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International Social Work  
and social context as a springboard  
to a mission statement

A DISCUSSION PAPER

Pam Colorado

## INTRODUCTION

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Issues, implications, contradictions, and possibilities abound in considerations of an international program in social welfare. Foremost among these elements of discussion are culture and politics; the quintessence of the term "nation".

In order to articulate a mission statement, this paper analyses the social context of international social work issues. Drawing on the political, scientific and ethical components of social science reality helps ground discussion on local and global levels.

### POLITICAL CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WELFARE.

#### 1. Social Welfare as Political Neutrality;

Withorn argues that social welfare has protected itself by riding the fence on its position in capitalism. The results of this retreat - from engaging directly in ideological debate/from working behind the scenes - are that social workers often present themselves as faceless bureaucrats without a social vision; workers are profoundly confused as to what they should do, and have an enormous sense of isolation and frustration from other workers and clients.

Withorn suggests that the 1980's are the time to;

"alter our perspectives and begin to see service delivery and political quest for basic social change as unalterably intertwined not irrevocably separate."

The author purports that open political debate that results from links with personal and political concerns will provide the base for a new strategy, which will demand services without compromising quality; and, which will see workers as people within a critical industry for social change efforts.

#### 2. Social Welfare as "Political Beast"

Good social work practice has faced fundamental challenges in the international arena. The locus of social work activities and the agent of publication and research has often been large, powerful agencies such as UNESCO and CIDA. Thus, social work has been subject to highly charged

international politics. Moreover, the international bureaucracies that house international social work activities have clutched the safety of western scientific, positivistic objectivity. The results of this retreat into unbridled positivism have often been disastrous for third world and minority peoples, and have done great damage to the reputation of our profession and its relationship to global humanity.

## THE SCIENTIFIC CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK

### 1. Atoms and Alienation

Bohm, theoretical physicist (University of London) points out the problems inherent in western, positivistic science:

"Fragmentation and wholeness are especially important to consider today. Fragmentation is widespread, not only throughout society, but also in individuals, in science, and in all human activities. It is creating a general confusion of the mind, leading to an endless series of problems that have no solution.

Science has become a very important source and sustainer of fragmentation in modern times, though its aim is unity. Physics has become the pattern or the paradigm aimed for by all sciences. . . . (I)n physics around the time of Newton, they developed a mechanistic approach by which the world was effectively regarded as made up of atoms - separate fragments, each with its own existence. Each one moving mechanically, interacting according to predetermined laws of force. The parts were the ultimate reality. They were fixed in their relationships. Any whole was only the convenient way of looking at the parts collectively because it had no independent reality. Now this fragmentation introduced a certain unity, for all the world was made of similar atoms with certain universal relations between them. So from the beginning it was a step towards unity.

The problems resulting from this paradigm include;

"Humans have attempted to live according to the notion that the fragments are separate, when in fact, they are not. Humans have lost an awareness of what they are doing. They just keep on dividing automatically. This process of division is the result mainly of a way of thinking. In order to divide things we must think of them as separate. This thought process was extended to cover man's notion of himself and the whole world; to say everything is divided up, including man. People are divided from each other. If you cross the border from one country to another there is very little difference in nature, but there is a tremendous difference in the way people think about it. This has pro-

duced big differences in the way people are living in the two countries, though they may come from the same background. Humans therefore obtain an apparent proof of the correctness of this fragmentary thought. They say, 'look! It is really all broken up.' They haven't noticed that they have broken it up.

Bohm goes on to argue that relativity and quantum mechanics both imply some individed wholeness of the universe. Thus physics is no longer supporting a fragmentary analytical point yet this fact is not commonly recognized.

"There is no very good non-mathematical way of thinking about these things that is easily available to most people, and thus they don't know what quantum mechanics means. Very few know what relativity means. The prevailing impression even among most physicists is that quantum mechanics and relativity are still supporting a mechanistic fragmentary point of view. There is no imaginative understanding. Instead of using Newton's equations to calculate, they are simply using these more complicated equations such as Schrodinger's equation or Einstein's equation. Then it looks as if no fundamental change has occurred, when in fact a very fundamental change has taken place.

What this means is that our present knowledge of nature does not support this fragmentary view, but the opposite view. Nature is an undivided whole. Therefore if we are thinking in fragmentary terms we are trying to break up things that should not be broken up. That is what fragmentation is.

## 2. Social Work and the Tyranny of Science.

Karger, Rosen, Fischer, Saleeby, and other social work researchers link the ascent of empiricism and quantitative research with the creation of hierarchical structures that bind social work to an undemocratic fabric.

"It is not that social work researchers consciously attempt through collusion to establish hegemony over knowledge in the profession; rather, through adhering to specific constructs and implicit ideologies, status and power hierarchies are enforced.

A striking feature of the hierarchical relationship between research and practice is the enforced division of labor. In the organizational structure of social work, the researcher-academics sit on top of the status pyramid. . .

Rein and White cite the existence of the division of labor between a group made up of social workers, teachers, planners, and administrators - the people who make things happen - as opposed to the group designated as people of knowledge.

The lower rungs of the division of labor are occupied by the practitioners who, paradoxically, constitute the bulk of the profession and the *raison d'etre* for the activities of the elite

researchers. Conflicts between researchers and practitioners are often reflected in the literature."

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The authors' concede that the rise in empiricism reflects the profession's need to establish greater legitimacy (in the ascendancy of the physical science); the desire for more effective service and the belief in the reality of empirical observation as the only legitimate method of examination. But the new empiricism also produced unanticipated outcomes, including;

a. Context Stripping.

"By this Mishler means that quantifying removes any social or subjective context from a phenomenon and objectifies it. Any interconnectedness with other events is necessarily minimized. This 'context stripping' that permeates so much of social work research is also political and ideological. Quantitative research's masking of the complex web of causes obfuscates social reality and hides the true nature of phenomena.

b. Control over Knowledge Production.

The role given to researchers is even more significant than it appears on the surface - it is the power to define the reality of the profession. Those who define the questions to be asked define the parameters of the answers, and it is the parameters of the questions and the ensuing answers that function as the lens by which people view reality.

c. Scientific Imperialism.

"All research is political and ideological: by the choice of the subject and design of methodology, the researcher creates a context for understanding social phenomena. Conversely, the refusal of the researcher to create a context for understanding social phenomenon is also political . . .

All research attempts or should attempt to clarify or interpret an event or problem. The meaning research gives to an event is shaded by the social and political climate in which the event is interpreted. As such, research functions as storytelling in modern societies, and the research is analagous to the stories that were used in nonindustrial or tribal societies to explain incomprehensible phenomena. The earlier stories were shrouded in religion and today's are scientific., but both make claims to legitimacy. The function of both stories is to reinforce the existing social paradigm in a society. Rein and White observe.

'On the one hand, the stories are classical in function in that they strive to bring meaning to human action in the way that stories always have in human societies. On the other hand, they are scientific in their constitution. Their

empirical foundation serves to make the stories corrigible and falsifiable.'

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The perpetuation of "stories" that are functional in reinforcing the existing social paradigm is political. It is the ability to perpetuate 'stories of reality' that is the prize of the ruling paradigm and the group that supports it." (Karger)

### 3. The Feminist Critique of Science.

Overfield provides a well developed critique of western science. She notes that the assumptions of science are the assumptions of our daily lives with the control of science concentrated in male hands. She argues:

" . . . that science is men's studies and cannot be modified and that a 'woman-centred-science' would be so radically different that it would no longer be invested with the meaning of 'science' as we understand it. It would not be 'science' and therefore, in a society where science is the frame of reference, would be without validity.

Despite the fact that it is possible to perceive science as a dogma and no less open to challenge and enquiry as, for example, the religious dogma which preceded it, science itself permits few heretics. Its system of beliefs must be accepted and rather than taking the challenge of non-believers, science denigrates them with labels such as spiritualist, mystic or telepath. While much of substance may come from sources outside science, such is the hold of the scientific dogma or ethic over our minds, we are capable of dismissing it, as superstition or mythology, of trivializing it, of spurning its non-rational nature.

Women as well as men have been impressed by the scientific ethic and have acquiesced to its values. Yet, argues Overfield, the scientific ethic is the male ethic; it is the ethic of dominance and control, it is the ethic which encodes a dichotomous and unequal division of the objects and events of the world into man/woman, norm/deviant, dominant/subordinate, rational/emotional. To enter science is to accept this scientific ethic, to accept these unequal dichotomies, and for the reason Overfield urges women to eliminate, not modify, the basic constructs of science."

### 4. Indigenous Reactions to the Monoscientific Paradigm.

The untoward consequences of applying empiricism transculturally are aptly summarized by Paulo Freire;

"Research is a cultural action, if it has a humanist character, it is eminently dialogical and dialectical. In culture based research, MEN DO NOT ACT ON OTHER MEN AS OBJECTS. Freire concluded that research should not be 'our research on you, but rather a research project in which, together, in dialogue, we will come to

know each other better and the reality in which we find ourselves so that we can more effectively transform that reality."

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Social work education is also perceived as a powerfully alienating experience for Native people. Deloria notes;

"One of the most painful experiences for American Indian students is to come into conflict with the teachings of science which purport to explain phenomena already explained by tribal knowledge and tradition. The assumption of the western educational system is that the information dispensed by colleges is always correct, and the beliefs or teachings of the tribe are always wrong. Rarely is this the case. The teachings of the tribe are almost always more complete, but they are oriented toward a far greater understanding of reality than is scientific knowledge. And precise tribal knowledge almost always has a better predictability factor than does modern science, which generally operates in sophisticated tautologies that seek only to confirm preexisting identities."

#### ETHICS AND INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK.

United Nations University scholar, Boulding, reminds us that a program in international social welfare involves moral choices:

"A program for social change is not a neutral institution. Moral choices will be involved. The program could try to repair the failed Western model of development or any one of its variants, or it could try to enter into the emerging transnational sharing society reflected in concepts of the new international order.

In the realm of the sociosphere, that sum total of interacting social entities, structures, and cultures of the planet, there is a world public interest which stands beyond national interests. Trying to discern what that public interest might be is one of our major challenges. It will not be easy. We are all citizens of nation states, and nation states have conflicting interests with regard to the inter-nation order. One indicator of the maturity of the new international order will be when scientists, planners and community development workers have been able to develop a variant of the Hippocratic Oath which will declare that they will practice their respective crafts in such a way as to do no harm to any nation state, and to be of service to all. It will be difficult to apply such an oath in practice, but its formulation will be a great step forward for science, building logically on the values set forth in the UN Declaration of Human Rights."



## RESOURCES AND TOOLS FOR DEVELOPING AN INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM

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### 1. Conceptual Tools.

a. Acknowledge the limitations as well as the benefits of the western, positivistic science:

"People thought for hundreds of years that classical physics was the final view of the world - the truth, not just a way of looking. Atoms were not taken as convenient divisions, but as 'the way it is'. . . .

Of course, breaking and dividing things up should not be condemned. It is necessary to divide things up for practical purposes. For example, we divide up fields according to what can be grown; we divide up all sorts of things. But this ability to divide things up has been carried too far because it has led us to divide things which should not be divided. This is an essential point. We attempt to divide things which are one and united." (Bohm).

b. Learn about and from nonwestern traditions.

"It is the special task of learning centers in the West to break out of the shell of western technology, to begin the overdue learning process about nonwestern traditions, and to identify the features and resources of the emergent new order and the skills at its disposal, so a collegial process of social construction can begin." (Boulding).

c. Change begins with each of us;

"Global transformation is a major theme of Third World planning these days, and it is a major theme of the work of the U.N. University with which I am associated. It is a term, however, that makes first worlders very uneasy. Transformation implies the emergence of wholly new forms; with all the uncertainty and unpredictability of the new, the untried. What the first world wants is equilibrium, stability. Change is perceived as a re-equilibrating process. Yet new theories of change, such as Ilya Prigogine's, are theories of dissipative structures, theories that direct us to look at the points of maximum disorder in the old system, a new order. We in the first world have to be willing to be part of the raw materials for the new order, rather than imposing our old molds on the rest of the world. From the perspective of creation we are all, individuals and societies, prima materia for that which is to come." (Boulding).

### 2. Methods, recommended by U.N.U. and U.N.E.S.C.O.

- a. Participatory research
- b. Create a new international information order, correct our lopsided information system by drawing on research findings generated by the Third World.
- c. Social science models have been operating overly simplistic models. Conceptual frameworks and research on international

- problems should be transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary.
- d. ~~Joint research and collegiality must be promoted between North and South.~~
  - e. A powerful source of international learning is the Third World in North America - reserves, rural and ghetto areas. "No one can be ready to work with Third World colleagues abroad who has not first learned to work with Third World colleagues at home." (Boulding)
  - f. Practice micro-macro interface modelling of social processes. "Individual, household, community, nation, world, all have living membranes which rub against each other. We must look where the rub is." (Boulding)
  - g. Engage in mental play about possible futures. No one can work for a world they cannot picture.
  - h. Draw from U.N.E.S.C.O.'s new international order concept.

#### UNIQUE RESOURCES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY.

In addition to a faculty already involved and committed to international social work, three factors make the U of C a viable and exciting possibility for an international social work program:

1. Alberta has a strong mix of cultural, ethnic and religious groups who can provide a wealth of learning.
2. The Province of Alberta has had extensive experience in international relations through its work with American Indian Reserves. These Reserves retain their sovereign status through international law.
3. The University is implementing a Native Options program which could be an integral component of international education.

#### CONCLUSION

It is true that many problems loom in the creation of an international social work program. But support for such efforts comes from all quarters. The U.N.U. hopefully predicts that such efforts will unleash creative social imaginations in all its members - students, teachers, researchers, policy planners and activists - and develop the everyday skills needed to make the dream come true;

Native people echo these sentiments:

"Western science must reintegrate human emotions and institutions into its interpretation of phenomena; Eastern peoples must confront the physical world and the effects of technology. We shall understand as these traditionally opposing views seek a unity the world of historical experiences is far more mysterious and eventful than we had previously expected."

Former astronaut, Frank White, founder of the Nortic Research Institute, exquisitely expresses the power of international approaches to human healing and development:

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"If the next step in human social evolution is to build a planetary civilization, then what is most needed is the ability to see and deal with problems and opportunities on a planetary level. It is also the ability not only to observe but to truly communicate with the planet as a whole."

As a profession born of holism, we have endured the slings and arrows of hard science, left and right wing politicals and our own self-doubt. How ironic and poetic that we find ourselves in the position of being, finally, in the right place at the right time with a powerful vision of international social work.

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