CHAPTER ONE

Defining Social Justice in a Socially Unjust World

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Abstract

A challenge for today’s social workers and social work educators is to formulate practice principles that link social justice goals with daily realities and to communicate them effectively to the next generation of practitioners. Through its focus on the inclusion of the “voices” of marginalized groups, its critique of long-standing metanarratives, and its emphasis on the importance of the means by which societies produce or impede the attainment of social justice, postmodernism has added a process-oriented dimension to contemporary thinking (Leonard, 1997). The author provides a broad conceptual framework for social justice education in the twenty-first century.

Educating social work students for social justice practice in the early twenty-first century presents faculty with a particular set of challenges and frustrations. On the one hand, we are compelled by our consciences and professional mandates to emphasize social justice in our teaching. Many of us take seriously the declaration of the revised NASW Code of Ethics (2008) that “social workers challenge social injustice . . . [through] social change efforts . . . focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of
social injustice.” We try to implement the education policy and accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008), which require accredited programs to educate students to promote economic and social justice and combat societal oppression. Our schools’ missions often reflect these dictates explicitly, as do our course syllabi.

Yet, despite their thorough immersion in this rhetorical climate, when I ask my students why social workers are not regarded as threats in today’s conservative political climate, why they are not harassed by government agencies or attacked by the media (George Will’s October 2007 column in the Washington Post notwithstanding), as their professional ancestors were repeatedly throughout the twentieth century, they merely shrug. When I tell them that in nations as different as Chile and South Africa social workers have played leadership roles in combating oppressive regimes, students often fail to see the connection to their own work. This reflects both their lack of knowledge about the history of social work in the United States and the inability of social work scholars and educators to bridge the gap between the profession’s noble and well-intentioned rhetoric and the realities of practice in our complex and increasingly diverse society.

In fact, despite the increased use of social justice rhetoric, there has been little discussion among social workers or social work educators recently about the frequently contested meaning of this concept or how it can be translated into action on a day-to-day basis. Neither the Code of Ethics nor CSWE’s Education Policy and Accreditation Standards defines the term or provides clear illustrations of its application. While the goal of social justice implies broad, structural change, most social workers continue to practice with individuals and families and largely fail to make connections between their practice and the profession’s underlying philosophy. In addition, the concept of social justice implies a universality that is frequently belied by the profession’s emphasis on the specific issues of specific populations. Lacking clear guidance around these critical dilemmas, faculty, students, and practitioners struggle to translate the profession’s most compelling ethical imperative into real-world terms. A significant challenge for today’s social workers and social work educators, therefore, is to formulate practice principles that link social justice goals with daily realities and to communicate them effectively to the next generation of practitioners.

Evolution of the Concept of Social Justice

For much of human history, the concept of social justice has been applied solely to specific communities. Social justice implied justice for
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a particular group or population and not for those of different ethnicities or religions. Within these limits, proponents of social justice sought to balance fairness in the distribution of resources with the maintenance of political and social stability (Chatterjee & D’Aprix, 2002). Since the appearance of secular humanism and scientific rationalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, concurrent to the growth of powerful nation-states and revolutionary movements in the West, debates over social justice have acquired a more universal tone. They have also reflected the tension between the preservation of individual liberty and the attainment of equality of rights and opportunities (Dworkin, 2000). Although there have been periodic attempts in the West to develop a single “universal concept” of social justice (e.g., medieval Christian doctrine; the ideas of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers and political theorists in Europe and North America; the work of German philosophers such as Kant and Hegel; and the numerous documents of revolutionary socialism and anarchism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), until the mid-twentieth century there was no systematic attempt to codify social justice in a global way. This first occurred in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949).

The UN declaration underscored a major theme in the evolution of ideas about social justice: the emergence of a distinction between group-specific and universal concepts and theories. It also reflected the evolving distinction between theories of social justice and theories that explain other forms of justice, such as distributive or retributive justice (Miller, 2001). Although the principles of the UN declaration have rarely been put into practice, by the late twentieth century, major critiques of their underlying, largely Western ideas of social justice appeared. Critics pointed out how the declaration’s universal paradigms were either no longer relevant or required extensive modification if they were to serve as effective guides in the contemporary demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural environment (Young, 2001). They also identified two unresolved problems in the attainment of social justice goals. One was the contradiction between social justice ideals and the persistent injustices of the institutional context in which they developed. The other was the tension between justice principles based on individual rights and inequalities rooted in invidious group- or population-based distinctions (Caputo, 2000; Morris, 2002; Nussbaum, 1999).

Historical View of Social Justice in U.S. Social Work

It is widely assumed that contemporary debates over social justice in the United States revolve primarily around liberal and conservative
philosophical differences. In this formulation, liberals attempt to balance efforts to distribute societal benefits and burdens more broadly and equitably while protecting individual rights. Conservatives put greater emphasis on individual economic (i.e., property) and political rights and responsibilities and are less supportive of using policy for redistributive purposes (Katz, 2002; Rawls, 1999, 2001). Views of social justice in the United States, however, are far more complex and nuanced. Over the past 200 years, they have been shaped by both secular and religious perspectives ranging from Marxism to postmodernism (Elshtain, 2002; Grogan, 2000).

From Marxism and its various offshoots, social justice proponents derived the values of equality, a positive view of social change, and recognition of the importance of ideas and culture in defining the parameters of a just society (Fraser, 1995). Through its focus on the inclusion of the “voices” of marginalized groups, its critique of long-standing metanarratives, and its emphasis on the importance of the means by which societies produce or impede the attainment of social justice, postmodernism has added a process-oriented dimension to contemporary thinking (Leonard, 1997). The diverse ideas that inform contemporary views of social justice have led to confusion about its meaning and implications for social work in the twenty-first century (Reisch, 2002).

This ambiguity is not a recent phenomenon; it has been reflected in the profession of social work almost since its inception (Holder, 1922; Wise, 1909). Although social justice has frequently been posited as an alternative to charity within the social welfare field, the social justice mission of social work has been compromised by its drive for professional status in a market-oriented economy (Reisch & Andrews, 2001; Specht & Courtney, 1994; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). The contradictions between the cause element of social work and its professional function appear in the profession’s vocabulary and in the ironic coexistence of practice theories that reflect social justice with professional practices that sustain oppressive conditions (Margolin, 1997). In recent decades, these contradictions have also appeared in the conflicts between universal views of social justice based on hegemonic cultural values and group-specific formulations (e.g., racial or gender justice) articulated by members of oppressed and marginalized populations (Johnson, 2001; Reisch, 2007, 2008; Young, 1990).

**Contemporary Views of Social Justice**

During the past two decades, in particular, critiques of universal conceptions of social justice have emerged from various perspectives, including neoconservatism, neoliberalism, socialism, feminism, critical
race theory, postmodernism, and multiculturalism (Hill Collins, 2000; Morris, 2002; Nussbaum, 1999; Reisch, 2002). For example, there has been a serious schism among philosophers and activists about the contradictions between social justice and human rights agendas in a multicultural but still unequal global environment (Prigoff, 2003). Significant regional and ideological differences have also made it difficult to translate social justice ideals into state-sponsored policies and micro- or mezzolevel practices in public or private institutions.

Most of the recent literature on social justice in the social work field focuses primarily on various manifestations of injustice. The strategies proffered to overcome or mitigate these injustices, however, such as culturally competent or nonoppressive practice, rarely move beyond the formulation of abstract principles (Barusch, 2006; Finn & Jacobson, 2007; Gil, 1998; van Wormer, 2004). Perhaps this is because the goal of social justice is largely applied to the macroarena, where only a minority of social workers practice. In addition, the literature presents the injustices experienced by different populations—generally defined by demographic or cultural characteristics—as distinct phenomena with scant references to their common features or systemic roots. In addition, to a considerable extent, these books are atheoretical and make few references to the scholarship on social justice in other disciplines.

By contrast, other works, often written by social work authors outside the United States or by scholars in other fields, emphasize the common effects of recent political/economic and demographic changes such as globalization and neoliberalism on social policy, social work practice, and conceptions of social welfare as a whole (Brodie, 2007; Piven, 2002; Pugh & Gould, 2000; Reisch, 2003). They articulate alternative paradigms, ranging from neoconservatism to Marxism to critical theory, and strive to present alternative approaches to conventional social work. Many of these authors critique welfare capitalism as a social system and argue that traditional social work has been unresponsive to the problems produced by an unrestricted market economy (Isbister, 2001; White, 2000). While these works are conceptually rigorous, their content is difficult to apply to the specifics of daily practice (Appleby, Colon, & Hamilton, 2007; Diller, 2007; Ferguson, Lavalette & Whitmore, 2005; Lum, 2005; Stretch, Burkemper, Hutchison, & Wilson, 2003; Sue, 2006).

Recently, some social work scholars have begun to acknowledge the importance of incorporating social justice concepts and practice principles into both societal goals and daily processes, and into the creation of spaces in which social workers can practice social justice skills effectively and ethically. As Hans Falck (1988) did two decades ago, they assert that this requires social workers to understand the implications
of individuals’ multiple identities and group memberships. In this analysis, the dialectic between invidious systems of discrimination—based upon race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, religion, ability status, gender expression, and age—and the agency of individuals and groups creates the reality of contemporary institutional structures and shapes people’s day-to-day experiences (Hill Collins, 2000). This dynamic is further complicated by the ways in which multiple group identities and social positions—some of which provide unearned advantage and others which produce persistent discrimination—influence one’s perspectives on the environment. Complicating the picture further, as societal conditions change, new contradictions emerge, new forms of oppression appear, and new forces for change arise. In addition, multiple conceptions of social justice exist concurrently, even within the same group, organization, or community. Given this complexity, it is hardly surprising that social workers have such difficulty translating values into straightforward practice principles.

Social Justice and Social Work Practice

In her autobiography, Bertha Reynolds (1963) summarized the first attempt by social workers (in the Rank-and-File Movement of the 1930s) to formulate social justice–oriented guidelines for practice. These “five simple principles” implied that the pursuit of social justice within the social work profession occurred across all methods and fields of practice. Today’s increasingly complex environment requires us to go beyond these broad statements and identify the specific competencies involved. It also requires a thorough critique of the underlying assumptions of our practice frameworks (i.e., their attention to issues of power and the implications of intersecting group memberships) and the importance of decentering our perspectives through reflection and interaction with other participants in the service relationship.

Since the emergence of the profession during the Progressive Era, social workers have assumed that practice with individuals, families, groups, and communities requires an understanding of the relationship between peoples’ problems and their environment. It was clear to our professional ancestors that societal structures and institutions produced a wide range of injustices on the personal and community level. Less clear for much of social work’s history was the ways in which social injustice was also reflected in the practice theories that underlie social work interventions, in the power differentials between clients and workers, and in the administrative processes employed by service agencies (Margolin, 1997). For many decades, most social workers remained unaware of the ways in which their privileged position as practitioners,
their agency’s control of critical resources, and the demographic and cultural differences between them and their clients maintained the societal status quo.

During the past several decades, through the influence of a diverse group of scholars, social workers have gradually expanded our understanding of the practice relationship. Social workers now recognize that by assisting clients in reframing aspects of internalized oppression, effective practitioners can help them develop critical consciousness about the nature of social injustice and articulate their own vision of a more socially just society and community. They can also enable people to select and attain goals related to this raised consciousness, which, ideally, are directed at both personal growth and societal change (Saleebey, 2002). Practitioners can sometimes provide assistance through advocacy and social action on behalf of service users, although such work has its own ethical and political challenges (Hoefer, 2006).

In the future, to work effectively toward social justice, social workers will need to possess six major components of social justice skills and knowledge:

- The ability to envision a socially just society and the actions needed to attain it;
- The ability to understand and work with conflict, dialogue, and community;
- The ability to engage in critical thinking about individual and community issues;
- The ability to apply critical self-awareness and use of self in one’s practice;
- The ability to develop strategies that integrate the social and political dimensions of the environment with one’s personal experience; and
- The ability to engage in praxis—the iterative and ongoing integration of ideas and action through experience, learning, and knowledge generation across domains.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Educating Social Justice Practitioners

A few recent works focus on the educational dimensions of social justice in a global society, in particular those approaches that help people (especially those who possess privilege) learn, think, and grow. They emphasize the prevention, reduction, and overcoming of resistance to change. Despite their application of critical, structural, or postmodern perspectives, and their emphasis on human rights, for the most part...
they address practice issues with individuals, families, small groups, and communities, rather than problems at an institutional level (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2005; Dominelli, 2004; Goodman, 2001; Lundy, 2004; Pease & Fook, 1999; van Soest & Garcia, 2003). They also do not sufficiently address areas of potential conflicts, unintended consequences, and the effects of underlying biases and assumptions that make social justice work today so complex and problematic. What follows is an attempt to augment these perspectives and outline a framework for social justice education for the field.

THE ROLE OF THEORY IN SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

Although most students prefer skills-based content to discussions of the theories on which they are based, there are many reasons why theorizing is important for social justice work. First, theorizing is a practical tool, one of the most important for creating effective change. Our explanations of injustice arise from or are articulated through different types of theories, as is our understanding of the change process. Theorizing is also an important means of maintaining one’s sanity and equilibrium while working for change, because it balances those forces that sustain injustice and often distort our perceptions; it helps resist the tendency to engage in self-blame, rage, and other defensive or self-destructive reactions to the forces of injustice. Finally, theorizing, especially as a collective endeavor, can help expand our sense of possibility and develop more acute analyses of societal conditions. Each theory can illuminate potential change goals and assist practitioners to develop change strategies that anticipate diverse possible outcomes.

The Roles of Diversity, Oppression, Privilege, and Power

Another fundamental aspect of working for social justice is the need to acquire a basic understanding of the implications of diversity in all of its manifestations. Although differences may arise from diverse sources, including groups’ historical experiences, social location, and cultural norms, they are always reflected in their values and goals, conceptions of need and helping, change agendas, and coping styles. Since miscommunication across any of these boundaries can become a social justice issue, we must learn to negotiate them in order to effectively work with people.

Social workers must also become aware of the multiple, often subtle, mechanisms of oppression and privilege that exist in our society and the ways in which the forces that create and sustain them operate through marginalization, domination, cultural hegemony, violence,
and the disempowerment of lower status groups. The deviance process, for example, contributes to the maintenance of some forms of privilege and oppression and creates barriers to social justice work if it is not continuously monitored and addressed. Similarly, different ways of conceptualizing power can lead to different approaches to the assessment and analysis of individual and social issues, and the formulation of change strategies. Power can emerge from formal political and economic structures and from the cultural mechanisms that create meaning and worth. Power both creates and rationalizes hegemonic assumptions about acceptable behaviors, attitudes, modes of thinking and personal interaction, and social goals. As Foucault (1994) argues, “disciplinary” processes, which arise from and are sustained by daily organizational and group transactions, also create other forms of power and define acceptable “discourse” about individual and societal problems.

Social justice education, therefore, must emphasize the ways in which various types of structural power both constrain and support our ability to envision possibilities and act in pursuit of our stated goals. Because of our unique location within the institutional fabric of society, social workers must learn ways to manage, challenge, change, and utilize these structural mechanisms within the systems in which they occur. This can occur through a variety of strategies, including dialogue, tempered radicalism, the creative use of conflict, coalition building, honoring different standpoints, decentering dominant viewpoints, and negotiating boundaries with those in authority.

Social Justice, Change, and Resistance

Doing social justice work, therefore, requires constant attention to the processes of creating and sustaining change. Even if some social justice goals are attained, new goals will emerge or be recognized. Although conditions must usually be destabilized for desired change to occur, both individuals and institutions often fear and resist alterations to the status quo. This implies that change strategies that do not anticipate, respect, honor, and strive to reduce various types of resistance are likely to create stronger opposition, often called backlash. This is particularly important in social justice work because it involves challenging various types of entrenched power.

Education in this regard must acknowledge the personal dimensions of resistance as well. The same processes that help us survive and find meaning in our lives can also block our ability to recognize injustice. Resistance, therefore, refers to all the mechanisms within a social system that work to maintain stability, even where change may produce a
desired result. It includes active, organized opposition, the subversive ways in which people who are oppressed exert dignity and agency in the presence of dehumanizing circumstances, and individuals’ difficulty in reflecting upon and understanding the inherent benefits of their position within the social matrix.

Intersectional Humility and Critical Thinking

As mentioned above, in order to work for social justice, practitioners need to be able to envision social justice goals and recognize the sources of injustice, including their manifestations in various forms of privilege and oppression. Two important skills in this regard are intersectional humility and critical structural thinking. Both of these involve “habits of mind,” the ability to place oneself in diverse social matrices, and skills in critical analysis—of oneself, one’s immediate environment, and the knowledge and tools used in practice. These two set of skills work together and enhance each other.

Intersectional humility allows us to take people’s multiple social roles and identities into account while remaining open to alternative ways of understanding and collaborating within and across domains of power. It requires regular self-analysis and monitoring, often in collaboration with others. An important task is to recognize in each context the ways in which our own dimensions of power, privilege, oppression, and difference are associated with these multiple and interacting roles (Hill Collins, 2000). This includes an understanding of our “insider” and “outsider” statuses in working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and institutions.

Intersectional humility is strengthened if social workers can broaden and “de-center” our own perspectives. One way to do this is to work closely with others who possess different voices and world views in order to learn other ways of “knowing.” Intersectional humility also enhances our awareness of the ways in which others perceive us and increases our ability to recognize the importance of context in shaping people’s perceptions and behaviors.

Critical structural thinking includes a set of competencies that allows us to identify the sources, manifestations, and mechanisms of injustice and to develop more diverse justice-oriented theories and practices. It involves a critique of the assumptions that underlie knowledge, research methods, theories, and practice interventions. As social justice does not mean the same thing to everyone in the United States and the world, critical structural thinking requires us to decenter the dominant paradigms that guide our practice. It leads to the formulations of such questions as: Who envisions the goals of change and action? Who is
responsible for implementing them? Who bears the social costs of such changes or reaps their benefits?

The Personal Dimensions of Social Justice Work

On a more personal level, social workers cannot sustain work for social justice without recognizing and supporting our own strengths and those of others. (I always tell students that social justice work requires them to prepare for a marathon, not a sprint.) This requires finding joy and meaning in work even when failure occurs. In fact, the ability to envision justice is often constrained by a lack of imagination regarding the ways in which justice would affect individuals and their communities.

Working toward a social justice vision in specific practice contexts also requires social workers to assess and build on a wide array of strengths and assets—within ourselves and others. This goes beyond the application of a “strengths perspective” to examine the complexities of incorporating an understanding of our social identities and the role of power in our analysis of doing justice work. It includes the use of accessible language, the acknowledgment of the value of diverse leadership and participation styles, appreciation of indigenous knowledge and experiences, and support for diverse coping and resilience-building strategies.

One important tool linking the personal and theoretical dimensions of social justice work is the concept of praxis. Praxis employs iterative and interactive cycles of theorizing, acting, and reflecting in order to deepen critical consciousness, increase insights about social justice, and identify and reduce barriers to justice. This includes making connections between our theories and experiences; recognizing biased assumptions that underlie presumably universal practice methods; managing the ambiguities and discomfort related to privilege, oppression, and diversity; and employing knowledge and skills for cultural humility. Doing justice through praxis also involves using skills in critical structural thinking and critical consciousness to modify existing theories and generate new knowledge and awareness.

The Organizational Context

Successful social justice–oriented education requires demonstration of ways in which these broad principles can be applied to specific practice settings. A good way to start is to refocus the nature of practice from the traditional dyadic (i.e., worker/client) relationship to one in which
the social service agency plays a critical role. Most social services and social change efforts occur through organizations that engage in conscious processes of need definition and assessment; resource development, allocation, and management; issue prioritization; strategic planning; program development and evaluation; and the establishment and maintenance of relationships with clients, constituents, collaborators, and community sponsors. Yet social work education pays little attention to the role of organizations in shaping the nature of social work practice.

This is particularly important because even among organizations with explicit social justice missions and goals, there is frequently a gap between their stated objectives and their day-to-day practice. This failure is reflected in the programs and strategies they create (including the manner by which these programs and strategies are designed, implemented, and evaluated); the nature of worker/client, worker/constituent, and worker/worker interactions; the relationships that exist between the organization and the communities it purports to serve; and the features of the overall organizational culture that shapes patterns of decision making and resource allocation, collegial relationships, and the overall climate of the organization. It undermines their ability to achieve stated goals, diminishes the level of trust within the organization, particularly between workers and clients, and creates barriers between the organization and critical stakeholders.

This contradiction between socially just practice and the socially unjust organizational climate in which it often occurs needs to be directly addressed in the educational process. Students should learn ways in which the attributes of socially just organizations are reflected in their structures and goals; patterns of decision making; means of allocating scarce resources; leadership style; supervision processes; organizational culture; strategies for dealing with intra- and interorganizational conflict; approaches to ethical dilemmas; and use and distribution of technology.

The Community Context

Similarly, since social justice practice occurs in a community context, it is important for students to distinguish between community work directed toward explicitly social justice–related goals and the use of socially just means in community work that lacks such explicit goals. Much of the recent literature on community practice in a multicultural society focuses on the challenges of working across racial and cultural lines, the problems involved in forming and sustaining multicultural
coalitions and alliances, and the need to cultivate increased civic participation, new forms of leadership, and social capital among diverse populations. In addition, it emphasizes the importance of awareness about the influence of global developments on practice at the local level (Weil, 2005). In combination, these attributes strengthen the ability of practitioners to work toward explicit social justice goals through socially just means.

A related set of skills involves the use of dialogue and nonviolent communication in various group settings, whose value in bridging cultural gaps has been recognized by social workers since the 1920s. In social justice work, the term “dialogue” is often associated with a particular form of intervention—dialogue groups—but, as Freire (1970) wrote, it can also refer to the use of dialogic education, intragroup and intergroup communication, and negotiation skills in all forms of practice.

Linking Policy and Practice

At the same time, in a rapidly changing environment, shaped by economic globalization and major demographic, technological, and sociocultural transformation, the relationship between social policies and social work practice has become both more significant and more complex. Greater attention must now be paid to transnational issues and the distinctive character of local needs and concerns. In the United States, the locus of policymaking and implementation has devolved from the national government to the state and local arenas. Finally, as a result of globalization, power over policymaking has shifted from the nation-state to supranational institutions and from the public to the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. While socially just policies require greater democratization, many critical policy decisions are increasingly made through nondemocratic means, often outside of long-standing political processes.

Despite these changes, it is important for students to learn that socially just policies can still be promoted from inside even socially unjust institutions and from the outside, through advocacy and other forms of community-based social action. This requires students to understand policymaking processes at multiple levels of government, as well as within civil society and the corporate sector. They also need to increase the involvement of low-power groups in the policymaking process, through the use of participatory action research, community-based policy advocacy, popular education, and training programs in public speaking, lobbying, and the use of media.
From a social justice perspective, there are several other aspects of the policy-development process that are frequently overlooked in social work education. One is the need to translate broadly worded legislation into specific socially just programs, which occurs primarily through the budgetary and regulatory processes. Another is the need to safeguard legislative or judicial achievements through ongoing monitoring of policies after they are implemented, often in a decentralized manner. This requires understanding the relationship between federal agencies and state governments; between state agencies and local governments; and between government, in general, and the private sector. Finally, it is increasingly important to evaluate the substantive impact of policy and the process by which it was developed and implemented. In sum, the application of a social justice lens to the policymaking process implies an assessment of the extent to which it expands people’s ability to make the critical decisions that affect their lives, increases their share of the tangible and intangible resources they receive, redefines the policy agenda so as to address their needs as they define them, and reduces the level of oppression and unjustified privilege in policymaking spheres.

The Role of Research

Lastly, because of the increased emphasis on the use of evidence-based practice, knowledge generation via research and evaluation, whether through the development of theories or the collection, analysis, and dissemination of empirical data, plays a critical role in social justice work. The growing significance of research enhances the importance of critically examining dominant methodologies, their assumptions about epistemology and the purposes of knowledge development, the criteria for determining valid (i.e., useful) knowledge, the power relationships that exist between researchers and the researched, and the connection between epistemological assumptions and their practice applications. The heightened value given today to quantitative, empirical forms of inquiry runs the risk of producing narrower views of “valid” knowledge that could impede the promotion of social justice.

A social justice perspective, however, acknowledges that power operates regardless of the types of research methods used and that no method innately promotes social justice. Some methods, however, may be more explicit in their social justice orientation or have more potential for promoting social justice processes, for example, by ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences, incorporating attention to the manifestations of power and privilege in the research process, encouraging the development of critical consciousness, and
promoting changes at multiple levels (Reisch, Reed, Yoshihama, & Garvin, in press).

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, social workers’ ethical imperative to combat injustice requires them to work toward social justice ends through socially just means. Social workers must acknowledge that the structures, cultural mechanisms, and processes that are necessary to produce progressive social change can also create and maintain forms of injustice. Social workers must recognize, however painful it may be, that social workers have sometimes been complicit in sustaining the very conditions we are obligated to challenge. This implies the need to incorporate ongoing engagement, vigilance, and struggle into social justice practice and educational preparation for that practice.

Recent political, economic, and demographic transformations on a global scale may compel closer attention to the meaning of our historic commitment to social justice in an increasingly diverse environment. Economic globalization has exacerbated prevailing socioeconomic inequalities in the United States and between the global North and South. Within the social welfare field, it has altered sectoral relationships; changed the ideology, vocabulary, and goals of many social service agencies; and contributed to the depoliticization of the profession. Social workers are now compelled to reexamine long-standing assumptions about the role of government in social welfare provision, the role of nonprofits in the social welfare nexus, the nature of worker/client relationships, and the underlying assumptions of our practice theories. Concurrently, demographic changes underscore ways in which contemporary socioeconomic problems can no longer be resolved within existing political boundaries, ways in which social divisions no longer occur along a simple majority/minority axis, ways in which the goals of social justice and multiculturalism are not inevitably compatible, and ways in which practice concepts and curricula need to be enhanced to address contemporary realities effectively.

In developing responses to these challenges, it is less important that social workers identify a single “right” social justice approach than it is to remain open to multiple possible explanations and strategies. Perhaps social workers can find common ground in the search for solutions to the social consequences of environmental degradation and climate change or in the articulation of the relationship between the peaceful resolution of local and global conflicts and the pursuit of social justice. Whichever organizing principle is selected, it is critical that efforts are renewed to find new meaning in old concepts, new ways to
translate new ideas into concrete actions, and new ways to communicate to the next generation the knowledge and skills required to engage in social justice work.

References


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