

A Social Exclusion Perspective on Social Work in Latin America

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This paper explores the relationship between social work and social exclusion within the context of poverty as capability deprivation. It suggests that a social exclusion perspective could be relevant and useful to social work theory and practice in Latin America. The Chile Solidario Program is used as an example of a social program that incorporates a social exclusion perspective and in which social workers play a vital role in promoting social inclusion.

A Context of Exclusion

IN LATIN AMERICA¹, 44% OF THE POPULATION LIVE IN POVERTY, 60% of children live below the poverty line, and nearly 20% of young people are unemployed (Klikberg, 2005; Inter-American Development Bank [IADB], 2008). A major cause of poverty is inequality. While the richest 10% possess 48% of the regional income, the poorest 10% possess 1.6% (Klikberg, 2005; IADB, 2008; IADB, 2003). Latin America has the most unequal income distribution in the world, and these inequalities are exacerbated by the exclusion of minority groups that are discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, race, gender, physical disability, and geographic location. In spite of the variations across Latin American countries, many actual problems of deprivation are widely shared across the region. Latin America has great economic potential, and is ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse; a diversity that could be a major asset in the process of constructing an inclusive society. However, the entire region must overcome a long history of exclusion that has left societies unequal, divided, and blind to diversity's riches.

The 1980s and 1990s were periods of profound transformation in Latin America. Neoliberal reforms applied in most countries in the

region changed the existing “intervening” states into “minimal” states. Active strategies to downsize the state caused accelerated privatization policies, elimination of public institutions, and reductions of personnel in the public sector² (Carlson & Paine, 2002). One of the consequences of these policies was the deterioration of the notion of state as representative of collective action (O’Donnell, 1993). These policies also had a huge impact on many economies in the region and worsened poverty and inequality. As Stiglitz described it, “growth under liberalizations is just over half of what it was under the old pre-form regime...Where growth has occurred, the benefits have accrued to those at the upper part of the income distribution...” (2003, p. 230). As a result of the policies implemented in the region during the 1980s and 1990s, the salaries, working conditions, and career prospects of social workers have deteriorated (O’Donnell & Tokman, 1998).

The professional identity of social workers in Latin America started as health workers (Velez, 2003; Alayon, 2005). The first school of social work, the School of Social Service, was established in Santiago, Chile in 1925 by the physician Alejandro del Rio. The second school of social work in the region was founded in Argentina in the early 1930s. It was connected to the School of Medicine at the University of Buenos Aires, and it followed the European idea of using “hygiene visitors” as auxiliaries for doctors. Since then, the social work profession in Latin America underwent various paradigm changes that weakened its identity. First it was influenced by a philanthropic and moralizing tone; then, it was focused on integrating social science epistemology, and after that, it went through a re-conceptualization process. The profession has been struggling to find a place for itself since 1925 (Parada, 2007; Velez, 2003; Alayon, 2005; Healy, 2001). Presently, there is a need for social workers in Latin America to renegotiate the profession’s position and its specific role through the use of new frameworks or perspectives that can inform both the theory and practice of social work.

This paper suggests that a social exclusion perspective could be valuable in analyzing and influencing social work theory and practice in Latin America. It explores the relationship between social exclusion placed in a broader context of the idea of poverty as capability deprivation³ and social work. The emphasis is on the relevance and usefulness of a social exclusion perspective for social work theory and practice.

A Social Exclusion Definition

The present debate on social policy in Latin America hinges on the issue of social inclusion and exclusion. According to the last IADB Report on Economic and Social Progress (2008), social exclusion is the most dangerous threat facing democracy in Latin America. Politicians and policy analysts mention the fight against social exclusion as the main objective of development and substantive democratization in the region (IADB, 2008).

The term social exclusion was first coined in France in 1974 by Rene Lenoir to identify and refer to the “excluded”, including the “mentally and physically handicapped, suicidal people, aged invalids, abused children, substance abusers, delinquents, single parents, multi-problem households, marginal, asocial persons, and other social misfits.” Since Lenoir, there have been major advances in the literature on social exclusion, and the concept has acquired various definitions. This paper uses Amartya Sen’s definition of social exclusion, which considers social exclusion by placing it in a broader context of the idea of poverty as capability deprivation (2000). This definition is particularly suitable for Latin America because there is general agreement that social exclusion contributes mainly to the analysis of poverty and marginality (Faria, 1995; Rodgers et al., 1995). Faria (1995) argues that social exclusion’s usefulness stems from its potential as a way of integrating poverty, deprivation, and lack of access to goods or assets into a single framework. Sen examines the term by placing it in the broader context of poverty understood as the lack of capability to live a minimally decent life. He defines social exclusion as “...constitutively a part of capability deprivation as well as instrumentally a cause of diverse capability failures” (Sen, 2000).

Social Work and Social Exclusion

Previous authors who have analyzed the relationship between social work and social exclusion have focused on the strong and natural intuitive appeal of the idea that a concern with social exclusion is embedded in the guiding principles of the social work profession (Sheppard, 2006; Smale, Tuson, & Statham, 2000). In a broad sense, social work’s mission is to increase opportunities for excluded populations. Social work is arguably founded on notions of social exclusion and inclusion. In spite of its recent origin, the term social exclusion can

give expression to some of the major issues, which have been, and continue to be, of concern to social workers. But what is the specific aspect of social exclusion that is useful for social work? Is social exclusion merely a relabeling of already known notions and concepts?

Social exclusion theory is adaptable, and it may be tempting to characterize every deprivation as a case of social exclusion. Does the concept add anything that we would not know or recognize without a social exclusion perspective? What is the specific relevance or new insight provided by the idea of social exclusion for the social work profession? What aspects or characteristics of a social exclusion perspective may be considered relevant for social work? Does it contribute to our understanding of the nature of poverty, or in identifying causes of poverty that may otherwise be neglected?

Described in this paper are the characteristics of the social exclusion approach which, placed in the context of poverty as capability deprivation, make it a valuable and useful concept for social work. One of the main characteristics of the social exclusion approach lies on its specific emphasis on the relational features in the deprivation of capability or lack of freedom to lead the life an individual values. Following Sen, the main attribute is that social exclusion literature provides a central role to relational connections. This feature is applicable for social workers in informing the theory and practice around relational connections and more fully understanding the person-in-environment transactions taking place at various systems levels that lead to capability deprivation. The relational aspect of social exclusion can also shed light on the multidimensionality of the experience of poverty.

Social exclusion is constitutively a part of capability deprivation. This is relevant in the sense that being excluded can sometimes be a deprivation, and it can be of intrinsic importance on its own. For example, not taking part in a community, not being able to relate to others, and not having social connections, can directly impoverish a person's life (Sen, 2000). These are losses on their own, independent of whatever further deprivation they may generate. Social work has an important role in understanding social exclusion as constitutive of capability deprivation and in presenting possible ways in which it can be addressed. The profession recognizes the importance of the dignity and worth of all members of society and their equality as humans, as well as the right of every individual to participate in the community. Being excluded from society can affect people's well-being in several respects, including mental health and ability to feel empowered.

Working in the different fields of practice and with different methods of intervention, social work has the knowledge-base to recognize and address the intrinsic importance of social exclusion and its effects, as well as recognizing external factors leading to exclusion and working to change them.

Social exclusion is also an instrumental cause of capability failures (Sen, 2000). Exclusion from social relations results in other deprivations, which further limit opportunities. When a deprivation has instrumental causes, it is useful to use the perspective of social exclusion to analyze whether the causal process can be better understood by invoking the idea of exclusion. For example, to be excluded from the formal labor market, which is not intrinsically damaging, can effect the opportunity of having social protection, which may lead to insecurity, poor health, or income poverty. This example has particular relevance for Latin America, where social protection is inconsistent, and where many informal-sector workers do not have health protection, which causes wide-spread feelings of insecurity (Tokman, 2007). Entry into the formal employment sector can open the door to social and economic citizenship, which in turn, is a prerequisite for belonging and being integrated in society. Understanding the causal processes leading to capability deprivation is relevant for social work to analyze the dynamics and interplay of the different factors affecting the interaction of the individual and the environment, and it can also inform policy decisions to improve the conditions of excluded groups.

A social exclusion perspective can enrich the practice and theory of social work at various levels. A vital interest in the issue of social exclusion for social workers must be focused on policy issues and on research which can lead to taking action. The challenge for social workers includes not only gaining a better understanding of the diverse phenomena of deprivation and poverty but also improving the conditions of clients; enhancing developmental, problem-solving, and coping capacities; contributing to the development and shape of social policy; and responding to the levels of social exclusion by introducing change and promoting social inclusion.

Strengthening Social Policies and Programs: A Role for Social Work?

Some governments in Latin American countries are making important efforts to implement innovative programs to promote social inclusion and the integration of excluded peoples, and have placed

the issue of confronting social exclusion at the top of their priorities⁴. Such programs include Zero Hunger in Brazil, Heads of Households in Argentina, National Front Against Hunger in Guatemala, and Chile Solidario in Chile. Now there is an unprecedented opportunity for Latin American social workers to contribute to the design and implementation of social policies and programs aimed at fostering social inclusion. This does not mean, as Parada (2007) states, that social work will be "...simply a discipline in charge of the operationalization of implementation of state policies" (p. 566), but rather, it is an opportunity for social workers to both engage in a process prioritizing social issues that can bring change and provide their knowledge in understanding social exclusion and working toward an inclusive society.

Chile Solidario: An Illustration

Established by the Chilean government in 2002, Chile Solidario is a program of social protections for families in extreme poverty that combines aid and skills development in an integrated approach³(Ministerio de Planificación Nacional y Política Económica [MIDEPLAN], 2002). The program acknowledges the distinction between the constitutive and instrumental aspects of social exclusion, which is evident in that its main objective is achieving social inclusion of poor families by integrating them into the public network of social services. The goal of this system was so that families would be integrated into their local surroundings and into existing social networks with an income above the line of extreme poverty (World Bank, 2004). The current aid approach of the program is to offer cash benefits and cash subsidies for participating families, as well as personalized psychosocial support for two years through the Puento Program as an effort toward social inclusion.

The program also takes into account the instrumental aspects of exclusion, by recognizing that exclusion from active citizenship can lead to other deprivations, further limiting opportunities for employment and access to education. For this, the program provides psychosocial support and participants also gain access to social promotion programs, including educational vouchers and labor benefits. Chile Solidario is innovative in understanding social protection as a central part of development and as an important instrument for freedom.

Social workers are presently playing a crucial role in this program (Saracostti, 2008). Using a social exclusion perspective, social workers are involved in direct practice, community intervention, and macro

policy practice. Social workers go door to door and invite poor families to participate in the program. If the family chooses to participate, the social worker helps them to identify their health, education, employment, housing, income, family life, and identification needs. The household and the social worker create a strategy for how these needs will be met and how progress will be monitored. At the community-intervention level, social workers are involved in coordinating an action network that supports the work of each family. At the macro level, social workers are involved with the Ministry of Social Planning in overseeing the program's progress and its design. Social workers and Latin American policy makers can be encouraged by this example and consider the role of the social worker as strategic in understanding social exclusion while also relating this understanding to their knowledge and skills in promoting social inclusion.

Conclusion

A social exclusion perspective is both relevant and useful for social work theory and practice. At present in Latin America, there is a need to fill the important role of implementing active and efficient social policies and programs which can alleviate poverty and exclusion. Latin American social workers could be involved in strengthening these actions by contributing and engaging in a process aimed at social renewal and the attainment of inclusive societies, states, and countries.

Social workers can play a vital role in Latin America using a social exclusion perspective to understand the relational features in the experience of poverty, the intrinsic importance of exclusion, and the nature of social exclusion as an instrumental cause of capability failures. Relating this understanding with their knowledge, social workers would improve the community work, research, and influence policy issues at the macro level. In this sense, social workers can make significant and valuable contributions to social change and build more inclusive, stable, safe, and accepting societies that respect diversity and equality of opportunity for all.

Notes

1 In this paper I define Latin America to include the parts of the American continent where Spanish or Portuguese is the main national language (that is, Mexico, Central, and South America, including some countries in the Caribbean).

2 The capability approach is a framework for evaluating and assessing social arrangements, standards of living, inequality, poverty, justice, quality of life, and well-being. According to Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, poverty must be seen as "the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of income." The capabilities a person has according to Sen are, "the substantive freedoms he or she

enjoys to lead the kind of life she or he has reason to value" (1999, p. 87). Sen argues that a person's freedom to live in the way one would like has intrinsic value and is therefore constitutive of the person's being. The individuals' capability of choosing and discriminating among possible livings is as valuable as the achieved functionings ("doings" and "beings").

3 For more detailed information on the program, see Palma, J. and Urzua, R. (2005). *Anti-poverty Policies and Citizenry: The Chile Solidario Experience*. UNESCO Policy Papers/12. Management of Social Transformations; MIDEPLAN. Sistema Chile Solidario. Gobierno de Chile, MInisterio de Planificacion y Cooperacion. Julio, 2002.

4 Subsidio Único Familiar to minors below 18 years old, subject to school assistance; Pension Asistencial for people over 65 years of age, subject to periodic health controls, Pension Asistencial for disabled persons who are heads of households, subject to periodical health controls, Pension Asistencial for people with mental disabilities, Subsidio al Consumo de Agua Potable, covering 100 percent of water bills for up to 15 cubic meters of monthly consumption for connected families.

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