Back to the ‘social’ of social work: Reviving the social work profession’s contribution to the promotion of social justice

Ping Kwong Kam
City University of Hong Kong

Abstract
Social changes and professionalization have moved social work away from advancing social justice and into the domination of individual therapies. This article redirects social workers’ attention to the importance of the ‘social’ in social work by presenting a six-social dimensions framework, and suggests that this refocusing helps to revive the profession’s contribution to promoting social justice.

Keywords
social justice, social work, social work profession, the ‘social’ of social work, the six-social dimensions

Introduction
Historically, social work has developed along two traditions. The first, pioneered by Mary Richmond upon the establishment of the Charity Organization Society in the nineteenth century, is a tradition of showing concern for individual problems, providing the necessary services for those in need, and striving for better individual change. The second, advocated by Jane Addams who developed and promoted the Settlement House Movement in the nineteenth century, paid attention to the deficits in social environments, creating structural changes, combating social discriminations, and fighting for social justice (Popple and Leighninger, 2008; Segal et al., 2007). These two traditions, the first emphasizing personal needs and individual treatment and the second aspiring for social reform and social justice, have become the major goals of social work which are generally included and explicitly stated in many different definitions of social work. There should be a dual focus on these two important goals in social work practice. However, these two goals have not received equal attention from social workers throughout the history of social work practice. Some social workers prefer to
focus their efforts on using therapeutic approaches to achieve individual changes, while some prefer to commit themselves to advocating for social justice.

Critiques have been raised that social changes and professionalization have moved social work practice away from advancing social justice (Ferguson, 2008; Olson, 2007; Solas, 2008a, 2008b) and that ‘social workers have dismissed the “social” from their professional nomenclature’ (Figueira-McDonough, 2007: 8). Though there is discussion, analysis and debate about the problem or the situation of the withering social justice mission in the existing social work literature, there is limited discussion on exploring the possible solution to deal with the problem. Furthermore, in the academic discourse, there is limited discussion and examination of the relationship between social workers’ increasing neglect of the ‘social’ in social work and the weakening of the practice of advancing social justice.

In recognition of this neglect, this article aims to examine the ‘social nature’ of social work. It argues that with diminishing attention to the social dimensions, the social work profession easily forgets the social justice goal and social workers fail to fulfil their professional responsibility or duty to advance social justice in society. The focus of the article is on identifying the meaning of the ‘social’ in social work and proposing a six-social dimensions framework. It also suggests that the proper way to revive the profession’s contribution to promoting social justice is to a) realign the social work profession with its original social nature, b) re-direct the social workers’ attention to the importance of these ‘social’ connotations, and c) come up with suggestions on how to return to the ‘social’ in social work practice.

Social justice

Social justice, according to Rawls (1971), is concerned with fair or just distribution of social primary goods in society. He suggested that social justice should be based on three principles. First, each person in society should be entitled to equal right to basic liberty. This is called the equal liberty or freedom principle. Second, social and economic inequalities are unacceptable or unjustified unless they are arranged to the greatest benefits of the least advantaged. This is called the difference principle. The third principle, closely related to the second principle, refers to the equal opportunity principle which indicates that the differences or inequalities in society should be ‘attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity’ (Rawls, 1971: 302). Rawls’s three principles of social justice have great impact on the social work profession and have directed the profession to the utmost concern with working for the disadvantaged groups in society and upholding the principles of human rights, liberty and equal opportunity.

Like Rawls, Miller (1976) pointed out that social justice is concerned with the distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation within one society. He also suggested three underlying principles of social justice but argued that these principles should be used differently in different modes of human relationship (Miller, 1999). He has identified three modes of human relationship in liberal democratic societies. The first one is the solidaristic community, such as family or religious group in which people share a common identity as members of a stable group with a common ethos. The second is the instrumental association, such as firm or work place where people relate to one another in a utilitarian manner. The third one is the citizenship association, such as political communities in which people interact with one another as fellow citizens. Miller (1999) claimed that in solidaristic communities, the principle of justice should be distributed according to need; within instrumental associations, the appropriate principle of social justice should be distribution based on merit; whereas the relevant principle of social justice in citizenship associations should be equality.
Rawls’s and Miller’s principles of social justice focus on the distribution issue in society. However, other theorists pointed out that an understanding of social justice should go beyond the distribution of material goods. Young (1990) suggested that we should not conceive social justice purely in distributive terms but need to bring in the dimension of social relation. Social justice needs to be assessed by examining in what ways the existing social structures and social institutions empower some people and oppress others (Wolff, 2008). Different forms of social oppression should also be included in the analysis of social justice. Sen (1992, 1999) also opposed the distributive view by claiming that what matters in social justice is not what resources we manage to distribute fairly to people but to what extent we are able to help people develop the ‘capability to function’. The capability refers to ‘what people are actually able to do and to be’ (Piachaud, 2008: 37). This capability approach proposed by Sen helps direct our attention from objective goods to the importance of enhancing one’s capability and opportunity to achieve effective social functioning. Contemporary theorists of social justice also suggested that due to the impact of globalization, social justice needs to be further examined and realized at the global level. Our concern should not stop at the level of advancing social justice at home but needs to be extended to the promotion of global justice across humanity as a whole (Cramme and Diamond, 2009). Three principles are suggested by Miller (2003: 367) to promote global justice: ‘the obligation to respect human rights worldwide; the obligation to refrain from exploiting vulnerable communities and individuals; and the obligation to provide political communities with the opportunity to achieve self-determination and social justice’.

Social justice as the organizing value and primary mission of social work

Since the founding of the social work profession, social justice has been recognized as the crucial mandate of social workers. Marsh (2005) made it very clear that social justice should be the organizing value for the social work profession. In 2000 the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) endorsed and announced a newly revised definition of social work to replace a previous version adopted in 1982. The new version states that ‘... Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work’ (International Federation of Social Workers, 2005: 1). Since its release, this new definition has gained wide support from other international social work bodies. In June 2001 both IFSW and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) agreed to adopt it as the joint international definition during the IASSW-IFSW meeting in Copenhagen, which illustrates that social justice is internationally recognized as the primary mission of social work.

The ‘Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles’ jointly published by the IFSW and IASSW identifies the relationship between social work and social justice. It states that ‘social workers have a responsibility to promote social justice, in relation to society generally, and in relation to the people with whom they work’ and social justice means challenging negative discrimination, recognizing diversity, distributing resources equitably, challenging unjust policies and practices and working in solidarity (International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004: 2–3). Finn and Jacobson (2003: 15) claimed that the principles or values of social justice upheld by the social work profession should emphasize ‘the equal worth of all citizens, their equal right to meet their basic needs, the need to spread opportunity and life chances as widely as possible, and finally, the requirement that we reduce and where possible, eliminate unjustified inequalities’. Miley et al. (2009: 9) pointed out that ‘social workers further the social justice ideal by expanding the institutional resources . . . promote fair health, education,
employment, and social welfare policies and to organize the social service delivery network for client access, respect and acceptance’.

**Weakening of the practice of advancing social justice**

Although social work has its historical roots in pursuing social justice, recent developments in the field do not adequately reflect these roots (Lundy, 2004). It has been observed that the development of the social work profession has not been accompanied by a stronger commitment to this goal (Jacobson, 2001) and social justice has just become the slogan or key term in defining social work (Olson, 2007). In actual practice, a weakening of the practice for advancing social justice prevails in the profession (Chu et al., 2009; Margolin, 1997; McLaughlin, 2002). Recent research finds that front-line social work practitioners have been largely missing from the discourse in the empirical and conceptual literature on the integration of clinical social work practice with social justice (Maschi et al., 2011).

**Unfaithful angels**

One of the strongest criticisms against the profession’s tendency to move away from the social justice goal was espoused by Specht and Courtney (1994), who expressed disappointment upon finding that some social workers became ‘unfaithful angels’ who have abandoned the mission of fighting for social justice. They reported three major criticisms. First, they did not want to see social workers’ increasing aspiration to ‘devote their energies and talents to careers in psycho-therapy’ (Specht and Courtney, 1994: 4) at the cost of their interest in social issues, policy advocacy, social reforms, and social justice. Second, they criticized the trend of social workers moving into private practice to serve clients predominantly from the middle class. Closely related to this issue, they finally criticized the profession’s abandonment of its mission to help poor people, whom it was originally supposed to serve (Figueira-McDonough, 2007). They were particularly frustrated with the profession’s decreasing efforts dedicated to combating exploitation, discrimination, and oppression at the community and policy levels. As social work turned away from the disadvantaged and oppressed communities, social workers were ‘distancing themselves from rather than engaging with broader struggles for social, political, and economic justice’ (Finn and Jacobson, 2003: xxxiv).

**From cause to function**

Another critique is based on the shift from ‘cause’ to ‘function’. An increasing number of workers have been found to over-emphasize the use of methods and techniques in discharging the intervention in practice, thus putting less emphasis on the ‘causes’ of the problems (Abramovitz, 1998). The effective performance of ‘functions’ by employing sophisticated and advanced clinical or therapeutic techniques has become the focus of many social workers, who gradually felt that achieving higher professional status depended on the proper professional concern about the ‘function’ (Popple and Leighninger, 2008). This over-concern with functions or techniques has fostered interest in personal problems and treatment of individuals, thereby foregoing the primary social goals of the profession to effect social change and combat the causes of societal malaise (Haynes, 1998).

The focus on function has led to the increasing emphasis on the adoption of evidence-based practice in social work which also has an impact on the weakening of the practice of advancing social justice. Over the past decade, evidence-based practice has been widely recognized and
advocated in social work practice and education (Fook, 2004; Gilgun, 2005; Thyer, 2004). Social workers are now increasingly expected to use research evidence in practice as well as to demonstrate effectiveness in their use of the methods and techniques. Social work educators are also expected to teach more evidence-based practice models and to enhance social work students’ knowledge in applying research evidence to practice and in evaluating practice effectiveness. Though there has been an increasing recognition that the promotion of evidence-based practice can have a positive effect on enhancing the credibility and status of the social work profession (Furman, 2009; Yunong and Fengzhi, 2009), negative effects on the social work profession have also been found.

McNeill (2006) commented that evidence-based practice has been developed based on the clinical practice model. Adams et al. (2009) also criticized that evidence-based practice is patterned after the medical model which tends to have a strictly individual focus. Thus the promotion of evidence-based practice has directed the attention of the social work profession more to clinical practice models or micro-level approaches that involve individuals as a focus of intervention. Social work practices which concern community changes, large-scale social change projects or social justice issues have become less likely to be adopted or advocated. As noted by Furman (2009), evidence-based practice has significantly contributed to the social work profession’s diminishing attention to the importance of the practice of promoting social justice.

**Therapeutization of social work**

The increasing dominance of casework, clinical models, and therapies has therapeutized the social work profession in the sense that social workers have become more committed to applying therapeutic modalities to meet personal needs and effect individual treatment, whereas this predominance of clinical intervention ‘has put the profession out of step with its own mission and on the margins of social change efforts’ (Jacobson, 2001: 53). Social work has become synonymous with counselling work, individual treatments, and clinical therapies. In practice, social workers prefer to use the individually oriented spoken language and seldom use the language of social justice, ‘even when discussing practice scenarios which might clearly suggest issues of social justice’ (Hawkins et al., 2001: 1, as cited in Butler and Drakeford, 2005). In a research study of 176 practising social workers, almost 70 percent of the respondents favoured personal problems over interpersonal and environmental ones in the formulation of client problems, and a psychodynamic theoretical orientation was positively related to that bias (Rosen and Livne, 1992). Other recent research also finds that social workers who do not abandon social justice commitments tend to focus the practice on their daily work to achieve social justice primarily for the specific individuals and families and are less likely to pursue the social justice goal at the macro or social level of change by ‘impacting on and affecting economic, social and cultural structures that create and sustain injustice’ (O’Brien, 2010: 185).

The therapeutization trend does not exist only in daily practice, but also in the field of social work education (Nuttman-Shwartz and Hantman, 2003). Social work students often have a keen interest in studying subjects that focus on clinical work. In fact, clinical social work has become the most popular elective course in the social work curriculum. As commented by Jacobson (2001: 52), ‘today’s social work students are trained more often as clinical practitioners than advocates for social change’. Many advanced postgraduate university programmes in the field of social work specialize in clinical practice and therapy, such as marriage and family therapy, family counselling, youth counselling, mental health counselling, student guidance counselling, and behavioural health. A study of social work graduates in Hong Kong shows that the majority of the respondents did not favour the reformist practice or strategies, rather a de-politicizing trend of social work practice was more favoured, which is characterized by giving primacy to the control and mediation
functions of social work and the supremacy of remedial and individualistic social work practice. Individual and group counselling were regarded by the social work graduates as the most important scope of social work practice (Chiu and Wong, 1997). Research studies in Israel have shown that social work students had less interest and confidence in showing concern for social issues and preferred clinical casework intervention to community or social change interventions (Nuttman-Shwartz and Hantman, 2009). Social work students nowadays are drawn into the social work profession not by their passion for social justice – but by their aspiration to become competent and professional therapists.

**Social change and professionalization**

The new social changes also have impacts on shaping the practice of the social work profession. As commented by Fung (2003), the new society which emphasizes globalization, marketization and programization has created a paradigm shift in social welfare and social work. Social welfare has been changed from promoting the spirit of care and love to the advancement of the value of individual responsibility and the achievement of the objective of ‘welfare to work’. Fung (2003) also pointed out that the social work profession has gradually lost its professional autonomy and has been less likely to regard itself as a force of social reform. The encouragement for and prevalence of an ethos of individualism in the society favours a therapeutic style (Figueira-McDonough, 2007). This renders social workers more likely to select the individual as the target for change (Popple and Leighninger, 2008). The changing political climate has made the government and the society become more conservative, making it difficult for social work professionals to rally support for social reforms, structural changes, and social justice, partly because of fear of political reprisals for activism (Abramovitz, 1998; Jacobson, 2001; Popple and Leighninger, 2008).

The trend towards social welfare privatization, which has resulted in cuts in the state’s financial support for social service provision, also provides an unfavourable environment for social service agencies and practising social workers to fight for the rights of the poor and oppressed communities. Maintaining the survival of the services and running the service in the most cost-effective manner have thus become the focal concerns of the social welfare personnel. Consequently, social workers can secure less support for projects that are perceived as confrontational to government policies and the bureaucracies. Instead, social workers spend most of their time on interventions directed at ‘small target systems of individuals, families, and small groups at the expense of efforts to bring about change in organisations, communities, and public policies’ (Nuttman-Shwartz and Hantman, 2003: 470).

Professionalization in a market economy also matters. Abramovitz (1998) observed that professional development is constrained by the market forces, and must therefore meet the demands of the social service market. To achieve this, the social work profession has been forced to narrow down its objectives by avoiding the area of promoting social justice and instead moving towards clinical skills and intervention (Nuttman-Shwartz and Hantman, 2003). Professionalization also drives social workers to pursue a professional status to gain public recognition and legitimization (Popple and Leighninger, 2008), especially when they are compared to other similar professions such as medicine, psychiatry, or clinical psychology. Concentrating on practising casework and therapies are often considered appropriate and effective methods to achieve this goal. This trend can be further explained by Olson’s (2007) analysis on the two projects in social work: the social justice project and the professional project. These two projects are conflated and indistinguishable from one another.

The social justice project is to work for the mission of social work by eradicating unjust social conditions and inequalities and creating a just society. The professional project, however, narrows
social workers’ concern with claiming jurisdiction for practice in competition with other professions in order to achieve legitimacy and respectability as a profession. Olson (2007) found that though social justice is claimed to be the central mission of social work, yet in reality, the primary organizing value of social work is actually the professional project rather than the social justice project. He argued that ‘if social work is to be thought of as equal to the other professions, it must adopt the core theories and practice standards adopted by the professions with which it competes’ (Olson, 2007: 53). In order to have successful competition with other helping professions, social workers thus tend to focus more on individualistic and therapeutic models of practice than on using the language of social justice and advancing the practice for structural and social changes.

According to Olson’s analysis, social workers tend to say one thing but do another, and the discourse of social justice is used as just a rhetoric vehicle of the professional project. He further pointed out that the problem in contemporary social work profession is the use of the social justice project to serve an instrumental function which promotes professional ends. To rectify this situation, he advocated for the reversal of the relation between the professional and social justice projects by making professionalization serve the ends of the social justice project instead.

The issue can also be explained by looking at the relationship between the social work profession and the state. To attain recognition in society, the social work profession needs the state’s support and legislation, but at the same time, the state needs the social work profession to ‘legitimize state intervention in terms of expertise’ (Hugman, 1991: 24). There is actually a state-profession alliance by which the state and the social work profession rely on each other to meet mutual needs (Kam, 2002). The social work profession is granted the power to act as the state’s agent to implement its commitments to offer necessary social services. As the social work profession derives power from its relationship with the state, in the process of mediating between the clientele and the state, social workers may easily locate themselves with the dominant classes and serve as the state’s agent to maintain the existing economic and social order. The government needs social workers to act as the gatekeepers of access to resources of support and help (Adams, 1996). Social workers are thus expected by the state to serve the social control function and ‘are acting as the front-line bureaucracy to control, restrain or reduce the aspirations and demands of service users for better equal treatment or structural change’ (Kam, 2002: 165).

Social work organizations are more likely to be organized in a mode called bureau-professionalism which is a hybrid form of organization involving a blending of elements of professionalism and bureaucratic organization (Parry and Parry, 1977; Walker, 1984). Purely bureaucratic hierarchies are less likely but the social work profession has to operate within the limits of the bureaucratic structures. As pointed out by Parry and Parry (1977: 47), ‘autonomous professionalism was never a serious possibility for social workers, partly because of the drive towards state managerialism, but also because of limited market opportunities’. In the light of the increasing emphasis on the practice of new managerialism in the social welfare sector, the state’s control, particularly limiting resource allocation and tightening the rules and criteria for services, has created powerlessness-inducing structures or environments in which social workers are discouraged to fulfil social justice ideals, and social work practice thus needs to be more concerned with rationing resources than with social reform activities.

**Neglect of the ‘social’ of social work**

The issue of the weakening of the practice of social justice has drawn more and more international concerns and academic discussion in many countries. Apart from the continuous discussion by the writers in the United States (Figueira-McDonough, 2007; Gil, 1998; Jordan, 1990; Specht and
Courtney, 1994; Wakefield, 1988), Mullaly (2007), in his new book, *The New Structural Social Work*, criticized the Canadian conventional social work perspective which focuses on the individualized approach, and suggested a progressive social work perspective by turning to a structural social work approach. Lundy (2004), another Canadian writer, also called for reclaiming social justice in social work by adopting a structural approach to social work practice. Bernstein (1995: 57–8) found that social workers in South Africa, ‘like their counterparts in the West, have shown a concern with seeing social work accepted as a profession – a concern which led to a reduced interest in social reform and an increased interest in counseling and working with middle class clients’. In their analysis of the current situation in Israel, Nuttman-Shwartz and Hantman (2009: 470) found that ‘at present social workers spend most of their time on interventions directed at the small target systems of individuals, families and small groups at the expense of efforts to bring about change in organizations, communities and public policy’.

Ferguson’s (2008) critical analysis shows that the negative influence of neo-liberalism and the growth of new managerialism in the United Kingdom have created neo-liberal social work which undermines not only ‘radical or structural’ approaches but also ‘traditional’ relationship-based social work. The social work profession has turned to being a ‘failing’ and ‘quiet’ profession. In 2004, Ferguson together with other academics drafted a Manifesto for Social Work and Social Justice with an aim to challenge the current situation and to instil resources of hope for a more radical social work. Since its release, more than 500 British social workers, academics and students have signed up to support the Manifesto and a Social Work Action Network was formed afterwards to take up the actions to promote the messages that ‘social work is a profession worth fighting for’ and ‘I didn’t come into social work like this’. What they particularly advocate is to reclaim social work and promote social justice in the social work profession. One of the important areas in the new change is to reclaim the ‘social’ of social work.

Though more concerns have been raised, these concerns have not brought about thorough and systematic discussion about the ‘social’ of social work. The existing social work literature also lacks a framework to present and explain the ‘social’ in social work practice. To understand the social nature of social work, it is necessary to ask how social work obtained its name. Why is it not called ‘human work’, ‘helping work’, ‘clinical work’, or ‘growth work’? Why does it have the term ‘social’ in its name? Is it because its main purpose is related to what is happening in society? Is it because its target is the ‘social’ human being? However, these notions are somewhat vague in capturing the unique meaning that is attached to the ‘social’ in social work.

The above analyses have illuminated the fact that social workers’ increasing neglect of the ‘social’ in social work is related to the weakening of the practice of advancing social justice. Many social workers tend to attach very little meaning to the ‘social’ in their daily practice and have nearly forgotten or have become ignorant of what the ‘social’ means in social work (Butler and Drakeford, 2005). Hence it is very important to bring the focus of social workers back to the social dimensions of social work.

**The ‘social’ in social work: The 6S framework**

‘Why is this profession called social work?’ and ‘What does the term ‘social’ in social work refer to?’ are the two questions that each practising social worker and social work student must be able to answer. Unfortunately, these questions are not commonly raised in the formal teaching curriculum. In my years of studying social work, no professor or instructor asked me these questions or encouraged students to reflect deeply on their meaning. This reflects that social workers have paid insufficient attention to the importance of the term ‘social’ in its name. The meaning of the social nature or dimensions of social work has not been thoroughly or clearly examined and identified in
the social work profession. In the following sections, based on the reflection on my practice experiences and the review of relevant literature, I would like to suggest a 6S framework to present and explain the ‘social’ in social work.

1) Social concern and consciousness

The social work profession does not only require the social worker to meet the clients, provide the necessary counseling and group services and organize community activities, but also requires the practitioner to be a socially minded person. Social workers need to be aware of what is happening in the community and society, otherwise they will be unable to fulfill their roles. Social workers also need to have social consciousness, which means that – among other professionals – they should be the ones who are highly alert and sensitive to community and social changes. Accordingly, this first dimension specifies that social work does not only concern individuals, but also the social affairs and public issues affecting these individuals. What sets a social worker apart from other professionals (clinical psychologists, counsellors, etc.), is that they have to develop ‘two’ caring hearts: one for people in need and another showing genuine concern for the larger society.

2) Socially disadvantaged groups as the priority

Social work is a profession which enables people in need to help them which in turn facilitates them helping others, and social work has a long tradition of serving the poor and oppressed groups. An emphasis on the social dimension is a reminder to develop a passion in taking the most disadvantaged, oppressed and discriminated groups as the priority groups in daily practice. Social work expects its practitioners to feel uncomfortable when they are witnessing the plights of these groups. In practice, if a social worker devotes most of his or her efforts to providing services but becomes apathetic to and disinterested in the situations of the oppressed and vulnerable groups in society, he or she will not be considered a passionate and respected helping professional.

3) Social context

The third social dimension is related to how social work addresses individual problems. Social work does not only look at individual problems but examines the problems within the social context. The individual problem has a relationship with the immediate social environment from which the problem arises. The ‘social’ in social work implies that social workers have to adopt the person-in-environment or person-in-situation perspective to understand and analyze human problems in this context (Miley et al., 2009). Accordingly, there should be a dual focus in social work interventions. This social dimension reminds social workers to ‘take consideration of both the characteristics of the person and the impinging forces from the environment’ (Morales et al., 2007: 43). The unique contribution of this social dimension ‘constitutes the special purview of the profession and makes it distinct from other helping professions’ (Germain, 1999: 300, as cited in Segal et al., 2007).

4) Social construction

It is not sufficient to alert social workers to the role of the social context. Rather, social work must also adopt a social construction approach when looking at the vulnerability of its clients. This approach asserts that clients’ problems have social causes and many individual problems are socially determined or constructed (Figueira-McDonough, 2007). Clients’ problems are not their
own problems, and social workers should avoid blaming the victims by applying an overly individualized perspective (Ryan, 1976). Instead, social workers should adopt the blaming-the-system perspective to investigate the system’s causal role for the client’s problems. Through that, a critical understanding of the problems faced by different client groups can be developed. For example, disability should not be seen as the problem that differently-abled people experience as a direct consequence of their impairment. It is the society or the social environment that creates the disability by imposing various restrictions and barriers in the community and inadequately providing barrier-free facilities for this particular group (Oliver, 1996).

5) Social change

Instead of confining itself to individuals, families, or groups, social work should consider communities and the society at large as targets for change. Recognizing the fact that individual or social problems have social causes and that many individual problems are socially constructed, social workers have a special obligation and responsibility unlike other professionals to work on the community environments, social structures, social policies, and the political systems. Apart from helping individuals to live better within a given society, social workers also need to make the society better for individuals to live in. The better these adaptations are implemented in society, the higher the quality of life of individuals living in it. The social nature of social work is related to the preventive and developmental functions that help change the impoverished communities, eradicate deficit social structures, and make policy changes. Hence social workers must also see themselves as agents of social development (Bernstein, 1995).

6) Social equality

Striving for social equality is the final social dimension. Social workers should have zero tolerance when confronted with social inequality, social exclusion, and violation of human rights. Social work requires its practitioners to develop a strong dedication to eradicate unequal treatments, remove exploitation, and break the cycle of oppression. What social workers need to strive for is a society providing fair and equal rights, opportunities and resources (Solas, 2008a). The pursuit of social equality helps social workers become more aware of injustice due to the existence of inequality and the overwhelming acceptance of the utilitarian thinking (Solas, 2008b). It also helps social workers advance the importance of human worth and dignity. The idea of ‘different but equal’ needs to be the significant part of social work thinking (Ife, 2008a). The promotion of equality helps enable difference and diversity to be respected and to flourish in society (Ife, 2008a; Malik, 1996; Solas, 2008a, 2008b). This is very important for social work practice to combat or eliminate social discrimination and oppression.

Back to the ‘social’: Reviving the profession’s contribution to the promotion of social justice

Having identified and examined the social dimensions of the profession, I would like to ask: if a practitioner is committed to individual treatment work but shows little concern about social issues, distances himself or herself from the socially disadvantaged groups, does not locate the client’s problem in the social context, neglects the social construction of the client’s problem, does not strive for social changes, and detaches his or her mission from social equality, should he or she then still be considered a social worker? Should he or she be better called a counsellor or any other...
name? But if the profession still wants to retain the name ‘social work’, then the social nature has to be emphasized and revived. Also without the social dimensions, the profession easily forgets the social justice ideal and social workers are prone to neglect their professional responsibility or duty to advance social justice in society. To rectify the situation, it is necessary and significant to realign the social work profession with its original social nature and help it make significant contributions to advance social justice in everyday practice.

**Heightened emphasis on the goals of social work in social work education**

In the social work curriculum, more emphasis should be given to the subject of teaching students the basic nature and the ultimate goals of social work. Helping students reflect on why social work is called by this name should be a prerequisite teaching theme. The history of social work, particularly the dual tradition of meeting individual needs and promoting social justice, should be given greater emphasis in the course syllabus. Abramovitz (1998) suggested that the historical review of social work’s relationship to activism is helpful in strengthening social work students’ commitment to social reform. Social work educators need to be aware of the problems of over-emphasizing methods teaching and the increasing neglect of goals and values inculcation. Too much concentration on methods and techniques creates the danger that ‘the goals will be assumed and attention to them will be subordinated to developing more effective means’ (Bisno, 1956: 12). To help bring the profession back to its social justice orientation, the curriculum ‘should therefore not only reflect what is, but also what should be; and what should be, must in turn be a response to wider social and political needs’ (Bernstein, 1995: 64). The promotion of the emphasis on the goals of social work in social work teaching helps redirect students’ attention to the social goals of the profession and prevent them from developing the narrow devotion to learning therapeutic knowledge and skills. Wakefield (1988) has identified that what gives social workers a unique professional identity is not its technology but its goals and values.

**Breaking the division between micro and macro practice**

One of the reasons why there is an increasing neglect of the profession’s social nature and orientation is the division between micro and macro practice. Social workers who are keen on conducting micro practice find themselves having nothing to do with macro practice. They have developed the perception that macro practice should be done by other social workers who are involved in community organization or political work. The gradual effect is slowly making them develop a disregard for the social dimensions of their profession. As a solution, there is a need to break the division between micro and macro practice. One way to do this is to link the micro and macro practice together and place social justice at the forefront of social work practice. As such, social justice should be treated as an overarching practice modality. Finn and Jacobson (2003) suggested that social work should have a middle name: social ‘justice’ work and further proposed that social work should become ‘just practice’ or ‘social justice-oriented social work’ which helps to challenge the boundaries between the individual and the social.

In fact, it is possible and necessary to advance social justice through clinical practice (Aldarondo, 2007) and encourage clinical practitioners to adopt a social justice orientation in their daily practice. There have been proposals to adopt a ‘clinical activist model’ (Walz and Groze, 1991) or to transform clinical therapy into a ‘clinical social justice practice’ (Swenson, 1998) or a ‘just therapy’ (Waldegrave, 2005). Common to these models is that striving for social justice should also be a core responsibility of all clinicians and therapists. Suggestions by scholars are also
found to encourage social workers to make better use of self-awareness and reflection, maintain a non-hierarchical working relationship and use social justice in assessment and goal setting, etc. as the strategies to integrate clinical social work and social justice (Maschi et al., 2011)

In reality, therapists are the most frontline workers who have gathered vast amounts of information about the clients’ hardships, difficulties, and problems brought about by discrimination, oppression, and injustice. Social change can start with an individual. Clinical social workers who help clients deal with stress in relation to oppression and discrimination can help clients examine the socio-political context in which they live (Birkenmaier, 2003). This process may not only help foster inner psychological changes but may also lead to clients’ effort and motivation for empowerment and socio-political changes if clinical social workers are well aware of the importance of integrating the micro- and macro-levels of intervention (Epple, 2007; Vodde and Gallant, 2002). It is also noted that significant change at a macro-level may help generate a need for clients’ individual change (Epple, 2007). If therapists actively and consciously take into account the social context beyond the family, see the ‘personal’ as ‘political’, and turn ‘personal troubles’ into ‘public issues’ they are able to integrate the social dimensions in practice and are ultimately providing opportunities to help clients collectivize their personal problems, combat social injustice and effect social change. Narrative therapy, which uses the narrative means to help clients deal with the power of social discourse, externalize their problems and deconstruct the constraints imposed by the social, cultural and political systems (White and Epston, 1990), is a good example that moves beyond an individualized clinical orientation by breaking the boundary between the individual and social interventions and linking the two together in a coherent manner. Maschi et al. (2011) found that empowerment, ecological systems, person-in-environment, the strengths perspectives, socio-structural and sociocultural theories, restorative justice and postmodern constructivist practice can be used as the integrative frameworks and theories for clinical social work and social justice integration. All these examples have given a new direction to social work practice. More work and new initiatives need to be promoted to break the division between micro and macro practice in the social work profession.

**Adopting a rights-based approach**

The reason why social workers prefer individual treatment and tend to use clinical methods may be their indulgence in a ‘need’ or ‘problem’ orientation which encourages social workers to perceive that their primary task is to first assess their clients’ needs and then use intervention methods to meet clients’ needs. Too much preoccupation with this orientation can easily pathologize the client. It is necessary to de-emphasize the needs or problems orientation and adopt a rights-based approach (Bateman, 2000), which puts the clients’ rights at the centre of interest to help address issues of social inequality, discrimination, oppression and social injustice. This can lead to a sensitization of both social workers and clients for the problems present within the social environment as well as the policy implementation and political processes involved. What social workers have to do is to keep clients’ rights in the forefront, and count and document the rights that are violated.

The importance of a shift to the rights-based approach is recognized in the new definition of social work adopted by both the IFSW and IASSW which clearly states that human rights together with social justice are regarded as the fundamental principles of social work (International Federation of Social Work and International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004). As suggested by Ife (2008b), social work should define and develop itself as a human rights-based profession. To help social workers realign their focus with the social goal, it is necessary to use human rights principles to inform social work practice as realizing the importance of clients’ rights “immediately poses the
question of why some people are denied the human rights that others take for granted, and this inevitably leads into any analysis of inequality and structural oppression’ (Ife, 2008b: 226).

**Prevalent use of a strengths-based approach**

Social workers may believe their clients to be lacking in the capacity and resources to engage in struggles for broader structural changes. To help social workers tackle this problem, a strengths-based approach should be strongly promoted and prevalently used in social work practice (Saleebey, 2006). The strengths-based approach recognizes that people have a distinctly individual and innate capacity for growth and change, while still having a reservoir of resources and experiences to draw upon in their efforts to effect change (Miley et al., 2009). Following this approach, the clients can be viewed as assets and resources, rather than sources of social problems or liabilities in the community. Social workers need to change their world view from looking at a glass as half empty to looking at it as half full. In daily practice, social workers must not start with what is absent in clients but with what is present in them.

Social workers can also use the asset-based perspective (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993) in dealing with communities. Community members should be regarded as experts in their environment who have a capacity to act on their problems toward effecting community and social change. Social workers need to use an asset-lens rather than a problem-lens to understand the community (Walker, 2006), and concentrate on efforts to identify community assets and strengths first. The prevalent use of the strengths-based approach can help social workers turn away from being over-concerned with the deficit perspective and build confidence to embrace the social in their practice and advance social justice (Mathie and Cunningham, 2005; Miley et al., 2009).

**Advocacy is part of being a professional social worker**

To help social workers relate their work to the ‘social’ in social work, we need to bring to their awareness that advocacy should be expected in the job of a professional social worker, regardless of which service setting they are working in. Many social workers have the misconception that advocacy work is not part of their official duties, and that it should only be taken up by those whose work focuses on policy advocacy and social activism. This perception may be due to the social workers’ misunderstanding that the aim of advocacy is to only bring about legislative changes and the effective means of advocacy is by collective social action. However, according to Ezell (2001), advocacy should consist of ‘those purposive efforts to change specific existing or proposed policies or practices on behalf of or with a specific client or group of clients’ (p. 23). Advocacy work should not be confined to macro legislation matters; it is also related to daily unreasonable treatments and unjust practices and policies imposed on clients. Also, apart from collective actions, individual advocacy work by social workers can also have significant impacts on changing unjust policies, practices and procedures. Thus every social worker, even the therapist or clinical practitioner, must carry out advocacy work. The more social workers become involved in advocacy work, the more they will gain an understanding of the impact of social barriers and environmental constraints on clients. Consequently, this will lead to an increase in their awareness of social inequality, social injustice and the negative impacts of oppressive social institutions.

Furthermore, advocacy work may not be as difficult as expected. Social workers’ indifference to advocacy work has more to do with their own hesitation than with job or agency constraints; a hesitation that is usually born out of personal doubts and inexperience (Ezell, 2001). Lee (1998, as cited in Kiselica and Robinson, 2001: 387) argued that even in counselling practice, counsellors can
‘advocate when they plead on behalf of a client or some social cause’. Kiselica and Robinson (2001) proposed ‘advocacy counselling’ as a new approach or new direction for counselling practice which requires counsellors to provide direct services to clients, complemented by indirect forms of help to confront social injustice and inequality, and helps to enrich the counsellors’ professional passion by re-discovering a personal imperative of initiating social activism and serving as an agent for social change.

**Becoming an ally**

Jacobson (2001) suggested that in order to move beyond therapy, social workers need to define a new helping relationship with clients. Suggestions have been made to promote partnership relationship and user involvement in the social work field. Social workers need to be aware of the problem of a norm of authority over clients in professional practice (Gora and Nemerowicz, 1985). As stated by Hugman (1991: 118), the relationship between clients and professionals is likely a power relationship in which ‘professionals have considerable power over the potential clients through knowledge of the criteria and the rules by which they are applied’. The practice of promoting user involvement should thus adopt the empowerment or democratic approach which is a user-orientated, needs-led and power sharing approach (Barnes and Walker, 1996; Beresford and Croft, 1993).

To change the unequal power relationship between the worker and the client which distances social workers from clients’ social suffering and creates apathy and indifference to the unjust treatment and oppression of clients, social workers also need to learn to become the clients’ allies (Bishop, 2002). Being an ally means ‘being there’ with the client, and working with them rather than working for them. To be an ally, a worker needs to be sensitive to the problem of power imbalance and the power-dependency relationship between the workers and the clients, and needs to avoid the trap of ‘knowing what is good’ for the client (Kam, 2009). The working relationship should be transformed into an egalitarian relationship based on collaboration and sharing of power. Social workers need to recognize that clients themselves are experts with regard to their own problems, capacities and potential resources and clients should be considered full partners in the helping process, rather than problem bearers. As allies, social workers help clients to get actively involved in identifying and defining their problems and needs. As suggested by Bishop (2002), being an ally is necessary for social workers to help clients understand their oppression and break the cycle of such oppression. An ally role allows social workers to genuinely tune in to the clients’ situations. As a result, their motivation and commitment to move the intervention forward to confront the structural causes of the client’s problem will be enhanced.

**Conclusion**

Since its inception, social work has aspired to achieve two goals: solving individual problems and effecting social change. Although the dual focus on individual treatment and social justice is widely recognized and stated in many definitions, the development of the social work profession has drifted away from the social justice orientation and has gradually abandoned the social reform objective. The over-domination of individual change effected by clinical therapies, social change and professionalization has resulted in the gradual neglect of the social dimensions of social work. As Haynes (1998: 509) strongly reiterated, ‘to do social work and to be a social worker requires commitment both to the goals of social justice as well as to the goal of healing individual pain’. Individual treatment and social justice should not be mutually exclusive paradigms in the social work practice. Social workers have to believe that focusing on the
social and justice dimensions does not imply that individual treatment work must be ignored, nor does it suggest that conducting clinical work has to abandon the mission of advocating for social changes and promoting social justice. By asking the fundamental questions as to why social work is called by this name and what constitutes the ‘social’ in social work, social workers will hopefully be able to re-discover the meaning and importance of the social dimension of their profession that helps to reconcile clinical practice with the social justice goal.

Social workers must be aware of the problems and negative impacts arising from the over-emphasis of working towards the ‘professional project’ as cautioned by Olson (2007). Social justice is not just a slogan or rhetoric to the social work profession and should not be instrumentally used to secure or promote the professional status in competition with other professions. Professionalization of social work should not undermine the social justice project. Rather, what social workers need to advance is not ‘just a profession’ but ‘a just profession’ (O’Brien, 2005). What the profession needs to do is not only affirm social justice as the organizing value and primary mission of social work but more importantly to strengthen its commitment to putting social justice into practice.

The challenge ahead for the social work profession is to come up with a collective and concerted effort to a) look for more effective ways to reduce the number of unfaithful angels, b) re-examine and reclaim the ‘social’ of social work in professional practice and c) revive the profession’s contribution to promoting social justice.

References


Author biography

Ping Kwong Kam is Associate Professor, Department of Applied Social Studies at City University of Hong Kong.