

Rethinking Social Work: Towards Critical Practice (2nd Edition).

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Reviewed by S. Gamlath¹

Overview

Is social work becoming a disillusioned profession? This is the key theme that underlines the entire discussion in this book. The author outlines this at the very beginning and says that because of the emerging hostile socio-economic and political environment, social workers are uncomfortable in the current practice context and become disillusioned. Many experienced practitioners are leaving the profession. A hostile practice context has emerged because economic rationalism, also known as neo-conservatism, has increasingly dominated the practice environment of social workers. In that new social situation, dominated by the values of economic rationalism, the fundamental values of social work profession, which is still widely recognized as a helping human service profession, based on a “strong human friendly value system” is constantly in question. So the content of social work practice has to be changed significantly in order to be compatible with new practice environment which is unfriendly for many social workers. It is problematic for many of them who genuinely believe that the role of social work is to make the society a fairer place by promoting and advocating the cause of social justice.

In such a “hostile” practice context, the serious question is whether social work indeed has a future? If so, what form would it take? The opinion present in this book is rather eye-opening for many in social work practice. The practice environment is hostile and uncomfortable, humanitarian values of conventional social work is constantly questioned and challenged, new trainees’ construction of social work is different, the service receivers (predominantly those who are already disadvantaged and highly vulnerable to fall into disadvantage) are excluded from the process of constructing what social work is etc. etc. Instead of it being defined with the service receivers’ participation, they are being continuously excluded from the processes which constantly construct and reconstruct the meaning of social work. Therefore, their participation in the problem-solving processes is also unwarranted, and unlike in the past, the solution for their problems are now simply made for them rather than made with them.

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So social workers confront a host of unanswered questions, some of which are highly ethical. The value basis of this “helping profession” and its commitment to promoting and ensuring social justice, human rights and equality is seriously challenged and, as a result, its guardians, the social workers, are stranded in clueless ambiguity.

The continued efforts of countering the giant strides of the values of neo-liberalism have made social workers tired. Many social workers have been witnessing for some time now that this has been happening. Being disappointed and disillusioned, many have left the profession. Yet, the relevance or the validity of the discussion in this book has not disappeared at all, instead it seems to be gaining continues momentums of an unprecedented appeal and soundness.

Therefore, it is strongly felt that critically looking at this book again in contemporary social context will be firstly helpful for many of us, social workers². Again, secondly, what the book examines outlining the alternative scenarios, in which the social work discourse can be located, unless it does not adapt to the changed situation, has been now unfolding before our eyes here in Sri Lanka too. Therefore, revisiting the content of this book has both an extremely important contemporary as well as contextual relevance for professional social work practitioners, in the country.

Challenging Practice Context:

The book starts explaining how social work was losing its territory. Social workers seemed to be less than fully accommodating to the demands of new managerialism, specified competencies, privatization and economic rationalism. They fear that their ideological scruples might leave them “out in the cold” as they see the valuable ground surrendered to nurses, occupational therapists, health workers, psychologists and others. There is a widespread concern among social workers that present structures of human service delivery are not adequately meeting the needs of their clients,

² It is strongly believed that what the author vividly explained and predicted far back in 1997 when the first edition of this book was published, was a bitter experience of many of us, social workers, in the early days of the 21st century, and has now been an obvious contextual reality of the day-to-day work of many all around the world. Therefore, reviewing what the author wrote at that time has unprecedented appeal for what we experience today. For the current practitioners, both the experienced and beginners, trainee social workers, students, and all others who are interested in professional social work action, this will be immensely valuable. It provokes critical thinking, reflection and challenge and a strong voice of advocacy for a fairer world.

because of declining resources and the way that service delivery is defined within an increasingly managerial paradigm. Many social structures are seen by social workers as disempowering and reinforcing processes of disadvantage.

The optimistic anticipation emerging in this discussion is whether modern economic rationalism would collapse because of its own internal contradictions and whether private perspective in the construction of public social issues is relevant and appropriate in an alternative paradigm. These questions are seemed very important in the rethinking about an alternative interpretation of the contribution of social work in a new practice context to deal with the issues emanating from grave disadvantages. They are, however, still unresolved though the current context is not static. It is again a result of historical dynamic process and therefore future trends in social work should not hesitate to challenge the current context.

The conventional construction of social work is first discussed because it is important to examine the direction social work has taken today. Social work has been differently constructed in different places. Again, modern social work has a different and conflicting historical origin and a variety of influences from different ideologies. The mainstream construction of social work has been formed by a heritage located primarily within the context of the “welfare state”. It is seen as a “profession”, a “generalist” occupation, a “secular” occupation, and it involves the integration of “knowledge, skills and values”. These characteristics have been challenged in the current context. So that the conventional construction of social work with which most social workers would still be comfortable, is becoming increasingly out of step with the reality of the contemporary practice context.

The book is strongly critical of the new socio-economic and cultural context because mainly of its non-human-centered face with which social workers find it difficult to agree with. The supreme characteristics of the new context are economic rationalism, managerialism, modern rationality and competency. It has no regard to the deliberate, welfare oriented human service. So, the very idea of “social work service” has been significantly changed. The service has become commodified, and is now understood as something that can be traded, measured, provided and frequently quantified and priced. The recipient is bereft of power since it is centered around the provider of service. The conventional heritage of social work in a context of welfare state is also no longer straightforward and has become increasingly problematic. If the welfare state survives and expands, then the social work can be expected to do likewise, but if the welfare state withers

and dies, social work may well share this fate unless it can establish some kind of alternative location.

The opinion of the author is that even in the conventional heritage, strong professionalism and secular notion of social work are inappropriate and the worst is that they prevent modern social work from responding effectively to its current crisis. The modern context promotes professionalism and secular approach in social work and that, according to the author, is extremely inappropriate from marginalized, disadvantaged and cultural and spiritual perspectives. Social work insists the importance of knowledge, skills and values as the basis for practice. It has consistently defined itself in value embedded terms. It does not simply do what political leaders and managers tell it to do. If knowledge is as important as skills, then understanding is as important as competencies. Social workers regard themselves as thinkers, as doers, and as people who have to make judgments on the basis of knowledge and experience. Yet, this now appears somewhat problematic, as social workers find themselves pressured to conform to the contemporary agenda and new managerialism.

So, the conventional value and ethical base on which social work has originated and constructed its entire “image” and with which most social workers still desire to function has changed. The question is how social work confronts this challenge. Even in the contemporary Western socio-political context, the challenge is still alive. For example, Webb and Gray (2013: 30) identify that the socio-political environment in which social work operates has changed dramatically in many Western countries since the 1970s and 1980s. Managerialism and market-driven forces have transformed the labour process in social work, eroded the one-on-one time that social workers have with service users, and imposed huge constraints on the possibilities for radical practice in the sector.

Hostile Environment:

The author explains the current reality in social work practice environment as hostile and the interrelated characteristics of this hostile environment within which social workers are seeking to practice.

First, he points out that, in economic rationalism, economic policy is supreme and all other policies, especially social and welfare policies, seem to be or are secondary to economic policy. It primarily aims to establish the primacy of the liberal market because it believes that the market best represents individual wishes and choices. It will ensure that prices are kept minimum, and the services are efficient and meet the needs of the

consumer. Therefore, the market is not intervened. The government spending is seen as an impediment for economic health because it discourages working hard and making profit. In this context, therefore, social policy was to wind back the familiar forms of welfare state expenditure which provided the context of social work practice.

Secondly, the so-called new managerialism is discussed as another aspect of the hostile environment of contemporary social work practice. The idea is that good management is the way to solve all problems in human service organizations, and it will make them more effective and efficient. Management is a generic skill and unlike prior to the 1980s, it is assumed that even human service department managers should not necessarily be human service professionals who move into senior positions through their careers. Even a former factory manager or one who managed a fisheries department can manage human service departments, as it needs only managerial skills. The author's grave concern of the possible worst consequence of this trend is that even social workers who are interested in management positions tend to gain managerial skills rather than relying on their social work qualifications. They also less like to define themselves as social workers and to identify themselves with the values of social work profession because they are "managers". This trend of managerialism has devalued social workers in terms of their traditional role as human service professionals, leaving them being not able to operate as creative, innovative and empowering professionals.

Next, the author elaborates on the fact that the assumption of modern rationality is the third important aspect of the environment in which social workers practice. It assumes that organizational and policy context of social work can be determined by logical analysis on the basis of objective data. There is little room for values or ethics in the analysis. Also, there is no opportunity for social workers to be creative because in modern rational mechanism, wisdom flows from the top while only information flows from the bottom. Social workers are expected to practice the given prescription rather than to be more explorative, creative and innovative. The grassroots workers are not believed even though their experience is the reality. In this approach, one simply tends to assume that there is one best answer to any problem.

Fourthly, the author explains that the strong emphasis on competencies in the new paradigm is flawed and the true social workers are not comfortable with it. Since the 1990s, the organization, appointment practices, accreditation and education programs of social work occupation has been

significantly affected by a concern of the “competency-based approach”. This seriously challenges the important fact that social worker, as a generalist, is able to do many different things at a basic level of competence. However, it is better, if taken in isolation, if someone who has specified skills, can do better than what social workers generally do but in that the emphasis is more on technical aspects. For example, better counselor, better caseworker, better group worker, better community worker, better youth outreach worker, better child protection worker, better disability service care manager etc. Yet the strength of social work is its generic and holistic perspective that relates these areas to each other. In generic perspective, the social worker is able to work in a broader context. In that, exploration of the clients’ world, the realistic assessment of the complex and confused situation of the client in a wider space from different angles is possible. Yet, a specialist child protection worker with limited competencies may not be able to appreciate the impact of cultural background, the consequences of institutional racism, or changes to a family system in the pattern of childcare and abuse. So that, the compartmentalized social work under different labels has neutralized generic social work.

New Thinking:

The above factors are interrelated and characterize the current hostile context of social work practice. The book however suggests that, there is no option, first, for its own survival, social work must work in the current context and build up its influence. The author is so optimistic of the development of internal contradictions within the current hostile context and predicts that the existing context is more or less permanent is a misleading assumption. Therefore, the author suggests that it is more important to discuss the current practice context of social work not as a static permanent phenomenon but as a dynamic changing system.

Although the current hostile context is still unchallenged, it is approaching the point of crisis. With economic rationalism, which leads to social uncertainty and instability a further decline of welfare state has been observed. In such a scenario, more community-based social work practice can be possible having critical alternatives such as creative and alternative practice within existing structures, supporting people, groups, and communities, countering oppressive institutions and alternative structures, and exerting external pressure through working for change by engaging in the new politics of social movements.

Conclusion

Economic rationalism, modern rationality, managerialism and competency approach are interlinked. In this entire paradigm, it is believed that there is one single medicine for all problems. For example, the assumption is that the package of those policies promotes economic growth and then the increased economic growth will automatically reduce poverty because it trickles down the benefits. This slogan has been chanted for many decades and still too. Yet, everywhere, irrespective of more developed or less developed, inequality and disparities have widened and poverty pockets have emerged. What the Human development report in 1996 echoed is still relevant, this growth is rootless, ruthless, jobless, helpless and hapless.

This book also explores that the solutions of economic rationalism are more or less technical and not human friendly, human centered or community centered. They are entirely market or production-centered and exclude the values of distributive justice. The key principles of social work action, such as human rights, equality, social justice, human dignity etc., are ignored. Its concern is not the social reality but the data with which mathematical surprises can be made in rhetoric terms like scientific and universal. So it simply ignores the reality that social workers can obviously touch and engage with. The values, ethics, sensitivity, spirituality and other cultural aspects that social workers mostly embrace in personal styles of practices are disregarded as either unscientific or unprofessional. What was heard and observed are simply unconsidered unless they are quantified and presented in measurable ways. Also, it devalues diversity. The richness of diversity suggests that there is no single answer to a social problem. In the name of dominant orthodoxy, cultural sensitivity is undermined, and mistrust and conflict created.

Social workers find it difficult to work in such an environment. It is hostile. In this hostile environment, the commitment of social work to social justice, equality, human rights and self-determination which make social work more human-centered has been ignored. What was previously a strongly value-based social work practice, has now become a rational procedure of specialized service delivery. An activity of bottom-up process has now become entirely an act of top-down process so that both the worker and service receiver have been alienated from one another.

However, it is not seen to be relevant that social work should adapt to the new socio-economic and political contextual changes. There is an emerging rethinking that the alternative form of social work practice can confront the hostile contexts and situations in more effective and positive ways. Still the

belief is that social work has much to contribute to meet social justice targets. To achieve it, social work first has to engage the existing dominant order and influence both policy discourse and practice realities. At the same time, it is not assumed that social work must rely on its conventional wisdom.

The creative alternative in the discussion of social work rethinking is whether social work can find grounds in the community. There is a global trend for rediscovering the community and restoring some functions of traditional community in new forms as one way of attending crucial social issues that are unlikely to be effectively addressed and solved in the new socio-economic paradigms. Dominant neo-liberal ideology is unchallenged but the role of the state is being reconsidered. It is not in terms of traditional welfare state but in a sense much more accountable ways in partnership with the community sector. The community sector is recognized as an emerging new sector, the “third sector”, as an alternative to the traditional public and modern private sectors. The new community sector continues to promote public participation in welfare. It is new approach to welfare service delivery and is, in a sense, reasonably agreeable to both conservative and liberal models of social welfare. It is seen as more local and community-centered. Some recognizes it as balancing way of economic and social development which is supposed to go hand-in-hand if the possible distortions of development are to be avoided. It is also interpreted as community and public-sector partnership with a developmental approach to social welfare and local level social development.

However, grave concern is whether it is so optimistic to believe that economic rationalism itself would develop internal contradictions and reaches a point of crisis. The global capitalism has already penetrated the very breath of community throughout the world, and it has been further accelerated by the contemporary trends of globalization. The question of establishing alternative territory for social work practice is still unresolved, and the answers seem to be still ambiguous. In less developed country contexts, social development perspective in social work practice has taken its strides. In more developed countries, the trends are much more towards community and community sector which seem to be emerging as an alternative to public and private sector welfare service delivery. True social workers are however still in limbo waiting for exact answers.

Many progressive social workers across the globe are currently experiencing what this book predicted decades ago (the book was first

published in 1997). However, for the sigh of great relief of many social workers, it predicted that future social work would take much more community-based institutional working context where even those conventional social work values and ethics would find a comfortable presence. It has indeed happened. In many parts of the world, irrespective of more or less developed, the unquestioned commitment of social work to the well-being of human kind could be secured in a more “community-centered” practice context. In that, modern social work could locate itself in a context in which conventional human-friendly approach can be redefined and reshaped, respond to the strides of current human hostile context, readjust itself along with modern social changes without losing its strong value base, and even easily embrace all that new radical and structural thinking in social work.

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