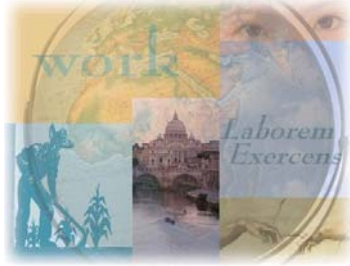


# Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



## Catholic Social Work Education

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### Introduction

Pope John Paul II repeatedly calls solidarity an essential virtue of social life. This interdependence necessitates the sharing of ourselves in intimate and larger groupings of our neighbors, both nationally and internationally. We are called upon to demonstrate our commitment to the well-being of others. Catholic social teaching portrays each person as fitting into the well-being of others. As part of Catholic social teachings, members of all societies are called upon to "participate." Each person has the obligation to oppose the injustices which permit the lack of full political or economic participation by other marginalized members of the global society.

Ordinarily, individuals participate in the economy through their labor. *Laborem Exercens* holds up the ideal of worker justice by demanding concrete conditions for workers, such as living wages and reasonable work hours. Labor unions and professional organizations influence the just treatment of workers. There are structural inadequacies in the market system which exist and will prevent full employment by all members of a global society.

As a profession, social work has traditionally played a role in addressing the balance of power in the economy by advocating for the rights of individuals. This social concern, which is at the heart of the social work profession, carries not only the need for individual acts of help (charity) but also the need to address the structures of justice and equity for all people. The values of Catholic social teaching, such as human rights, the necessity of peace,

social in the use of property, broad participation in politics, and special concern for the poor, mirror the values of professional social work.

If social work is to make an impact in a global economy, we need to look much more closely at low cost car loans, on the job mentoring and financial help for child care facilities. Social work needs to speak to the importance of support from religious and civic groups and from employers during rough times. It is obvious that government alone can't solve the many problems facing the poor, but it can focus spending on programs that show promise. It speaks to the need for coordinated efforts by many sectors. As a profession, social work is a coordinating which will be useful in assisting the multidirectional approaches needed to assist in employment in just situations.

Professional social work training must focus on the amelioration of the structural inadequacies of various societies. One of the foci of social work education in the United States is to prepare professionals with the skills to activate the resources in a culture or society to assist the economically vulnerable. Catholic schools of social work in the United States emphasize the economic and social justice message to a high degree. To address the economic and social justice concerns of the profession, Catholic social work programs emphasize a social justice approach to social work practice.

Social work, as an agent of individual and family change and as an agent of social and economic development, has always been involved with issues of injustice and oppression. Why is it then that the debate within the profession still rages around whether 'social work has lost its roots? Professionals line up on both sides of this debate to assert that those who practice clinically and those involved in social action are not practicing the same profession. For them, social work as agent of individual and family change and agent of social and economic development is a dichotomy.

Others believe as stated by Reamer:

The profession of social work historically has been committed to enhancing the welfare of people who encounter problems related to poverty, mental health, health care, employment, shelter and housing, abuse, aging, childhood, hunger, and so on. As the profession has evolved, it has continually stressed the need to attend both to the needs of individual clients, and to the ways that the community and society respond to those needs. Thus, there has always been a simultaneous concern in social work for individual well being and the environmental factors that affect it (1995, pp. 893 - 394).

Maintaining the dichotomy between clinical work and social action reinforces the status quo, focusing the worker's and client's attention on a client's private troubles rather than focusing attention on changing social institutions and the structure of society (Sachs & Newdom, 4).

In Catholic graduate social work programs, we work to eliminate the dichotomy

between clinical social work and social action practice. We work to integrate the values and concepts of social and economic justice throughout our curricula. Our objective is to educate students for whom intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational and global practice merge. This merger of foci connects social justice advocacy/social action/social development with clinical work. Graduates leave our programs knowing that their mission is to actualize the Judeo-Christian concept of social caring, to demonstrate the intrinsic values of all humankind, to serve those in need, and to act with conviction in advancing the principles of social justice and human rights.

Social justice practice emphasizes advocating collaboration with clients in the place of expert diagnosis and treatment. Catholic Charities USA states this " is a process of engagement that increases the ability of individual, families, organizations, and communities to build mutually respectful relationships and bring about fundamental, positive change in the conditions affecting their daily lives."

## **Foundations of Social Justice**

Four sets of mandates serve as the foundation for the emphasis on social justice advocacy in the curriculum: the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the Curriculum Policy Statement (CPS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), and Catholic Social Teachings.

The NASW Code of Ethics was revised in 1996. Social justice is a key value identified in the code and the ethical principle states that social workers must challenge social injustice. The code states "Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people..... (5) The code also states that social workers' have ethical responsibility to the broader society. "Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability" (26-27). Social justice is a responsibility of all social workers.

Social workers who are committed to principles of social justice is a basic principle of the IFSW Code (1994). Social workers must respect the basic human rights of individuals and groups as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions derived from that Declaration (1948).

The Curriculum Policy Statement of CSWE (1992) mandates integration of content on social and economic justice in the undergraduate and graduate curricula. Programs of social work education must provide an understanding of the dynamics and consequences of social and economic injustice, including all forms of human oppression and discrimination. Programs must provide students with the skills to promote social change and to implement a wide range of interventions to further the achievement of individual and collective social

and economic justice. Theoretical and practice content must be provided about strategies of intervention for achieving social and economic justice and for combating the causes and effects of institutionalized forms of oppression (140).

The University of St. Thomas, the College of St. Catherine, and St. Ambrose University are Catholic based institutions of higher education. As Catholic schools of social work we are guided by On Catholic Universities (Ex Corde Ecclesiae) and Catholic social teaching. Service to the larger society is central to the mission of Catholic universities. This mission is carried out through studying the serious issues of society, such as human life, equal justice for all, the environment, peace, and economic and political order that will be more equitable and better serve the human community. "The fulfillment of Jesuit (Catholic) education is not just learning about justice, it is doing justice" (Spohn, 2000). Ex Corde Ecclesiae states that "The Christian spirit of service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic university – to be shared by its teachers and developed in its students" (20) and that every Catholic university, as Catholic, must have "an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family" (13-14). Six basic themes emerge as one examines Catholic social teaching. These principles include the life and dignity of the human person, the rights and responsibilities of the human person, the call to family, community, and participation, the dignity of work and the rights of workers, the option for the poor and vulnerable and solidarity. Each of these six themes is connected to premises underlying the purpose of social work education "to prepare competent and effective social work professionals who are committed to practice that includes services to the poor and oppressed, and who work to alleviate poverty, oppression, and discrimination" (CPS, 1992, 1).

One theme of Catholic social teaching, that of solidarity, presents a particular challenge to a social work program in a Catholic university.

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers (cf. Gn4:9). In a connected and global economy, our responsibilities to one another cross national and international boundaries. Violent conflict and the denial of dignity and rights of people anywhere on the globe diminish each of us. Catholic social teaching clearly identifies the Church's concern for world peace, global development, environment, and international human rights. "Loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world (USCC, 1990).

Newman notes that the Catholic university has "duties to society" on the local, national, and international level. A Catholic school of social work must recognize an international context for its research and publication. We must accept the challenge to become actively involved with professional international exchange programs to help prepare trained professionals who understand social development. Providing the knowledge and skills for survival and growth demonstrates a commitment to the dignity of the human person, encourages individuals to take an active role in society, provides meaningful work and assists the poor and the oppressed. A particular challenge for a school of social work is

to incorporate content on the larger international context. Our position within a religiously oriented institution requires that we pay attention to the goals for human and social development.

Our social work programs provide specific knowledge about values and their ethical implications, developing strategies for achieving social and economic justice and for combating the causes and effects of oppression. The social work curriculum is rooted in the value that raising people's consciousness about themselves and the social institutions that affect their lives and the lives of others is critical. We are committed to educating social work professionals who are committed to both individual change and social justice and social development. The above values and principles provide the foundation of our social work curriculum which includes attention to social justice advocacy and a public and global policy agenda.

Social justice practice widens the scope of change by working with clients to change their situations rather than working with clients to accept the situation and adapt to it. Social work, as taught in US Catholic programs, looks to basic social justice requirements of all citizens. These include basic human needs, a sense of participation and economic planning, and re-establishing the economic balance of power.

### **Social Justice/Advocacy Perspective**

Attention to issues of social justice provides the link to issues of social development. Social justice is more and more being seen as the core purpose of social work (Swenson, 1998, 527; 2000, 1). Swenson contends that little attention has been given to relating social justice to clinical social work practice. Her definition of clinical social work is consistent with the definition that frames our programs. We also use a broad definition of social work practice that includes advocacy, case management, teamwork, mediation, supervision, organizational change, directing programs, community education, and prevention activities, as well as psychotherapeutic practice.

What is social justice? Social justice is defined as "alleviating deprivation in its many forms" (Swenson, 1998, 535). Van Soest (1995) states that there are three components of social justice: legal justice, commutative justice and distributive justice. She believes that distributive justice "what society owes a person" (1810) is the most important as it involves decisions about allocating resources and underlies the other two. What society owes a person relates to their political, social, psychological, physical and spiritual needs. Commitment to a social justice perspective in a social work curriculum requires that we evaluate clinical theories on the basis of whether they are congruent with the value of social justice. This is important as we believe that social, economic and political justice issues are present in every clinical interaction.

Some of the theories and practices that are consistent with a social justice

perspective are:

- strengths perspective - respect, worthy of respect, internal and external resources, acknowledge and use assets of clients
- resiliency theory - factors that interact to buffer and prevent high-risk conditions from resulting in devastating outcomes
- ethnic-sensitive practice - emphasize the significance of race and ethnicity as a mediator of people's day-to-day objective experience and of their subjective sense of self
- feminist practice - analysis of power and suggests understanding and using power based on collaboration and cooperation rather than on competition; gender-free, flexible, interactionist, and life-span-oriented
- justice-oriented practice - comprehensive services incorporating clinical work with health, employment, anticrime, and housing initiatives, providing group and community change activities, individual and family work and offering extensive availability, affirmation and high expectations to clients
- self-awareness or reflexivity - practitioners pay careful attention to their own experiences of oppression and of privilege or domination
- narrative approaches - a reestablishment of individual and family freedom from the oppression of external problems and the dominant stories of larger systems
- externalization - separating problems from the person so that the person can exercise increasing influence over the problem
- "oppressors" as clients - 'inviting responsibility' as a stance that the therapist takes toward people whose behavior is oppressing others
- "just" therapy - spirituality - respecting the sacredness of all life and viewing the process of therapy as sacred; justice - naming the structures and actions that oppress and destroy equality; simplicity - recognition that people and societies have been resolving difficulties without the necessity for therapists
- mutual aid groups - build on the strengths of individuals too give help to each other
- empowerment practice - emphasizes reducing direct and indirect power blocks caused by external and internalized oppression
- critical theory - connects the emancipation of individuals with social and political change through developing critical consciousness .

The above theories and practices affirm self-determination of diverse and oppressed groups, the just allocation of resources and the expression of marginalized voices (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994, 168). Other theories, such as behavioral, cognitive, family systems and psychodynamic theories are consistent with a social justice perspective, especially when taught by faculty with strong commitments to social justice (Swenson, 2000, 3). Additionally, some social work practitioners believe Gandhian ethics provide a

clear connection to social justice and service to others (Walz & Richie, 2).

Social justice practice means that practitioners practice in a way that is consistent with the values of social justice. Social justice practice means that clinicians understand the contradictions among values, theory, and practice in what they, their agencies, the profession, and social institutions affirm with the actions in which they actually engage (Sachs & Newdom, 1998, 8, 91).

Examples of how social justice practice can be expressed by clinical practitioners include:

- appreciating client's strengths, contexts and resources and their experiences of race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, and ability
- engaging in thorough analysis of professional and organizational power
- actively working to increase client power relative to professionals and agencies
- acknowledging and articulating the client's social realities
- engaging in the work of exploring ones own experiences of oppression, and of privilege and power
- assessing clients' "relative deprivation" and "minimally acceptable levers of resources" in the economic, political, political, social, spiritual and psychological domains
- acknowledging political, moral and ethical issues as political, moral and ethical
- letting clients know where we stand, when appropriate
- encouraging clients to experience the reciprocal help of mutual aid groups
- organizing for collective social action
- planning services and advocating for services that decrease clients' relative deprivation
- examining all the ways that professionals interact with clients from a position of expert power and attempting to do things differently
- examining agency structures and attempting to create structures that are socially just
- raising issues of socioeconomic status, race and gender in the agency and devise strategies of accountability from the more to the less powerful groups
- emphasizing strengths
- planning comprehensive, continuous and integrated community services
- supporting people to remain in the community
- becoming "bilingual"
- arguing for social justice thinking or interventions

- supporting enhanced services as intrinsically worthwhile and cost-effective (Sachs & Newdom, 1998, 45-90; Swenson, 1998, 534; 2000, 2-9).

### **Social Justice Advocacy Survey**

Gil in examining whether social work practice has been consistent with the mandate of its Code of Ethics, to pursue social justice and resist oppression concludes, "in spite of their values and ethics, social workers are typically not involved in efforts to confront and transcend injustice and oppression. They tend to consider their practice as politically neutral, and they separate it, therefore, from their philosophical rejection of injustice and oppression" (1998,85).

This supports the premise by Sachs and Newdom (1998, 8) that social workers must learn to deal with contradictions between what we profess to stand for and what we actually do. If this statement accurately describes the graduates of our programs, we are not fulfilling our mission nor meeting our objective that our graduates will "understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and the strategies and skills of change that advance social and economic justice" and employ them in their professional practice and personal lives.

In order to determine if we are achieving our desired program and student learning objectives, the graduates of St. Thomas/ St. Catherine School of Social Work and St. Ambrose School of Social Work were asked to complete a survey of social justice advocacy practices. In September 2000, we mailed a social justice/advocacy survey to the two hundred and eighty graduates of St. Thomas/St. Catherine's clinical graduate program from 1995 - 2000. One hundred and sixteen surveys were returned for a response rate of 41.4%. St. Ambrose University, a new graduate program, sent surveys to all their graduates and had a response rate of 85%. The results of the survey are considered representative of the populations sampled.

The results of the survey clearly shows that graduates of our social work programs demonstrate a strong professional and personal commitment to social justice advocacy for their clients, both as part of their professional position and perhaps more importantly, as part of their commitment outside of employment to advocate for structural changes to help the poor.

The survey was divided into three sections: demographics, attitudes, and social justice advocacy activities. Who are these clinical practitioners and what is the nature of their practice? Most (82%) graduates are employed full-time while only 19.5% are employed part-time. A majority (55.3%) are members of NASW the US professional organization for social work practitioners. The primary or secondary social work function is reported as direct service or therapy by 88.9%. Only 10 % indicated they are administrators or managers. As to the types of organizations in which the MSW graduates are employed, 49.5% work for private not for profit agencies, 15.2% for private for profit agencies, while

25.9% are public employees. The majority of respondents (79%) identified their employment as agency-based practice with only 14% indicating that they were engaged in private practice. In order to assess the graduates ability to engage in social justice advocacy, we asked the respondents to describe their family and professional income, with 35% of the respondents earn more than \$25,000 per year, 35% more than \$35,000, and 12% more than \$45,000.

When the respondents reported the types of clients served by their practice, 29% indicated that mental health best describes their agency's area of service, 12% work in schools, 20.5% in health care, and 10.7% work in family services. All (100%) indicated that they work with clients who are poor. In their typical caseloads, 66% indicate that a majority of their clients are mentally ill, and 58% indicated that a majority of their clients have problems with substance abuse. Almost all (97%) of respondents indicate that they work with clients who have been victims of domestic violence. When we look at ethnic practice, 100% of respondents have African American clients, 98% have Hispanics clients, 97% have Native Americans clients, 96% have Asian clients and 97% work with gays and lesbians. When asked about the ages with which the social worker usually works, 97% work with children, 95% provide services to the elderly, while 100% stated that they work with adults. None of the respondents work exclusively with men or women.

Respondents provided a great deal of information about their attitudes about social justice and social advocacy and the amount of time both on and off the job they devote to these activities. Social justice and advocacy activities was defined as "those purposive efforts which attempt to impact a specific decision, law, policy, or practice on behalf of a client or group of clients." Respondents were asked to answer questions with respect to advocacy in human and social services, recognizing that social workers might be involved in social justice and advocating on many different issues which are not commonly thought to be social work issues, such as the environmental protection or nuclear arms reductions.

More than one-half (59.7%) of respondents stated they are involved with voluntarism, pro-bono work or community service work. When asked the amount of time spent in voluntarism, only 1% average 20 hours per week, while 4% average seven to fifteen hours per week and 33% spend one to six hours per week. When asked about advocacy and their professional activities, 84% agreed that social justice advocacy is part of their official duties, and 96% stated that it should be part of their official duties. All (100%) agreed that social justice advocacy is part of being a professional social worker. When asked if social justice advocacy produces changes, 58% agreed that advocacy produces more than minor changes. Only 18% thought that they are rarely successful at helping clients through advocacy. More than one-half (59%) agreed that clients benefit more from advocacy on their behalf than from counseling. Almost all (93%) agreed that advocates have a better chance of success if they work together in coalition or through an organization. Only 11% felt that social justice advocacy takes away from other job activities which would help clients more, while 68% indicated that major social reconstructing is needed to help clients. Almost unanimously (99%), respondents indicated that schools of social should offer courses on social justice and advocacy skills, and 93% indicated that the attitude of other social workers support their social justice beliefs and advocacy efforts. Obstacles in their

agencies that make being an effective advocate difficult is noted by 46%. Only 14% state that the social work profession gives lip service to social justice.

The level of involvement in social justice advocacy activities demonstrates commitment and an application to social work practice which supports the belief that social justice is a key principle for clinical practice. The level of engagement in social justice advocacy activities varied for respondents from a low of 19% to a high of 94% for different activities. Only 19% of respondents reported being involved in political campaigning and 96% report they have never testified before a legislative committee. Of the respondents, 26% engaged in activities to influence media coverage of an issue, 34% conducted issue research, 36% lobbied individual policymakers, 40% represented a client in an administrative hearing, 58% gave testimony to decision makers, 60% have written or talked to elected public officials, 82% taught advocacy skills to clients, 89% educated the public on an issue and 94% pushed for increased or improved services within their agency. Almost all (94%) of respondents reported that they have educated clients on their rights to benefits from other agencies while 96% have educated clients on their rights to services from their own agency.

Regarding use of the internet for advocacy activities, 100% stated they use the internet, while only 17% indicated that they use the internet more than moderately. The most frequently used methods of internet advocacy involve issue research, electronic mail to decision makers, and to coordinate policy within their agency. Few respondents are involved with chat rooms, newsrooms, developing a web site, on-line fund raising, video conferencing or on-line survey research.

Almost all (90%) of respondents stated that they had engaged in some social justice advocacy activities in an average week, with 27% of respondents indicated that they devote time each week to social justice advocacy not associated with their job. Respondents reported that they devote time on the job more frequently to case advocacy activities than class advocacy activities. Reporting on skill training received in advocacy, 49% reported receiving skill training in advocacy in school, 23% indicated that they attended workshops or conferences in advocacy skills and 22% reported receiving skills training on the job. Only 28% reported never having received any skill training in advocacy.

When asked why advocacy is done, 48% of respondents described their primary reason for doing social justice advocacy as personal values, 23% as professional responsibility, and 8% as the best approach for certain problems and they like to see things change, while 6% indicated that their own experiences with oppression are the primary reason for their involvement in social justice advocacy.

When comparing the respondents answers to time spent in voluntarism with the other variables of types of clients served, beliefs on efficacy of advocacy and years of experience as a social worker, significant correlations were found. The more years of experience, the likely the social worker was to engage in voluntarism ( $r = .27, p = .00$ ), which may be reflective of the renewed emphasis on social justice advocacy. Respondents whose clients are elderly are most likely to engage in voluntarism ( $r = .56, p = .003$ ), followed by

clients in domestic violence situations ( $r=.522$ ,  $p=.004$ ), clients in the criminal justice system ( $r=.507$ ,  $p=.011$ ), and clients who are substance abusers ( $r=.462$ ,  $p=.012$ ). Respondents who believe that clients benefit more from advocacy on his/her own behalf rather than counseling were more likely to engage in voluntarism ( $r=.515$ ,  $p=.000$ ).

## **Conclusion**

By working with clients to change their situations rather than accepting an oppressive culture and repressive social welfare policies, social justice practice helps clients to create alliances with others to define the social services systems and empowers the social worker to activate clients to work for themselves rather than operating the social service delivery system for the client or system.

The results of our survey of graduates of two Catholic schools of social work in the United States indicate that our graduates are committed to voluntarism and providing advocacy services. Of particular interest is the findings that our graduates involve themselves when they are not employed to do so, giving of themselves and their professional skills. This finding validates Catholic social teaching to "participate", the obligation to oppose injustice which permits the full participation of marginalized citizens in political and economic arenas. The finding that all the respondents believe that teaching social justice advocacy as part of a graduate social work curriculum must have an effect on other graduate social work programs, which are fully incorporating social justice into their entire curriculum.

The focus of Catholic social work education is to provide professionals with the skills and competencies to advocate for economic and social justice for their clients, in any culture and society. Results of the study may spur other programs to increase their skill development in organizational and societal change. Continuing support for Catholic professional social work education needs to increase. Globally, social work can become a professional intervention to assist individuals in all societies to access the resources of the global economy, to activate the helping mechanism which exist to assist citizens in economic downturns, and to mobilize citizens to demand economic citizenship. These activities will increase employment as clients become advocates for themselves and gain their full economic citizenship.

We believe that social work has a contribution to make to a social justice perspective and that it is possible and necessary to integrate clinical social work practice and social action practice. As we increase the international and global context of the American social work training, we need to further develop links between clinical practice, social justice and social development. We must emphasize the responsibilities of social workers to be agents of individual and family change and also agents of social and economic development. We want our graduates to be social workers who are always cognizant of the false dichotomy of clinical social work and social action.

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