

## PRIMARY OBJECTIVE OF SOCIAL WORK: SOCIAL JUSTICE FROM RHETORIC TO PRACTICE THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

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### Summary

This article discusses the relationship between social justice and social work in a theoretical framework which is structured on the basis of the empowerment approach. It is emphasized that as an academic discipline and also a profession, the primary objective of social work is to promote social justice. Throughout the development process from beginning to this time, connectedness of social work with social justice is analyzed through critical thinking. In every practice setting, both psychosocial improvement and development focus on the micro level and social change and policy practice focus on the macro level, social work requires a paradigm change to ensure the objective of social justice. To satisfy this requirement, both in an individual's subjective life, and in the process of meeting the needs of large part of a society, the paradigm of empowerment mainly focuses on solutions rather than problems and sees people as actors in their own lives and solutions. Consequently, it is emphasized that in various practice settings, from individual, group, family level to societal and policy practice level, professional practices which are structured on the basis of empowerment approach, will directly serve to the objective of social justice.

**Keywords:** Social justice, empowerment, social work.

### Introduction

The ongoing discussions pertaining to the definitive target of social work as a profession are arguably as old as the subject itself. What is the definitive target of social work? Is it the promotion of social justice and societal change? If the answer is the ideal of social justice, will we be distancing ourselves from social justice target with "clinic social work implementation" that contains knowledge-skill repertoire built on scientific fundamentals, as well as social work practices which are focused on the changes in the lifestyle of the client and achievement of psychosocial adaptation with the environmental conditions. Which one has more weight in the field of practice? Macro focused social justice

and policy based studies, or micro focused clinical interventions. On the other hand, is it possible to serve the consideration of the social justice target by clinical practice focusing on individual, group or family? The purpose of this article based on the empowerment approach is to discuss the relationship of social work and social justice fundamental target, from a critical point of view.

Bisman (2004:109-110) claims that the discussions on purpose of social work negatively affect the development of the profession and as a result of this, the process for the promotion of social justice for vulnerable individuals as well as groups in the society is harmed. According to O'Brian on the other hand, social work as a profession has paid too much attention to the methods, theory and practice methods for the sake of providing social justice for the people in need (2003:389). Social work must have the capacity to perceive, evaluate and interpret the individual and his/her circumstances beyond what is apparent on the surface. This is the only way societal change and social justice can be served.

The subject of this article is not to discuss the ontology of social work as a discipline. However, it would be beneficial to touch upon the subjects that are considered to have an effect on the possibility that the social justice may be diverted from its essential objective.

The knowledge base of social work has been mostly fed through social sciences and medicine from its establishment to our day. Within this scope, the perspective on individuals and society has especially been shaped by inspiration from modernist theories of psychology and sociology. This situation had an effect on the utilization of the terms of "pathology" and "dysfunctional" in the processes of identifying problem and finding solution in professional interventions oriented towards clients. The professional practice has been based on "improvement", "amelioration" or "correction". O'Brian (2003:395) links this to the fact that the social work theories do not benefit from economics and education as much as they do from sociology and psychology. However, she argues that strong connections have been established with the modernist-positivist theories that visualize individuals as the object of change instead of subject.

Both psychology and sociology expand effort to explain the general appearance and problems of individuals and societies. These disciplines suggest theories that help to explain the basic defects and injustices in the society that cause the individuals to be dysfunctional or inadequate in the society (O'Brian, 2003:395). However, if the final destination to be reached is to adopt the principles of social justice, it is required to go beyond the defects and explanations and to work on how to ensure that people live under more just and equal conditions. Working on these subjects is undoubtedly under the responsibility of social work.

On the other hand, the economic issues have always constituted an effective dimension of the relationship between social worker and client. Especially the clients that are poor need cash more than they need therapy. It may be easier for social worker to provide therapy or advisory services to the client instead of cash. As a matter of fact, most of the clients that come to social workers with economic problems such as housing and living, may temporarily settle for the ease that they feel as a result of sharing their feelings and the hardships they experience instead of getting economic support. On the other hand, the practice of social work that is solely limited to providing support in cash and kind would be insufficient in making the problems experienced by the client visible as well as coping with those problems. In cases where social worker refrains from making multi-faceted professional interventions in helping each and every individual to discover his/her internal world that is unique to him/her as well his/her external environment and strengths, such would limit the practice with "restoring" practice. These processes create situations in which social workers feel themselves powerless and incapacitated. In conclusion, we can say that in each professional process, which is apart from social justice target, the common denominator of a relationship between social worker and a client would be "powerlessness" in a dramatic way.

### **Towards the Social Justice Target**

The social movements have had an important role in integrating social work with social justice that is defined as the distribution of the societal resources and responsibilities to the entire members of society equally (Wendorf, Alexander and Firestone, 2002:20) in the process since its emergence as a profession to our day. Thompson states that the societal movements change the traditional, psychodynamic, individual focused paradigm in the practice of social work (2002:711). The development of social welfare programs lead to the measurement of the reliability of social work by the capability to create a social change in the major part of the society.

The final target of social work as a profession and discipline is undoubtedly to promote social justice. However, the concept of "justice" that finds life in a social dimension must also be handled in

an individual dimension. Any and all the actions oriented towards promoting social justice must be reviewed in terms of dignity and value of the individual, due to the reason that sometimes it is possible for some groups and individuals in the society to be seriously harmed instead of benefiting from situations for the sake of the "common well-being" of society. As an example the encouragement of the women to participate in the work life to ensure economic growth and to reduce poverty may cause some harm to the development and growing up of children, if such a move is not accompanied by some effective social protection instruments such as paid vacation allowances as well as birth and child support schemes. According to Pelton, even slavery was once qualified as "just" due to the fact that it directly contributed to the economic and social development of some nations as a whole and it was considered as a factor that contributed to the promotion of social justice (2001:433). Therefore we can say that social justice is a very sensitive concept, and in the final analysis the fundamental concern must be to ensure that individuals are not used as means in achieving some specific goals. Otherwise, it would be inevitable for some to be damaged while others are benefiting from the situation.

Social justice as a concept has been developed to improve the results of injustices that have been generated hierarchically in time or left to us as inheritance from past (Reisch, 2002:343). Here, two subjects surface for discussion. The first one is the danger of preserving the status quo in the attempt to create a just society in order to establish social justice. And the second one is the difficulty that may be experienced in protecting the individual rights and freedoms in establishing the social justice in democratic societies. According to Pelton, especially in the Western democracies, the individual justice is forsaken for the common well being of the society. Social justice, in terms of its definition, implementation and maintenance, has an important place in the policies of modern democracies arranging the daily life. However, its structure that organizes societal behavior and cultural responsibilities as societal benefits may sometimes disregard the individual space that is concerned (2001:435-437).

Craig (2002:671) has considered the scope of social justice in four dimensions as follows; the (i) equal value of all the individuals, (ii) having equal rights in meeting their basic needs, (iii) utilizing their chances and opportunities in life on the largest scale possible while (iv) they are protected against any thought or action that creates injustice.

Within this framework and with regards to the political objectives, social justice can be considered as a whole of social, economic and environmental policies that are based on an understanding of equality and followed up in a structure in which differentiation is accepted. The essential outputs of social justice can be considered as protection of equality in the societal arena while the consciousness that every individual is respected, valued and given equal chances is made prevalent, and the fundamental needs are met in line with this approach and equal income distribution is achieved in a societal structure that heavily involves disadvantaged groups.

In "Peace and Social Justice" titled section of Social work Encyclopedia; Dorothy van Soest states that social justice has three elements. The first one is the legal justice and it is concerned with the liability owed by the individual to the society. The second is the justice that is shared and is related to the liabilities owed by one individual to another. And the third one is the distributed justice that is related to the liabilities of the state towards the individuals. The distributed justice, due to its quality that covers the other two elements of justice, is focused on the problem of ensuring just distribution of societal resources and questioning of such (1995:1811; Swenson, 1998:528) and it functions as the basic objective of social work to a great extent. In this dimension, the social justice makes possible for the strengths and resources of the client to be taken into consideration along with the ethnic, social and economic environment that the client comes from.

The Contribution of Social Justice and Empowerment Approach from the Aspect of Social work

Social Justice has been argued to be an ethical principal within the scope of the code of ethics (NASW, 1996) of social work and takes up a defying role against social workers in promoting the social justice. This principal is expressed as follows in short: "...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..."

In addition to clearly indicating social justice as a target in the code of ethics of social work, there is also a widely accepted view by the scientific circles of social work that argues for the positioning of social work sometimes in the state and sometimes in opposition to it in the promotion of social justice (Becker and MacPherson, 1988; Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 1998; cited in Craig 2002:677). Social workers take place in the production and distribution mechanisms of social welfare as profes-

sional structures in state and as such they must take up a radical, critical and opposing stance against the social policy practices that may harm the function of social justice. This attitude is also in the nature of and required by democracy that is included in the value base of social work as a discipline.

There are various studies reflecting the attitudes and views pertaining to the social justice concept and basic target of social workers. In the international study of Weiss (2005) from among these, 781 social workers from 10 countries were reached and their professional ideologies and beliefs covering social justice variable were questioned. The most remarkable result obtained from the study was the fact that almost all of the social workers pointed out the promotion of social justice as their primary responsibility. However, the structural and societal reasons were emphasized for not being able to promote social justice instead of individual deficiencies that lead to poverty, which is a very widespread social problem.

On the other hand, Hawkins, Fook and Ryan (2001) have searched for an answer to the following question in a study that covered social workers: If social work discipline and profession have been built on the basic principles of justice, then to what degree are these principles met in professional practices. For this reason, in the present study, the way that social workers talk about their practices as well as whether they use a terminology reflecting the social justice ideal was examined. From the two studies that were conducted within this scope, in the one that is dimensional, a group of social workers were observed for a period of five years and in the other one, 30 experienced social workers were observed for a shorter period of time. In-depth interviews were held with each participant and questions with regarding various case studies were asked. It has been observed that the participants in both of the groups used social justice terminology that involves terms such as "empowerment", "justice", and "equality" infrequently but used "consultation", "family therapy", "isolation", "evaluation", "adaptation", and "mediation" rather frequently. Undoubtedly, the conceptualizing of the practice of social work that has taken on the task of achieving social justice as a final objective, with the terms of social justice, is an indication that it is conducting work to achieve the subject matter target.

In the social work literature, it has been shared as a general belief among most that the social work profession has deviated from its fundamental purpose of promoting social justice for the sake of clinical practices (NASW, 2002; Reisch, 2002; Gibelman and Shervish, 1997; Specht and Courtney, 1994; Reeser and Epstein, 1990; Clark, 2005:37). Against to scientific environment of this view of social work, the optimistic perspective set forth by Swenson (1998:527-537) in his "Clinical Social Work's Contribution to a Social Justice Perspective" titled article is quite remarkable. According to Swenson, the clinical social work can be realized with the help of theories and approaches that are in harmony with the values of the social work discipline and prioritize the client system. In such a situation, practice can even be named as "clinical social justice practice".

Within this framework, the social justice is viewed increasingly as an organizing and regulating value of social work. This situation also has an effect on the nature of social work practice. This leads to fundamental changes especially in clinical social work. Clinical social workers undertake roles in supervision, organizational change, societal development and training programs. Clinical social work must not be thought as being equal to the medical model that focuses on pathologies, blaming the victim, or for that matter to the social protection practice. Clinical social workers can operate through social justice perspective when they work with individuals, families and groups (Swenson, 1998:527).

At this stage it is required to look at what social justice means and why it is visualized as a regulatory value of social work. Wakefield (1988a, 1988b) has, in absolute terms, stated what social work meant for social work discipline. Within this context, social justice is an identifying function and a final goal of social work just like treating patients is the fundamental purpose of medicine and learning is of education. The fact that social justice is a regulatory value besides being a fundamental objective has an influence on the whole of social work in terms of knowledge, skills and values. In direct and active problem resolution and research applications, as well as in efforts to create policy changes, the ideal of social justice is at the same time the regulatory and organizing factor of social work.

The primary approaches that separate clinical practice from focusing on the pathologies of the individual and saves it from being dependant on traditional medical model are the strengths perspective, narrative approach and finally the empowerment approach.

If we touch upon the subject of the strengths perspective and narrative approach among these; it must be stated that the strengths perspective is very important for clinical practice that are based on social justice (Saleebey, 1994,1992; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan and Kisthardt, 1989; cited in Swenson 1998:530). To such an extent that social workers without the help of strengths perspective will be left alone with the institutions that suggest intervention that take action on the basis of the pathologies and deficiencies of the client. These theories reduce the motivation of the clients in using their internal and external potential resources. The professional approach triggers the relative deprivation of the individuals by ignoring their dignity. Weick and Saleebey (1995:5; cited in Swenson, 1998:530) argue the

view that people in their subjective lives gain the skills to deal with many problems, by using powers that are activated through stories and narration, values and beliefs, informal and natural resources, dreams and hopes, cultural accumulation and doctrines.

Like the strengths perspective in fundamental intervention, narrative approach has a special place in bringing the idea of social justice to life (Freedman and Combs, 1996; White, 1995; White and Epston, 1990; Swenson, 1998:532). White (1995; cited in Swenson, 1998:532) Foucault, inspired by the thought that "power" and knowledge" complete each other, stresses how important it is for the clients to possess power and knowledge in the process of creating a just society. Within this framework, it is possible for an individual to be freed from the pressure imposed by a problem he is experiencing as his knowledge and power increases. In the social worker – client relationship based on narrative approach, the influence and the power of the social worker on the client is at minimum level. Social worker accepts that the client wants to change and he can change and that he has the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to do this. The role of the social worker here would be to aid the client in discovering his already existing sources of power.

The empowerment approach, which completes both strengths perspective as well as narrative approach, is related to the lifting of internal and external pressures on persons (Lee, 2001; Simon, 1994; Gutiérrez, 1990; Solomon, 1976; Swenson, 1998:533). This approach, developed in the 1970s, is increasingly being used in welfare policy, social programs or in direct intervention and has taken the place of the traditional therapist-client model (Shera and Page, 1995; Pinderhughes, 1983; Rappaport, 1981; Boehm and Staples, 2002:449-450).

The theoretical bases of empowerment approach have been laid at the studies of educators and community psychologists, who were studying population groups with social disadvantages. Empowerment is a concept that has greatly fed from the education philosophy Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2003) developed in the 1960s. In his book titled "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" which he wrote in 1972, Freire makes reference to a liberating pedagogy that turns inside out the objectifying of people and their being distanced from humanity by developing their own critical conscious and simultaneous actions. Although Freire's primary concern is class oppression, his philosophy has been adapted to other empowering studies.

New horizons have opened up following Barbara Solomon's "Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities" (1976) book in the relationship between empowerment and social work practice. Empowerment has not only entered into various areas of social work, but has also started to be used to show the other essential approaches. According to the assumption the empowerment paradigm depends on, there are personal and social costs of being a member of a group equipped with a very limited social or political power. The access to resources of such individuals is also unequal. If they are to improve this situation, they should be aware of their own selections and attain opportunities by bringing to life their actions from among these selections (DuBois and Miley, 1996).

Once people acquire knowledge, they should also have the belief that they can make such selections and use such opportunities to their advantage (Bandura, 1978 cited in Cearley, 2000:17). Furthermore, belief itself is the most powerful determinant of change in behavior. Starting with this belief, the person may perceive that he/she has a certain control of power in attaining the necessary resources and in decision making. The harmonious function of belief and skills may be learned by taking as model, sharing of authority and support (Leslie, Holzhalf and Hollan, 1998; Kadushin, 1974, cited in Cearley, 2000:18).

Rafael has stated a certain number of attributes of empowerment, with reference to studies of different writers, (1995:29; Jones and Meleis, 1993; Gibson, 1991; Rappaport, 1987, cited in Mok, 2001). Firstly, the clients should be active and equal participants in their own empowerment. In other words, instead of empowering the clients, the social workers should facilitate their empowerment. Secondly, empowerment is an enabling process that expands personal control. Thirdly, Gibson (1991:355-356) has highlighted the revolutionary aspect of empowerment. This aspect is related to the consciousness of and devotion to changing problematic social and cultural contexts. Finally, empowerment obliges the other to see not an object but rather a subject capable of changing his/her own reality.

Barker (1999:153) defines empowerment as, "a process aiming at increasing the personal, interpersonal, socioeconomic and politic power of individuals, families, groups and communities in social work practice and to assist them in improving conditions". Gutierrez (1990:149) on the other hand has defined empowerment in a similar fashion as, "the process of increasing the personal, interpersonal or political power in order to enable the individuals to take action to improve their living standards". This process directly serves the development of social justice.

There is considerable consensus in literature related to the indirect orientation in the empowerment process and facilitating the role of a social worker. According to Lee, "people empower them-

selves. Social workers should only assist.” (2001, cited in Boehm and Staples, 2002: 452-454). Most of the writers make an important emphasis on self-determination as a critical value and principle in the field of practice. The point self-determination emphasizes is the necessity of social workers not to orient the clients to anticipated selections (Rubenstein and Lawler, 1990; cited in Boehm and Staples, 2002:450). These writers call for a model, which will decrease the inequality in the power of social worker and client and which will provide independence to the client in taking the decisions that will affect his/her life. Instead of the all-knowing social worker who provides responses, generates solutions for relatively passive clients, social worker involves the clients in the problem resolving process during the helping process (Gutierrez, 1990:149-151). This is a partnership relation and is a process that presents alternatives.

Nonetheless, empowerment approach is establishing a rather sensitive and complementary balance between self-determination principle, which is among its fundamental pillars, and social justice, the fundamental target of social work. In a social structure solely established on the principle of social justice, the individual is faced with the threat of becoming passive. The person may fall in a position in which he/she accepts the results generated by change from his/her perspective. A structure where self-determination is dominant on its own on the other hand breeds the threat of openly departing from social justice and draining of social conscience. Individual preferences and expectations may be of a character that limits the rights and freedoms of the other members of the society. This viewpoint sets forth theoretical framework as to how human services process should work and how social justice target will be met from a social work discipline.

Empowerment approach, due to its nature, has as the main emphasis the coping capabilities of clients rather than supervision and arrangement of their environment. On the other hand, social action and advocacy practices, which aim for the clients to take hold of the control of their lives in their own hands, may cause, without the client being even aware, the facilitation process to become politicized and used in the direction of the personal and political preferences of the professionals who carry out the process.

Besides clinical practices at the individual, group or family level, social policy interventions at the macro level on empowerment basis will also contribute to the social justice target. McDonough (1993), stemming from the thought that final target of social work is social justice, stresses the contribution of social policy in achieving this target. Social policy practice is a dimension of social work, which has been neglected for a very long time; again medical model of traditional clinical practice is shown as the culprit of one of the most important reasons for this situation.

McDonough (1993:181–186), by effectively including social policy in social work practice, suggests some methods that allow the attainment of social justice ideal. Three of these attract attention. The first is the legal advocacy. This aims to effect legal arrangements that will serve to the benefit and empowerment of various communities in social deprivation, which social work profession represents. The second social policy practice is to contribute to the protection and development of social rights of especially marginalized people (criminals, handicapped, etc.) by taking part in the proceedings and by making it possible to make amendments to existing laws and applications. Social action represents the third dimension of social policy practice serving the social justice target. Social action is at the same time a practice method of social work and may be qualified as a social movement in which the conflict areas of social thought on “to have” or “not to have” lie at the foundation of concept of “right”. Such a format seems as an organizing and liberalizing proactive practice during the process of ensuring the common well-being of certain special needs groups (such as workers, gays, and women) and getting their social or political rights. All of such social policy practice methods are effective at the basis of “empowering social work”.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the empowerment philosophy that serves the social justice target depends on three assumptions due to its nature (Dunst, Trivette and Deal, 1994:15; cited in Cearly, 2000:20). Firstly, people are already self-sufficient or have the capacity to be self-sufficient. Secondly, the failure to show such sufficiency does not arise from the faults of the person but on the contrary due to the malfunctioning of the social system in creating opportunities related to exhibiting or learning of sufficiency. Finally, the client and his/her environment should be able to show behavioral change. The change will not only take place in the personal behavior of the client, but will also show itself in the social circumstances and organizations surrounding him/her. This is the meaning of empowerment and such an empowerment process enables the direct construction of social justice.

In all micro level psychosocial focused improvement and development, as well as macro level focused social change and policy practice environments, paradigm change is the requirement of social work for achieving the final target of social justice. The paradigm should be fortified, which generates responses to this need, as well as focuses on the solution rather than the issue in satisfying the requirements of wide social parts on a large-scale, and which sees the owners of the issue as the main actors of the solution.

The individuals are weakened when they become the object rather than the subject of social change and in proportion to not participating in the construction of the social reality. In the final analysis, the empowerment process brings to the forefront the factors effecting the identification of social forces, which negatively effect dominance over environment, self-determination and life of an individual, and advocates promotion of partnership and equality between the members of the society during the liberalization of the individual with its dimension that highlights social justice.

The empowering social work practice that is realized in both the individual as well as social dimension, assist individuals, groups and communities, who come from weakened structures, in acquiring the belief that they have a control over the results with regards to their lives, and to gain the perception that the culpable for the issues in their lives are the external barriers such as discrimination, prejudice and exploitation. Empowerment models in support relations decrease the hold and control of the social worker on the client to a minimum by focusing on, "the strong aspects instead of the pathologies of the client".

Social justice is the sum total of social realities and shared beliefs existing in the minds of individuals and groups. As such, it exists with certain sanctions and rules set by the members of society, and inevitably it is beyond rhetoric, and should be beyond rhetoric together with empowerment paradigm, from a perspective of social change and achievement of progress.

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**PAGRINDINIS SOCIALINIO DARBO TIKSLAS: SOCIALINIS TEISINGUMAS.  
PER ĮGALINIMĄ NUO RETORIKOS PRIE PRAKTIKOS****Tarik Tuncay**

Hacettepeso universitetas,  
Ekonomikos ir administracinių mokslų fakultetas,  
Socialinio darbo katedra

**Ercüment Erbay**

Hacettepeso universitetas,  
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Socialinio darbo katedra

Straipsnyje autoriai analizuoja socialinio teisingumo ir socialinio darbo santykį remdamiesi teorine įgaliojimo paradigma. Autoriai pabrėžia, kad socialinio darbo, kaip mokslinės disciplinos ir profesijos, pagrindinis tikslas turėtų būti socialinis teisingumas.

Socialinio darbo vystymosi plėtros istorijoje buvo įvairiai interpretuojamas socialinio darbo ir socialinio teisingumo santykis. Siekiant užtikrinti socialinį teisingumą būtina socialinio darbo paradigmų kaita: kiekvienoje praktikos vietoje greta psichosocialinės pagalbos mikro lygmens svarbu pabrėžti ir socialinių kitimų bei socialinės politikos makro lygmenį. Praktikoje individualus socialinis darbas ir socialinės politikos lygmuo dažniausia yra atskiriami. Autoriai teigia, kad šiuolaikinėje modernioje visuomenėje taip neturėtų būti. Siūlydami glaudžiau susieti šiuos du lygmenis autoriai analizuoja įgalinimo paradigmą, kuri nukreipta daugiau į sprendimus, o ne į problemas ir pripažįstanti žmones priimant sprendimus, kaip aktyvius savo gyvenimo formuotojus. Autorių manymu, nesvarbu ar socialinis darbas susijęs su individu, grupe, šeima, ar su visuomene, jei remiamasi įgalinimo paradigma, neišvengiamai pasiekiamas socialinis teisingumas.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** socialinis teisingumas, įgalinimas, socialinis darbas.