

Social Work Practice: Innovation and Social Justice for a Changing World

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The world is complex and ever-changing, requiring innovation and a commitment to social justice. We, as social workers, are part of an empowering tradition and one that must evolve with what is happening around us to stay timely and effective. Thus, we are called to be innovators of new approaches and practices in a dynamic, fluid, and responsive manner while in the midst of changes at multiple levels. These changes require social workers to be at the forefront of shaping discourse, advancing policy, and building on the science that supports practice.

Right now we are witnessing discussions about poverty in America. Although it could be said that these notions are new, the truth is that they are cyclical. Fifty years after the War on Poverty, we have slowly watched safety nets diminish and economic opportunities challenged. With the War on Poverty emerged important legislation that provided health and food security, and education and economic opportunity. The legislation, which provided a safety net for poor and vulnerable populations, is now being debated, reconfigured, and reconsidered. The face of poverty has changed in the past 50 years from older Americans to women, particularly single mothers, and children. The debate about poverty, why it exists, who is to blame, and how to move our country forward has resurfaced. Yet, we often forget to examine wealth inequity. The wealthiest get richer, while the middle class shrinks and the poor get poorer. Economic inequality is growing in the United States, exacerbated by the economic recession. For the first time in a generation, younger people are not expected to make similar economic strides as the generation before them. Discussions about increasing the minimum wage, extending unemployment insurance, and protecting safety nets are all critical issues. These conversations are not just for the 15 percent

in our country struggling with the deprivation of poverty; they meant for all of us, especially social workers. In October of 2013, the government essentially shut down for 16 days over debates on the budget and the debt limit; however, the stalemate was about much more than economics. There are differences in opinion about how to achieve equity and justice. Social workers must be engaged in these discussions and provide leadership rooted in the *NASW Code of Ethics*. The renewed focus on poverty will call for social workers to be innovative practitioners, fierce advocates, and committed researchers.

Amid these debates is a changing America. Our country is becoming demographically older and more diverse. People over 65 years of age were 8.1 percent of the U.S. population in 1950. Now, that population represents roughly 12.4 percent of the U.S. population and is projected to reach 20.2 percent of the population in 2050 (Shrestha & Heisler, 2011). The white population is projected to fall from 81 percent to 74 percent of the U.S. population, and people of color are expected to grow from 19 percent to 26 percent of the U.S. population by 2050. These population changes will be critical for informing culturally competent services that speak to the diversity within the United States. We will be called to embrace a science of cultural competence that recognizes and responds to diversity both between and within groups.

We are also faced with an increasing call to respond to health and behavioral health in our nation. Although the majority of those with mental illness are not violent, recent highly visible incidents involving people with a mental illness have rendered a renewed focus on the state of mental health services in our nation. As the largest number of mental health practitioners in the United States, social workers are especially vital to the discourse

that examines mental health services, treatments, and policies. With one in four Americans over the age of 18 years suffering from some form of mental illness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011), ongoing and pervasive trauma being experienced (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2011), and an increase in suicides (CDC, 2014), social workers must be at the center of creating new mental health structures, improving access to care, and providing culturally competent services at multiple levels of practice. The health care debate is also a part of this discussion. The Affordable Care Act contains important provisions that promote equity and access to health and mental health care, particularly for people of color, people who are poor, and women (Bent-Goodley, 2012a). At the intersection of these issues are our military—our service men and women—returning home with serious physical and mental health needs. Social workers are encouraged to strengthen their military social work prowess through advanced competencies and levels of engagement (CSWE, 2010). Women continue to be disproportionately more likely than men to experience interpersonal and sexual violence in their homes and their communities both within our nation and the global community (Bent-Goodley, 2012b). Human trafficking of women and girls is a global phenomenon between and within nations. Although men most definitely experience these issues, it is the perception of women as unequal and the institutionalization of their perceived inequity that drives these statistics. Our footprint on these issues is needed now more than ever.

It will take all of us to respond to these challenging issues. We will need the interplay of micro and macro practice to create innovative responses that spark social change. As a profession, social work continues to be challenged with balancing between these two worlds of micro and macro practice. Yet, the combination of both is at the heart of the strength of our profession. Being able to advance both perspectives is critical to the progress of our profession and our role as global citizens.

I want to thank NASW Board President Jeane W. Anastas and the NASW Board of Directors for entrusting the progression of *Social Work* with me. I have the benefit of assuming this responsibility after a very dedicated Editor-in-Chief—Elizabeth C. Pomeroy. I would like to thank Dr. Pomeroy for

her service, hard work, and commitment to advancing *Social Work*. I hope to build on her work and the work of past editors. Working with the Editorial Board and consulting editors, I plan to further expand and build on the scholarship and science that supports social work practice. I will work to ensure that articles published in *Social Work* are both research and practice informed, showing the powerful interplay between the world of practice and research. In addition, I will work to increase the number of articles that evidence an appreciation of diversity and advance the science of culture and cultural competence. Finally, I will seek manuscripts that advance our knowledge and understanding of how social work can be at the forefront of innovation in practice and social justice. Without a doubt, we are at the brink of change—some things will be cyclical and others new. Regardless, I am confident that social workers will be there to meet these challenges with leading-edge solutions that will foster promise for future generations. **SW**

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