

## Work Should Be a Valid Component of Social Work Intervention

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### Abstract

*The most recent financial crisis in America has had a lasting effect on the citizens, institutions and polices of the nation. In their day-to-day interventions with clients, social workers are witness to the clinical effects of this meltdown on individuals, families and communities. Still, the profession sustains a philosophical partition between the clinical interventions it provides and the precipitating factors of the economy. Historically, social work was closely aligned with other professions and institutions for influence of government policies around employment reform and poverty amelioration. Such interest in a direct approach to the effects of economic circumstances on people has waned, in favor of an individualistic view and treatment of social problems. This article reviews the scant literature on this topic and includes comments from previous researchers who suggest that social workers, social work education and social work curricula have studiously avoided issues related to employment policy and the economy. Finally, with the profession of social work being well represented in the current federal administration, the article offers a challenge to the profession to address social justice issues related to unemployment and employment.*

The most recent economic crisis and subsequent financial melt down affected almost every person and family in North America. According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), social workers noticed the impact of an economic catastrophe, witnessing an increase in demand for services across modalities. Early in its formation, social work practice and methods were shaped by the effects of economic factors on the health and well-being of clients. Through attempts to eradicate direct and indirect effects of poverty, social workers specifically addressed employment and unemployment within the larger sphere of social inequity and political suppression (Ehrenreich, 1985). This article discusses the role taken (or not) by the profession of social work in bringing work into the therapeutic milieu.

Reich (2009) provides a comprehensive historical perspective of social work's commitment to address employment and economic issues. Clearly, the interest has waned over the decades. The descent from a growing disinterest, to what appears to be a full absence during the most recent economic crises, indicates a distancing of the current practitioner from her predecessors. "The link between the macro-economic system and the family micro-economic system ought to be apparent but has been denied by the helping profession" (Jones, 1991, p. 102). This is evidenced by the present-day failure to acknowledge work-related issues and the effects of employment and unemployment into individual interventions. As Reich (2009) suggests, these are social justice issues, the essence of social work practice. A review of the literature using the key words *social work*, *unemployment* work and *economy* supports the notion that social work, as a profession, has little interest in the role of work as a therapeutic milieu. Moreover, the limited literature on this topic is dated and coincides (for the most part) with poor economic times. For example, literature dated from the 1980's and early 1990's depict articles and researchers interested in social work and its relationship with unemployment. Other than

Reich's historical perspective (2009) interest appears to fade after that, with the most recent professional article on work almost a decade old (Reisch & Gorin, 2001). Why does social work appear to ignore the impact of employment on individuals and their environment?

### **Social Work and Employment in Perspective**

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), published "Social Work Speaks to the Economy" (NASW, 2009). The report shed light on what the profession has identified as critical issues to be addressed during an economic crisis. It admits that, in the most recent economic meltdown, client financial troubles created an increase in clinical social work interventions. Despite this, the report fails to discuss how, or whether, social workers can facilitate alleviation of the individual financial crises that are often masked by the various presenting issues. It fails to address how work can often be a therapeutic resolution to individual and family predicaments. This position appears to betray the origin of the profession perhaps suggesting either a lack of knowledge or disinterest. Social work emerged during the latter years of the industrial revolution with a central purpose of addressing poverty in its myriad forms. Early pioneer Jane Addams' philosophy was that "social workers not only help people but also study the conditions under which they live" (Franklin, 1986, p. 510). Addams was unwavering in her attempt to make issues of unemployment and employment a public responsibility. Further, she adopted the notion that social workers needed to be involved in workplace conditions and the effects of those conditions on society that the profession was the 'social conscience of society' (Franklin, 1986). One clear effect of workplace conditions (or economic conditions) is the absence of work and income, and the effect of that on individual clients.

Mary Richmond, as the originator of the concept of social *casework*, promoted interventions whereby the individual, rather than societal conditions, received 'treatment' through methods calling for specific skills, knowledge and protocols (Franklin, 1986). This shift in focus was the beginning of decades of redefining the efficacy of employment as an individual intervention.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Francis Perkins worked within the Roosevelt administration to establish social policy that addressed the primary cause of familial and individual distress of the period. The lack of employment resurrected the concerns of the early social activists. Perkins, citing the importance of work in social interventions, devised economic safety nets and supports to alleviate the trauma and discord caused by lack of income. Her interest in unemployment and working conditions are evident in the Social Security Act, National Labor Relations Act, Civilian Conservation Corps, Fair Labor Standards Act - including child labor laws – and numerous New Deal policies and regulations (Downey, 2009).

### **Why Unemployment is a Social Work Concern?**

To work and contribute is an essential human activity that provides purpose and meaning. Employment brings more benefits than income alone. In America, a job defines a person's role in society; it brings an identity and a social network. It is common to engage in a therapeutic relationship with clients presenting problems such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, family conflicts and numerous other disorders, where the underlying circumstance is unemployment or under-employment. In several other fields - corrections, disability, and substance dependency - employment is found to be a defining element of recovery and reentry into a productive participation in society. The clients who utilize social services, regardless of modality (welfare, child welfare, individual and family counseling) frequently are the same people facing

employment problems (Briar Lawson, 2009). Yet, social work views unemployment as a temporary phenomenon with assistance tending to be crisis oriented (Macarov, 1988).

In her book "Social Work and the Unemployed" (1988), Katharine Hooper Briar recommended that occupational problem strategies, including job development and job search, be an integral part of an intervention. Hooper Briar suggested that occupational problem solving incorporates two beneficial processes: the assessment and stabilization of presenting symptoms and the acquisition of a source of income and personal identity.

In the traditional, and still current social work educational curriculum, this skill set is rarely developed. Social work education and training continues to equivocate the knowledge and skill criteria needed to attend to employment and its relationship to healthy functioning citizens.

### **Employment and the Education of Social Workers**

In a recent discussion surrounding social work and employment, several issues rose. Among these were the fact that little, if any, discussion or research has been presented on the topic since the earlier discussions of the 1980s and 1990s.

Riches (1989) suggested that the profession cares to know very little about the labor market and views unemployment as a macro economic policy issue, ignoring that it surfaces regularly as a factor in individual practice. Social workers' views on joblessness are 1) unemployment is considered too political for social work, 2) the invisible unemployed (women, older workers, people with disabilities or mental illness) are not seen as experiencing unemployment in its truest sense, and 3) the impact of unemployment on the individual is devalued as a rationale for client referral.

Michael Sherraden (1985a) was a voice on employment issues during the 1980's, with his seminal work on the importance of asset development in the eradication of poverty. He espoused that there is "no single social welfare issue more basic or more 'preventative' than employment" (p. 5). In an email conversation, Sherraden agreed that social work has been absent from the topic of employment/unemployment concerns and stated that the profession has shifted to mental health issues and psychological problems. He further noted that social workers have accepted a back seat in the debate (Sherraden, 2009).

In an effort to spur the profession to build an interest in work as an intervention, Sherraden developed a framework to better understand employment/unemployment policy options (Sherraden, 1985a). Twenty years later, based on the continued avoidance of this topic in social work education and curricula, work is still not an accepted intervention strategy alongside other clinical methodologies (Sherraden, 2009).

Michael Reisch (2009) agrees that career preparation remains focused on individual mental health and medical based practice. He believes that there is lack of a political agenda within social work that would seek greater ongoing partnership with employment advocates and specialists, such as the labor movement and employment services. Such partnerships need to be established even during times of largess, so as to be ready during times of need.

With the exception of its formative years, and during times of severe economic crisis, the relationship between social work and economics has been tenuous (Brucker, 2009). Katharine Briar Lawson (2009) claims that social work has preferred to focus on individual issues on the assumption that these are more concrete and present identifiable and treatable problems. She suggests that social work education has been resistant to including employment topics in curricula. Unemployment is unlikely to go away and, thus, will always be a concern for social work (Sherraden, 1985b). Riches (1994) noted, "Unemployment needs to be understood as a

central reality that requires a variety of responses.” Social Workers must know how to manage the toxic effects of an ailing economy on the most vulnerable citizens.

The current economic crisis (2009) has affected a different group, otherwise considered economically secure, adding them to the roles of those living and attempting to cope with personal and financial instability. Social workers now face interventions with a *nouveaux poor* population as well as the more traditional poor. The acknowledged stress and divisive effects of sudden poverty among typically well-to-do groups should be viewed as an example of the effect of unemployment on clients at all levels of income, but it is not. It seems, rather, that the need for therapy among this population is viewed as unusual and out-of-the ordinary; that this group has suffered more from the economic downturn than do those who encounter unemployment and lack of work on a regular basis. This disparity calls for continued research and discussion.

### **Social Work Education and Employment**

Tully et al. (2005) discuss the BSW curriculum policy statement of 1992, which states, in part: “[p]rograms 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...” (Tully et. al., 2005, p. 21). The curriculum policy addresses macro-economic issues and cycles in terms of social injustice and oppression. It does not address the intimate effect of micro-economics (e.g., household income, employment) on treatment or intervention.

Ehrenreich (1985) notes that many have historically pursued the MSW in order to enter the fiscally sound realm of private counseling, “They fled the profession’s traditional institutions for private practice, which grew dramatically” (Ehrenreich, 1985, p. 208). Yet, to be effective in clinical social work, one must be able to grasp common economic principles and apply them (Tucker, 1974). Neglecting important factors, such as employment, is to be remiss, thereby bringing about injustice to clients (Akabas & Gates, 2000).

Social work education must take responsibility for developing the competencies needed to address the effects of under- and unemployment. Reisch and Gorin (2001) implore educators to include topics related to the labor market, the legal and regulatory framework for employment, and the socio-cultural significance of work. They also suggest that direct practice courses could include topics on the ramifications of unemployment that lead to the reason clients seek out services. There are clear examples of how the profession could prepare itself to interface employment and economic issues both on the micro and macro levels. For example, social workers must be up-to-date on, and interact with, services linked to the labor market. These include career counseling and development through the publicly funded One Stop Career Centers, vocational and psychiatric rehabilitation services, and various state and national groups dedicated to employment. In addition, conversations around job search efforts, including career exploration and job interviews need to be present in any intervention with under- or unemployed clients. The connection of social work interventions to any of these areas fulfills the purpose and beliefs instilled in the profession by its founders over a century ago.

### **Conclusion**

In his keynote address to the Democratic Leadership Council (1991), then-Governor Bill Clinton stated, “Work is the best social program.” In this statement, Clinton accepted that work is an essential element of public welfare policy. In addition, the government’s role in addressing employment problems has typically been accepted and recognized by the profession of social

work. However, the profession has seemed to exclude itself from any role in this process; an opportunity to reverse this trend is here.

In 2009, NASW supported the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which is designed to provide assistance to states to prevent cuts to essential services to low-income families. More importantly, they report that a number of social workers have been appointed to key governmental positions including the Chief Economic policy advisor in the Office of the Vice President (NASW, 2009). There are currently nine social workers represented in Congress. In light of this representation of the field, the time may be ripe for social workers to once again become leaders in social welfare policy and incorporate work and employment in the therapeutic model, just as Addams, Perkins and Hopkins did many decades ago.

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