Speaking Truth to Power: Interrogating the Invention of the Social Worker and the Client

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The development of a professional social work identity involves being socialized into the history, mission, values, and ethics of the profession--learning what social workers can say and do. This socialization also corresponds with a silence about the limits and philosophical extremities of the profession--what social workers do not, perhaps cannot, say. Drawing from social theorist Michel Foucault's analysis of subjectivity, power, knowledge, and discourse, this article aims to articulate the limits of the social work profession. By examining the historical and contemporary invention of the "social worker" and the "client," I challenge social workers to consider the work that must be conducted upon themselves.

FOR NEARLY 100 YEARS, PUBLIC DEBATE HAS BEEN CIRCULATING regarding the identity of contemporary social work. The nature of this debate is reflected in arguments concerning social work's values, the relevancy of its knowledge base, and its professional status (Bitensky, 1978; Bar-On, 1994; Eaton, 1958; Flexner, 1915; Gibleman, 1999; Haynes & White, 1999; Risler, Lowe, & Nackerud, 2003). At the heart of this debate lay questions concerning epistemological, theoretical, and methodological challenges and opportunities for social work in the 21st century. What is social work? Is it a quasi-profession? Has professionalization privileged technique over social justice?

Michel Foucault (1984a) provides a strong starting point for examining these questions: "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same thing as bad, if everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do" (p. 343). We always have

something to do. This is a positive position: not all social work knowledge and practices are bad, but they all can be problematized in an effort to expose their limitations and highlight their possibilities. From this position, social workers can grasp the nature of the debate by focusing on the dangerous potential of knowledge and practices rather than starting with the assumption that they are inherently good or bad. Moving beyond these moral categories, Foucault advises us to conduct a "critical ontology of ourselves" in which we analyze and reflect upon what we are in order to recognize the dangers of our conduct (Foucault, 1987).

In problematizing the origins of social work and the shaping of the social work professional identity, I argue that critical examination of knowledge production, subjectivity, difference, and power allow us to help "determine which is the main danger" (Foucault, 1984a, p. 343) in the creation of ourselves as professionals who help others in the name of social justice. By conducting a critical ontology of social workers, I will illuminate how particular "expert" and "client" identities, social relationships, and practices are made possible while others are excluded. It is in this space of social work discourse that potential "dangers" can be located: as social work produces knowledge, it necessarily blocks other ways of knowing and being. It is not my intention to provide a blueprint for alternative knowledge and practices; rather, by fostering a "limit attitude," (Foucault, 1984b) I contemplate the historical and contemporary limits that have been placed upon social workers and interrogate them in an effort to establish the possibility of moving beyond them.

Shaping of the Social Worker Subject Position

Before interrogating how contemporary social work professional identities are constructed, let us first consider the historical origin of the social worker. In the early 20th century, economic depressions, the emancipation of slaves, and the explosion of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe to urban areas such as New York City, prompted an awareness of the need for social programs to assist millions of the poor and needy (Glicken, 2006). Social work as a profession began to take shape in the early 1880s with the formation of charity organization societies and settlement houses. Their objectives, to "repress mendicancy" and inculcate values such as "politeness, cleanliness, and independence" were met through a system whereby "friendly visitors" and settlement house workers (most of them middle and up-

per class white women) investigated applicants for charity and provided support in immigrant communities (Specht & Courtney, 1995).

Parton and O'Byrne (2006) observe that the growth and legitimization of social work was closely allied with modernist aims to develop rational forms of social organization, which reflected broader utopian goals for creating ideal cities with ideal citizens. The central focus of the modernist project was the classification of the population based on the scientific claims of the different "experts" of the new human sciences--particularly medicine, psychiatry, psychology, criminology, and social work. These "experts" theorized about the nature of human beings, their perfectibility, the reasons for their behavior and the order in which populations could be classified. In this sense, human qualities were conceptualized as measurable and "could be changed, improved, and rehabilitated" (Parton & O'Bryne, 2006, p. 39). It is in the modernist tradition that a new scientific education was introduced into universities in the United States. Operating under the assumption that scientific inquiry could be used to improve the human condition, professional schools of medicine, psychiatry, and law were established across the country. By adopting a scientific approach similar to the social sciences, social work found its home in the academy beginning with the first school of social work, the New York School of Philanthropy in 1904, later known as the New York School of Social Work in 1917, and finally becoming the Columbia School of Social Work in 1963 (Feldman & Kamerman, 2001).

A necessary element in reconstructing the invention of the social worker is the concept of discourse. Foucault (1980) defined discourses as "historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth--what is possible to speak at a given moment" (p. 93). Following Foucault, Margolin (1997) conducted a discourse analysis of early 20th century social work case records to demonstrate how social workers created and sustained themselves as well as others, primarily through the language of helping. By examining this language, we can observe how as the classification of populations into "allegedly universal moral categories" such as the "mentally ill," "the criminal," "the delinquent," "the drunkard," "the wayward woman," and the "orphan" (Wagner, 1997) warranted the intervention of social workers. Margolin pays particular attention to this classification process, suggesting that it reflected the power interests of the middle-class: "social work stabilizes middle-class power by creating an observable, discussable, [and] write-about-able poor" (p. 5).

By inventing such categories, or what Foucault (1969) calls "sub-

ject positions," social workers became judges of normality. Through their techniques of home visits, observations, and note-taking, a new figure arose that became the object of intervention, something to be reformed. Foucault (1977) maintains that: "We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social-worker judge. It is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based" (p. 304). Most salient in Foucault's analysis of the invention of subject positions is his notion of "power/knowledge relations," in which he understood that it is impossible to think of knowledge outside of its connection to power. We know someone to be "delinquent" or "mentally ill" not because of traits that are inherent to those individuals, but, rather through the power of experts to conduct scientific research, distinguishing the deviant from the normal and the ill from the healthy. This process, in which the modern state confers power upon credentialed "experts," allows for the creation of others as objects of knowledge. Who is defined as "expert" and who is defined as "other" is the result of a particular configuration of power/knowledge relations.

As social work evolved from the voluntarism of friendly visitors and settlement house workers into a full-fledged profession with a distinctive value base, body of knowledge, and method for training, several authors argue that it has matured from its preoccupation with the morality of the poor to having a keener appreciation of the limits of science and its ability to respond to complex societal problems (Feit, 2003; Gibelman & Schervish, 1997; Levy Simon, 1994; Reisch & Andrews, 2002). The last 20 years have witnessed considerable scholarly and practice activity focused on empowerment, the strengths-based perspective, cultural competence, evidence-based practice, and person-in-environment considerations. The emergence of this knowledge base, transmitted systematically through formal education in schools of social work, gives shape and meaning to our self-fashioning as experts, both individually and as a professional collective. How are our subject positions shaped today? Has the way we imagine ourselves as "experts" changed from the modernist goals of moralizing the poor and deviant?

The Code of Ethics: How Social Workers Imagine Themselves and Who They Serve

Since the 20th Century, codes of ethics have been central aspects of professions (Banks, 2006). Banks suggests that codes of ethics establish guidelines for professional behavior, contribute to the professional status of an occupation, establish and maintain professional

identity, explain the moral stance of a profession, and protect clients from harmful activities (Banks, 2006, p.44). Given the importance of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics in guiding professional behavior, it is a key document for analyzing how contemporary subject positions of both social worker and client are formed. The Code includes four major sections. The first section, the Preamble, summarizes social work's mission and core values and sets forth several key themes to practice, including service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 1996). As the Preamble lays out the framework for the rest of the Code of Ethics, it is a good starting point to conduct a discourse analysis to investigate how social worker and client subject positions are constituted:

> The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human wellbeing and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual wellbeing in a social context and the wellbeing of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. "Clients" is used inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems (NASW, 1996).

The concept of discourse is central to analyzing the subjectivities that are expressed within the NASW Code of Ethics. By paying particular attention to the representation of worker and client subject positions in the code, it becomes apparent that these positions are constituted through dualistic categories such as: privileged/oppressed,

financially stable/impoverished, unlimited technical knowledge/limited individual capacity, strong/vulnerable, powerful/powerless, and worker/client (one who does not 'work' on society, but on whom society and the social worker works). Within these dualisms, social workers are always fixed to the positions on the left and clients on the right. Furthermore, this mode of representation fails to acknowledge the complex individual and collective histories that exist within each category.

To illustrate how these categories constrain the articulation of the whole self, consider the complexities inherent in my own formation as a social worker. According to the Code of Ethics, I fit the description of someone in need of the help of a social worker. I grew up as what could be categorized as "disadvantaged:" an African-American youth living in a low-income, single parent family. Growing up in the economically blighted community of West Oakland, California during the early 1980s, my family was intimately affected by the high rate of poverty, crime, and the crack epidemic. Terms such as "crisis," "at-risk," and "marginalized" could be used to describe the conditions I faced, yet, within the logic of the Code of Ethics, in becoming a social worker, I must disengage with this experience, as the oppositional subject positions do not allow for being both the social worker and the oppressed. Some may argue that rather than disengage with the experience of oppression, I could use this common experience to enhance my connection to the communities in which I work. Such sentiment constitutes a further danger, as it masks the power I wield as a social worker over my clients. Hence, in the social work context, my experiences beyond the practice setting are dislocated at worst or used to manipulate my power at best.

The disempowering effects of the oppositional constitution of social worker and client identities is particularly problematic, given the profession's stated commitment to social justice. Although the Code is intended to position social workers to challenge social injustice, the oppositional constitution of worker and client leaves little room for dialogue among equals, insofar as it assumes that social workers and clients do not exist in equal social worlds and that clients are dependent on the work that will be conducted upon them to become empowered. Within these categories, there is neither reciprocal interaction nor a space where the social worker is on equal status with the client. In naming clients as objects of intervention, help can never flow both ways, and if it does, it is neither acknowledged nor codified within the Code of Ethics. The danger in this assumption is that, rather than enable a politics of social justice, oppositional categories foster

a politics of domination, as "privileged" professionals make claims on behalf of "oppressed" groups. The placement of the social worker subject position as the helper, the powerful, and the invulnerable, fundamentally contradicts the pursuit of social justice; by beginning our work in a space of inequality, we effectively foreclose the possibility of moving toward equality.

Conclusion: Speaking Truth to Power

Conducting a critical ontology of social worker and client subject positions is not about what is good or bad more than it is about an awareness of the limits of the social work profession. The aim of such a task is to unmask the forms of knowledge by which we construct ourselves as "experts" and by which our "clients" are objectified; the interventions that operate upon them; the judgments, decisions, and forms of authority to which they are subject; and the types of relationships to which they are drawn into, with us as social workers.

By engaging in this critical ontology, my purpose is to articulate that the consequences of our expertise cannot be acknowledged while our professional identities are being formed. Foucault (1977) argues that for any discipline to exist and have a piece of knowledge, there have to be certain things that go unsaid: "There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (p. 27). I argue that in order to be aware of the main danger, it is critical to speak truth to these silences. Social workers must not only acknowledge that the historical invention of the social worker and client are tied to certain moral imperatives, but that the present invention is also rooted in oppositional identities that are fixed in a relationship, which is fundamentally hierarchical, oppressive, and unequal.

Speaking truth to the power of the social worker identity requires that we do a kind of ethical work on ourselves by "shaking up habits, ways of acting and thinking, of dispelling commonplace beliefs, [and] of taking a new measure of rules" (Foucault, 1991, p. 11-12). Such ethical work pushes us beyond the limits of the NASW Code of Ethics and allows us to confront those things that cannot be said. The stakes are high: if we chose to work at the center of our subject positions as experts we run the risk of becoming uncritical and placing ourselves in a struggle against our clients and their realities, even if we believe that struggle is toward equality. However, working at the limits of ourselves stipulates that we work at the frontiers of what a social worker is, working from a place of vulnerability. It is through working at limits

that I have come to realize that in order to transgress oppositional categories, it is necessary to suspend a preoccupation for the care of the other (i.e., vulnerable, oppressed, powerless individuals) and focus on the care of the self.

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