

Toward a Context-Specific Definition of Social Justice for Social Work: In Search of Overlapping Consensus

Janice A. Gasker, DSW, LCSW
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania
gasker@kutztown.edu

Alice C. Fischer, A.B.
Bryn Mawr College
afischer@brynmawr.edu

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Abstract

While the quest for social justice binds social workers to a common cause, its equivocal vision undermines unity and provokes inefficient—and even contradictory—practice. This paper sheds light on the intersection of widely-accepted social work tenets and multidisciplinary perspectives on justice and social responsibility. In so doing, it provides a theory-driven method for social workers to incorporate client voices into context-specific definitions of social justice.

Keywords: social work values, social justice, Capabilities Perspective

1. Introduction

There is a compelling call in social work to strive toward social justice (McLaughlin, 2011; CSWE, 2008; NASW, 2008; Lundy & van Wormer, 2007; Marsh, 2005; IASSW, 2000). This call is directly driven by the profession's mission to forward "individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society" (NASW, 2008, p. 1). Such a clear, uniform focus appears to bode well for the profession to make a unique and remarkable impact on societal conditions as well as human functioning. However, meaningful practice efforts are driven by presumptions about

the meaning of social justice and its remedies. Such presumptions are often inconsistent among social workers, and that inconsistency has been a long-lamented barrier to progress toward a just society (Solas, 2008; Banerjee, 2005; Barry, 2008; Reisch, 2003; Caputo, 2002; Saleebey, 1990; Hodge, 2010). Social workers with differing ideas about the nature of social justice (and the role of the state in its achievement) may at best dilute their own efforts and at worst strive for change at cross purposes (Bonnycastle, 2011; Granruth, 2009; Reichert, 2001; Strier & Binyamin, 2010; Thyer, 2010). Indeed, there is potential to weaken the profession's attention to this core value (Nichols & Cooper, 2011; Chu, Tsui, & Yan, 2009; Reisch, 2002; Olson, 2007). In short, social work practice, policy and education all suffer in the "absence of conceptual or historical clarity or agreement" on the definition of social justice (Reisch, 2002, p. 349).

To respond, this paper takes one step toward achieving conceptual clarity by addressing a specific gap in the social justice discourse. It responds to the professional blur that exists in the face of theory: social workers have widely drawn on established justice theory but have seldom made focused attempts to explicitly tie elements of established theories to the mission, values and principles of the social work profession.

2. Method

This paper reviews multidisciplinary theories related to justice and social responsibility from an overarching constructivist paradigm. Relevant theories were identified as they emerged in a review of juried social work literature. The literature was located via a search of Social Work Abstracts (June 2012) with “social justice and social work” as key terms in abstracts from 2009-2011. Once sorted by relevance, articles were sorted by date published, with articles selected from 2009-2011. Additional peer reviewed social work literature was located in iterative fashion as sources were referenced in the selected articles. To identify theories of justice, content analysis was conducted within article abstracts to identify a kind of quota sample as described by Ruben and Babbie (2010) in which one attempts to identify representatives of all participant categories. This sampling technique revealed a number of theories of justice. A limitation of the study is that the purposive nature of the sampling method undermines its generalizability.

Once identified, theories of justice were reviewed in seminal forms in the context of a number of what were deemed to be the most authoritative statements of social work perspectives available. Specifically, the context of social work knowledge and values was gleaned from the content analysis for the term “social justice” within relevant portions of the following documents published by the profession’s most widely subscribed organization, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). NASW documents referenced include the *Code of Ethics* (2008), the *Social Work Dictionary* (2003), *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (2012), and *Social Work Speaks* (segments online) (2000). In addition, since there is a single body in the US that certifies social work accreditation in education, the Council on Social Work Education’s *Educational Policy and Standards* (CSWE’s EPAS) is considered here to be an authoritative source (CSWE, 2008). Initial analysis of justice theories was conducted in an iterative fashion using the techniques of grounded

theory (Corbin & Straus, 2008), revealing several relevant themes that were the subject of content analysis in the remaining documents. A codebook was developed as described by Silverman (2006) in which the themes could be tracked for their appearance in the documents. We reviewed many of the documents collaboratively, with some independent review and comparisons serving as checks of inter-rater reliability. Findings related to the meaning of theoretical concepts were triangulated via cross checks within seminal works using the indexes and reviewing selected passages for consistency with our interpretation. The search and find function of Word was used where electronic copies of documents were available.

This work has serious limitations. It is more than possible that influential theories of justice were inadvertently passed over. In addition, the volume and the nature of data analysis attempted here in light of space limitations demands a somewhat cursory review; identification of overlapping elements is preliminary.

Social justice must be understood in its socio-politico-cultural-spiritual context (McCormick, 2003). In an extensive review of the literature, Hodge (2010) points out that oppression itself is a force that changes as power shifts, and that over time, social workers have developed conflicting definitions of social justice that have occasionally blunted the voices of marginalized populations. This being the case, it makes sense that social work has not committed to a static definition of social justice. We would postulate that there might be a middle ground between absolute relativism and absolutism. It is the purpose of this article to examine relevant theory and carry forward the process of clarifying social justice for social workers. Awareness of a variety of perspectives on social justice will inform effective practice.

3. Findings

3.1 Theory Grounded in the Data

Several overlapping conceptual elements emerged from the analysis of justice theories in

the context of social work sources, suggesting a pattern based on a logical extension of Rawls' notion of the "ideal overlapping consensus" (Rawls, 1982). Overlapping consensus in Rawls' theory of justice refers to the potential for a "pluralism of ...incompatible yet reasonable, comprehensive doctrines" to come together through the identification of commonalities to create political justice (Rawls, 1993, p.11). The logical extension of this idea suggests that an overlapping consensus can be identified among elements of social work tenets and accepted definitions of concepts like social justice. An "overlapping element" was operationalized as a concept present in a theory of justice and supported in the definition of social justice in at least two of the authoritative social work sources while being contradicted by none.

The identified themes were human rights, relationship and redistribution. Two of these were ultimately confirmed to be overlapping elements while the third was ultimately eliminated: it was contradicted in a professional authoritative source. Surprisingly, human rights emerged as incongruous with the criteria established for overlapping elements in a social work definition of social justice. (See Table 1.)

4. Human Rights

Given its ubiquitous references in social work literature and justice theories, it might be suggested that the conceptual umbrella for this discussion is human rights. Social work has for some time considered the quest for human rights to be at the foundation of social justice (Reichert, 2001; Chu, Tsui, & Yan, 2009; VanSoest, 1994). Social justice has been linked with human rights in professional literature, in NASW policy statements, i.e. online segments of *Social Work Speaks* (2000), in the *Social Work Dictionary* (2003), the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (2012), and in the educational standards set forth by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008). For the social worker, it seems that the universal assurance of human rights may be the goal toward which all conceptions of justice strive.

According to a statement from *Social Work Speaks* (2000) available on the NASW website, human rights "encompasses social justice, but transcends civil and political customs, in consideration of the basic life-sustaining needs of all human beings, without distinction" (NASW, 2000). In peer reviewed literature, the notion of human rights has been pervasive, although its definition has varied to include resources that are needed to prevent shortening a person's

Table 1: Themes from Justice Theory in Social Work Sources*

Theme	Code of Ethics	Social Work Dictionary	Encyclopedia of Social Work	Social Work Speaks	CSWE's EPAS
Human Rights	N/A	S	N/A	C	S (limited)
Relationship	S	S	N/A	N/A	S
Redistribution	S (limited)	N/A	S (limited)	N/A	S

*Key: S=document supports the theme for social work practice; C=document contradicts the theme for social work practice; N/A=no mention or ambiguous support in the source document

life (Braybrooke, 1987), to provide access to goods that include resources to plan for the future and fulfill one's purpose and capabilities (Gewirth, 1978), and to create the state of "being human" (Beverly & McSweeney, 1987). Most definitions build in some way on the relatively comprehensive, widely accepted *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 2011), that posits that all individuals should be entitled to dignity in the form of the basic legal, social and economic rights conceptualized as equality, liberty, security and freedom. According to the declaration, the common standard for all humans is access to these rights without discrimination based on "race, sex, language, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (United Nations, 2011, Article 2, para. 1). Of the *Declaration's* 30 articles, one of interest to social workers is Article 25, which calls for "necessary social services" as part of human rights.

NASW sends a mixed message related to human rights. On one hand, the official policy of the social work profession in the US endorses the human rights outlined in the United Nations document and places human rights at the very foundation of practice:

Human rights and social work are natural allies...NASW endorses the fundamental principles set forth in the human rights documents of the United Nations. These include, inter alia, those expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the right to a standard of living that is adequate for the health and well-being of all people and their families, without exception, and the essential resources to meet such a standard; the right to adequate food and nourishment; the right to adequate clothing; the right to adequate housing; the right to basic health care; the right to an education; the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability,

widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood beyond one's control; the right to necessary social services; and the right not to be subjected to dehumanizing punishment...the civil and political rights of all people, including indigenous populations... that the rights of people take precedence over social customs when those customs infringe on human rights...[and] that women's rights are human rights. (NASW, 2000, Policy Statement, para. 2-4).

Following this ringing endorsement, however, NASW becomes much less clear. The same policy statement provides the following caveat: "Although individual social workers, the International Federation of Social Workers, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (United Nations, 1993), and NASW's 1990 International Policy on Human Rights have all acknowledged the importance of a global human rights perspective, the fact is *the profession does not fully use human rights as a criterion with which to evaluate social work policies, practice, research, and program priorities*" (NASW, 2000, para. 9, italics added). The meaning of "a global human rights perspective" is unclear. A word search of the NASW Code of Ethics reveals that the phrase "human rights" does not exist in the document (2008).

The meaning and commitment to human rights is perhaps less ambiguous but certainly less ambitious in social work educational policy. While the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) provides latitude for educational programs to establish their own identities, it does provide identification of minimal elements of human rights and a requirement that all social work graduates recognize that: "[e]ach person, regardless of position in society, has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education" and that "[s]ocial workers recognize the global interconnections of oppression and

are knowledgeable about theories of justice and strategies to promote human and civil rights” (CSWE, 2008, p. 5).

In conclusion, it appears that human rights cannot be identified as part of a concrete conceptual foundation on which social work can build knowledge of social justice. It seems the most that can be said is that the profession is moving toward a making a commitment to some set of human rights, an articulation that would likely include such concepts as freedom, safety, an adequate standard of living, health care and education. Professional will appears to be strong toward such a commitment, as evidenced by the policy statement that notes “[where] there is a serious questioning of the responsibility of society to ensure that peoples’ civil, political, cultural, social, and economic needs are met, social workers should be absolutely clear about where they stand” (NASW, 2000, Policy Statement, para. 2-4). Yet the situation is such that the same policy statement reveals a lack of progress: “NASW supports the *adoption* of human rights as a foundation principle upon which all of social work theory and applied knowledge rests...[italics added]” (para. 5). The most current available version of the *Social Work Encyclopedia* entry on human rights (Wronka, 2012) echoes this exact phrase related to the future adoption of human rights as a foundation principle in social work. It is not surprising that a social worker might wonder “How can we reconcile traditional ideas of social justice with the emerging interest in human rights?” (Reisch, 2003, p. 348). The analysis below reveals that the answer to this question lies in a comprehensive understanding of theories of justice along with a commitment to the value of self-determination.

5. Theories of Justice

5.1 Overlapping Elements

Two basic tenets emerge from consideration of both justice theories and social work practice: relationship and redistribution. The intersection of relationship and redistribution in contemporary theories of justice within the context

of social work authoritative sources are presented together from utilitarian, conservative and liberal egalitarian perspectives.

6. Relationship and Redistribution

Many theories of justice, including those considered here, hold that justice occurs in relationship and is the calculation of who owes whom what and how much. Whether the calculation of that debt is based on “need, merit, contribution, talent, or some mixture thereof,” differs, and that debt can only be reconciled once individuals determine who they are to each other, or what “right relationship” might look like (McCormick, 2003, p.8; Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

What might be called meta-theories of justice include considerations of relationships and debt in some form. These fundamental considerations have led to many theories: they are often characterized as falling into one of three broad categories.

7. Perspectives on Justice

Three major perspectives, or what Rawls (1993) would call comprehensive doctrines, of justice are considered below. Each of these doctrines examine the meaning and significance of justice, as well as how just behaviors are identified, created and carried out. As suggested above, it might be said that a central question among these perspectives is that of a society’s perception of the relationships between its members. In other words, these perspectives consider what each member of a society is perceived to owe the other; individuals whose debts are cancelled out may be considered to be in “right” (or just) relationships (McCormick, 2003; Poe, 2007). Primarily, then, right relationships might be thought of as concerned to a great degree with resources and their distribution within the society.

8. Utilitarian perspectives

According to utilitarian perspectives of justice, justice consists of action that produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people,

where “one person’s happiness...is counted for exactly as much as another’s” (Mills, 1956, cited in McCormick, 2008, p. 14). The operant term above is *action*. Mills, an influential utilitarian theorist, suggested that the ideal of common interests is not an automatic, peaceful development in society. Instead, a “harmony of interests” had to be created through purposeful reform (Mills, 1956). Neo-Marxist thought builds on this utilitarian theory of holistic social equality through the articulation of the idea that selfish and aggressive competition causes social and economic injustice (Wright, 1978). The emphasis in utilitarian justice lies on social equity, not individual equality. In other words, the focus is on recognizing that the playing field is not level and expecting the privileged to work to smooth it. Regarding relationships among people and the distribution of their resources, the utilitarian perspective assumes an ideal encompassing unconditional, unmitigated responsibility of Marx’s “haves” toward equity in outcome for the “have nots.”

Likewise, action and unconditional advocacy seem to come together in the *Dictionary of Social Work* definition of social justice: “...an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same rights, protections, opportunities, obligations and social benefits...[it] entails advocacy to confront discrimination, oppression, and institutional inequities” (Barker, 2003, p. 405). However, the *Dictionary* goes on to suggest that to achieve this inclusive equity, the social worker is likely to view individual equality and freedoms to be to a degree sacrificed in the unbounded redistribution of resources for the greater good (Barker, 2003). The *Code of Ethics* is similarly cautious in its support of radical equity at the expense of equality: while the ethical principle “Social workers challenge social injustice” states unambiguously that social workers “pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people,” it also suggests that the social worker’s social change efforts should be much

milder than radical redistribution, providing such examples as: “[to] seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity...[and] ensure access to needed information, services and resources” (NASW, 1996, p. 5). To this point, philosopher Bernard Williams observed utilitarianism’s failure to realize personal integrity, where an individual’s life and actions are his own. A similar observation has been noted by Nussbaum, (2011) who goes on to suggest that individual agency--one might call it empowerment--is a central tenet of social work (Nussbaum, 2011).

It is clear that relationship and responsibility figure significantly in social work depictions of social justice. However, the radical redistribution of resources that is commonly considered to be consistent with utilitarian theories of justice appears to be contradicted in the *Code of Ethics* and will not be considered to be a common element of a social work definition. Consequently, social relationship based on the unconditional responsibility of some members of society toward others is incongruous with social work tenets as well; this type of relationship inhibits basic equality and empowerment.

9. Conservative perspectives

Equality, freedom and an inherent respect for individual empowerment are the central concerns of the conservative perspective on justice. It has been suggested, however, that some NASW publications have specifically identified conservative political thoughts to be in opposition to the obligation of social work to advance social justice (Thyer, 2010). This is likely due to conservative advocacy that centers on limiting federal services, like the development of a welfare state, because those who are taxed to distribute their earnings to others are not considered to be free. Thus, in the conservative view, income redistribution, especially as mandated by government, is not socially just. Conservatives also argue that federal welfare programs perpetuate social inequality by inadvertently perpetuating

dependence on government services—which are costly to the taxpayer. On the other hand, Thyer (2010) makes the case that conservative ideology is not necessarily in conflict with social work values, stating “conservative social workers believe that adhering to their principles results in a more socially just world via the creation of more socially just programs and policies” (p. 272). Conservative ideology does not avoid remedies for social ills, but rather reliance on the for-profit and voluntary sectors for those services. Since the radical, systematic redistribution eschewed by conservatives appears also to be contradicted in social work’s authoritative documents, the fundamental question for social workers to consider is whether the conservative ideology values relationship and social responsibility (i.e. redistribution) as these are expressed in the profession’s authoritative documents.

Of primary importance is the question of responsibility for redistribution. While a conservative argument that “equitable distribution” may violate social justice for the “forgotten men and women” whose goods are distributed, CSWE standards emphasize the need for “society” to redistribute:

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 (CSWE, 2008, p. 5, emphasis added)

Additionally, the profession’s mission to “help meet the basic human needs of all people”

(NASW, 2008) directs our attention away from those whose income and influence is most likely to be redistributed through social justice practice and toward those who may need help in acquiring basic human needs. However valuable the conservative argument may be, its emphasis on social relationships built primarily on freedom rather than responsibility seems to be at odds with the social work mission, values, and educational standards.

10. Liberal egalitarian perspectives

Based on these analyses we can conclude that neither utilitarian nor conservative perspectives on social justice are consistent with social work authoritative documents. Instead, social work has looked to liberal egalitarian models of justice. The *Encyclopedia* suggests that of the various theories of justice, the liberal egalitarian model, particularly as articulated by Rawls, has appealed to social work for its focus on redistribution as a moral obligation in the context of individual equality in basic rights and opportunities (Finn & Jacobson, 2012). In fact, Rawls is widely considered to be one of the most influential theorists in social work (Banerjee, 2005; Reisch, 2002; VanSoest, 1995). His liberal egalitarianism centers on the concept of the social contract in which fair terms of social cooperation are agreed to by free, equal citizens. For Rawls, the social contract can be developed only under “appropriate conditions... [where] free and equal persons must have equal bargaining advantages [and]...threats of force and coercion, deception and fraud cannot be present” (Rawls, 1982, p. 52). Put simply, a definition of “justice as fairness” is a social contract in which individual rights and protection of the marginalized are both prioritized. Fundamental questions like responsibility for environmental protection in a free society will occur within an “overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines” (Rawls, 1982, p. 182). In modern democracy, pluralism, in terms of what free and equal citizens regard to be fair terms of social cooperation, naturally

develops. For Rawls, these comprehensive doctrines tend to be reasonable and consequently an overlapping consensus may be identified in which a social contract is developed where political conceptions are shared. In a revision of his seminal work, Rawls (1993) focused on the political, stating that a theory of justice is unworkable without “the structure and content of a political conception [i.e. government] that can gain the support of an overlapping consensus” (p. 11).

Social work has embraced the Rawlsian conception of justice, probably because of his basic principle of redistribution known as the Difference Principle (Banerjee, 2005). The difference principle is built on the ideal that government provides a scheme of equal basic liberties, but any social and economic inequalities are to be “to the greatest benefit to the least advantaged” (p. 45). However, the fit between the theory and social work values seems less ideal under scrutiny. Rawls has been seen to be at odds with social work values in that those who are most in need seem to be entirely outside his concern. Persons who do not contribute, who have not been able to participate in the provision or development of commodities (i.e. adults who are unemployed), have no claim on community resources. Thus, his is a theory of distribution, not of allocation (Banerjee, 2005). Given social work’s mandate of concern for all people, what is surprising is the lack of critique of Rawls as his work continues to be used, at times almost exclusively, to support social work practice and policy analysis (Banerjee, 2005; Reisch, 2002).

11. Capabilities perspective

One reason Rawls does not attend to those who do not contribute to the development of commodities is ironically that he is concerned with “fairness,” (Rawls, 1982). Sen (1992) has recognized that all theories of social justice are concerned with the equal distribution of something: to the conservative, liberty; to the utilitarian, utilities, or resources; to the egalitarian, welfare. According to Sen, each of these

approaches contains a fatal flaw due to the simple fact of human diversity: “It is precisely because of such diversity that the insistence on egalitarianism in one field requires the rejection of egalitarianism in another” (Sen, 1992, p. xi). Sen’s (1992) suggestion to amend theories on social justice is to account for individual capabilities as well as the impact of individual values on the achievement of those capabilities. Thus, Sen’s Capabilities Perspective highlights two significant factors: the importance of human diversity and empowerment, two concepts consistent with the social work core value related to the dignity and worth of individuals (NASW, 2008, p. 5).

Building on Sen’s seminal work, Nussbaum (2011) maintains that the Capabilities Perspective must be extended to basic needs for all people and beyond basic needs into a consideration of the nature of a life with dignity. As a theory of justice, the Capabilities Perspective is consistent with all-inclusive service to others: its egalitarian focus on justice as fairness is tempered by obligation with special consideration of dignity and worth. Human dignity and worth are central to determining quality of life, or more basically, the Capabilities Perspective’s recurring mantra “what each person is able to do and to be.”

The two primary capabilities in this approach are internal capabilities and combined capabilities. Internal capabilities are traits and abilities that are developed in relation to the social, economic, familial and political environment. Examples include: personality, intellectual and emotional capacities, health, learning, skills and perception. These capabilities constitute primary and secondary socialization in addition to innate characteristics and make up a person’s individuality. While these are important to an individual’s development, the real source of justice and human dignity comes from combined capabilities: internal capabilities plus the social, economic, familial and political environment. Through combined capabilities, individuals can use internal capabilities within specific contexts to develop to what they identify to be their fullest

potential. The concept of combined capabilities provides a measure of government responsibility. It is the responsibility of any just government, according to Nussbaum, to provide individuals access to these capabilities; that is, governments' responsibilities go beyond removing barriers to opportunity and instead actively guarantee access to opportunity (Nussbaum, 2011).

A society may encourage the development of internal capabilities but at the same time limit combined capabilities--an example of this would be a society that prepares people to be good voters, but denies them legal rights to participate in politics. Similarly, "social, political, familial, and economic conditions may prevent people from choosing to function in accordance with developed internal capabilities" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 30). While social, political and economic conditions may temper the choices individuals make about using their capabilities, the very fact they have agency is important.

The focus is on choice or freedom, holding that the crucial good societies should be promoting for their people is a set of opportunities, or substantial freedoms, which people then may or may not exercise; the choice is theirs. The society thus commits itself to respect for people's power of self-definition and ascribes an urgent task to government and public policy to improve the quality of life for all people as defined by their capabilities. As a result, the Capabilities Perspective's relativism stresses choice for the individual, a primary focus of the social work profession that Rawls overlooks. Self-definition and choice in the context of relationship requires equality in communication: one has to express one's choices in an atmosphere conducive to dialogue.

The importance of human relationship is identified in the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) as a core professional value. Moreover, relationship is conceptualized as a vehicle for change, with practitioners engaging others as "partners in the helping process," (NASW, p. 6). Thus, partnership as a fundamental characteristic of relationship;

partnership implies relationship among equals. *The Social Work Dictionary* (2003) also presents the theme of relationship as indispensable along with mutuality as an inseparable component. The definition of relationship states that relationship is in part a "mutual emotional exchange" and that it is necessary to "create the working and helping relationship" (Barker, 2003, p. 365). Mutuality forms a central role in the social work conception of "right relationship."

For both Sen and Nussbaum, equal access to capabilities is paramount to social justice, and the recognition of agency and individualism carries over into welfare policy. The Capabilities Perspective sees poverty as deprivation of capabilities and holds government accountable in distributing resources:

People have differing needs for resources if they are to attain a similar level of functioning, and they also have different abilities to convert resources into functionings. Some of the pertinent differences are physical: a child needs more protein than an adult for healthy physical functioning, and a pregnant or lactating woman needs more nutrients than a nonpregnant woman. A sensible public policy would not give equal nutrition-related resources to all, but would (for example) spend more on the protein needs of children, since the sensible policy goal is not just spreading some money around but giving people the ability to function (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 57).

As suggested in the quote above, individual needs are a major priority; they do not determine access to resources--everyone should have access. This universal access departs from Rawls: where he rejects those that do not contribute to society (e.g. adults who are unemployed) capability perspectivists give voice to them and recognize

their equal qualification for and different use of resources--without a value judgment (Nussbaum, 2011).

Content analysis of authoritative documents in social work reveals congruence with this theory. The *Encyclopedia of Social Work* points out that Morris (2002) and others have recognized the empowerment focus inherent in the Capabilities Perspective. The *Code's* conceptualization of relationship as partnership and mutuality is a clear connection (NASW, 2008). Likewise, the *Dictionary's* call to advocacy toward inclusive equity tempered by concern toward individual equality and freedoms speaks to the need to recognize diversity when considering response to need (Barker, 2003). Taking together social work tenets with the principles of the capabilities perspective reveals particular qualities of relationship and redistribution to be overlapping elements in a social work-specific definition of social justice.

These two overlapping elements suggest that for social work, social justice requires relationships based upon unconditional responsibility tempered by protection of each person's capabilities. Thus, redistribution is conditional but not judgmental. Each person, regardless of the perceived value of his or her contributions to society, is to receive the resources needed to meet what he or she believes to be their fullest potential. All are responsible to contribute resources, but not to the extent that their own capabilities are blunted. One's responsibility to others is universal, yet finite. It ends, not where the other person's social contribution ends, but where one's own needs are not met.

The identification of these two essential elements holds a number of benefits for the profession. Relationship and redistribution as they are conceptualized here can initiate a generic base for the beginnings of a shared understanding of social justice that can apply in various practice settings. First, social work tenets and the Capabilities Perspective share the conviction that redistribution of resources is necessary, albeit

tempered by concern for the empowerment of both the giver and the receiver of the resources. In addition, it is clear that relationship is central to a social work understanding of social justice. Interaction, in the context of relationship, may be used to conceptualize justice (Dessel, 2011). Relationship that is mutual suggests the importance of pluralism in identifying local meanings of justice as it is conceptualized by vulnerable populations as well as other groups. The mindset behind the acceptance of this potential has been called "epistemic pluralism" (Hodge, 2010, p. 202). As Olson (2007) suggests, a just world is created when the voices of many groups share dialogue, claims to truth are open to interpretation, and the dialogue between members of communities can transform communities and make the "just world become that much more visible" (p. 56).

12. Discussion: Moving Forward

There is little doubt that a static definition of social justice will not serve to meet its own ends. Further, this work has demonstrated that current authoritative documents in the profession of social work do not fully support a single utilitarian, conservative or egalitarian/Rawlsian perspective of justice. It is important to emphasize that the individuality and environment-specific components of the Capabilities Perspective meet the necessity for flexibility in social work practice. However, an understanding of all of these conceptualizations of justice is necessary for context-specific practice to occur.

This understanding may drive practice, research and policy development that focuses on seeking out the views of representatives of all groups as a method for understanding social justice in a given setting (Solinger, Fox & Irani, 2008). As Strier and Binyamin (2010) have suggested, knowledge about oppression should come from dialogue between workers, clients and others, with "the epistemology of anti-oppressive knowledge grounded on the recognition of practice and experience as main sources of knowledge

development” (p. 1971). As voices are only heard through engagement, the concept of mutual relationship reminds practitioners that a static definition of social justice superimposed on a practice setting is as intrusive as imposing any other value.

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