

Guest Editorial-Social Justice in Social Work Practice and Education

Since the beginning of the Progressive Era in the 20th century and the origins of the Settlement House Movement, social justice has been an ideal, a core value, and guiding principle for social work practice. In contrast to the morally uplifting advice that was the mainstay of the earlier Charity Organization Society, social workers during this era were actively involved in advocacy for progressive social reforms and social policy initiatives aimed at improving the living and working conditions of women, children, and newly arrived immigrant poor (Reisch, 2002; Robbins, in press). However, the profession's commitment to social justice and progressive social work that embodies those ideals has been inconsistent over the course of our history. As Reisch and Andrews (2001) have noted, our profession, both historically and currently, has promoted practices that essentially reinforce the status quo rather than promoting social justice. This tension between social control and social reform has been an ongoing issue in both practice and education.

And, despite its centrality for social work, the concept of social justice can be seen from a variety of perspectives and have multiple definitions, some of which run counter to the values of our profession (Austin, Branom & King, 2014). A general definition that is consistent with social work values holds that social justice is "an abstract and strongly held social work ideal that all people should have equal rights to the resources of a society and should expect and receive fair and equal treatment" (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001, p. 352).

More explicitly and fully defined in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2008) as one of our professions six ethical principles, the mandate that social workers "challenge social injustice" includes the following:

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people (para 15).

In contrast, the Council on Social Work Education (2015), the organization responsible for overseeing accreditation of social work programs in the United States, has expanded this to also include "advancing human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice" as one of the nine core competencies for social work education. This includes an understanding of "the global interconnections of oppression and human rights violations" and knowledge about "theories of human need and social justice and strategies to promote social and economic justice and human rights (p.7). Given these varying definitions combined with extant research that has also found inconsistent definitions used by students, academics, field advisors, and social workers in practice, Morgaine (2014) suggested that "For social work to continue to utilize the language of social justice, it is imperative..." that we "...engage with and extend these dialogues" (p. 6).

Several developments in the 21st century have brought social justice ideals to the forefront of both practice and education. These include the Just Practice Framework proposed by Finn and Jacobson (2003; 2008); alternative research models that support social justice practice; a growing interest in political social work, anti-oppressive practice, and structural social work practice; and an expansion of our theory base to include a broad variety of critical theory and the strengths perspective (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Robbins in press). These are all important and timely advances that help bring us back to the roots of our profession.

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