

The place of social justice in strengths-based social welfare work

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This paper attempts to unpack strengths-based practice in social welfare in order to reveal the location of social justice within such an approach. Firstly, this paper will briefly explore the origins of a strengths approach, including historical development of the approach, mentioning some specific practice theories. The paper will then investigate the concepts, using Jim Ife's (1998) model of a social justice perspective in community development to achieve this.

The two approaches will then be discussed in terms of how they should be used together to support not only positive casework, but effective social action, using the work of UnitingCare Burnside as examples.

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OUTLINE OF A STRENGTHS APPROACH

Strengths approaches, including 'Solution Focused', 'Narrative' and 'Appreciative Inquiry', seek to work within a 'solution building', rather than a traditional 'problem solving' paradigm. These approaches have arisen in response to a growing commitment to human rights and empowerment in social welfare, disability and mental health work. They have also arisen out of a belief that casework has, over time, become more psychoanalytic in its focus (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kisthardt 1989; Early & GlenMaye 2000).

In strengths approaches it is argued that traditional problem solving approaches are based upon the medical model, involving an initial diagnosis or assessment of an individual to determine their illness, deficit, problem or pathology (Weick et al 1989; De Jong & Berg 1998; Ben-Zion 1999). Such practice creates the illusion that there are solutions to people's 'problems' or deficiencies (Weick et al 1989), and that 'the experts' are the professionals (Saleebey 1996; Blundo 2000). In traditional practice this results in the clients themselves being considered 'the problem', and ostracised when 'the problem' is not solved (the person is not fixed up), while the professional moves on to the next person/s to be 'healed'.

Saleebey (1992), a prominent academic of strengths approaches, identifies a number of assumptions underlying strengths work. These are:

- that clients have many strengths, and that practitioners must respect these;
- that practitioners must avoid 'the victim mindset' and collaborate with the client;
- that client motivation is based on fostering their strengths; and
- that any environment is full of resources.

Strengths approaches and those who write about them focus mainly on the relationships between service users and workers, either individually or in small groups. These approaches are rarely discussed in relation to the wider social justice skills such as advocacy for change within political and legislative structures. UnitingCare Burnside works with service users, using a strengths-based approach

to support their voices being heard through submissions to Government Inquiries, issues papers and research.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL WELFARE WORK TRADITIONS

Examination of the history of social welfare practice (more specifically the social work profession) provides evidence of a shift during the early parts of the 20th century, from practice being motivated by a charity perspective to practice underpinned by principles of social justice (McGrath Morris 2002). The charity perspective is characterised by the practitioner knowing ‘what is best’ and providing for people in need without empowering them or respecting their abilities to know, bring about and maintain a more beneficial life themselves. McGrath Morris (2002) argues that although a social justice perspective has been played out over time in various ways, and with varying degrees of success, a fundamental commitment to social justice in social welfare work remains today. This is important because, as Michael Reisch (2002) argues, a social justice perspective provides the opportunity for dominant ideologies, theories, policies and practice to be challenged and changed, leading to integration of new ideas into policy and practice, and subsequent improvements in people’s lives.

One difficulty with practising from a social justice perspective is that there is no straightforward or universally endorsed definition of social justice across society, let alone across the social welfare profession itself. Even preliminary observation of discussion about social justice reveals that it is claimed as a core value by adherents at extreme ends of the ideological continuum, and everywhere in between (Reisch 2002).

Contemporary Western understandings of social justice have been formulated by constructing and testing different, and often conflicting, meanings and theories of justice over time. During the 17th and 18th centuries, justice became conceptualised in terms of the role the state would take to ensure the preservation of individual and collective rights, freedom and peace throughout the society (Reisch 2002). During the 19th century, Marx argued that, since the State was a vehicle of oppression, exploitation and discrimination for some, and privilege for others, justice for individuals was not attainable through it (Berlin 1996, in Reisch 2002). Despite this counter argument, over time Western notions of justice as an abstraction became separated from, and replaced by, legal notions of individual and social rights (Reisch 2002), and the utilitarian notion that ‘just’ laws are such when they promote the greatest good, or ‘best outcomes’, for the greatest number of people in the society.

During the middle of the 20th century a new perspective emerged that tried to broaden the idea of social justice beyond that of legal rights and utilitarianism. This theory was formulated by the recently deceased John Rawls and has been very influential in recent Western theorising and policy

making. Briefly, Rawls’ theory of distributive justice is premised on the idea that individuals are able to attain justice, as opposed to having it imposed upon them by the State (Rawls 1999). Relying heavily on the concept of fairness, it is built around the following principles (*Australian*, 3 Dec. 2002, Time and Tides/Obituaries):

- [that] the requisition that certain liberties (liberty of conscience and freedom of thought, political liberties, freedom of association and so on) be equally provided for and treated as more important than other basic rights and liberties;
- these basic liberties [are to] be given priority over aggregate social good and perfectionist values;
- that fair opportunities be equally provided for all citizens;
- that differences in income and wealth, and in social positions, be structured so as to maximally benefit the worst-off members of society.

Social justice is now commonly associated with a commitment to concepts such as fairness, equity, virtue, access, participation, mutuality, entitlement, egalitarianism, collective responsibility, citizenship and rights (Macintyre 1985; Macintyre 1995; Reisch 2002). It is also closely related to the political aspects of society (Macintyre 1985) and is influential in conceptualising the role of the State in structuring the economy and negotiating a social contract, especially in the light of competing interests, and including the introduction of mutual rights and obligations (Macintyre 1995, Reisch 2002).

Basic to strengths approaches is the idea that clients do in fact know what they need and have the resources and knowledge required to meet these needs...

Jim Ife (1998) has argued that Rawl’s conception of justice is too heavily related to the individual, and consequently not sufficiently able to be transferred to the social realm, and to justice for communities. Ife proposes principles of justice that are, he argues, more relevant to the social realm. They are:

- structural disadvantage;
- empowerment;
- needs;
- rights;
- peace and non-violence, and
- participatory democracy (1998: 51).

This conceptualisation of Ife's forms the basis for the following discussion of a social justice perspective of the strengths approach, as conceptualised at *UnitingCare Burnside*.

IFE'S PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE STRENGTHS APPROACH

STRUCTURAL DISADVANTAGE

Ife (1998) argues that structural disadvantage is an important feature of a social justice perspective. This implies that if social justice is concerned with 'the social', then the structures and systems that comprise 'the social' are relevant and necessary elements to ensure justice. This means that if calls are being made for social justice, then it must be lacking in the existing structures and systems. Ife (1998) argues that where social justice does not exist, then oppressive systems and structures creating inequity and injustice do. For social justice to be a reality, these systems and structures must be challenged, overcome and changed.

According to Scott (2000), the strengths approach supports multi-sector social action and the addressing of inequalities in society, rather than focusing solely on any problems that individuals might experience. It can be argued that by advocating for a social-environmental perspective rather than adopting an individualistic approach, strengths approaches are very much in line with these ideas (Weick et al 1989; Blundo 2000). Strengths approaches view failure as related more to malfunction in the wider social context rather than the individual or family (Dunst et al (1994), in Early & GlenMaye 2000). Saleebey (1992) sees strengths work as a political statement as much as a therapeutic approach, and White and Epton (1990, in Etchison 2000) state that narrative therapy (an example of a strengths approach) is based on the idea that problems are manufactured in social, cultural and political contexts.

EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is an important element of both a social justice perspective and the strengths approach. According to Ife (1998: 56), empowerment 'aims to increase the power of the disadvantaged'. This is achieved by helping people gain awareness of, and release from, oppressive elements affecting them (Saleebey 1996).

As noted earlier, traditional problem solving based on assessment and diagnosis by a professional suggests that problems are part of people, leaving them unable to experience themselves as having any personal agency in finding the solution (De Jong & Berg 1998). Strengths approaches seek to enhance the competence of the service user. An underlying assumption is that the person/s in partnership with the worker has as much valuable knowledge about their situation, if not more, as the worker (Ben-Zion 1999; Blundo 2000). The worker encourages the

service user to see that they are not the problem and works to assist people to identify where they are located in the context of the problematic situation (Saleebey 1996). Therapists working from strengths approaches believe it is more appropriate to actively focus on identifying and building upon service user strengths, that is, their

... capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values and hopes, however dashed and distorted these may have become through circumstance, oppression and trauma (Saleebey 1996: 297).

In social justice work, the emphasis has traditionally been on professionals advocating for the service users, using their own constructs of the issues rather than those of the service users. Burnside has chosen to use the emerging principle of participation as broadly as possible to support social justice principles, such as empowerment, within the agency.

'Having Your Say': This process was initiated by Burnside in order to give greater voice to young people in Burnside's residential care programs. The process began in 1994 and was a response to a number of factors. Among these were the trend to greater consumer rights, a trend that had begun to exert influence in the child welfare sector, and the establishment of the Complaints, Appeals and Monitoring Act 1993 (CAMA). These factors contributed to the impetus to change the agency culture and practices around hearing and responding to residents' views (Little & Mondy 1996:4).

Under the CAMA legislation agencies providing substitute care were required to establish a complaints mechanism. Burnside opted to develop a process, in consultation with young people, that would enable broader feedback about their place in the agency and its programs, as well as more specific complaints.

NEEDS

Need is one of those complex notions about which there are many different views and which are underpinned by subjective ideas of value. In defining need, the definer is revealing what they believe, or assume, to be basic rights and entitlements for their life, or for the lives of others. An integral part of including need in a social justice perspective is that there must be room for people to define their own needs as opposed to being told what they need (Ife 1998).

Basic to strengths approaches is the idea that even if clients do not realise it, they do in fact know what they need and have the resources and knowledge required to meet these needs, yet they may need help to discover what they know (Parton & O'Byrne 2000). The worker and the client

therefore re-construct the client's story together. Therapists utilising strengths approaches tend to advocate practices that are actively respectful of the wishes, feelings and self-identified needs of people.

In relation to a strengths approach with children, Butler and Williamson (1994: 119) argue that:

... children should always be consulted, as part of the negotiation and review of work, to identify any preference they may have regarding the gender, race and culture of their worker

and that:

... working agreements with young people should ensure that they retain a maximum possible choice/autonomy within the working relationship, while having easy access to advice and support outside of it (1994: 122).

Wilkinson (1999) argues that unless the stories of the children are incorporated into the discussion of their needs, the discussion supports children as a 'virtual reality' in social welfare work. Through the workers' engagement of children in a strengths model, with the aim of putting aside suppositions and professional knowledge as to what they think the children 'need', children may begin to be heard within social welfare work. Butler and Williamson (1994) demonstrated children and young people's understanding of the different perceptions, priorities and world views of adults, and how these inhibit the adult's abilities to meet the child's needs. In this study it was noted that tendencies by adults to trivialise, under-react or over-react, or just react inappropriately, were the main issues for children and young people. According to Butler and Williamson (1994: 82):

[T]he dilemma for children and young people, as they see it, is that once they convey something to adults, the power to determine what should then be done is too often taken out of their hands.

UnitingCare Burnside and the University of Western Sydney have been involved in a collaborative research project, which commenced in 1999. This project has concentrated on supporting children's voices in out-of-home care. A specific aim of the project has been to include children as participants in an action research process. Children's participation was facilitated through methods increasingly being documented as helpful for researching the lives of children in ethically and methodologically sound ways (James & Christensen, 1999). This research project, now completed, will be further rolled out through strategies to support those voices within our programs.

RIGHTS

Rights relate to what have been deemed to be fundamental entitlements for a certain standard of living. These can be universal or relative to certain situations, depending on the perspective of the people defining them, and relate to notions such as fairness and equity (Ife 1998). One important difference between rights and needs is that rights have, in many countries, been instituted into the legal system. Another equally important difference is that rights, as opposed to needs, exist alongside responsibility as two sides of the same coin, which means that they cannot exist without each other. A social justice approach involves explaining, defining, asserting and balancing both rights and responsibilities and teaching others to do the same (Ife 1998).

Examination of the underlying assumptions of a strengths approach indicates that, although not explicitly stated, such an approach is strongly founded on the notion of rights. This is evidenced principally by, amongst other things, underlying assumptions such as the idea that people need to be engaged in the community as citizens (Saleebey 1996) and that the person seeking assistance works in partnership with the professional, rather than from a position of inequality (Saleebey 1996; Ben-Zion 1999). Citizenship implies that there are rights accompanying that membership. In strengths practice the notion of rights is evident through an expectation that professionals and clients work together as equals to overcome oppressive and dominant forces in the lives of clients (Saleebey 1996). This implies that there are shared basic rights to make this possible, and that this occurs through practice that is designed to assist people to determine and meet their needs in order to reach their potential (Saleebey 1996), the inference being that they have the right to change.

Service users from the NEWPIN project in Western Sydney have presented to State politicians at the Inquiry into Crime Prevention and Social Support (1999). Additionally, they have spoken about their experiences to the broader public via programs such as ABC's *Lateline*, Channel 9's *A Current Affair*, and Channel 7's *Today Tonight*. Within NEWPIN, the parents are seen as working together with the staff to effect change at all social levels.

PEACE AND NON-VIOLENCE

According to Ife (1998), valuing and practising peaceful engagement and non-violence are integral to social justice. This idea is not necessarily related to such action on a global scale, although this is part of it, but is more specifically about practising inclusive and consensus decision-making

locally instead of instituting social ideologies, structures and systems based on competition (Ife 1998).

Practitioners of strengths approaches advocate peace and non-violence through their mutual and collaborative partnerships and practices (Saleebey 1996; Ben-Zion 1999; Early & GlenMaye 2000). A focus in practice is on the identification of strengths, in collaboration with the client, rather than an extensive focus on the problem, abuse or illness (Saleebey 1996; Ben-Zion 1999; Blundo 2000; Early & GlenMaye 2000). Additionally an integral part of strengths approaches relates to the creation of egalitarian and mutually beneficial communities that are comprised of representatives from all interest groups, including government, business, unions, welfare and social services, and community members (Saleebey 1996; Blundo 2000; Scott 2000).

Burnside seeks to work collaboratively with government, non-government and corporate partners to ensure cooperation rather than competition. The 1997-1999 Invest in Families campaign, chaired by the then Burnside CEO and supported by the resources of the Social Justice and Research team, involved collaborative work with a range of community partners in order to successfully promote child abuse prevention as an issue in the 1999 State election.

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Founded on the system of social organisation and decision-making said to have been developed and practised in Ancient Greece, democracy has come to mean many different things. Although in its most pure sense democracy is defined as 'the rule of the people by the people', alternatives have developed. Very simply, the two most prominent forms of democracy are known as participatory democracy and representative democracy. By definition participatory democracy involves a social structure where the constituents are able to be directly involved in decision-making. Representative democracy, on the other hand, involves a structure whereby certain people, who are usually elected to the position, are assigned specific powers to make decisions on behalf of others. Ife (1998) argues that representative democracy provides, amongst other undesirable consequences, greater opportunity for power imbalance between members of society as well as lack of access to decision-making processes for any person not affiliated with dominant interest groups that wield power. He also states that, in spite of difficulties such as the logistics of involving large numbers of people and its complexity, participatory democracy is a more desirable system for ensuring social justice than representative democracy.

Ife argues that a move towards a more participatory model of democracy requires the implementation of four characteristics (1998: 76-78). These are:

- decentralisation of decision making processes, where the perspectives of those further from the centre are considered and valued. Ife argues that centralised functions, where required, should preferably provide more of a coordination and information/resource provision function;
- development of a system of accountability where the people directly involved in decision-making are accountable rather than accountability being directed to the centre, and to those not directly related to the issues;
- increased education and awareness-raising about the issues in order that decisions might be well informed;
- obligation on the part of those affected by decisions to participate and become informed about the issues requiring decisions.

Saleebey argues that the use of strengths-based approaches

... requires a deep belief in the necessity of democracy and the contingent capacity of people to participate in the decisions and actions that define their world (1992: 8).

He later argues that workers must meet with clients as equals to develop a relationship of mutuality, sharing 'knowledge, tools, concerns, aspirations and respect' (Saleebey 1996: 303). Another important element of the strengths approach is that the clients are assisted to develop membership of solid and lasting networks (private and community), known as 'enabling niches' (Saleebey 1996), that can be drawn upon in the future as required.

CONCLUSION

Examination of a strengths approach to social welfare provides evidence that such an approach is certainly imbued with social justice principles, and that social justice strategies can draw more upon the strengths-based principles. Jim Ife's (1998) notion of a social justice perspective provides a useful way of investigating a strengths approach for its social justice characteristics. The links between a strengths approach and social justice principles are clear and could be characterised as:

- a concern or focus on the impact of structural disadvantage and the environment over attention to individual pathology;
- designed to ensure that people are empowered to embrace their personal agency and knowledge of themselves, requiring that workers are in partnership with them;
- intended to challenge workers to engage with their clients in order to ascertain what is required, rather than

imposing their own values and assumptions about clients' needs;

- based on principles of human rights;
- seeking peaceful and non-violent responses to issues by adopting collaborative strategies;
- establishing a culture of democracy in therapeutic and community relationships.

In *UnitingCare* Burnside, workers, management and service users are working together to ensure that these principles are contained in actions and interactions at all levels of our work. □

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