappaport, 1984](#)). Askheim states that although empowerment is a main objective for social welfare policy and practice, it is also a complicated mix of granting power to service consumers and at the same time, retaining power as service providers.

To understand empowerment is to understand that to empower is to relinquish power. According to [Askheim \(2003\)](#), "The empowerment philosophy challenges the profession's traditional authority and power. Professionals who want to follow the principles of empowerment must redefine their traditional role" (p. 235). Social workers are sometimes criticized for being both *social advocates* and *social controllers*. As advocates, we focus on power issues and argue that social problems are largely borne out of inequitable distributions of authority. We see the lack of power as the culprit of oppression. As controllers, we focus on

deviance and seek to maintain harmony between groups in society, thereby enforcing power we maintain (DuBois & Miley, 2005). Given that the issues of power seem to be embedded in both society at large and the profession, how do we relinquish power when we recognize that sometimes, service consumers are unable to manage power granted to them? Addressing this paradox, Askheim (2003) suggests that social workers must recognize that they hold power and that sometimes it must be retained – granting full power to consumers is neither reasonable nor possible. The author states:

The users' right to self-determination has to be balanced against securing them against risks and dangers and their right to have an optimal quality of life. Service users will always in different degrees be aware of the consequences of their choices and the consequences of what they are selecting... It is important to emphasize that empowerment must not have as a consequence that their problems are covered over and made invisible in the name of user involvement or user control. Empowerment then must not mean that the professions renounce their competence (p. 237-238).

Given these observations, Askheim clearly states that there is conflict between how to retain power, and how much to empower. Applying this interpretation into my own philosophy of social work requires me to sort through what I feel is important about empowerment. To empower, I must first identify what my level of power is and how I apply it. I then must understand that I hold a bias toward retaining power I should consider relinquishing to the consumer. Finally, I must recognize that to empower is not an absolute concept. Over-empowering is a possibility, and when it occurs, damage can result, which could eventually lead to disempowerment of others, including myself.

3.3. Foucault's Parrhesia

Foucault's concept of *parrhesia* focuses on the question of who among us has the right, duty, and courage to speak the truth. I argue that fundamentally we all do, but because of the negative effects of human power differentials, many do not concretely recognize this as their right. Therefore, we as social workers are bound to the duty to speak out for people not otherwise empowered to speak for themselves. In the text *Fearless Speech* (2001), Foucault explains that "if you do not have the right of free speech, you are unable to exercise any kind of power" (p. 29). He continues to state that without parrhesia, you cannot oppose power structures that confine you. How can social work be effective if people cannot

exercise their right to parrhesiatic speech? I argue that we as social workers are responsible to educate those who are oppressed in the action of parrhesia. Without it, the concepts of justice, empowerment, and equality remain just that, concepts – and lack concrete application to real-world problems. To accomplish this goal, we must then embrace *education* as a tool to achieve the goals of moving the positive forces of justice and equality forward.

From this position, social work is viewed as education, and education becomes power. I do not “tell” a consumer (either in the micro or macro sense) what to do. I inform, empower, and educate. Attempting to “tell” instead of empower and teach them is an instrument of oppression and disempowerment. It strips their right to self-determination and social justice. It stops the forward motion generated by parrhesia. But empowering is hard work. My observation of attempting to empower is that while the intention is good, the process often fails. To educate and empower means you are engaging in a long-term commitment. People become disempowered over long periods of time; therefore, it is unreasonable to believe they will become empowered immediately or without much effort.

To answer the questions I first posed, I draw my philosophical boundaries around what I have learned from others. I then work from that place and stretch out to reach deeper understandings based on these works. I have gained much from the works of Rawls and Foucault, but cannot in good conscience rest upon their laurels. I recognize that my philosophical interpretations are in constant flux and growth, but this does not imply that the philosophy is adrift aboard an abandoned ship. I have set for myself criteria by which I will hold myself accountable. I promote the broad concepts of social justice, empowerment, and equal access by combining the abstract concepts with the concrete actions of the veil of ignorance and parrhesia. The veil protects from biases, and parrhesia grants the power to bring injustices to light for critical evaluation.

4. Conclusion

Given the complexity of the question presented here, it is unlikely that anyone could produce a thoughtful discussion around the question without recognizing that we hold several philosophies of social work. In its simplest form, there is the understanding of systems theory and person-in-environment. Beneath these concepts we find discussions about ethics and why we do what we do. But beneath the ethics, we find that we do have a philosophy of social work that is intimate and personal as well as professional. Here is where I believe we can truly identify the real philosophy, the personal philosophy that then influences our public philosophy. This is the space where we must begin to “flesh-out” our position with clarity so as to have a clearer understanding of all that rests upon it.

Being able to apply Rawls' veil of ignorance is important to the well being of others as well as for the person applying it. Here is where I can protect against both known and unknown biases I may hold. Given the nature of preconceived notions and beliefs, there is always the problem of not being able to recognize bias within oneself. Therefore, the application of the veil serves to guard against making decisions about others one would not otherwise want to be made about oneself. This concept is closely related to Askheim's *empowerment*. To make the statement that I will strive to empower others is too simplistic. I must recognize that I may be retaining my power for my own good and not for the good of others. I must at the same time recognize that there is a need to retain power that is too great to be employed by some others. Both approaches and understandings are acceptable at appropriate levels, but as [Askheim \(2003\)](#) put it, the problem described here is "an act of balancing on a slack rope" (p. 239). Foucault's *parrhesia* provides a practical guide as to how one can empower and promote social justice. The power of speech can be at the same time enormous and crushing. Here, too, one must beware of potential pitfalls. Fearless speech implies that one has the power to be "fearless." To have this as a component of my philosophy of social work implies that I understand the power of fearless speech and the possible ramifications of applying this philosophical tool.

The three tenets of my philosophy of social work described here reach into the depths of what social work means to me, and how I apply my knowledge and conduct my practice. However, the investigation of the question shed light on a new level of understanding of the question. Now that I have deconstructed the concepts *the veil of ignorance*, *Askheim's empowerment*, and *Foucault's parrhesia*, I am able to fully view my philosophy and reconstruct what this philosophy means to me. From here, I can be more confident in my philosophical position and have a better understanding of conceptual underpinnings of the philosophy.

The process for me was refreshing and educational. When asked, I can now provide a thoughtful response to the question, "What is your personal philosophy of social work?" I am also more comfortable with the possibility that part of the response is, "I am not sure," because at the same time I know that I am working on the questions at a sufficiently deep level as to effectively investigate the meanings of the concepts. Over time, I am certain that my philosophy will mature and become more developed and sophisticated. To know that this change is likely is to know that I now have a starting point and benchmark to measure future forward motion.

In the end, I return to the beginning – to understand my philosophy of social work, I must promote and espouse the concepts I value with the understanding that to have a philosophy is not enough. I must also have a plan of action. Only after these elements are brought together can I satisfy my philosophy of social

work, which is committed to fighting for and alongside the worst-off members of our society.

References

Askheim, O.P. (2003). Empowerment as guidance for professional social work: An act of balancing on a slack rope. *European Journal of Social Work*, 6, 3, 229 – 240.

Cnaan, R.A., Boddie, S.C., & Danzig, Rivka, A. (2005). Teaching about organized religion in social work: Lessons and changes. *Journal of Religion and Spiritually in Social Work*, 24, 1-2, 93 – 110.

Desai, M. (2000). Curriculum planning for history of philosophies of social work. *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, 61, 2, 221 – 239.

DuBois, B., & Miley, K.K. (2005). *Social work: An empowering profession (5th Ed)*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Elliot, A. (Ed.). (1999). *Contemporary social theory*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews & other writings 1972 – 1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1994). *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth. Essential works of Foucault 1954 – 1984. Volume I*. New York, NY: New York Press.

Foucault, M. (2001). *Fearless speech*. Los Angeles, CA. Semiotext(E).

Gutierrez, L.M. (1994). Beyond coping: An empowerment perspective on stressful life events. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 21, 201 – 219.

Payne, M. (Ed.). (1997). *Modern social work theory (2nd ed.)*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum.

Princeton University WordNet (n.d.). WordNet search 2.1 “Philosophy.” Retrieved October 16, 2006 from <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=philosophy>

Quartz Hill School of Theology. (n.d.). Glossary. Retrieved October 16, 2006 from <http://www.theology.edu/theology/glossary.html>

Rappaport, J. (1984). Studies in empowerment: Introduction to the issue. *Prevention in Human Services*, 3, 1 – 7.

Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press.

Reamer, F.G. (1993). *The philosophical foundations of social work*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Timms, N., & Watson, D. (Eds.). (1978). *Philosophy in social work*. London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd.

Towle, C. (1930). Changes in the philosophy of social work. *Mental Hygiene*, 14, 341 – 368.

Vijayalakshmi, B. (2004). Building social work knowledge: Some issues. *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, 65, 1, 73 – 86.

About This Article and the *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*

This article is published in the *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, Volume 4, Number 1 (Spring 2007) and provided here for educational purposes with the permission of the publisher. This peer-reviewed *Journal* is available online **FREE OF CHARGE** at <http://www.socialworker.com/jswve>. Go to the Journal's Web site to read additional articles and to sign up for a free subscription. Subscribers receive an e-mail notification of each new issue of the *Journal* when it is available. The *Journal* is published twice a year. Selected articles from each issue will be available for continuing education credit.