

Rethinking the Clinical vs. Social Reform Debate: A Dialectical Approach to Defining Social Work in the 21st Century

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Statement of the Research Problem

In perhaps its simplest form this dissertation involves an investigation into re-visioning, or reframing, how we think about the clinical vs. social reform debate in social work. This debate is often characterized as an enduring, thorny problem for social work, which reflects an ongoing identity conflict and confusion in the field. This ‘identity crisis’ of sorts has been a problem for social work since its inception as some in the field have focused their attention on interventions at the individual level, while others have focused on interventions at the societal level. Many conferences, books and articles spanning the course of over 100 years have deliberated over this often divisive issue. But the problem endures, at least in part because it is assumed that a legitimate profession cannot have two seemingly disparate foci, along with a widely varying collection of practice and research methods.

Research Background and Hypotheses

The origins of social work in the United States, which stem from European, and particularly British, ideas about social welfare, were dichotomous—according to what would later be referred to as clinical and social reform perspectives—from the outset. These disparate ideas about how to perform the ‘work’ of social work in a modern, industrialized, urbanized society were reflected in the early divisions in nineteenth century charity organizations in the United States, which later developed into the broad theoretical and practical differences between the Charity Organization Society (clinical) and the Settlement House movement (social reform). The subsequent clinical vs. reform debate has endured to the present day, often leading to divisiveness and confusion about the social work identity, purpose, and research and practice methods. These theoretical and methodological divides have also inhibited the development of social work as a unified profession. This has led to ongoing disputes and problems in determining a core knowledge base and training/education program for social work. They have also inhibited the production of ideas and interventions that involve the transactions of both persons and environments. This dissertation suggests a solution to this age old problem by applying pragmatism as a grounding philosophy for social work. Pragmatism can be useful

because it does not presume a single theory or ideology, but instead embraces a diverse array of ideas and methods which can all be applied to achieve desired ends in social work.

It was hypothesized at the outset that the historical investigation of the relevant texts would yield evidence which indicates that the clinical vs. reform debate was in fact divisive, problematic, and non-pragmatic.

Methodology

The methods used in this dissertation are conceptual. There are four primary tasks to be accomplished in this dissertation. 1- generate a pragmatist framework via literature review. 2 -gain a richer and deeper understanding of the problem—the clinical vs. social reform debate. The method for this will be to review primary and secondary source materials (books and journal articles) from selected national social work conferences and scholars. 3 - apply the pragmatist framework to the newly gained perspective on the clinical vs. social reform debate. The method for this will be to make explicit conceptual linkages between the elements of pragmatism and the problem in social work (dialectical). Analysis of the connections and relationships between ideas will be the primary tool in all of these processes, as it will be in drawing conclusions from this application. Finally, implications of the application will be discussed as they relate to teaching, practice, research and policy. The social work conferences/proceedings selected for analysis include: 1) The Milford Conference (AASW, 1929); 2) The Hollis-Taylor report (Hollis & Taylor, 1931); 3) The NASW subcommittee on the “working definition” (NASW, 1958); and 4) The Madison Meeting (*Social Work*, special issue, 1977). The selected social work theorists include: 1) Jane Addams; 2) Mary Richmond; 3) Bertha Reynolds; 4) Arthur Todd; 5) Herbert Bisno; 6) Edward Lindeman; 7) Edward Devine; 8) Charlotte Towle; 9) Jesse Taft.

Each of the above mentioned texts was analyzed according to the following 5-item framework (from Gordon, 1962): purpose, value, method, knowledge and sanction. The goal (as in 2 above) was to gain an understanding of how the author(s) define and understand social work. Each selected text was subsequently analyzed with regard to its content pertaining to the clinical vs. social reform debate, and whether pragmatism was evident in the ideas about social work.

Results

Given the starting point and assumptions that were present at the beginning of this dissertation, the findings are rather unexpected. This dissertation started with three major assumptions based on the recent literature surveyed. First, it was assumed that social work has an unresolved identity crisis that has existed since its inception in the early 20th century. Second, it was assumed that the primary and persistent problem with the social work identity is the clinical vs. social reform debate. And third, it was assumed that the philosophies of social work which would be surveyed in task 2 were not already pragmatist and therefore that a pragmatist framework could be applied to them in order to

remedy the supposed divide in social work. All three of these assumptions have been refuted, unexpectedly, by the analysis of social work philosophies according to task 2.

The findings are summarized below according to task (except for #4 since it is the next section). Task 1 involved the generation of a summary framework of Dewey's pragmatism which produced the following three themes: the revolution in philosophy; the organism-in-environment perspective; and instrumentalist epistemology, including the democratic approach to ethics and politics. It was anticipated that further elements of pragmatism might be generated from the social work theorists themselves, and put into conversation with Dewey's ideas. However, what was discovered is that pragmatist elements were present in all of the philosophies of social work already. Social work itself was either conceived of as an 'arm' of pragmatist thought (or, more generally, of progressivism, of which pragmatism is arguably the key philosophical paradigm), and/or key pragmatist themes were clearly discernible in the philosophies of social work. Thus, no new framework was needed as this would be redundant.

Task 2, the analysis of nine social work theorists (and four major social work conferences), was completed in order to better understand the nature of the clinical vs. social reform debate. What is discernible from this analysis is perhaps the most striking conclusion of this dissertation: without exception, all of the social work theorists analyzed here are dual focused with regard to the clinical vs. social reform debate. In other words, every philosophy of social work represented here includes both the clinical and the social reform perspectives. Each thinker has his or her own contribution and emphasis—some offer ideas more specifically linked to the clinical side (e.g. Taft's Rankian social casework), some leaning more toward the social reform side (e.g. Addams' Hull House)—but all of them define social work as an institution, discipline and practice that includes both aspects. This renders task 3 somewhat null. It was assumed that the clinical vs. social reform divide needed a fix, and that pragmatism might provide the solution. However, since all of the philosophies of social work are already pragmatist, and, more importantly, since they also represent a unified, dual focused approach, it would only be redundant to apply pragmatism as a solution, and it is unnecessary in the first place, since a clinical vs. social reform 'identity crisis' is not apparent in any of these perspectives.

The primary conclusion of this dissertation is, therefore, that the clinical vs. social reform "debate" was not indicative of an identity crisis, at least not in the first 60+ years of the development of the profession. To be sure, there can be tensions between clinical and social reform perspectives, and there were difficult questions that had to be addressed (e.g. at the Milford conference regarding the unity of social work practice). But the conceptions of social work analyzed here indicate that these tensions need not be considered dividing lines of crisis proportion since every single thinker always included both. In other words, social work, from its inception (even with Jane Addams and Mary Richmond), should be considered a profession with a burgeoning *unity*, though it was never a profession of *uniformity*. All of these thinkers recognize the unity of social work, including both clinical and social reform aspects, to be inclusive of casework, group work, and various forms of social reform work such as community organizing and political advocacy for policy change. In sum, social work does not need a new theory or philosophy in order to define itself, or to solve a putatively irreconcilable divide—it

would perhaps do better to *remember what it has always been*, a unified, though not uniform, perpetually growing and developing discipline and profession.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Generally speaking, remembering (or re-remembering) who we have been in social work for over 100 years in the United States can offer both scholars and practitioners a solid, unified foundation for the profession. Social work has a robust and pragmatic intellectual tradition which permits diverse forms of scholarship and intervention in order to achieve social goals such as improved individual and family life, increased social justice and a better society for all people. With regard to research it is hoped that a unified, pragmatist understanding of social work will help put an end to the often divisive ‘paradigm wars’ occurring in many social work schools. This historical perspective values quantitative, qualitative, historical and conceptual research methods—anything that can be put to use in describing, explaining and solving social problems. The same hope applies to the divides that too often occur between clinicians and social reformers in social work. This research shows that both perspectives have always been valued historically as the profession emerged. Even Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, who are inaccurately caricatured as mere opponents in the literature, boldly pronounce their respect for each others’ work and recognize that each perspective is essential to social work. Thus, the diverse practices we employ in our aim to make a better society should include both clinical and social reform perspectives. Recognizing this dual focused approach will hopefully lead to further developments that examine the intersection of persons and environments which may generate innovative interventions that better serve those in need. Finally, this historical understanding of social work offers a sound perspective that can be taught to our students so that they are not burdened with confusion or divisiveness about what social work practice entails or how we conduct research. If nothing else, I hope this perspective will deflate much of the anxiety that often accompanies discussions about who we are as a profession.

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