

Living in the Tension: Social Services and Systemic Change

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“You’re profiting off of poverty.” Coming from African American community organizers who’d spent their lives fighting for justice and systemic change, this was hard to hear. My classmates and I just heard these men present on their organization and were going around with our names and majors. When they found out that three of us were social work majors, they really got interested and asked us to define social work. We whipped out our professional jargon, rattling off something about empowerment, service, dignity and worth of the person, strength based perspective, etc. I thought we would have made our professors proud, but these men didn’t agree. They believed that social work as a profession creates dependencies and enforces the inequality of our social structure. We argued about the strengths and weaknesses of the profession of social work, and then they got down to their bottom line: “You’re profiting off of poverty.” They believed that the social work profession couldn’t *really* be interested in social change, because it is in our best interest financially, and in terms of job security to continue the cycle of poverty.

Our disagreement exposed underlying differences in our approaches to social change. The community organizers were focusing on long-term structural change through capacity-building while still trying to address individuals’ needs. They saw SOWK as too often improving the lives of individuals while ignoring structural injustice - rendering the individual work futile. The other SOWK Majors and I recognized this tension, but hoped (and still hope) that SOWK has the potential to work in the lives of individuals *while* keeping the bigger picture in mind. Everyone there agreed that systems are broken *and* that individuals sometimes need help and support while the injustices of the systems are being addressed. The question is how we do all that.

In this speech, I'll share with you one way that I've seen social services detracting from social change – much in the way these community organizers would expect – and one way that I've seen social services working with individuals and emphasizing community strengths to create social change. I'll touch on broader policy-level issues and also examine how Christianity can be an impetus for social service work focused on social change. In order to do all these things I'll need to simplify matters, but I'll try not to simplify away the important parts.

First, social workers *do* get bogged down running the system and forget that we're actually supposed to be critiquing it too. One example comes from my experiences last semester as a medical case management intern at The Women's Collective in DC.

At The Women's Collective, we used an educational program called WILLOW put out by the CDC. The program's aim is to decrease HIV transmission by empowering HIV positive women. It educates about HIV, safer sex, gender pride, support networks, etc. However, this program, designed to create long-lasting change through empowering women, can have degrading aspects.

Willow had several standardized forms provided by the CDC. I'd start out with a client by asking her if she'd like to do the intake forms herself or together (Deborah said: "Well, I can't write very well, so it's best if you just ask me the questions"). The very first question, then, was age, which got some women defensive from the start ("I don't like to talk about it, but I'm already 62"). Then we asked about employment status ("No, I'm not working now"), monthly income ("There's the \$664 from SS, and I get \$16 a month for food stamps"), level of education completed ("Only the tenth grade"), and it just kept going. Then we continued on with the pretest with questions like "How many times in the past year have you exchanged sex for drugs or money?" Although there were times when Deborah laughed and blushed at the detail of the

questions, her body slouched and she became more dejected as the interview went on. The program absolutely ignored this dehumanizing effect. It is a program designed to empower women, but it starts by lining up all of the ways that society has labeled them failures. With the WILLOW program, did we build community or did we point out a deficiency and provide our cookie-cutter fix? The program did educate and probably had an overall positive effect, but at what cost?

While this is an example of how social services can lose sight of the big picture of social change, let me share an example of a program that I think really did help empower women for lasting change by beginning with their strengths.

When I think about the strength-perspective in The Women's Collective (TWC), I immediately think of the Community Health Workers (CHWs). These are women who began as clients of TWC and with some training have stayed with the organization to work as peers even after they no longer need case management services. They provide intensive attention to women who are at high risk for one reason or another - including women recently diagnosed with HIV. They accompany women to appointments, call them with medication reminders, walk them through prescription pick-up, and more. Through this intensive work, they support the women to the point where the women are more comfortable doing these things on their own and begin to see their own capabilities more clearly. The CHWs generally started out in a rough place - Sabrina was hospitalized and very ill while dealing with her recent diagnosis and caring for her three children - but they are able to build on their own strengths to the point where they are now working with TWC in a paid position with input into their colleagues' work. These women challenge the injustices in society not through policy-level changes, but through empowering

others and building on the strengths that already exist within the community while also helping provide needed services to individuals. This is real change.

This same question of services vs systemic change applies on a broader policy level. In many ways social programs and policies *do* perpetuate oppression and need. They highlight people's needs thereby encouraging dependency and victimization. So how do we do public policy in a way that encourages social change? That's the topic of another speech, but one thing I would suggest is the importance of including in the formation of policy the people who it will *directly* affect. This is important - from free and reduced lunches in Harrisonburg all the way to water purification in Zambia. It's a conversation we need to have.

While many people do good work in social services without a faith background, I believe that adding faith to the mix takes these questions to a whole new level. After all, we are commanded repeatedly in the Bible to do things like "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God" and the narrative I read in the Bible shows a Jesus who confronts oppression and often upsets the social and religious status quo (Micah 6:8, New International Version). Now I know that not everyone reads their Bible that way, but I can't really address that right now, so we'll just pretend that everyone thinks like I do. This call to action that I read in the Bible can be a great motivator for our churches to do all sorts of good work, but our churches are too often guilty of the same short-comings of secular organizations when it comes to social services and social change. In his article "Why 'Servanthood' is Bad," John Mcknight (1989) forms this into a question addressing church service organizations. He asks "Have they substituted the vision of service for the only thing that will make people whole - community? Are they service peddlers or community builders?" (p. 38). He goes on to make the same charges as the community organizers I first mentioned critiquing the ways funding designated for those

in poverty is spent – too often paying for social workers like me. So the question remains in both Christian and secular organizations: how do we do service in a way that doesn't preclude community but instead builds communities to take on oppressive power structures? Christianity provides us with a strong rootedness in our social change efforts, so we have to keep facing the questions and tensions involved.

This puzzle of how to fit a broader and long-term vision of social change into our day to day activities is not limited to a single issue. As such, there is no blanket call to action but the call to live in the tension of opposing right answers - providing for immediate needs *and* working for broader social justice. We all want world peace and to make the world a better place, but different people do this in different ways. I challenge us to use our gifts to empower individuals, communities, and policy-making bodies in ways that both confront systemic injustice and shift toward sustainable change. We *must* not forget the end goal.

#### References

McKnight, J. (1989). Why "servanthood" is bad. *Other Side*, 25(1), 38-41.