

Spotlight on a Discipline: Social Work as the Academic Stranger

Early German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel (1850-1918)'s image of society focused upon group interactions in modern life, where individuals are alienated from themselves, society, and their interactions cannot always be understood by applying natural laws. In one of his most influential works, "The Stranger" Simmel portrays individuals as "a wanderer who come today and stays tomorrow." Simmel's essay points to those who in society are both part of a community yet at the same time outsiders, those who are detached and near, or alienated and marginalized. Simmel's observations were of those individuals in Europe who were without a place—travelers and the marginalized. This position in society provided the stranger with a unique position in a community. However, this position can be alienating. While being a part of the community, "The Stranger" may also have the strength to empower and create structural and institutional change. Leading one to possibly draw parallels and ask, "Are social work educators' strangers in academia; are they an unidentified asset in university communities?"

The focus of "The Stranger" is on their relationship within the community. Simmel views the stranger as something of a mediator. In the essay "The Stranger" Simmel describes '...he is the freer man, practically and theoretically; he examines conditions with less prejudice; he assesses them against standards that are more objective; and his actions are not conformed by customs, piety, or precedent...' ¹ The concept of the stranger is "...that a person may be a member of a group in a spatial sense but still not be a member of the group in a social sense." ² The Stranger, according to American Sociologist George Ritzer, can be more objective than other group members in their interactions because of the closeness and distance of their roles. ³ For the social work education to fully become part of academia, the discipline must be equal to other social sciences, such as psychology. ⁴ As social work scholar Margaret Gibelman

describes, social work as a profession that is constantly evolving based on social, economic, and political contexts.⁵ This search for identity is part of the uniqueness of social work as a profession and academic discipline. Labeling the profession and academic discipline as human services, social services, or helping professions can create misunderstandings for students, academics, and the professional identity for those who practice.

Social work, like other professions within academia, is an integral part of the higher education system and is important to the overall university structures. Elisa Martin and Loretta Pyles have studied the role of social work at universities and view it as engaged and applied learning. Academically, social work is not confined to health professions, education, social sciences, criminal justice, business, but inclusive of all of these to develop knowledge and skills for practice.⁶ Central to educating social work students is enlisting social work faculty to embrace the university's community as critical subfield of social work practice and teaching. These faculty are community social work practitioners who are in practice with social service agencies and who teach serving as the field practicum supervisors. The social workers in the field bridge social work practice, teaching, applied learning, while intersecting with the academic environment as licensed professionals.

Like many other social sciences, social work foundations are in the liberal arts. The liberal arts perspective provides social work education with a "which provide the intellectual basis for the professional curriculum and inform its design."⁷ Social work education is grounded in a range of knowledge, skills, and ethics which support a generalist perspective as the basis for practice. As of 2015, CSWE accreditation process places social work into a unique category with its own concepts, language, and standards, and it also includes the research rigors and standards associated with the social sciences and humanities.⁸ Samatha Wehgi "argues that

as academics we need to engage in self-reflection on our own practice as educators.”⁹ Whereas Kathy Hogarth and Rachelle Ashcroft argue the nature of social work with “several competing views within the profession, ... only adds to its identity crisis.”¹⁰ Consequently, the concept of “alienation” or “strangeness” may be associated within and outside the profession and how social work fits in the academy first needs a clear definition. For Simmel, these are the underlying conditions where the individuals are not attached to a group, community, or society by the traditional attachments. Social work in higher education appears to be detached as a “stranger” in its own mission, aims, uniqueness, and / or goals.

The Profession of Social Work

The CSWE EPAS specify nine competencies that structure social work education. The first standard asserts that students “demonstrate ethical and professional behavior.” Social work students “demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communication.”¹¹ The focus on social work education, as Donald Leslie and Rosemary Cassano discuss, is to build a foundation of professional identity around the structured CSWE accredited education system.¹² The CSWE EPAS include nine competencies, “each competency describes the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes that comprise the competency at the generalist level of practice, followed by a set of behaviors that integrate these components.”¹³ The CSWE competencies for social work, share vocabulary and terminology with the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) “Code of Ethics” (2008). NASW (2008) includes six core values for the profession of social work “service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.”¹⁴ These core values should be expressed in the language and memoirs of students and professionals. These NASW core values in conjunction with the CSWE EPAS competency

“identifying as professional social workers and conduct oneself accordingly”¹⁵ supply the framework for developing a social worker’s professional identity. However, the interface between practice settings and social work practitioners’ professional self-development is where six-word memoirs reflect their own integrity may be questioned by those outside the profession of social work. Margaret Carpenter and Sheila Platt assert that social workers have felt a split between traditional social work values and marketplace values. Social Worker’s professional identity has many components, one of them being identification with traditional social work values which are currently under assault by managed care.¹⁶ Social work practice settings often include agencies that are not traditionally regarded as delivering social services. Settings such as healthcare, corrections, military, education, organizations, or other institutional settings present conditions, which may challenge social workers professional identity and ethics. Susan Manning writes “Today social workers face the challenges of the most complex ethical dilemmas in the history of the profession.”¹⁷ Integrity fills the gap between professional identity and ethics. The center of this complex interaction for the social worker is *self*. The CSWE’s EPAS (2015) along with ethical guidelines of the social work profession (NASW, 2008) create conditions, which challenge even the most staunch social worker’s professional identity.

Social Work Empowerment

Empowerment has been a growing theme in social work education over the past three decades.¹⁸ Amnon Boehm and Lee Staples state “. . . empowerment refers to processes and outcomes whereby less powerful individuals and groups move to reduce discrepancies in power relationships either through zero-sum, win-lose strategies or mutual benefit, win-win approaches.”¹⁹ Whereas Robert Barker defines empowerment as “...the process of helping individuals, families, groups and communities increased their personal, interpersonal,

socioeconomic, and political strength and develop influence toward improving their circumstances.”²⁰ With these definitions of empowerment as a guide to decrease incongruities in power relationships and a resource to improve circumstances, empowerment can be applied by social workers to many contexts of practice. Past literature has associated the process of empowerment to various populations such as consumers and professionals,²¹ graduate social work education as connected to social justice and advocacy.²²

Empowerment is a fundamental concept in social work education and practice. The concept of “power” goes to the heart of empowerment theory. Competence is central to the meaning of empowerment; and the kinds of experiences and skills necessary to actualize empowerment is a consistent theme in the literature about this concept. Brian Bolton and Jeffery Brooking add personal empowerment with elements of self-efficacy, self-esteem, mastery, perceived competence, or assertiveness.²³ Whereas Barker in the helping process in social work practice empowerment is defined as way to increase “... strength and develop influence toward improving their circumstances.”²⁴ Gutierrez, Parsons, and Cox identified four components of the empowerment process in practice as: 1) attitudes, values, and beliefs, 2) validation through collective experiences, 3) knowledge and skills for critical thinking and action, and 4) action. These empowerment components of social work practice are broad, universal, and readily relevant to conducting research.²⁵ Boehm and Staples found “...consumers viewed empowerment in terms of both process and products/outcomes, they definitely placed much greater emphasis on tangible results.”²⁶ Thus, to be empowered research and evaluation should drive practice and the process needs to be connected to positive outcomes and tangible results. This will lead to a more integrated sense of social work education and practice.

Conclusions

This essay begins a dialogue on social work's place in higher education through the narrative of social work educators. The Stranger is a metaphor for the social work educator's role in higher education and not a role as practicing professionals. The academic social worker is not a stranger but a transformative partner in higher education that should be more visible in as an academic. The academic social worker should apply the values and ethics as an integral part of higher education. Finally, understanding the effects of stereotyping on social work education as visibility of the profession will advanced and empowering in the higher education service delivery in the future.

ENDNOTES

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