

# Social Work's Professional and Social Justice Projects: Discourses in Conflict

Jeffrey J. Olson

**ABSTRACT.** This article argues that social work has two distinct and very different projects that are so conflated that they are indistinguishable from one another; the social justice project and the professional project. The social justice project seeks to transform the conditions that permit the existence of preventable human suffering. The professional project positions social work as a profession in a system of professions in competition with one another for jurisdictional turf. The effect of this conflation is that social justice discourses are rendered instrumental vehicles of the professional project. After laying out this thesis, this article discusses ways to reverse this relationship so that professionalization can be made to serve the ends of social justice. doi:10.1300/J059v18n01\_04 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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## *INTRODUCTION*

One of the main problems that the profession of social work faces at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that it has situated itself

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so that it is unable to move in ways that address how to solve pressing social problems. This article argues that social work has narrowed its focus to achieve legitimacy and respectability as a “profession.” This achievement is identified as the goal of the professional project. What is lost in this narrowing is the scope needed to be part of creating a just world, what could be called the social justice project.

This article calls into question the common assumption that the profession’s organizing value is social justice (Wakefield, 1988). The core argument is that social work’s primary organizing value is the professional project and its assumptions, not social justice, and that the two projects have no common ideational ground. Rather, through the historical conflation of these two very different projects, the social justice project is a powerful, instrumental vehicle of the desired ends of the professional project—status and legitimacy as a profession in the system of professions. By “conflate” is meant an historical combining of two very different sets of assumptions about the world so that over time they appear to be part of a unified discourse. The unquestioned assumption (conflation) is that social work has as its end the creation of a just world.

Beginning in the late 1970s, a critical voice emerged that questioned if the movement towards empirically based practice was grounded in larger principles of humanism and social justice (Goldstein, 1990, 1992; Heineman-Pieper, 1981; Saleebey, 1979, 1991, 1993; Witkin, 1991, 1992; Witkin & Gottshcalc, 1988). Over the last 10 years a body of literature has emerged that not only critiques the role of empirical knowledge, but deeply explores some of social work’s assumptions about itself (Simon, 1994; Kunzel, 1993; Tice, 1998; Margolin, 1997; Fook, 2002; Reichert, 2003; Pease & Fook, 1999; Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001). This questioning, critical voice continues to raise questions about the role of professionalization in the academy and in practice.

The following sections develop the argument that the two projects have completely different sets of assumptions and desired consequences. By understanding how these two projects are different from one another it becomes possible to explore how to begin to reverse their relationship. The desired consequence of this reversal is that the professional project becomes an instrumental vehicle of the social justice project. However, this is only possible if a clear distinction is made between the two projects at the level of fundamental assumptions and desired ends.

The article begins by discussing the professional project. It lays out three assumptions that can be seen to constitute modernization and underlie professionalization: (1) the cosmology of the natural world, (2) capitalization of the market economy, and (3) differentiation of the

discourse of rights. It then discusses Andrew Abbott's (1988) model for understanding the system of the professions and ends by clarifying the mission of the professional project. The next section discusses the social justice project. It outlines a set of assumptions developed from social constructionist (Gergen, 2000) and post-structuralist (Foucault, 1980; Falzon, 1998) thought. A definition of social justice is then developed. The last part of this section describes the social justice project's mission. The third section discusses how the two projects are conflated, and the final section discusses some strategies to reverse the relation of dominance between the two projects.

### ***THE PROFESSIONAL PROJECT***

Social work's professional project consists of claiming and maintaining jurisdictions of practice in competition with other professions in a system of professions. The basic mechanism of inter-professional competition is the "use of abstract knowledge to reduce the work of competitors to a version of their own" (Abbott, 1988, p. 36). The "core jurisdiction" of a profession is its theory and the state-of-the-art knowledge derived from theory that frames professional practice.

More narrowly, social work's professional project consists of standardizing and codifying methods of intervention into "evidence-based practices" so that they form a professional standard of care in all of the various venues in which social work is conducted. Only by using interventions framed by empirically generated theory and tested by the empirical methods of the academic social sciences can social work compete with other professions in the system of professions. The theories that legitimize social work's place in this system are themselves derived from empirical research, for example, social learning theory, attachment theory, and cognitive/behavioral theories.

#### ***The Fundamental Assumptions of the Professional Project***

The fundamental assumptions underlying the system of professions and social work's place within this system are those of modernity and the productive forces of modernization. Best and Kellner (1991) say of modernity and modernization;

Modernity entered everyday life through the dissemination of modern art, the products of consumer society, new technologies,

and new modes of transportation and communication. The dynamics by which modernity produced a new industrial and colonial world can be described as “modernization”—a term denoting those processes of individualization, secularization, industrialization, cultural differentiation, commodification, urbanization, bureaucratization, and rationalization which together have constituted the modern world. (pp. 2-3)

I argue elsewhere (Olson, 2001) that there are three main forces making up modernization: (1) the cosmology of the natural world, (2) the capitalized market economy, and (3) differentiation of the discourse of rights. The modernizing processes mentioned by Best and Kellner (1991) are more specific combining of these three forces. These three forces make up the fundamental assumptions about the world that undergird and structure the professional project. The next three sections flesh out these modernizing forces.

### *The Cosmology of the Natural World*

Cosmology is defined as a theory or framework describing the natural order of the universe. The cosmology of the natural world says the world known by Western science is objective and real apart from subjective perception of it. This cosmology claims that nature exists whether humanity exists or not, and consequently, has a more objective reality than does any human perception of it.

The inhering belief within this cosmology is that nature is real in and of itself. There is an abiding faith that by rigorous adherence to the principles and guidelines of the scientific method nature is ultimately knowable. We may not have the tools to know it fully now, but someday we will. Rubin and Babbie (2005, p. 40), in one of social work’s premier research textbooks, state, “postpositivists believe an objective external reality exists, although they recognize its elusive nature.” Briar (1971, p. 23) says,

I realized that the problem is that all these orienting concepts (and I could give a very long list) have no tangible, observable referents in the real world. Their only referents are to their definitions, which are stated in words that are also without tangible meaning in the real world, the definitions often being only descriptive analogies. Efforts have been made, of course, to give concepts such as “ego strength” some meaning in the real world. However, even

very sophisticated efforts have been unsatisfactory, because this concept, and others like it, were never anchored in the real world in the first place.

Briar's comments perhaps reflect the more naïve attitude of the early 1970s that signaled rejection of psychodynamic theories and methods for those of the natural and social sciences. However, today this perspective in more sophisticated form has moved to the center of social work's claim to being a legitimate profession. Teaching and using evidence-based practices takes on an ethical, if not moral, imperative (Gambrill, 2003).

The underlying cosmology is that the natural world as viewed by Western science remains "real" apart from human existence within it, and that the scientific method allows us to "know" it with ever greater clarity.

### *Capitalization of the Market Economy*

The second force of modernization is capitalization of the market economy. It emerged as a result of some of the forces mentioned by Best and Kellner: industrialization, commodification, urbanization, bureaucratization, and rationalization. These forces transformed the medieval market, which was based in the master/apprentice system of production, barter, and trade of food and goods. The modern, capitalized market is based in vertical (hierarchical) organization of the means of production and systems of distribution.

The classic view of the market has economic activity essentially an individualistic act. Adam Smith's 1776 "Wealth of Nations" explored such concepts as the role of self-interest, the division of labor, the function of markets, and the international implications of a laissez-faire economy. He argued that self-interest guides the most efficient use of resources in a nation's economy, and that state and personal efforts to promote social good are ineffectual compared with unrestricted market forces. The invisible hand of the market insures that individual self-interest is balanced. According to Hooker (1996),

Capitalism as a way of thinking is fundamentally individualistic, that is, that the individual is the center of capitalist endeavor. This idea draws on all the Enlightenment concepts of individuality: That all individuals are different, that society is composed of individuals who pursue their own interests, that individuals should be

free to pursue their own interests (this, in capitalism, is called “economic freedom”), and that, in a democratic sense, individuals pursuing their own interests will guarantee the interests of society as a whole.

The classic view of capitalism can be seen as a stepping stone to the post-modern, corporatist, multi-national/global form of capitalism. The very idea of individual self-interest forming a balance of competing interests has a horizontal component. The individual will not risk his or her own self-interest for fear of being excluded from the markets within which s/he sells goods.

This Enlightenment view of economic commerce was radically transformed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. One marker of the transformation of capitalism occurred in 1886 when the Supreme Court ruled, “that because they are ‘persons,’ corporations should be protected by the 14th amendment’s rights to ‘due process of law’ and ‘equal protection of the laws,’ rights originally entrenched in the Constitution to protect freed slaves” (Bakan, 2004, p. 16). It was no longer individual persons that controlled capital and competed within the self-balancing marketplace; rather, it was corporations.

The legal transformation of corporations into persons and the passage of laws allowing corporations to own pieces of each other can be interpreted to have had the effect of erasing the classic, horizontal, invisible hand of balancing self-interests in a free marketplace. While the jury is still out on whether this more benefits or creates suffering for humankind, Bakan (2004) argues that the corporation as person is inherently pathological in motivation, aims, and ethics.

### ***Differentiation of the Discourse of Rights***

As part of modernization of the medieval world, the rights held by the King, nobility, and clergy were differentiated into the rights of the “citizen.” Insofar as the clergy and royalty continued to claim the right to define and enforce divine and sovereign law as a way to solve new social problems, their rule increasingly came to be seen as irrational and arbitrary. A major consequence of the struggles of liberation that took place in eighteenth century Western Europe and America, was that the rule of law and written contract replaced Sovereign/Clerical decision-making as the primary ordering mechanism of the social world. The “rights” of the King, nobility, and clergy were differentiated into the rights of the citizen. The “One” King and “One” God from which the medieval social order

stemmed slowly became the “many ones” of modernity as more and more groups of persons claimed the rights of the citizen.

Today differentiation of the discourse of rights continues with increasing numbers of groups claiming citizen status. The categories of the 1970s—women, for example—have differentiated into lesbians, Palestinian women who found their identities more in their nation status than gender, and many, many other self-described identity categories. In large part, these identities are created as a solution to the social problems generated by the cosmology of the natural world and capitalization of the market economy. Whether it’s a new job on the factory floor, developmental stage within the lifespan, or identity category based on hitherto subjugated difference, ever finer distinctions emerge within which groups of persons claim the rights of the citizen.

### ***Professionalization***

I argue elsewhere (Olson, 2001) that professionalization performs a specific function within the process of modernization; problem identification, naming and solution in development of an intervention that is then implemented. Professionalization moves in a *spiral* cycle of problem recognition/identification/solution/intervention. Each historical moment, its problems and eventual solutions, is unique. This is opposed to the medieval *circle* of repetition in which problems that emerged were solved by appealing to Sovereign law and/or interpretation of static scripture. A “crisis in authority” emerged when scriptural interpretation no longer could cope with these different kinds of issues (Haskell, 1988). The modern professions emerged along with the public research university to address the social problems created by modernization.

The system of the professions is the social institution within which problems go through the spiral process. Solutions become part of the social fabric out of which new problems generated by the three forces emerge. These new problems are identified and new solutions to the new problems are created.

In the 1870s, social work’s pioneers disavowed the approach the newly emerging social sciences based in public research universities were taking to address social problems. The academic social sciences were grounding their approach in empirically generated theory and knowledge. Germain (1971) argues that for the heads of correction institutions and charities, the issue emerged as a tension between theory and practice, “between the proponents of science and knowledge on the

one hand, and the proponents of practical procedures and methods on the other” (p. 40).

Social work eschewed alignment with academic institutions and adopted the scientism of the charity organization societies, the case-work methods of Mary Richmond, and the psychodynamic theory of Rank and Freud. It wasn't until the mid-1970s that in a search for legitimacy as a profession social work began to adopt the methods of the academic social sciences. Joel Fischer's (1973) question, “Is what we do effective?” continues to shape social work's worldview and knowledge base. When social work aligned itself with the academic social sciences in the 1970s after a 100-year search for theoretical and epistemological legitimacy, it fully adopted the fundamental assumptions of the professional project.

The key understanding that undergirds the idea of professionalization is that it is part of modernization, and that it is both constituted by the three forces, and differentiates them in an ongoing spiral of problem recognition, naming/identification, solution, and intervention. Andrew Abbott's, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (1988), offers a language for understanding this process and how the professions assume the three forces.

### *The System of the Professions*

The key contribution Abbott (1988) makes to our understanding of the professions is that “the professions make up an interdependent system of professions, and that the fundamental fact of professional life is interprofessional competition” (p. 2). Each profession's self-interest is in competition with another profession's self-interest to claim jurisdictional turf.

*Jurisdiction and competition.* Abbott looks at the professions from the perspective of “what they do” within the context of a jurisdiction. “A jurisdiction is the link between a profession and its work” (p. 20). The “tasks of professions are human problems amenable to expert service” (p. 35). In line with how corporate self-interest organizes hierarchizing capital, Abbott (1988) says, “Jurisdictional boundaries are perpetually in dispute, both in local practice and national claims. It is the history of jurisdictional disputes that is the real, the determining history of the professions” (p. 2). He says, “Since jurisdiction is the defining relation in professional life, the sequences that I generalize are sequences of jurisdictional control, describing who had control of what, when, and how” (p. 3). In the system of professions, as in the economy of multi-national

corporations wielding huge blocks of capital, there are winners and losers in the battles for turf.

An example of this process is social work's success in convincing managed care organizations that our version of what mental health services deliver, and how they are delivered, are superior to those of psychologists (Strom, 1997). Social workers currently provide the majority of mental health services in managed care organizations. The June 1999 issue of NASW's monthly newspaper had as its largest headline, "Profession dominates mental health."

Nieves (2000) says,

The changes wrought by managed care organizations (MCOs) are spurring the profession of social work to protective action. It is NASW's aim to assure that social workers do more than simply weather the change, but seek opportunity and come out ahead . . . Whatever the result, our goal will continue to be the same—representing members' interests and concerns and protecting jobs and salaries. And we will continue our integrated, multi-pronged strategy to obtain the best for NASW members and their clients and to grow the power of professional social work. (p. 3)

### ***Professional Mission***

The term mission will be understood to consist of a formal statement intended to capture a social entity's unique purposes and practices. Social work's professional mission charges social workers to claim jurisdiction for practice in competition with other professions. Abbott (1988) says that a profession is an exclusive occupational group applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases in competition with other occupational groups. Wenocur and Reisch (1989), two of social work's historians, define a profession as a "quasi-corporate enterprise whose members have obtained a substantial degree of control over the production, distribution, and consumption of a needed service commodity" (p. 4). Both definitions place the system of professions squarely within the forces of modernization.

The core jurisdiction of a profession is its theory. The professionalizing force within social work seems to have us think that if social work is to be thought of as equal to the other professions, it must adopt the core theories and practice standards adopted by the professions with which it competes. These theories and practice standards stem from the cosmology of the natural world and capitalization of the market economy. To be

successful in this competition for jurisdictional turf, social work necessarily must find itself in the core assumptions of the professional project. It is within these assumptions that social work generates its mission and makes its jurisdictional claim to represent those who have not yet achieved citizen status within the social contract and rule of law.

### ***SOCIAL JUSTICE PROJECT***

In contrast to the professional project, which assumes the reality of the natural world as it is being uncovered by Western science, the social justice project assumes a multiplicity of perspectives that describe what's real.

#### ***Cosmology of the Social Justice Project***

There are four assumptions that form the cosmology of the social justice project:

1. All humans believe
2. Out of believing emerge different beliefs
3. Over the lifespan, persons internalize community patterns of belief and participate in their reproduction and transformation through the role of community member
4. The just world has its origin in the ongoing act of believing.

The cosmology developed in this section is informed by both social constructionist (Gergen, 2000) and post-structuralist perspectives (Foucault, 1978, 1980; Falzon, 1998) of the world. The term "cosmology" is chosen intentionally. The cosmology of the natural world assumes one independent reality. The cosmology of the social justice project assumes a common core process to being human from which all difference emanates, including different understandings about the "nature of the universe."

The first proposition is that the *process of believing* is the foundational commonality that connects every human being. Believing is not something that happens at one time and not in another. It is the constant presence of purpose and meaning within the various moments and contexts of living. What is common is that each person believes what s/he believes. Believing is the core, most concrete, context within which all community beliefs (difference) emerge.

This leads to the second proposition; each and every human being is born into a community that shares specific historical, cultural, and socio-political patterns of meaning and purpose (beliefs). The idea of difference is aligned with the idea that there are many communities, each having its own unique and historically contingent understanding of reality. What is different and emergent from within what is common (believing) are specific beliefs held by each community and its members. Whether a tribal society in Borneo, an inner-city African American church congregation, or the “agreement reality” (Rubin & Babbie, 2005, p. 3) of social work researchers, all humans within community believe. All communities are different from one another in terms of specific beliefs held.

The third proposition of the cosmology is that throughout the lifespan, individuals internalize community patterns of meaning and purpose (systems of belief), and in some degree, participate in their transformation through dialogue with other persons. To believe is to participate in both reproduction and production (transformation) of meaning and purpose in dialogue and action with other persons within a community. Our very modes of explanation, description, and representation are derived and generated through dialogical relationship within community (Gergen, 2000; Falzon, 1998). The act of believing remains the same through all cultural and socio-political change. What is different and contingent are the specific beliefs held by communities in any given historical, cultural, and socio-political moment. When two or more persons engage in dialogue with one another, they both reproduce and transform beliefs (meaning and purpose). The role of dialogue here is captured in Freire’s (1970) idea of praxis–dialogue, reflection, and action within a community.

The fourth proposition has two parts. The first is that the just world (defined in the next section) has its origin in the ever-present act of believing. The world emanates from within the context of believing, where emanate means to flow or emerge continuously from a source. Believing is continuous and beliefs emanate continuously through dialogue and action within community and between communities in reproduction and transformation of the world. In this article, the term “source” is understood as the process of believing, not a transcendent, universal God, a unifying Good, or big bang. Use of the term stems from a post-structuralist understanding of capillary power (Foucault, 1980, p. 96).

The second part of this proposition is that to the degree that any claim of “T”ruth is made about a specific historical, cultural, and social configuration of belief that is not prefaced with “I believe,” in that degree the just world is hidden, erased, eradicated, and/or rendered invisible. This parallels Foucault’s (1980, p. 104) idea of totalizing discourses.

A “T”ruth claim, or a totalizing discourse, not prefaced with “I believe” covers over the origin/reality of the just world, the ongoing act of believing. A “T”ruth claim takes the form of, “My ‘T’ruth, as I understand it, is ‘T’rue for everyone.”

All claims to “T”ruth are historically, culturally, socially, and individually contingent, and when not prefaced with “I believe” are necessarily contested by some other similarly contingent claim in relations of domination and subjugation. This contestation can run from genocidal war between different cultures, to social work competing with psychology for dominance of a jurisdiction of practice, to one person condemning the beliefs and behaviors of another person. Any “T”ruth claim that does not open itself to interpretation and questioning necessarily creates a world in which there are winners and losers; those who dominate and benefit from totalizing discourses, and those who are subjugated by and suffer from them. This describes the unjust world.

When a claim is prefaced with “I believe,” the claim lays itself open to interpretation and questioning within dialogue. When dialogue occurs between two members *within* a community, that community is reproduced and transformed. When dialogue occurs between members of different communities, bridges *between* communities are developed and both communities can be transformed. In this way community is both reproduced and transformed, and the reality of the just world becomes that much more visible. When what the other presents is reflected upon, the potential to act differently and be part of changing community norms emerges—praxis.

### ***Definition of Social Justice and the Just World***

Social work’s social justice project seeks to illuminate the just world. The term “social justice” frames the process by which the just world is made visible. The definition of social justice used in this article begins with Maslow’s (1968) hierarchy of needs. Economic justice occurs when the first two basic needs (physiological and safety) are satisfied for a human being. The mechanism of this satisfaction is *community provision of access* to opportunity, in this case, the fruits of economic functions; food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and medical and wellness care. Social justice occurs when the third and fourth basic needs (the love of others and self-love) are satisfied for each human being. The mechanism of this satisfaction is *community provision of access* to opportunity, in this case, the fruits of social functions: love, education, satisfying work, the opportunity to develop identity within one’s own

cultural and social milieu, and pro-social role models. When a person within his or her community has these four basic needs sufficiently satisfied, s/he has been provided the opportunity to live in the just world.

The first two needs can be seen to parallel the individual rights or distributive justice perspective found in Rawls (2001) and Pelton (2001), and in the radical perspective found in Gil (1998). The third and fourth needs parallel the group rights perspective described by Young (1990, 2000) and Longres and Scanlon (2001).

The just world exists for those who have these four basic needs satisfied. For most persons in the world, the just world is invisible, is ideal, an abstraction. Without seeing and feeling access to economic and social opportunity, the said opportunity doesn't exist. In the perspective being developed here, the just world exists for only a few.

The process of self-actualization, Maslow's fifth basic need, occurs in this definition when a person has not only had the four basic needs satisfied, but chooses to be part of *community provision of access* to economic and social opportunity for other persons whose basic needs are not yet satisfied enough for the just world to be visible. For social workers, the characteristics of a self-actualized individual described by Maslow have meaning only within the context of dialogue, reflection and action–praxis–within a community, of which social work education and practice are two.

Many communities are based in totalizing discourses not open to interpretation and questioning. When these communities control provision of access to economic and social opportunity, they benefit from the reality of the unjust world and seek to reproduce, not transform, their "T"ruth claims. The communities that are subjugated have access to opportunity withheld from them. The mechanisms by which this withholding takes place are the institutional "isms"—racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, religionism, classism, and nationalism. For subjugated communities, it is the unjust world that is visible and real.

Subjugated communities don't seek to wrest the right to claim "T"ruth. Rather, they seek to enter into inter-community dialogue with the intent to transform relations of domination and subjugation. Only in this way are communities transformed and new institutional pathways created that provide (heretofore withheld) access to economic and social opportunity.

Subjugated communities can base claims for citizen status in their community's cultural/social history without identifying with the categories through which relations of domination and subjugation are maintained. Rather than identifying with a category that differentiates discourses of rights—Black versus White, Latino versus Anglo, Gay versus straight—a

community's claim of citizen status assumes the cosmology of the social justice project. Freire (1970, p. 60) says, "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it." He believes that the oppressed will help transform the world of the oppressor through dialogue.

The self-actualized person working as a social worker has the self-conscious intent to be part of helping make the just world visible for as many others as possible. S/he does this by being part of a community providing real *access* to economic and social opportunity to other communities and their members so they may live in the just world as well. S/he continually and constantly engages in transformative dialogue within her community and between communities as she facilitates the other community's development of a voice that might result in claim to citizen status and access to economic and social opportunity to satisfy basic needs.

In an important sense, from within the perspective of a person for whom the just world exists, belief in the unjust world is part of a "Great Lie." Actual human suffering, preventable disease, poverty, and starvation, for example, exist as a consequence of believing injustice is really real. Believing injustice is fundamental necessarily reproduces that injustice in action, no matter what actions are taken. In the social justice project, injustice and human suffering are a consequence of believing the unjust world is real. To be self-conscious and a vehicle of the social justice project is to believe the just world is real and act from this belief as part of praxis within community. Only in this way are the very assumptions that permit the unjust world to exist slowly transformed.

### ***Social Justice Mission***

The social justice mission charges social workers to generate access to economic and social opportunity within society's institutions. Social work's mission has been characterized in many different ways over social work's history. Morales and Sheafor (2004) define social work's mission as, "directly serving people in need and, at the same time, making social institutions more responsible to people" (p. 32). Simon (1994) notes the twin missions of "relieving the misery of the most desperate among us" and "building a human and just social order" (p. 23). The latest version of the NASW code of ethics identifies social work's primary mission to be to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living

in poverty” (NASW, 1999). At the profession’s heart, social workers are charged to create a just world. However, to the degree that the actions of social workers stem from professionalization and professionalism, this mission is a rhetorical and instrumental device to reproduce the ends of the professional project, competition for turf.

### **CONFLATION OF PROJECTS**

The system of professions has always had as part of its mission general or specific improvement of living conditions—the doctor and nurse seek to heal physical malady, the psychologist to heal emotional dysfunction, the social worker to relieve human misery and suffering within the transactional boundary of person and environment. For social work, there is a key conflation of ideas revealed in the difference between “what is said,” and “what is done.” To the degree that the role of professionalism in modernization informs and perhaps dominates practice, in that degree the mission of the social justice project is a rhetorical vehicle of professionalization, part of the social work’s winning strategy in competition with other professions for turf. In the perspective here, this conflation is a historical vehicle of totalizing discourses, of dominating “T”ruth claims and consequently acceptance of oppression and the reality of the unjust world.

*Saying one thing, doing another.* The conflation of these two projects has one very important unintended outcome. This is that it is normal for social workers to say one thing and do another. Tice (1998) discusses how social workers created clients, their problems, and solutions as part of developing professional authority and identity over jurisdictions of practice. Following Leighninger (1978), Tice argues there was much more tempestuous conflict internally as social work professionalized than traditional historical accounts emphasize. The battle over turf was the primary mechanism by which social work shaped itself, not the goal to create a just world.

Kunzel (1993) connects the experience of unwed mothers with their construction as discursive objects by professionals. Unwed mothers were constructed as a sub-population of women whose very individuality is derived from professional contestation over turf. Who gets to define these women’s problems and the solutions for them was an issue through which professionalization of the field was carried out. The rhetoric of social justice validated this objectification.

Margolin (1997) provides a chilling perspective on this problem. He argues that social workers blind themselves to how professional practice perpetuates and expands social injustice in order to do what we do. Professional practice can be understood to be a process that extends the defining reach of dominant, privileged populations deeper into the private lives of the different populations social work serves. Social justice is the discursive beacon allowing interrogation, investigation, and surveillance of poor persons, persons of color, and other subjugated populations.

Simon's (1994) history is cast through a feminist and constructionist lens. Her history can be read as a challenge to the underlying, and unquestioned assumptions of the professional project. She both critiques the social work's traditional historical view of itself, and in the space she clears lets non-traditional, subjugated voices be heard. She reworks traditional history, showing how it is patriarchal, and writes another based in the voices patriarchal mechanisms have silenced.

All four cited authors can be interpreted to support this article's argument, that social work's organizing value is not social justice, but professionalization and the dominance successful professionalization entails. The discourse of social justice that is core to social work's professional mission can be seen to serve an instrumental function. It promotes professional ends.

Wakefield (1988) argues that, "teleological concepts, such as the purpose, goal, and mission of a profession, all refer to the promotion of the profession's organizing value" (p. 192). He goes on to say, "An understanding of the organizing value of a profession informs and constrains all aspects of professional practice . . . Every step in the process of professional intervention, from assessment to evaluation, is shaped by the organizing value" (pp. 192, 193).

I argue that this discourse has a discursive commitment to social justice, but rather than organizing and guiding social workers in what they do, it serves as an instrument of the professional project and three forces of modernization. As Margolin (1997) put it, social workers talk Jane Addams and do Mary Richmond. This is the disjuncture hidden within the conflation. The consequence is that there is great difference between "what is said" and "what is done" by social workers.

Wakefield (1988) goes on to say, "To the degree that the organizing value of social work can be made more explicit than it has been, the profession can have a clearer target at which to aim and a better chance to realize its goals" (p. 193). He wants to make more explicit the role of social justice in social work practice. So does this article.

One of the goals of Enlightenment modernity is that of a just (rational) world, where all have access to economic and social opportunity, where every person enjoys the universal, natural rights of the citizen. However, neither the cosmology of the natural world or the corporate controlled capitalization of the market economy includes this goal. Pure science discovers what is there in nature. The technologies of applied science are formed by corporation controlled capital and its hierarchizing role in the market economy. Differentiation of the discourse of rights is part of problem identification and solution the other two forces generate—new identity categories codified in law that preclude horizontal organizing and praxis.

Social work's use of the discourse of rights does not focus on the structural conditions generated by the three forces of modernization, and does not focus on relations of domination and subjugation that inhere within modernization. It utilizes the discourses of strengths and empowerment and participates in the differentiation of rights within the context of the cosmology of the natural world and capitalization of the market economy.

Social work does not identify its own participation in modernizing professionalization and how it reproduces the structures of social and economic injustice. Its own romantic history is marked by Flexner's 1915 question, "Is social work a profession," and his answer, "No." Social work's story about itself makes this speech into a fulcrum around which the field focused its professionalizing efforts (Austin, 1983).

Ehrenreich (1985) says that the social work literature over the decade after Flexner's speech was filled with proposals to increase the professionalization of social work. At the same time, there were efforts to make sure that the powers that be were not offended so that professionalization would not be jeopardized. Specht and Courtney's (1994) work marked Flexner's speech as the turning point when "the search for theory began in earnest" (p. 87). This search for a theory within which to ground practice, what Abbott (1988) calls a core jurisdiction, further rendered the social justice project a mechanism of professional ends, competition for turf amongst the system of professions. Because the theories being heralded as the profession's core jurisdiction assume the three forces of modernization, the moral imperative to use evidence-based practices itself comes into question.

It might be argued that social work is begrudgingly opening to post-structuralist, critical perspectives such as those of Kunzel, Margolin, Tice, Simon, and the perspective developed in this article. I have argued that this opening is primarily rhetorical. It serves the function to more

firmly allow grounding of the profession's ontology and epistemology in the cosmology of the natural world and corporation controlled capitalization of the market economy (Olson, 2001).

In my view, social work has yet to move into the twenty-first century in perspective simply because it is a product of modernization and remains wedded to its origins. To the degree social work's identity is grounded in its being a profession, in that degree social work actively works to avoid taking responsibility for the social justice project and creation of a just world. Some, such as Margolin, argue that it actively destroys the possibility to be part of creating a just world. The perspective I take in this article offers an alternate vision; let professionalization be the instrumental vehicle by which the social justice project organizes what social workers do.

### ***THE REVERSAL OF PROJECTS***

In this final section, this article suggests some ways in which the reversal of projects might occur along three venues: doctoral education, MSW and BSW education, and professional practice.

#### ***Doctoral Education***

Research epistemologies in doctoral education are, by and large, shaped by the three forces of modernization. Thyer (2001) argues that social work is an applied profession that seeks solutions to psychosocial problems—that this should be social work's research focus rather than the theory-testing model of the academic social sciences. It can be argued that neither the applied nor theory-testing models are open to perspectives not framed by the three forces of modernization. Anastas and Congress (1999) argue that doctoral program directors face resistance when non-logical positivist epistemologies are included in doctoral education.

If a reversal between the professional and social justice projects is to take place, doctoral education must open itself to, and promote epistemologies based in the cosmology of the social justice project. Quantitative research methodologies should slowly be de-centered in doctoral education. While there will continue to be need for research that validates whether interventions are or are not effective, and hence deserving of the name "evidence-based," the ontology and epistemology underlying the use of empirical research skills has to come from the

social justice project. The tension/resistance Anastas and Congress (1999) speak of must be worked through so that social work research develops or utilizes research methods that stem from the undergirding assumptions of the social justice project.

Participatory action research (PAR) is perhaps the most accessible of research methods that can be based in the social justice project (Guba, 1990; Reason, 1994; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). PAR is based in dialogue between research process participants. Social work research can help create intra- and inter-community dialogue, help create bridges between communities, and actually model mechanisms that provide access to economic and social opportunity for others. In this manner, the research process actively helps make the just world visible.

Research methodologies from the liberal arts such as historiography, literary criticism, post-colonial critiques, Derrida's (1976) deconstruction or Foucault's (1980) use of counter narrative are all mechanisms to effect the reversal of projects. Doctoral programs can encourage students to learn and use the critical voice inhering within these methodologies to illuminate how modernization perpetuates social and economic injustice. This will clear a space in the dialogical landscape for the next generation of social work's academics to do what we say we do—to engage in praxis.

### ***MSW and BSW Education***

The contention of this article is that the fundamental assumptions of social work education come from the three forces of modernization. Almost all MSW and BSW curricula are adopting the model for practice that asks the reason to engage in a practice with a client system for which there is no evidence as to the effectiveness of that practice. Why not use interventions that have been evaluated to be effective? As part of professionalization, this movement is largely grounded in the cosmology of the natural world.

Social work emphasizes the importance of cultural competence and diversity of perspectives in education and practice. However, the model being taught in the academy is based in a view that claims the right to determine the methods by which an intervention is evaluated, and hence in a large degree, the "T"ruth of what is effective. Now it may be that the classic scientific method used in traditional social science-based evaluation is more "useful" than other methods, but usefulness must be distinguished from any claim to dominance and "T"ruth.

Students are taught to be consumers of research and that their clients are consumers of services. This perspective stems directly from the capitalization of the market economy. The consumer's needs are created by hierarchizing forces controlled by corporations. In the same way, social work creates markets and consumers for its services in jurisdictions of practice. The work of Simon et al. (2002) and Mowbray, Robinson, and Holter (2002) are examples of how central to social work totalizing discourses the term consumer is. Hawkins, Fook, and Ryan (2001) explore how once in the field, social work practitioners tend not to use the language of social justice.

Differentiation of the discourse of rights proceeds according to needs unrelated to social justice. Clients are understood to belong to groupings of different category variables: gender, age, nation status, religion, sexual orientation, class, and ethnicity, for example. These categories come from research on psychosocial problems experienced by persons in their worlds. Professionalization has the practitioner identify an emerging problem and the social work researcher name it, and come up with an empirically valid and reliable intervention that solves the problem. The practitioner then implements the intervention with the target population identified by the categories. The spiral of professionalization works itself through this relationship between practitioner, researcher, and categorized population. A small problem is solved as part of the mechanism to avoid being part of making the just world visible.

The dominant critical voice social work's MSW and BSW students learn is that of modernization—the voice that critiques use of non-evidence-based theories and practices. The post-modern critical voice might have students focus on the assumed right to claim “T”ruth by the institution of social work education. This voice explores the perception that professional educators know what's best (dominate), and to be professional, students accede to this voice (are subjugated). When the critical voice is based in the cosmology of the social justice project, no claim of “T”ruth is made. The use of the critical voice seeks to illuminate the forces at work. This illumination can result in different understandings of social work education and practice. It attempts to create praxis and a space where BSW and MSW students learn to take responsibility for their own educations.

Finally, for the social justice project to assume the *a priori* position within social work education, MSW and BSW programs need to move beyond modernization's categories of oppression to begin with persons. As Fraser (1997, p. 31) suggested, “But for this scenario to be psychological and politically feasible requires that all people be weaned from

their attachment to current cultural constructions of their interests and identities” if we want to advance the cause of social justice. This can only be done when the assumptions of both projects are illuminated and analyzed and the person learning to be a student and learning to be a professional social worker, assumes personal responsibility for the assumptions underlying her practice. This can only happen if educators do it first.

### ***Professional Practice***

The competition for jurisdictions of practice social workers experience is driven by corporate-controlled capital, by scarce resources and by newly emerging boundaries along which professions compete for turf. Once a social worker enters practice where the professional project provides the socio-cultural context that defines job responsibilities, it is highly unlikely that the worker will be able to use her macro skills to be a vehicle of organizational and larger systems change.

The professional milieu discourages practitioners from questioning the assumptions of the professional project. At root, this discouragement takes the form of mechanisms based in fear of marginalization and loss of job. The kind of fresh thinking needed to develop alternate perspectives on larger social problems is unlikely to come from the world of practice, bound as it is by competition for soft money, for jurisdiction and by hierarchies whose tops are controlled by corporate interests. These perspectives might come from social work’s commitment to continuing education.

The goals of continuing education could be re-configured to assist practitioners to develop the skills to identify the two projects and how they do, or don’t, structure professional practice. In this manner, practitioners can learn to become aware of, identify, and take personal responsibility for the system-level norms of which they are vehicles. Practitioners have developed professional identities, and these identities are part of institutions with a vested stake in maintaining the status quo in which the professional project is foundational. Continuing education could facilitate practitioners learning how to effect the reversal of the two projects’ relation with one another, to slowly wean themselves from professional identities in the act of creating new communities based in different norms, those stemming from existence of the just world.

### CONCLUSION

This article identified a serious problem—there are two projects with two different sets of assumptions and goals that are conflated in social work’s understanding of itself and what it does; the social justice project and professional project. Assumptions, missions, and goals of the two projects were discussed. It was demonstrated that the two projects have nothing in common, other than the fact they are conflated. This conflation serves the ends of the professional project. Social justice discourses are one of the “means” by which professionalization achieves its “ends”—claims to jurisdictional turf in competition with other professions in a system of professions. Suggestions were made on how to reverse this relation of projects so that professionalization serves the ends of the social justice project, making the just world visible for many more persons.

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