

Six Aspects of Justice as a Grounding for Analysis and Practice in Social Work

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Abstract

This manuscript explores how the question of social justice is approached by some major social work theorists in the anti-oppressive practice school. The article then draws on ideas from moral and political philosophy and from critical social theory with a view to broadening and deepening social work's theorization of social justice.

The article points to six ideas that can enhance our thinking about social justice in social work theory: i) justice as equality based on the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings, and the rights that adhere to them; ii) justice as (relative) equality through economic redistribution; iii) justice as the flourishing of all species in a healthy and sustainable (natural and built) environment; iv) justice as moral integrity; v) justice as fairness; and vi) justice as restoration and healing.

A broad and nuanced understanding of “social justice” in social work is more necessary than ever, as we carry out our work in the challenging contemporary circumstances of social injustice, inequality, environmental degradation, and the politics of austerity.

Keywords: Social work theory, justice, social justice, human rights, redistribution, environment, restorative justice

Introduction

Social work as an academic discipline and a practicing profession sees the advancement of “social justice” as one its core purposes. This article

examines the framing of social justice by prominent social work theorists situated in the “anti-oppressive practice” (AOP) school and calls for a broader and more positive theoretical understanding of justice in order to better support theory, research and practice. As a contribution to the theoretical development of such an enhanced framework for justice that can guide social work practice, I will draw upon six ideas from political and moral philosophy and from social theory. In the discussion that follows, I am treating “social justice” as the collective expression in various aspects of society (economics, politics, social relations, etc.) of the underlying moral-philosophical principle of “justice” that can be understood in at least six different ways as described below.

An influential book in the AOP school of social work theory is Mullaly and West's (2018) title *Challenging Oppression and Confronting Privilege: A Critical Approach to Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Privilege Theory and Practice*.¹ As is readily apparent in the title, the authors take an oppositional stance to extant patterns of oppression and privilege that social workers must confront and challenge. Mullaly and West (2018, p. 13) also posit *distributive justice* as “[o]ne of the oldest and most ubiquitous concepts of social justice.” They refer to the distribution and redistribution of material assets such as income, wealth, and property, and non-material social goods such as rights, opportunities, and power (p. 14).

Mullaly and West (2018, p. 14) draw on the work of political theorist Iris Marion Young (1990) to argue that “[e]quating the scope of

social justice with distribution only is misleading in two ways.” It does not account for “the social structures, processes, and practices that caused the maldistribution in the first place.” Nor does it address unjust distribution of “non-material goods and resources as rights and opportunities.” In their consideration of social justice, Mullaly and West (2018) usefully focus on the economic structures that generate maldistribution in the first place, as well as on patterns of oppression based on various aspects of personal and collective identity (such as gender, racialization, indigeneity, ethno-cultural and religious identity, dis/ability, and sexual identity). Mullaly and West (2018) draw on Young’s (1990) work to outline “five categories or forms of oppression ... that encompass both distributive issues of injustice and social structures” (pp. 24–29)—specifically, economic exploitation, social marginalization, political powerlessness (especially in the workplace), cultural imperialism of the dominant group, and physical and social violence against subordinated groups.

Other social work theorists in the AOP school do not emphasize questions of (re) distributive justice to the same extent as Mullaly and West do. In the third edition of her edited book entitled *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice: Social Justice Social Work*, for instance, Donna Baines (2017a) cites “ten common themes or core insights that stand the test of frontline [social work] practice in terms of promoting social justice” (pp. 5–8). The first such theme is “macro- and micro-level social relations that generate oppression,” with capitalism and related economic policies of government and international bodies being listed as oppressive macro-level forces. It seems curious that in Baines’s formulation, capitalist economic structure and class relations are framed in terms of “oppression” rather than *exploitation*—the latter being the term that is commonly used in Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions. Like Mullaly and West, Baines (2017a) emphasizes multiple forms of oppression—“including gender, class, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, and race” (pp. 5–6)—but does not differentiate economic class as a distinct category

based on one’s location in the materialist relations of production in advanced globalized capitalism. Such a Marxian understanding of economic class sets it apart from other aspects of oppression based on social identity, but Baines appears to conflate the economic with non-economic aspects of individual and collective social location.

Baines goes on to offer useful theoretical insights as part of her AOP framework, emphasizing the necessity of balancing “client assistance” with “efforts to transform society,” the importance of participatory and self-reflexive approaches to practice, and aligning social work with progressive social movements. However, it is notable that Baines’ (2017a) list of “core themes” for “promoting social justice at the level of everyday frontline social work” contains no explicit reference to economic or redistributive justice (pp. 5–8).²

Baines’ (2017a) final core theme identified for AOP is that “a blended, heterodox social-justice perspective provides the best potential for politicized, transformative social work practice” (p. 8). These motifs of blending and challenging orthodox assumptions provide us with a good jumping off point for the discussion below. This article proposes that social work academics and practitioners should follow the advice of David Miller (2017) to expand our understanding of justice in creative and flexible ways. Such an exercise would help us in social work to expand our insights and sharpen our critiques in social work theory. Miller points to the need to understand both the lacunae and unexpected insights of various thinkers on justice, and to pay attention to these thinkers’ contributions to understanding injustice in various societies across time and geography.

The goal of this paper is to contribute to such an enhancement of social work’s understanding of the concept of justice, as one step towards a more sophisticated and coherent articulation of justice in social work theory and practice. It is my intention to take a positive and constructive approach in this endeavor. Several AOP theorists such as Mullaly and West (2018) and Baines (2017a & 2017b) tend to be very focused on what the discipline and profession

opposes—notably social oppression, economic inequality, patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, and the “other-ing” of various marginalized groups. Of course, all of these negative forms of domination and exclusion are very real and are played out in various ways and in diverse social contexts. They certainly present impediments to the achievement of social justice. But beyond taking an oppositional stance, AOP theorists such as Mullaly and West and Baines pay little attention to what social work should stand *for*—that is, how “social justice” (as one of the key theoretical and normative beacons in social work) can be defined and understood as a positive ideal with specific components and goals.

In social work theory, it is essential to both understand the negative dimensions and pernicious mechanisms of social injustice *and* to advance a positive framework for social justice that can guide the professional and political actions of social workers and inspire them to make the sacrifices and take the risks necessary to advance social justice. Such an approach is outlined by Hutchinson (2015). On the negative side, she maps social work theories focused on injustice—including *inequality* based on gender, class, race, and other factors, the *intersectionality* of these various forms of social oppression, and *privilege* that is exercised by the advantaged to maintain unequal and oppressive social conditions. But Hutchinson (2015) also frames social justice as a positive goal for which we should strive—citing Rawls’ contractarian theory of distributive justice; theories of recognition and just relations among groups; perspectives emphasising human capabilities, human rights, multiculturalism, and the empowerment of marginalised individuals and groups; and theories focused on the struggle for global social justice.

In this vein of accentuating the positive (while recognizing the need for trenchant criticisms of injustice), this paper will draw on the broad fields of political and moral philosophy and social theory. The intention here is to broaden and deepen social work’s thinking on social justice. We must fully take into account injustice, oppression, and exploitation, but we also need positive formulations of justice

in social work in order to guide our theorization, research, teaching, and practice.

Six specific aspects of justice as they pertain to social work are identified in what follows. They are social equality, economic equality, environmental sustainability, moral integrity, fairness, and restorative healing.

Justice as Equality Based on the Inherent Worth and Dignity of All Human Beings, and the Rights That Adhere to Them

The International Federation of Social Workers refers to “the inherent worth and dignity of human beings” as a foundational principle in defining social work.³ This statement is very much aligned with philosopher Immanuel Kant’s conception of the moral worth and autonomy of human beings as capable, rational moral agents who can discern universal moral laws. Specifically, Kant’s concept of the categorical imperative demands that all human beings treat one another as ends in themselves, and never as means to some other end or purpose (Johnson & Cureton, 2018). Additionally, Kant points to human autonomy as a marker of human dignity and worth that is based on individual freedom and rationality, and that knits us together through a shared moral code (*ibid*). These Kantian formulae of humanity and autonomy apply to all human persons and form the basis of equality among us all as practical reasoners seeking to discern and act in accordance with moral laws.

From Kant’s idea of the inherent worth, dignity, and rational abilities of all human beings who are equal to one another, it is a short leap to seeing this equality as the basis of universal *human rights*. An early and influential formulation of human rights as they relate to social welfare was by T.H. Marshall (1964). He conceived three “generations” of rights that were built up over time and that accrue to all members of a democratic society equally. Marshall referred to the eighteenth century as the time when *civil* rights (such as freedom of speech and right to due process under the law) were advanced in Britain and other western countries. He

pointed to the nineteenth century as the time when *political* rights (such as the universal right to vote and hold political office) were advanced, at least for white men of most classes. Finally, he saw the twentieth century as the time when *social* rights (such as social insurance, health care, and other forms of social support through the state) were initiated. Our conception of rights has expanded beyond Marshall's original formulation of these three categories. Other generations of (especially collective) rights include the right to a clean and healthy environment; the rights of Indigenous peoples to use their languages, cultural teachings, and land; and the rights of cultural and linguistic minorities to maintain and evolve their identities in democratic societies (Philip & Reisch, 2015; Sanders, 1991).

Jim Ife (2012) focuses on the centrality of human rights in the practice of social work. But Ife and Tascón (2016) also caution that “the idea of human rights remains a ‘two-edged sword’ for critical social work practice” (p. 27). They contend that “human rights can be used to maintain conservative perspectives on critical social work reinforcing the neoliberal status quo” (p. 27). They also argue that in critical social work practice “a Western-centric development perspective” on human rights must be avoided by “challeng[ing] top-down approaches to human rights implementation” (p. 27).

On the international level, social work takes a very cosmopolitan approach in its Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development. Truell and Jones (n.d.) outline the need for the three international social work organizations,⁴ working in concert with both global institutions and local communities, to strive for social and economic equality, the inherent dignity of all peoples, a healthy and sustainable environment, and stronger human relationships. These goals exemplify a cosmopolitan conception that all people, regardless of their nationality, politics, or other aspects of identity, being seen as part of a unitary global community (IASSW, ICSW, and IFSW, 2014; Kleingeld & Brown, 2014).

This broad conception of human dignity that is rooted in equality and community on a global level is a noble aspiration. But it is a formal and empty sentiment unless, on a practical and everyday level, we relate to one another in ways that recognize and respect both human individuality and collective identities. In making such a connection between theory and practice, social work can usefully draw upon the work of the German social theorist Axel Honneth (2004) in incorporating *recognition* as a key aspect of our understanding of justice. Honneth (2004) presents “a theory of justice starting with the social and moral fact that social recognition is necessary” (p. 352) and conversely that “the experience of social injustice is always measured in terms of the withholding of some recognition held to be legitimate” (p. 352). Misrecognition occurs when individuals or groups are understood by those around them in negative and devaluing ways, and this misrecognition is embedded in social norms and values (Iser 2019). Such misrecognition results in those experiencing it having difficulty in placing positive value on themselves and on their life goals and activities (Iser, 2019).

Honneth (2004) points to “three spheres of recognition”—namely *love* in one's personal and intimate relationships, *equality of rights* in the legal sphere, and just recognition of one's *achievements* as a contributor to the broader collective good (p. 352). Honneth conceives lack of recognition as linked to both “economic disadvantage and cultural deprivation” (ibid), thereby not divorcing the question of (re)distributive justice from the cultural and social spheres of human interaction.

Amy Rossiter (2014) highlights the potential for Honneth's perspective to help social work translate the broad ideal of justice into reality, and to use the concept of human dignity based on recognition to practical ends in social work theory and practice. Rossiter (2014) argues that

Honneth is particularly useful for social work because he rejects the liberal conception of human subjects as independent and self-determining, arguing that the

inevitable dependence on others for identity formation renders people vulnerable to recognition. This vulnerability of identity substantiates Honneth's claim that justice must be concerned with the social conditions of identity formation. (p. 93)

Rossiter (2014) also makes the point that recognition is shaped by "the power dynamics of identity and difference in relation to recognition demands" (p. 93). She advocates that "the perpetuation of domination and oppression through the power relations of identity formation" (p. 93) must be a primary concern for the practice of social work.

There are indeed multiple forms of misrecognition or non-recognition related to inequality, oppression, and domination. Major examples include patriarchal assumptions about and treatment of women; heterosexist oppression of queer and non-binary people; subjugation of racialized populations; discrimination against ethno-cultural, religious, and linguistic communities; and stigmatization and exclusion of persons with disabilities. These aspects of lack of recognition or misrecognition typically have economic as well as social implications, and economic inequality is the focus of the next section of this article. But Honneth's argument that recognition is fundamental to justice is valid in and of itself, regardless of if and how lack of recognition or misrecognition may (or in some cases may not) be related to economic inequality.

Justice as (Relative) Equality Through Economic Redistribution

In the previous section it was argued that social equality is a function of the inherent worth and dignity of human beings, who thereby possess a set of inalienable human rights, and who should be recognized accordingly. Equality formulated in this way can be seen as a universal and uniform concept—every human being everywhere has the same "amount" and "type" of dignity and worth. Based on this universal and uniform equality, all of us should have equivalent opportunities to exercise

our capabilities in ways that we choose and to have equal access to recognition from others in loving personal relationships, in our political rights, and in rewards for our achievements. To the extent that these normative standards are not met or are violated, we must remedy the negative treatment of persons and groups who are denied their dignity and worth and whose rights are ignored or suppressed. We may not always achieve "perfection" with these remedies—but we must never cease striving for the goal of perfect equality based on human worth, dignity, and recognition.

We can examine the more specific question of *economic* equality as a relative, rather than as a universal and uniform, goal. Economic equality is a function of the mechanisms of distributive and redistributive justice. It is measured as possession of, or access to, physical resources (such as land and productive assets), monetary wealth, cash income, public goods, and realizable opportunities for economic and social advancement. When it comes to economic equality, most schools of political and philosophical thought do *not* hold the view that everyone must have exactly the same amount and kind of economic wealth and resources at their disposal. Even Karl Marx came up with the maxim of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need," implying that the mechanisms of redistributive justice should appropriate from and bestow to individuals in differing amounts depending upon each person's particular circumstances.

In this way an *approximate* level of economic equality could be achieved in which everyone has enough for a decent material standard of living, but no one can accumulate or hoard wealth to the extent that others lack sufficient economic resources. Unlike aspects of social equality related to identity, recognition and rights—elements that one either has or does not have in a more or less *absolute* sense—economic equality is a question of *relative* equivalencies that is typically shaped by differing aspirations and wants across individuals and groups. John may not be as wealthy as Mary, but if John has his basic economic needs met and

has reasonable economic opportunities, he may not feel unjustly treated compared to Mary.

It is necessary in a just society that there are not gross discrepancies in income and wealth, for they will likely result in the suffering of the worst off and will compromise our attainment of distributive justice. But perfect economic equality is not necessary for justice, nor is it likely achievable in complex and diverse democratic societies. In fact, justice requires that each of us has as much *choice* as possible in regard to how we earn and spend our economic resources, consistent with the ideal of human freedom and the imperative of economic redistribution to ensure basic economic security for all. Justice also demands (as will be discussed in the next section) patterns of distribution and consumption that respect ecological limits in the interests of intergenerational justice (i.e., leaving sufficient resources and a healthy and habitable planet for our children and grandchildren).

John Rawls (1971) launched the contemporary debate about justice in distribution. Rawls' theory was built around two principles (p. 266) that have direct relevance to questions of economic distribution and redistribution. His *principle of liberty* states that "[e]ach person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all" (p. 266). Rawls' *difference principle* states that social and economic inequalities are inevitable and tolerable, but that they must be arranged so that the least well off is as well off as possible, resources are preserved for future generations, and there is equality of opportunity in attaining social rewards.

Rawls' "maximin principle" demands that social systems must ensure that those who are the least well off are as well off as possible, consistent with the preservation of liberty and the allowance for individual differences in aspirations, efforts, and talents. Rawls' formulation of justice has obvious relevance to social welfare policy and programs designed to achieve greater income security through economic redistribution. Rawls' formulation of social justice thus incorporates a fair and relatively

equal primary distribution of economic assets and opportunities, a redistribution of wealth and income to end insufficiencies and gross inequalities, and of a comprehensive and universal set of public goods (such as education, decent and affordable housing, health care, social services, and public transportation) to ensure a decent quality of life for all.

One particular aspect of redistributive economic justice that has been gaining a great deal of international attention in recent years is *basic income*, "a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement."⁵ As a radical approach to ensuring universal economic security through a guaranteed and adequate cash income for all in a particular political community (a city, a state, or a country), basic income would be a significant step forward in the struggle for economic equality and justice (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). To date, social work researchers and organizations have generally not been at the forefront of advocating for basic income, with a few exceptions such as the Canadian Association of Social Workers (Drover, Moscovitch, & Mulvale, 2014; Kennelly, 2017).

Basic income, in combination with renewed and reinvigorated public services, would bring us much closer to a just Rawlsian distribution of social goods. These measures could also reverse the austerity agenda that has profoundly impacted welfare states over the last four decades (Edmiston et al., 2017), and reinvigorate political agency and economic democracy.

Justice as the Flourishing of All Species in a Healthy and Sustainable (Natural and Built) Environment

In recent years social work as an academic discipline (although less so as a field of professional practice) has been paying considerable attention to questions of ecology (Besthorn, 2013; Coates, 2003; Zapf, 2009). This literature tackles the question of how social work theory, research and practice needs to be reframed in ways that link environmental sustainability with social justice (Mulvale, 2017). One of the intellectual leaders

of this shift in thinking has been Lena Dominelli (2012). Her model of green social work points to the need for our discipline and profession to work to achieve environmental sustainability as part of a broader imperative for economic restructuring and political change based on social justice, human equality, and environmental rights.

Social work academics and practitioners have a deep responsibility to make the links between environmental sustainability, economic redistribution, and fostering good ecological citizenship in our communities and internationally. Social work's potential contributions in this regard include taking account of both the social *and* physical environments in social casework; using our expertise in community development and community organization to assist local groups to challenge environmental degradation and destruction; and promoting universal basic income linked to a steady state, no-growth (and likely post-capitalist) economy as essential public policy goals. Social work's theorization of justice must be fundamentally linked to an understanding of ecology and environmental crises such as climate change, loss of natural habitats and species, and human overpopulation and overconsumption. Such a "green consciousness" will better equip social workers to play an advocacy role in reversing environmental degradation, and to assist those whom we serve in dealing with the material losses, social dislocations, and emotional trauma of the Anthropocene.

Justice as Moral Integrity

This sense of justice has to do with the moral standards that pertain to social workers, usually expressed as ethics and standards to which they must adhere as practicing professionals. These standards apply to the various settings in which social workers practice—direct practice with individuals, families, groups and communities, and indirect practice as carried out by policy analysts, administrators, educators, and researchers. In all of these instances, social workers occupy positions of relative power and privilege in relation to the

constituencies which they serve. With this power and privilege comes the responsibility to adhere strongly to ethical standards and moral codes, which provide one line of defense against abuse of power by social workers and mistreatment or domination of clients who almost invariably have less status and privilege.

The ethical concerns of social workers must extend beyond their individual conduct as practitioners. They must also address the question of how well (or not) moral standards (such as those pertaining to compassionate care, social inclusion, and a decent material standard of living) are inscribed in laws and public policies, especially in matters that directly relate to social work practice, such as child welfare, family relations, health care, and protection of vulnerable persons. More broadly, social workers have a strong moral and ethical stake in human rights codes and instruments, which can help to equalize power between their vulnerable clients and dominant social, political, and economic elites. If laws and policies fail to meet the standards of justice, social workers have the moral responsibility to advocate for positive changes to them in ethical and effective ways.

One aspect of social work's moral and ethical "genealogy" is its historical grounding in the social gospel movement of the Christian churches of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Authors such as Allen (1973), Guest (1997), Finkel (2006), and Graham et al. (2007) trace this intersection of Christian faith and social work in the case of Canada, as an example. This confluence has been reflected historically in the location of many social work practitioners in social service organizations connected with Christian churches, as far back at the late nineteenth century and the beginning of settlement houses. These agencies, if not formally affiliated with Christian denominations, were at least firmly ideologically rooted in the social gospel movement (Rose, 2001). Shewell (2018) sees the origins of the settlement house movement as rooted in part in an idealist-Romanticist tradition that also influenced the social gospel movement. To be sure, there was a divide

in social gospel-influenced approaches in the early twentieth century between those wanting to address individual pathologies (reflected in the work of the Charity Organization Societies) and those seeing the need for broad social reform to address poverty and related social problems (expressed in the work of the settlement house movement).

This faith-based moral genealogy of social work is also evident in the development of Jewish community organizations and social services in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This is readily apparent in the *kehillah* (meaning “congregation”) concept in Judaism that was embodied in Jewish community organizations and philanthropic funds that developed during this period (Moore, 1978; Schoenfeld, 2012). These initiatives in Jewish communities expressed the scriptural invocation (Deuteronomy 16:20) that “justice, and only justice, you shall follow.”

Finally in regard to faith-based understandings of justice, there is evidence of social work’s moral-ethical affinity with teachings in other major faith communities that emphasize not just service to, but also liberation of, the downtrodden and vulnerable (Evans, 1992). A question that merits further exploration is how the moral principles underlying social work (as a profession that emerged in Judeo-Christian countries) resonates with the moral teachings of other faith traditions such as Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism.

While social work emerged partly from the historical legacy of social gospel, it is also the case that the connections between social work as a profession and faith groups, have become quite attenuated in recent decades. This trend is especially apparent in secular western democracies. This attenuation is partly the result of the shrinkage of mainstream Christian denominations in size and power. Additionally, some fundamentalist Christian communities have in fact moved away from the progressive moral positions on social justice questions that typified the social gospel movement and have instead adopted the tenets of the “prosperity gospel” that celebrates capitalism, consumption, and political conservatism as

the signs of God’s favour (Bowler, 2013).

Nonetheless, a case can still be made for social justice oriented social workers (whether or not they are spiritual as individuals) to work in solidarity with progressive leaders and groups in faith traditions that share similar social justice goals. On one hand, social work values and ethics may run counter to certain moral tenets in fundamentalist groups in Christian and other faith traditions who espouse the subordination of women, the oppression of LGBTQ persons, or the exclusion of other groups judged to be unworthy or sinful. On the other hand, progressive social workers may find strategic allies in ‘liberal’ and ‘left’ sectors of the major faith traditions in advancing ethical analysis and moral advocacy in pursuit of social justice goals.

While social work can and should find common ground with faith communities in seeking social justice, it is also necessary that social work as a secularized profession must not be formally aligned with or privilege any particular set of moral teachings. Social work must be “ecumenical” and tolerant in regard to all moral perspectives—whether they are faith-based or not—that are broadly consistent with social work’s commitments to justice. If social work theorists and practitioners are to undertake a project of “moral construction” in social work that fits the secular political order of liberal democracies, once again the figure of Kant looms large. The use of Kantian practical reasoning is particularly relevant when it comes to “high stakes” moral issues that social workers frequently deal with in their intervention with clients, such as conjugal or parent-child relationships, health or mental health crises, and securing the material and emotional necessities of life. The ethical dilemmas and moral uncertainties that social workers face can be particularly acute in the context of funding and service cuts resulting from the politics of austerity (Baines et al., 2009). In recent decades, welfare states have been profoundly reshaped by social conservatism and economic neo-liberalism. In such a context, social workers concerned about morality and ethics frequently walk a fine line between what Rivist and Moreau (2015) refer to as emancipatory

practice (enacting justice) and disciplinary interventions (exercising control over vulnerable and/or troubled clients on behalf of the socially conservative and economically neo-liberal state).

Pullen-Sansfaçon and Cowden (2013) have made an important contribution to theorizing morality and ethics for social work using sources divorced from religion and spirituality. They point to “the three specific families of ethical theories ... which have greatly influenced professional ethics in social work” (p. xxiii). These three theoretical moorings are: i) Kant’s concepts of self-determination and human dignity; ii) social justice as articulated in the utilitarian ethics of John Stuart Mill and John Rawls’ theory of justice; and iii) virtue ethics and the ethic of care as rooted in the work of Aristotle and Alasdair MacIntyre. Pullen-Sansfaçon (2010, p. 403) also points to the importance of specific virtue ethics in professional practice in social work, such as temperance, truthfulness, respectfulness, magnanimity, modesty, professional wisdom, care, courage, and justice. Pullen-Sansfaçon (2010) illustrates how to educate social work students on using practical reasoning in a collective setting as part of reflective practice, using Socratic dialogue as a tool. This method can assist those preparing themselves for social work practice (and also, presumably, those already practicing) “in their moral development by developing and nurturing appropriate virtues for social work” (p. 402).

Weinberg (2010) offers a social-constructionist approach to social work ethics, calling for the grounding of ethical reflection and formulation in the social contexts in which social work is practiced. She states that “[s]ocial workers would benefit, when constructing their ethical responsibilities, by moving beyond the spotlight on the one-to-one relationship between worker and client” (p. 40). They must also focus on “the broader structures and paradoxes that shape and limit practice” (p. 40). These constraints include what Weinberg (2010) refers to as the “risk society and the blaming game” (pp. 37–38) and “the economic effects of globalization” (pp. 38–39). But Weinberg does not focus solely on

big social structures or hegemonic ideology, so as to minimize or exclude the power and agency of individual social workers. She claims that social workers should “sidestep the dualism of the notions of agency and structure,” and recognize that “[p]ractitioners are restricted by structure but they also create structure” (p. 40). Social workers must use self-reflexivity as a fundamental tool in their professional tool kit in order to look beyond “the predominant paradigm [in which] the profession as a whole is generally viewed as being benign” (p. 40). They must critically examine the organizational and political contexts of social work practice. They must recognize that their profession is “part of the power elite” and that “[q]uestions about privilege and perquisites should be fundamental parts of the social construction of ethics, not sidebars viewed as political difficulties” (p. 40). If social work follows this path, according to Weinberg (2010),

the social construction of what constituted ethics would shift and there would be the possibility of reversing the historical trend away from a technical function and toward the causes of social problems. (p. 40)

This is not an individualistic exercise, and it must reject arrogance and certainty. Weinberg (2010) emphasizes that “the social construction of ethics would be strengthened by the solidarity of a community that recognized the inescapability of trespass [with clients], allowing for humility, doubt, and clemency” (p. 41).

Rossiter (2011) takes a broadly similar and illuminating approach to social work ethics. Rossiter deploys the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to call for “unsettled practice”—doing social work in a way that moves beyond “satisfaction with knowledge and technique” and that places ethics before knowledge. Rossiter (2011) contends that it is necessary to move beyond “innocence” (p. 989) in social work practice, and to

present a radical challenge to the notion of “professional” itself. Ethics cannot

be a “competence” or a naive appeal to “evidence”—it is a commitment to struggle with the vast historical legacy of totality—a struggle that requires constant judgments of the conflicts between ethics and justice. (p. 990)

Rossiter (2011) points to examples of how social work knowledge (such as neo-Freudian therapeutic counseling, or social casework based in systems theory) can do “violence” to clients by classifying and defining them in ways that negate what Levinas calls “the inexhaustible, irreducible singularity of people” (p. 983), which he also calls a person’s “infinity” (p. 983). Rossiter (2011) contends that even critical social work’s representation of “oppression” is not an ethically sufficient move by itself, and that we must embrace “the contradiction between the inevitable need to totalize or represent and the need to make space for the sociality that derives from our orientation towards that which is beyond comprehension of an individual” (p. 990).

On a pragmatic note, Rossiter (2011) recognizes that “thoughtful practitioners mediate between knowledge and practice judgments,” and that “the substantial role of judgment in practice belies the brute application of totalized knowledge” (p. 987). Rossiter (2011) calls upon social workers to engage in practice that is reflexive and critical, and that eschews “ethical innocence” (p. 993). Rossiter (2011) contends that social work must exist “on the razor’s edge that is unsettled practice: the tension between justice and ethics that must be maintained at the expense of settling for justice at the expense of ethics (p. 993).

The above approaches provide points of departure in theorizing moral foundations and ethical standards for social work practice that strive to be consistent with a broad conception of social justice. Much work remains to be done along these lines in regard to theorization, empirical research, and practical application. But a general direction seems clear—that social work has the capability and must rise to the challenge of developing a more sophisticated understanding of the moral dimensions of justice, and a concomitant set of professional

ethics that goes beyond narrow, individualistic, and quasi-judicial codes of behavior.

Justice as Fairness

Justice as fairness is perhaps the most “mundane” of the six elements presented in this article, but it is a principle that is integral to social work practice. Justice as fairness is the idea of treating people equitably and impartially. It builds on the general moral understanding in liberal democratic societies that each should be given their due, which in matters being disputed before formal bodies translates into due process and procedural fairness (Hurlbert & Mulvale, 2011). Justice as fairness does not necessarily imply treating parties to a dispute exactly alike. If one party has a legitimate grievance and/or is in a position of disadvantage or subordination compared to the other advantaged and/or dominant party, justice may require that this imbalance be corrected and that the aggrieved party receive a favorable ruling and compensation of some kind.

Justice as fairness is germane to many different social work practice settings in which decisions are made that affect individuals, families and communities. These settings include casework practice carried out in legal and criminal justice programs, appeals of formal decisions concerning income security benefits, child custody disputes, refugee application hearings, and other quasi-judicial or legal-administrative matters with which social workers assist clients. Social work practitioners can be instrumental in such settings, using both formal and informal dispute resolution mechanisms, to achieve just, fair, and helpful outcomes for their clients.

Justice as fairness is a relatively easy concept to grasp intellectually, but in everyday practice its realization is often complicated by power imbalances, bureaucratic complexities, and the need for significant resources (time, money, expertise) to ensure that justice is done. Social workers seeking justice as fairness often practice in less-than-ideal contexts. Their ability to access resources to ensure the best possible assistance and

advocacy for clients is often constrained and may even be grossly deficient. In such circumstances, the imperative of achieving justice as fairness may conflict with a social worker's professionally determined ethical obligations and may raise profound moral (and perhaps even legal) dilemmas for a social worker (Yu & Mandell, 2015). If social work practice in a particular setting cannot meet the test of justice as fairness, then the moral and ethical standards of social work may impel practitioners to refuse to play a role that would sanction an inherently unjust process.

Restorative Justice

Finally, a specific sense of justice that has particular relevance to social work is restorative justice. This is especially the case for social work as it is practiced in the legal-judicial and criminal justice systems, and in other settings in which interpersonal harm or group conflict has occurred. Braithwaite (2002) quoting Tony Marshall states that “[r]estorative justice is a process whereby all the parties with a stake in a particular offence come together to resolve collectively how to deal with the aftermath of the offence and its implications for the future” (p. 11). Braithwaite (2002) identifies “the core values of restorative justice” as “healing rather than hurting, moral learning, community participation and community caring, respectful dialogue, forgiveness, responsibility, apology, and making amends” (p. 11). The exercise of restorative justice involves victims, offenders, their families, and their communities.

Braithwaite (2002) contends that restorative justice and “responsive regulation” can also be applied at macro-societal levels beyond interpersonal crime. Such applications include the economic regulation of business, international peacemaking, and sustainable development. Braithwaite (n.d.) sees restorative justice as both taking responsibility for past harms done and creating conditions for a more just future. These processes must be carried out in ways that prevent shame for past wrongdoing (which in proper measure can be adaptive) from turning into humiliation and indignity for

wrongdoers (which sabotage the restorative justice project) (Braithwaite, n.d.).

Social workers can play key roles in restorative justice settings, especially in community-based programs and processes that offer alternatives to the legal, judicial, and punitive machinery of the formal criminal justice system. Gumz and Grant (2009) argue in this regard that social work must move beyond seeing social justice “primarily as efforts to ensure a fair distribution of resources and opportunities” (p. 119), and to expand its view to see that “justice is also restorative in nature—seeking to restore and enhance victims, offenders, and communities to fuller functioning” (p. 119). To explore the involvement of social work in restorative justice practice, Gumz and Grant (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 80 peer reviewed social work articles on this question. They concluded that “[t]he role of social workers in restorative justice programs remains largely unknown” (p. 125). So the challenge remains for social work to embrace justice as restoration and healing more completely, and to use this approach more systematically with the aims of alleviating pain, restoring relationships, and facilitating the healing of individuals and communities.

Conclusion

The argument in this article has been that social work must do more to deepen and broaden its understandings and applications of justice in its academic work and professional practice. Social work academics and practitioners must challenge themselves to act humbly but passionately to make things better for their clients and communities—and to become more adept at specifying and measuring what “better” really means. In this way, social workers can move closer to “justice” in its various and nuanced senses, including those presented in this article. This movement towards justice can (and must) be realized by social workers in all of their fields of practice (child welfare, health and mental health, aging, school social work, etc.) and at all levels of social work intervention (including casework, group work, community organization

and development, policy analysis, administration, and research and professional education).

Wilson (2017) makes the point that “[t]he importance of our justice imaginations cannot be overstated” and that we should “develop a relational form of historical practice from which to engage with each other” (p. 1312). These insights can help us to reach a deeper understanding of “justice,” remedy past injustices for which social work is responsible, and avoid future harms that could result from arrogant, non-reflexive, or duplicitous practice.

At its best, social work has drawn on diverse and eclectic sources of theoretical insight and practice wisdom to advance justice and equality. But it is also the case that social work as a discipline and practice has frequently supported capitalist, racist, sexist, and colonialist ideologies and political projects that have resulted in exploitation, oppression, social exclusion, poor health and social conditions, and even death. Social work has often been complicit in structural violence carried out against the communities that supposedly were being “helped” (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Ioakimidis, 2015).

The process of rectifying past unjust practice, and charting a more positive path for the future, will mean that progressive social workers must dialogue with—and if necessary, challenge—their colleagues whose views on justice do not incorporate a fundamental commitment to equality, recognition, and inclusion. Social workers must also challenge conservative ideologies and practices in organizations in which they are employed.

If social work is to contribute to political-economic transformation, and to be a path toward social justice for both its practitioners and those whom they serve, then it must take account of its political context at the “macro” level. Social work emerged first in the Anglo-American liberal democracies in the early decades of the twentieth century. This political context is composed of paradoxical elements. On one hand, according to C.B. Macpherson (1965), the “ultimate ethical principle” of democracy is “to provide the conditions

for the free development of human capacities, and to do this equally for all members of the society” (p. 87). On the other hand, Macpherson (1964) points out that liberal democratic societies are embedded in capitalist economies, and that the latter are infused with an ethic of possessive individualism that undermines the exercise of human capabilities and restricts social and economic equality.

Social workers are well situated to clearly grasp these conditions of inequality and lack of freedom that shape the lives of their clients. With a multi-faceted understanding of justice to guide them, social workers can play a key role in enabling better lives for clients, and in working for more just social conditions and a more equitable economic distribution. Progress in these struggles will help to take us beyond the possessive individualism that Macpherson (1964) warns us about and enable us to realise democracy’s full promise of individual freedom and collective welfare.

To progress along this path, social work must engage in continuous theory building; rigorous empirical research on the multiple sources of and potential remedies to social and economic injustice; and careful evaluation of our applied professional work in program delivery and policy development. This work by social work must build on the discipline’s best traditions of self-reflexive analysis and critique of its practices and must fully incorporate the ideal of justice into its theorization, research, and intervention strategies. A social work approach that can be built upon and developed along these lines is structural social work (Lundy, 2011; Moreau, 1979). This model for practicing social work addresses the roots of injustice in the neo-liberal political economy. It also recognises in the various forms of social oppression that arise therein, in all of their complex and intersecting patterns, while at the same time avoiding the quagmire of a totalizing view of oppression that can rob us of agency and hope.

Social work’s theoretical eclecticism and professional self-reflexivity can sometimes lead to conceptual messiness and to complicated and intense debates on what is to be done in the various

and challenging fields of practice. However, these engrained patterns of eclecticism and reflexivity in social work can help to move the discipline and profession toward the ideal of justice understood as human dignity, social and economic equality, sustainability, moral integrity, fairness, and restorative healing.

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Endnotes

¹This is the third edition of this text. Robert Mullaly was the sole author of the two earlier editions of the book in 2002 and 2010.

²In the subsequent chapter of this book, Baines (2017b) does point out that “social work and social policy scholars are increasingly identifying capitalism as a major source of most of this misery [related to poverty]” (p. 37) and points to the problematic nature of neo-liberal globalization and social policies based on austerity.

³Retrieved at <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>

⁴The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) focuses on practice, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) focuses on education, and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) focuses on social policy.

⁵Retrieved from the website of the Basic Income Earth Network: <https://basicincome.org/basic-income/>