

Conceptualizing Social Justice in Social Work: Are Social Workers “Too Bugged Down in the Trees?”

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Social work organizations such as NASW, CSWE, IFSW highlight social justice as a primary value and function of social work, yet scholars suggest there are multiple meanings attached to the term, which leads to a lack of clarity. Little research has examined how social workers define social justice and how/if they engage in social justice in their work. Focus groups were held with social workers to ascertain how participants define and apply social justice to the work that they do. Results point to a focus on social justice as individual rights-based, which can be complicated by multiple meanings. Additionally, participants focused on the potential for the term to cause discomfort and for this to inhibit actualizing social justice in practice. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2014 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.*]

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And I think once we lose touch with social justice, we kind of lose touch with what we're actually supposed to be doing.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

When I proposed a name change from “social welfare” to “social welfare and social justice” for the concentration that I coordinate, I naively presumed it would be viewed as a positive and timely change. The impetus for this proposal stemmed from my desire to have the name reflect a broader macro perspective. I believe the term social welfare tends to evoke concepts of direct service provision, primarily to individuals and families—temporary measures to provide aid and support. While I have over 10 years’ experience in direct micro and mezzo practice, my teaching focuses on macro/structural issues and I was hoping the name change would be more inclusive and perhaps more dynamic.

My department is a sociology department populated almost exclusively with sociologists. My name change proposal received a mixed response—from support, to disinterest, to questions about whether it would have a negative impact on students. The questioners asked for data about the impact—what would social workers and agencies in the area think about the change? So I set out to see for myself.

Having recently relocated to the area and no longer working in direct services, I had limited contacts, yet I informally asked a few of my contacts through field placement classes. The individuals I spoke with felt that social work and social welfare provision should be based on social justice and were supportive of the potential name change. For example, one community partner stated, “Given that advocacy, insuring that our clients are treated fairly under the law and educating the community are large parts of what we do, I think the change would more accurately reflect what working in this field involves.” A part-time faculty member who worked in the mental health field offered to do an informal poll in his office. I was most intrigued by the oppositional responses—of which there were 3 out of 12. They felt that the term “social justice” was “too political,” which suggested that they would shy away from the use of the term. As someone who sees social issues as political issues and who believes that social work has strayed far from some of its early activist roots (see Olson, 2007; Specht & Courtney, 1994), this seemed to be the challenge I needed to inquire a bit more deeply into (the ways that social workers and others working in the social services fields defined their work in the context of social justice).

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL WORK

Social justice, while a complex and contested term, is identified by many as an organizing value and foundation of social work (Marsh, 2005; Reisch, 2002, 2007; Van Soest, 2007; Wakefield, 1988). While there has been an upsurge in dialogue about the meaning and role of social justice in social work, it has been a part of social work since the early beginnings during the Progressive Era, cited by foremothers such as Addams and Abbott (Reisch, 2002). Reisch provides an historical overview noting that the early intersections of social work and social justice values and practices were evident in the community and political work of settlement house workers and the principles of the Rank and File Movement. From the New Deal through the War on Poverty, social workers pursuing social justice have supported the institution of a welfare state in the US as a way to ameliorate systemic inequalities based in class disparities. As severe cutbacks to welfare programs began in the 1980s through the present time, social workers seeking social justice remedies have often refocused their attention to peace and anti-war movements and a variety of identity-based movements such as women's rights, civil rights, LGBTQQI rights, among others. This shift, based in the changing terrain of social movements and influenced by increased attention to identity-based claims rather than class-based claims, has led to a groundswell of changes in the social and political landscape and to a complex dialogue related to diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice.

These changes have led to a concerted effort to understand the applications and definition of social justice within the social work field. Numerous authors have presented critical theoretical discussions regarding the tensions of multiculturalism and social justice (Caputo, 2000; Reisch, 2007, 2008); the impact of globalization on social justice (Midgley, 2007); the variety of social justice theories that have influenced social work (Banerjee, 2005; Chatterjee & D'Aprix, 2002; Wakefield, 1988) and the need for reassessing and reformulating social justice theories for social work (Banerjee, 2005; Chatterjee & D'Aprix, 2002; Hodge, 2010; Morris, 2002; Solas, 2008). Reisch (2002) provides an important overview of the current attempts to apply social justice to social work practice from micro through macro contexts yet also astutely points out that these applications are often based in different definitions of social justice, which could include utilitarianism, egalitarianism, libertarianism (see Van Soest, 1994). Additional social justice approaches include restorative justice (Braithwaite & Strang, 2002) and

post-modern approaches (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007), among others.

The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics explicitly states in its preamble that “social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients” (2008, p. 6) and includes “social justice” as one of the six core values of the profession (p. 7). Social justice is never defined per se, yet in delineating the ethical principle that is based in the value of social justice, they examine social *injustice* by stating that “social workers’ social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice” (p. 20). The *Code of Ethics* also states that “social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people” (p. 20).

On the NASW website social justice is defined as:

...the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Social workers aim to open the doors of access and opportunity for everyone, particularly those in greatest need. A brief glance at the many roles of social workers shows how this value system underscores everything they do. (NASW, n.d, p. 2)

This definition appears to be grounded in the concept of social justice as rights-based and access-based with a strong individual focus. Their statement goes on to include brief examples of how social justice can “underscore” all of the work that a social worker does. Two of the examples are based in supporting access for service users and ensuring that service users are treated respectfully. The third example expands into the macro arena noting that social workers released a statement post 9/11 that called for an examination of the structural causes of the attacks, suggesting that global practices may have contributed to the terrorist attacks (NASW, n.d).

Interestingly, in the policy statements that NASW publishes every three years, social justice appears in the “Peace and Social Justice” statement yet is not specifically defined. In the 8th edition, which spans 2009-2012, the “Peace and Social Justice” statement is just over four pages long and is devoted primarily to militarization/impact of military spending on global social issues, peace, and violence. The statement indicates that “issues of social justice have special meaning for women, particularly in a world in which education, the vote, work outside the

home, and rights within marriage and the family are not assured for significant numbers of women” (NASW, 2009, p. 244). They also state that “we must bear responsibility for the social justice travesties our policies create” (p. 242) and that “social justice is central to the profession’s values” (p. 245). The statement does not specifically define social justice and while it speaks to significant social justice issues, it is contextualized primarily in relation to peace and violence.

In the 9th edition, which spans 2012-2014, “Peace and Social Justice” has been reduced to just over two pages long, using the *Social Work Dictionary* definition, social justice is defined as: “an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection[s], opportunities, obligations, and social benefits” (as cited in NASW, 2012, p. 242). The statement goes on to list a number of factors that affect peace and social justice which include poverty, economic disparities, “limited and/or unequal parity to health,” social relationships, education, death penalty/high levels of incarceration, environmental degradation, and lack of social mobility (p. 242).

The Council on Social Work Education has stated in their most recent Educational Policy Accreditation Standards that curriculum must “advance human rights and social and economic justice” which are described as:

Each person, regardless of position in society, has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers recognize the global interconnections of oppression and are knowledgeable about theories of justice and strategies to promote human and civil rights. Social work incorporates social justice practices in organizations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice. Social workers

- understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination;
- advocate for human rights and social and economic justice; and
- engage in practices that advance social and economic justice (CSWE, 2012, p. 5).

This definition also situates social justice in individual and human rights, yet it includes a focus on the global context and stresses that social workers need to understand multiple theories of justice.

While national organizations such as NASW and CSWE both highlight social justice in their ethical and policy statements (CSWE,

2012; NASW, n.d., 2008, 2009, 2012), there continues to be concerns about the ambiguous nature of the term social justice and how social workers define and apply the term to their work (Reisch, 2002). If the NASW identifies promotion of social justice as a primary role for social workers and CSWE requires all social work programs to teach students about the promotion of social justice yet the term itself is conceptually muddy, how can social workers and social work educators best embrace this foundational aspect of social work?

Limited attention has been paid to how social work practitioners and students conceptualize social justice and how/if they put these concepts into practice in the field. O'Brien (2010) surveyed 191 social workers in New Zealand to assess how they defined social justice and the ways that they practiced social justice in their work. Findings suggested that social workers described their daily practice in social justice terms including "equality," "fairness," and "rights" (p. 180). Noting that the majority of respondents focused more on social justice through micro, rather than mezzo or macro practice, O'Brien suggests that this provides important groundwork for additional inquiries into the micro social justice practices of social workers since the focus is typically on social justice via macro practice. Additionally, he indicates the results provide encouragement that social workers have not "abandoned social justice commitments" (p. 185), they are applying them in daily micro practice.

In a study of 13 social work educators, Funge (2011) asked educators to reflect on their role in educating students about social justice and the manner in which their institution either supported or constrained their efforts to integrate social justice material into their teaching. While all educators believed that they had a duty to expose students to social justice perspectives, a smaller group (four) believed that they should actively engage with students in cultivating a social justice perspective rather than simply exposing students. They noted a number of institutional constraints in engaging students in dialogue about social justice, including "(1) the absence of structured opportunities to engage with colleagues about teaching; (2) the norms and practices underlying retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) processes; and (3) the relevance of CSWE's social justice standard" (p. 62).

For social work to continue to utilize the language of social justice, it is imperative that social work educators, students, and practitioners engage with and extend these dialogues. Given the dearth of information regarding how practitioners define and apply social justice to their work, this research examines the intersections of social work and social justice in practice. The goal of this project is to gain greater understanding of

how social workers conceptualize social justice and how/if they see the work that they do in the field as “social justice work.”

METHOD

Participants

Sampling was convenience/snowball sampling; individuals who were known to me through my position as the coordinator of the Social Welfare program were asked to participate in the study. Additionally, two students assisted in making inquiries and posting flyers. The flyers received no response; one student coordinated participants in two focus groups through her contacts in her MSW cohort. Participants included social workers, MSW students who were currently practicing in the field, professors, and field liaisons. It is important for me to acknowledge both my frustrations and my own shortcomings in terms of sampling for this project. Some typical issues were the inevitable conflicts that come up in scheduling—out of five focus groups, all but one had 1-2 no shows/cancellations which resulted in two focus groups with only 2 participants in each. Another planned group fell apart when myself and my student assistant arrived—what was planned to be perhaps 4 or 5 participants ended up being one—clearly not a focus group.

Five focus groups were held over a period of a year and a half. In the spirit of full disclosure, the combination of initial frustrations regarding no-shows in the first three groups (which were clustered more closely together), shared recruitment duties (handing over to student assistants after the first three groups), and an overfull plate of teaching duties, contributed to the longer-than-hoped-for timespan of the project and to smaller-than-hoped-for groups. Ideally the five focus groups would have had 5-8 participants in each compared to 2-5 participants (for a total of 16 participants excluding the one individual in the defunct group). There was a relatively broad scope of fields of practice represented including Child Protective Services, shelter work for homeless youth and homeless women with mental illness, county mental health, aging/medical social work, community organizing, SED youth, and domestic violence. Additionally, participants held positions from entry level through director with a number also working either part-time or exclusively in academia, having transitioned from direct practice. Regarding education and fields of study, one participant had not quite completed a BA, six had completed a BA (many of whom were currently in an MSW program), eight had completed an MSW and one had completed a PhD.

The primary field of study was social work for nine participants while, at the undergraduate level, 7 had studied psychology, sociology, social services, or a combination. The ages of participants ranged from 22-58 years old and the years employed in the field ranged from under one to 35 years with an average of 14.5 years. It was interesting that while there were more women than men—nine women, six men, and one transman—there was still a larger than expected male representation given the disproportionate number of women receiving BSW and MSW degrees (Schilling, Morrish, and Liu, 2008). The racial/ethnic composition was less diverse than I would have hoped with nine participants identifying as white (one as white and Jewish), five as Latino/a, one as biracial and one as multiracial.

Procedures

All of the focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim; groups lasted from 1-2.5 hours. I asked participants a series of questions which focused on how they defined social justice; how they believed service users and the general public might define social justice; where they saw social justice intersect with social work; and if/how they saw their work as enacting principles of social justice. Analysis was completed using HyperResearch (ResearchWare, 2011) software through a process of detailed reading and rereading of transcripts utilizing initial, focused, and theoretical coding processes (Charmaz, 2006).

Multiple meanings

What stood out as a primary focal point in most, if not all, focus groups was the response to the initial question about how participants' defined social justice, which typically ended up being the heart of the discussions. There was a common theme of social justice as individual rights-based, and while there was variation in what participants meant by this, whether it was equal opportunity/access, social justice as equality, or social justice as fairness, there was an emphasis on individuals and on fair treatment. A number of participants stressed that defining social justice was value and culture-laden and, therefore, would have multiple meanings and could not be universally defined. In one group in particular there appeared to be a strong feeling that this may be reason enough to avoid changing the name of the program to social welfare and social justice because it would be vague and/or might prompt outsiders to

presume the program is grounded in a specific ideological perspective. To illustrate a personal definition of social justice, one participant stated:

That men and women have the right to have choice. They have the right to have fair opportunities. They have the right to live in a safe community. They have the right and we have to build on that right.

Echoing this sentiment:

Just fair. That it's fair that a child who doesn't have parents or whose parents have beaten them up and are alcoholic or whatever it is; those children, those acting out kids, however they're acting out, need to have an opportunity...they should have a fair chance to develop their own individual goals and lead their own individual life and hopefully tend to our communities so that our communities are safe.

While there seemed little debate over the initial meanings that were discussed, there were different focal points, which deepened the conversations. In two groups there was more discussion about social justice as a macro/systemic issue that would require a “cultural shift” to truly achieve—“Right, yeah, its more of a cultural shift as well as a civil rights kind of access issue.” Elaborating further this participant indicated—

So I mean more than just legislative, but its sort of you know in a more cultural basis like just the way that people treat each other or will listen to each other or...I don't know, like make policy to make people listen to each other, but ha, ha I think its that more than official policy.

There was also commentary in these two groups about how the conversation appeared to be more western in focus and there was limited dialogue related to a more global social justice definition—“I think we're all focused on the American perspective of what social justice is, but go to another part of the world and see what their idea of social justice is.” This was particularly interesting given that only two participants were born outside the US (Canada and Mexico) and only three participants had traveled outside of the country in a work-related capacity. It is possible that given a more globally diverse participant base, broader non-

western/northern perspectives might have been examined at greater length.

It was typical that as the focus groups proceeded there were more complex notions about the term with a number of participants reflecting during or after the group that the conversations were helpful and that they often don't take the time to think about the issues raised in the group; this was more common for participants who had been out in the field for a longer time and who were not currently in school or teaching. After hashing out various definitions and challenges in defining, most groups seemed to reach a sort of consensus that kept equality/equity somewhere in the center of the dialogue but acknowledged the need for fluidity: "so our current understanding of social justice will constantly be in flux dependent on social norms and cultural values." Another participant noted: "I mean to encompass everything within the two words social justice, good luck. You know. Just because we have so many different you know people and players involved that it's always going to be more of the moving definition." There seemed, in these cases, to be a move towards greater cultural relativism rather than an acceptance of a universal definition, although this participant may be attempting to bridge the universalism-relativism gap somewhat by acknowledging the need for open dialogue:

I think a big component of that might be having a lot of different voices heard and considered to be valid on the same level and not having a dominant narrative or dominant culture that is kind of the "norm" if you will, everything else to the side of that. I think that is part of what social justice would look like, would be embracing the conversation instead of accepting the common narrative.

When asked to reflect on the meanings that service-users might attach to social justice, the conversation was more speculative and less global and theoretical than the responses to questions either about themselves or the potential for social justice to be enacted in social work. Typically the participants noted that service-users were struggling with their specific life circumstances and that they would be more likely to see social justice as meeting their immediate needs—"they don't have time to think about the big picture; they're struggling to survive." Others suggested that it would be more intuitive for service-users to reflect on social injustice rather than social justice—"so I think maybe for them to define social justice it would be the absence of the social injustices, which are bountiful."

While this may be grounded in the reality of struggle, this assumption may contribute to social workers' own feelings of inertia and difficulty "seeing the big picture" and also could dissuade social workers from seeing the potential to work in alliance with service-users to move towards systemic changes. One participant did note that he saw service-users as understanding concepts of fairness—"I think when we talk about people intuitively, people understand it, their level of sophistication may vary, I mean average folks may not have a deep understanding but they understand justice and fairness." Even this statement presumes that service-users do not have intellectual sophistication to grasp systemic/structural issues. While there is a danger in this presumption that needs to be examined more closely, even if this were the case, then is it part of the role of social workers to engage in these discussions with service-users who are often most deeply affected by social injustices?

IS SOCIAL JUSTICE "TOO POLITICAL?"

The political nature of the term social justice was examined in a number of focus groups, often spurred on by the question of how the term is generally viewed in the US. It is crucial to also historicize the discussions since they took place during a time when there was heightened media attention from conservative media such as *Fox News* about Obama's healthcare plan. For example, in the spring of 2010 Glenn Beck focused a great deal of attention on the issue of social justice: "here's my definition of social justice: Forced redistribution of wealth with a hostility toward individual property rights, under the guise of charity and/or justice" (p. 12). Participants in the group identified a couple of related dimensions—the tendency to conflate social justice with socialism and/or communism, which seems directly related to the contemporary media saturation from conservative media, and the idea that a social justice perspective can make people uncomfortable. As noted by one participant:

It is kind of like it's communist or socialist, and that means limiting my independence and individuality and I'm going to live under a dreary no-choice state that will dictate my life. So when you believe in state control you believe in taking away my liberties and that is a bad world for me. So that is the kind of linkage and it's like a new version of the Red Scare. Especially with Obama. But it's crazy how he's been effectively labeled a socialist. If you know anything

about socialism that's crazy. And there's a legitimate segment of society that believes that though.

While many of the participants initially defined social justice in a predominantly individualistic framework, when reflecting on the general public's reactions to social justice and change, there tended to be a critique of the individualist perspective—"Individualism. Americans fear of not being American." This was often connected to fear of change and a general sense that even discussing social justice could provoke discomfort: "I feel like social welfare is a very like compassionate kind of word and social justice is a very not-compassionate-make-people-uncomfortable-with-change kind of word. It probably makes people reluctant."

The lines blurred sometimes when discussing fear and discomfort—fear dominated by loss of individuality and freedom based in a conservative world-view—and fears as social workers to engage in social justice work. This statement seemed to be both general and personal: "I think it's just really hard for people to think sometimes about social change. It's kinda scary. Unless you have nothing to lose. Then maybe. It's just hard. It's just hard." At times the personal fears seemed to be embedded in a need to remain somehow "neutral" in the face of opposition while at other times the fears seemed grounded in a sense that the struggle to do social justice work was simply too challenging—emotionally and pragmatically. Specifically focusing on her own sense of being overwhelmed, this participant indicated:

... going back to the idea of fear, it's easy to think I can help one person—like if I could get this kid into college or I can get this woman off the street or I could get this person into a safe house or that whatever issue it is we're working on, but to think but I have to change this society that allows that to happen in the first place--that's incredibly overwhelming and scary and, "no way I can't do that," so I'm just going to focus on this woman or this kid or this whatever.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN PRACTICE OR SIMPLY THEORETICAL?

"It's almost like a theoretical goal that needs to be put into like a practical actual goal."

One of the most intriguing aspects of the conversations was that most of the participants indicated that they believed that they did engage in social justice work in their practice even after the discussions about how challenging it was to define and that the term could be politically loaded. The minority of participants who indicated that they did little or no social justice work in their day-to-day practice were the participants who had experience in community advocacy and policy change rather than the participants who worked in a more micro context, which seemed somewhat contradictory. It appears that the more engaged participants were with systemic change and the more critical they were of US social work, the more likely they were to critique their own work—“me? Not really. I think I just try to put band-aids on people. That’s basically what I do.” In this same group, a community organizer with an MSW stated: “I don’t see much attempt in social workers trying to change systems.” Another critique came from a participant who did not train in social work and became involved in social service work initially through her experiences as a service-user. She had observed in her 5+ years in the field, “my experience has been that they (social workers) often get bogged down in the trees and don’t see the forest.”

In contrast, the majority of the participants who were engaged in direct micro practice believed that their work was social justice work, although it would be interesting to tease out if they believed they were creating social justice through their work or if they were applying social justice principles of equity and fairness—which is important to differentiate. For example one participant indicated, “...we’re using our voice to advocate for our clients in the profession. We’re all working toward social justice and use our limited power in reaching that goal.” This social worker appears confident that engaging in advocacy for her client is a way to move in the direction of social justice. On the other hand, another participant seemed more ambivalent about the potential for the work her agency does to be seen as social justice work: “I think our agency does social justice; I definitely know we do social welfare. I think we’ve had some moments in time when our social justice work has been more upfront and out in the open.”

One way participants appeared to struggle with their own ambivalence was to conceptualize social justice as a goal, a foundation, or an “umbrella” for their work. Similar to the opening quote in this section, this participant stated: “But I just think it’s almost like a fantasy you know, it exists, you know, in a theoretical world, but like in any practical realistic world, it just seems like it’s always in the distance of being attainable.” One participant in particular vacillated between seeing social

justice as the foundation for social work, an “umbrella” under which social work practices, or, as in this statement, both:

I guess I strive for it, so it's a building block. There are some days when I'm not too sure about what I'm giving towards that, but basically it's building towards a fair more equal a more compassionate society, a more forgiving society, a more, whatever, through the kinds of work through the kinds of opportunities or educational opportunities that we provide to families it is both the umbrella and the foundation of what we do...the foundation of where we jump off of why we do what we do. Why we spend our time doing this and we believe in it. We believe in these principles for people in our society.

In some ways the groups seemed to raise more questions for participants than provide concrete answers—“As everyone was talking, I was thinking, I don't want to sound pessimistic, but will we ever reach that? Will we ever reach some form of social justice?” In this same group a participant responded:

And once we start to question that, I know it's important, but it feels very defeatist, like if its not possible why bother? And I think that there are social workers that believe the change is possible because without that we wouldn't be in this room and wouldn't have the practice of it. No matter how insurmountable it seems it has to be our duty to push for that. And like you had said, there's no sort of end to it. As we go along we're constantly learning more and there will be other issues that pop up and that will get the attention of the moment. And we're evolving as a human race and society and we're part of the process and we have to push and strive to be better for ourselves and others to get to a point where we reach that Utopian social justice.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how the participants in this study conceptualized social justice. They seemed most comfortable defining social justice using an individual rights-based perspective with limited acknowledgement of global and non-western/northern perspectives. While there was some focus on the influence of personal values and culture on the interpretation of social justice, there was

essentially no attention paid to social justice on a community or group level. As can be seen in the figure, individual rights are central while global perspectives/cultural shifts are represented as contributing factors, but not the core of social justice. Participants discussed ways in which they saw their work actualizing social justice yet there was also honest and critical reflection about how the “political” nature of social justice and the systemic nature of social justice issues created a sense of overwhelmed which challenged their ability to actively pursue social justice in their work. Additional concerns included a sense that social welfare work is generally a “band-aid” solution that will not create systemic change and that there is no time to do the type of work required for structural change. These concerns are represented as barriers that can inhibit providing access, education, advocacy, and fair treatment—which were seen by some participants as the enactment of social justice.

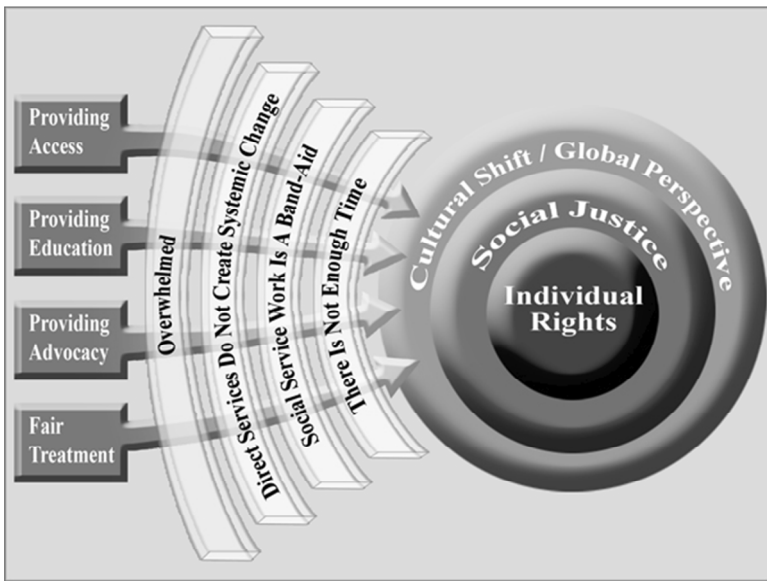


Figure 1: Conceptualizing Social Justice in Social Work

Central to the current literature on the application of social justice frameworks and principles of social work is the issue of the multiple meanings of social justice, which can create a lack of cohesiveness and common understandings (Hodge, 2010; Reisch, 2002). Social justice can connote social change and a progressive perspective; yet can also be used by those with conservative viewpoints in ways that are contradictory to

many of the tenets of social work. In some forms, “social justice” has, and can be, used against vulnerable groups and to advantage those in positions of power (Caputo, 2002). Positioning social work in a social justice framework is a hollow exercise if applied with no critical reflection about what social justice means—particularly for those most intimately affected by injustice and for social workers engaging in daily practice with groups that have been marginalized and disenfranchised.

As schools of social work, NASW, CSWE, and other social work organizations have moved towards an increasing prioritization of social justice as foundational to social work, there must be on-going dialogue regarding the meanings and applications of social justice to counteract the potential for it to become either a meaningless “feel good” statement or too elusive to truly put into practice. Social work programs and educators are responsible for more than “exposing” social work students to social justice concepts (see Funge, 2011); they are responsible for critically evaluating the multiple meanings and applications of social justice. CSWE has recently stated, “social work’s purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice” (2010, p. 1). The integrity of social work and its presumed mission is at stake if statements such as this remain merely rhetorical. As Michael Reisch recently stated in a 2011 keynote address at the 25th anniversary of the Social Welfare Action Alliance, “Instead of challenging the roots of social problems, we are encouraged to channel clients’ needs within existing parameters. Social justice rhetoric masks the social control functions this produces” (p. 7).

It is crucial that social work educators and researchers continue to explore how diverse groups of social workers and service-users experience social work in light of social justice and to expand the dialogue beyond an individual rights-based focus to include a more dynamic, global perspective. There are no easy answers to what social justice means in a complex world, yet to claim that social work is a social justice-oriented profession calls out for critical reflection of the use of this term before it loses the potential to be emancipatory.

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REVOLT!

The Next Great Transformation from Kleptocracy Capitalism to
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“A welcome return to the center stage of political discourse—and action—for the working class, and class consciousness. A must read for everyone that actually takes working-class self-determination seriously.”

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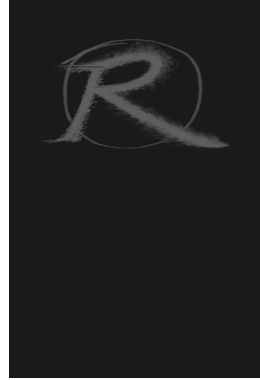
*“In our increasingly crisis-ridden world, where the global working class is rediscovering its spine, we need visions of vastly different worlds to aspire to. And these visions must be linked to critiques of the existing society. Asimakopoulos combines these tasks in his latest book, *Revolt!* This book is recommended reading for anyone sickened by an increasingly violent, volatile, and boring status quo.”*

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ABOUT THE BOOK: Asimakopoulos develops a theory to action model for working class movement building toward societies based on direct democracy. *Revolt!* analyzes the Great Recession showing neoliberal globalization is intensifying capitalism’s contradictions resulting in perpetual crises and collapse. Reviewing the labor and civil rights movements Asimakopoulos argues social justice can only be achieved through a new movement which, short of the immediate overthrow of capitalism, can obtain with direct action specific working class victories that will set in motion transformative change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: John Asimakopoulos, is Full Professor of Sociology at the City University of New York and executive director of the Transformative Studies Institute (TSI), an educational think tank. He has advanced degrees in and has taught sociology, political science, and economics resulting in a unique interdisciplinary perspective. His students include undergraduates and graduates from diverse ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds who honor him for over 20 years with the highest teaching evaluations. His research is focused on social movements, critical theory, and international political economy. Asimakopoulos is author of *The Accumulation of Freedom* (2012), *Social Structures of Direct Democracy* (forthcoming Brill), many journal articles, and is editor in chief of *Theory in Action*, an interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal.

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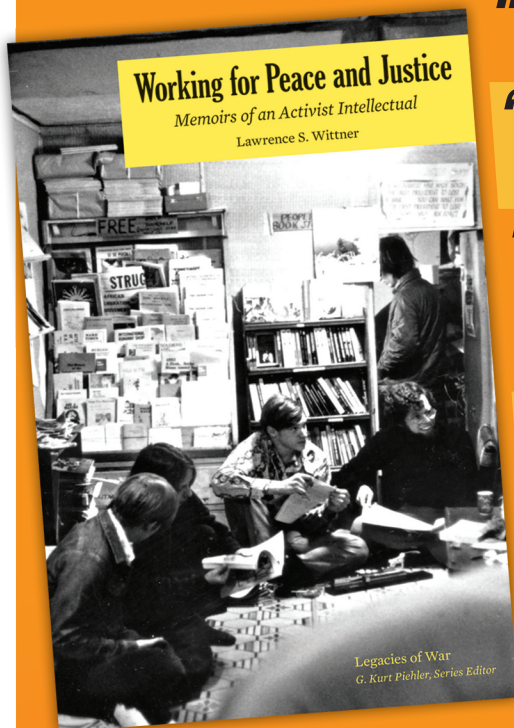
WRITINGS ON
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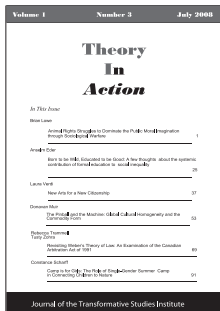


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"PUTTING THEORY INTO ACTION!"

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The Transformative Studies Institute (TSI) fosters interdisciplinary research that will bridge multidisciplinary theory with activism in order to encourage community involvement that will attempt to alleviate social problems. As part of the mission, scholars, activists, and other concerned individuals in fields such as social sciences, humanities, and law will be invited to conduct research and become involved in like-minded various grass roots organizations. The Institute is concerned with issues of social justice and related activism, and its aim is to provide a working model of theory in action, through shared research, governance, and operation of the center. As such, the institute may provide a working laboratory for evolutionary socioeconomic forms of organization. Further, we invite literary participation through our independent, peer-reviewed journal *Theory in Action*, through which research associates, scholars, activists, and students may disseminate their research and expand thematic social dialogue. TSI also welcomes opportunities to work with national and international scholars who serve as research associates and fellows. In addition, the institute plans on collaborating with various worker education programs, labor centers, universities, think tanks, advocacy groups and non-profit organizations. TSI is managed and operated by a dedicated global team of academic scholar-activists, grassroots activists, and the concerned public. Many of TSI's members have multiple graduate degrees, multiple years of secondary and college level teaching experience throughout most disciplines. TSI also provides consulting services, custom policy papers and projects, and operates a speakers' bureau.

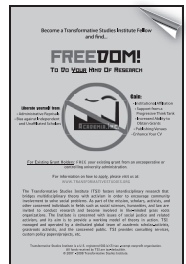


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