Social Work As An Active Cultural Change Agent

Gisela Konopka
University of Minnesota

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GISELA KONOPKA

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

An anthropologist friend of mine showed photos of people of another culture. His five-year-old son exclaimed in disgust at some of the eating habits. The father said quietly, "It really is nothing to be disgusted about. It is not 'bad.' They just eat differently than we do." He helped his son early to learn one of the basic tenets of his own science, and — as many of us think — basic attitudes valuable for all people: respect for the right of human beings to be different, and humility in the face of one's own biases.

It is often said that human beings have no "prejudice" by nature, that they would have these attitudes normally, if not taught otherwise. Anyone who knows the powerful influence of what we vaguely call "culture" knows that it is so pervasive and enters the life of the human being so early, that nobody is really free from his own value judgments derived from this intangible "way of life" in which he has grown up. We know that values are imbedded into the human being by real identification with his parents and other significant persons around him. They are not simply taken over — they filter through the complicated and — yet quite unknown — individuality of each human being (a variety infinitive and awesome), they may lead a specific individual to do exactly the opposite of what his elders want him to do. They are also formed — in our increasingly complicated cultures — by many contradicting demands. Each person constantly makes deliberate or unconscious choices.

Therefore, whenever a person becomes a scientist, especially one directly related to human beings, he must learn about his own biases and learn to view others *as they are*. This demand is not an easy one to fulfill. It does not mean a dispassionate "viewing," as some scientists in psychology and sociology once thought, it *always* includes a rather painful look at oneself and a compassionate understanding of the other human being or human society. Otherwise "understanding" is only a one-dimensional picture, not the total living web of human life with its plasticity and many sidedness. The method used in anthropology of living with the populations in anthropological field studies has recognized this.

Social work, the profession discussed here, has incorporated this realization through its first basic principle taught to every student of social work, "Start where the client, the group, the community are." To practice this principle the social worker must observe, feel with the other one, learn to understand. He must make use of the knowledge derived from those sciences which describe, dissect, probe, and explain human behavior: as in sociology, anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, economics. He must learn to look at himself — not to eliminate himself from the picture, but to learn about his own biases.

This he has in common with the scientist. Yet immediately, in each moment of his practice, he is confronted with evaluations of those facts and with active intervention. In our practice with indviduals, related to predominantly individual problems this intervention is often in terms of "healthy" or "sick," at least as understood in the given society. This does not necessarily involve a change in culture, in given mores — though even then it might involve such change. But since its beginning, social work had another function, which becomes increasingly important. In its practice of social group work, of community organization and social policy it takes its place among other human relations professions as an active culture change agent.

Based on the previously discussed attitude of accepting the right of individuals, groups and communities to be different, it is confronted with the constant dilemma between acceptance of the given situation, people, attitudes and the demand for change. The question of the right to intervention is not an occasional one, but one which pervades the total professional effort. It is to this problem that this short paper is addressed. One may point toward some form of possible solution — knowing full well that far more discussion is needed. Similarly, there is awareness of the fact that social work is not alone in this quest, but that this is the basic question of many diversified efforts to change — and (here value judgments enter) to improve human relations.

The social worker is in the same dilemma — only more so — which Nadel calls "vital for the future of applied anthropology," but "unsolved." (S. F. Nadel, "Anthropology," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1957, Vol. 2:58). One may say "only more so," because the social worker is not called upon to be advisor to those who especially carry out the policy of change. He usually is actually helping with this change. He also, because of his position close to the most intimate cells of a given culture, the family, the small group, the community, is constantly involved in this culture change.

Some examples will illustrate this:

The pattern of a certain neighborhood in a northern city of the United States is segregated, though Negroes and Caucasians live in rather close proximity. There are no open tensions. Children of both races go to school with each other, but their contacts are restricted to classroom attendance. The attitude toward each other is one of remoteness and underlying distrust, but not open hostility.

The Neighborhood House in this area sees it as one of its tasks to break down this distrust, to help people who live closely together

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to appreciate each other and to learn to see each other as individuals, instead of representatives of a certain race. The social workers working in this neighborhood therefore accept the attitudes of the people in the neighborhood as given facts, but they only *start* there. They see as their responsibility a basic cultural change in the neighborhood pattern as well as in the attitudes of individuals. The specific of the role of the social worker in such a situation is the use of the social group work process. He does not "exhort," "preach" or "teach," the latter word used in its intellectual meaning. He provides opportunities for people to meet in a face-to-face group which allows for freedom of expression — even negatives. The creation of a group climate which allows *working through* of hostility and prejudice, in interaction is *really* producing culture change. The group must also give opportunity for accomplishment, individually and as a group. There is no dichotomy seen in group work between enhancing individuality and working as a group. The great skill of the group worker is to help with both, thus increasing satisfactions of each individual. Only then is the human being free to accept the other person on his own terms.

This is done in informal groups of adults or children on *their* level and through the kind of medium most suited to their needs. They may be children's clubs, adolescents discussing their problems with adults (and finding thus the commonness among races), adults working on community committees, often learning through violent conflict.

Change in attitudes is achieved not through a sudden conversion or individual therapy. It is achieved through the natural cultural process of human interaction — accelerated, consciously supported and sometimes instigated by the social group worker. Where do they take the right to "help toward this change?" A young social work student expressed this question openly: "If we are supposed to accept people as they are and accept their pattern of living, why should we fight segregation?"

Another example: In Germany after 1945, social workers were confronted with many children in institutions, used to the harsh authoritarian treatment of German tradition intensified by Nazi militarism. They began to help these children to learn without ordering them around, they encouraged responsible participation — neither complete obedience nor rebellion. This meant deep change of a pattern of "child-rearing." How could they justify this?

Social workers who fight for support of the illegitimate child — in spite of community feelings against this child and his mother (not his father, in our culture), who insist on treatment, not punishment for the law offender — in spite of a deep-seated rejection of the offender by the large majority of the population — the social worker, who insists on public support to the aged or the sick — in spite of a general culture which denies such public responsibility — is constantly involved in producing cultural changes. He does not always succeed, but he definitely works in this direction.

At times the efforts of the social worker are more subtle than in these examples, and they cut the more intensely into the cloth of

predominant mores and habits of living. This work does not lie in advising political forces, but in daily work with people.

One may take the social worker who is confronted with the case of an American Indian high school student who is constantly making poor grades though he can do better. He understands that this is strongly influenced by a culture which does not allow one person to set himself "above" another one. In the boy's attitude is perpetuated a deep cultural value of humility and cooperativeness and a rejection of predominant competitive thinking. Yet the social worker must help this boy to find his way into a society which requires a new cultural pattern. He must also find some way of helping the boy to integrate attitudes of his culture with different values.

Take the role of the social worker who must help and strengthen the girls who come to her at the end of a successful interracial camping period and who question, "What will we do at home? We love our parents, but they will never let us associate with Negro girls, they will consider us 'bad.' "

The line between "imposing" one's own values, the "uplifting," the "meddling" and the not only justified, but necessary "helping to change" is thin. The query of the young student mentioned earlier is to be taken seriously.

There is an answer to those questions — for social work, as well as for other "culture change agents." It does lie more in philosophical-ethical considerations than in scientific inquiry.

It involves three considerations:

1. A clear distinction between primary and secondary values.

2. An investigation into the sources of value judgment.

3. An acceptance of the interrelatedness of ends and means, of goals and methods.

To enlarge on these three aspects of the problem:

Eduard C. Lindeman helped with the distinction between primary and secondary values.[1] The two primary values are the dignity of each human being and the interdependence of individuals. The first one establishes the right of each human being to full development of his capacities, while the second one raises a demand on each human being to act responsibly toward others in the framework of his own capacities. Those are values without which social work cannot operate. They are "absolute" in the sense that they become the basic criterion for the practitioner's actions. Social workers — as many others — will disagree on the origin of those values: the religiously oriented person sees it in divine command, the humanist in ethical law. Both agree though on the content.

The recognition of this "absolute" justifies the effort to effect certain cultural changes, if the given culture violates basic human rights, as for instance in the disregard of individuals because of their origin, race or religion, or the authoritarian, dictatorial way of life, which does not allow for freedom of expression of thought. The code of ethics developed in most "applied" professions is an expression of the

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[1] See Gisela Konopka and Eduard C. Lindeman. *Social Work Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, 1958, Chapter V.

binding force of those primary values. Standards for professional practice in social work accepted in 1951 by the American Association of Social Workers (then the representative organization of the social work profession) read:

"1. Firm faith in the dignity, worth and creative power of the individual.

2. Complete belief in his right to hold and express his own opinions and to act upon them, so long as by so doing he does not infringe upon the rights of others.

3. Unswerving conviction of the inherent, inalienable rights of each human being to choose and achieve his own destiny in the framework of a progressive, yet stable, society." [2]

And the Society for Applied Anthropology, interestingly enough in the same year, 1951, also published its Code of Ethics. It asked for respect for the individual and for human rights and the promotion of human and social well-being. It says:

"To advance those forms of human relationships which contribute to the integrity of the individual human being; to maintain scientific and professional integrity and responsibility without fear or favor to the limit of the foreseeable effects of their actions; to respect both human personality and cultural values . . ." [3]

Both professions not only *justify* culture change by the realization of those primary values. They both make it a task of the profession to *promote* them.

More complicated — and more debatable — is social work practice when it influences secondary values. Those are values in *use*, sometimes related to the moral-ethical realm, often to customs, mode of living or even aesthetics.

Here work toward change must be exercised with great caution or not at all. The social worker must scrutinize carefully the sources of those values, in himself as well as in this client, group or community. Only such honest self-insight can help him to determine whether he "imposes" his own values arbitrarily or whether they have true importance to the other person or group.

Secondary values are strongly influenced by four factors:

1. Cultural background.

2. The precepts and demands of groups which are significant to us (church, social groups, task groups).

3. Strong personal experiences. as illness, death.

4. Adherence to certain theories regarding human behavior and motivation.

Each social worker must periodically look at himself and determine whether his own secondary values enter his work in such a way as to impose his own system on others. By no means should he strip himself of those values — he would be an empty creature without

[2] *Standards for the Professional Practice of Social Work*. New York: American Association of Social Workers, 1951.
[3] "Code of Ethics of the Society for Applied Anthropology" *Human Organization*, Summer 1951, Vol. 10, Number 2, page 32.

them — but he must check himself and examine whether they are helpful and applicable to others. He has a right to present them or to even promote them — as long as he allows others to take them or leave them — except when primary values are violated. Again the Code of Ethics of the Society for Applied Anthropology directs itself to the same problem,

"The applied anthropologist may not in any situation justify a course of action by appealing to a set of values to which he himself owes personal allegiance, unless he is willing to submit this course of action to the same scientific tests he would use in other applied situation." [4]

To the social worker such "scientific test" means a disciplined and honest insight into himself.

A final consideration in this profession lies in the interrelatedness of means and end. Again one may refer also to the Code of Ethics of Applied Anthropology,

"That the specific means adopted will inevitably determine the ends attained, hence ends can never be used to justify means and full responsibility must be taken for the ethical and social implications of both means and ends recommended or employed." [5]

If the goal of the efforts of the social worker are enhancement of human dignity and mutual responsibility, the means to this end must be in accord with it — otherwise the end is defeated. This means, for instance, that the social worker — as part of his professional endevour — cannot force racial equality by authoritarian means. He can only work on this by the slow process of social group work or social case work, which include a recognition of the given situation, the total cultural climate — whether he agrees with it or not — and the introduction of helpful experiences which can change this culture. This point must be made very clear. As a citizen, a political participant in his total community, the social worker can — and often must — enter action which uses force, violates some people's standards and establishes norms of action by legislation. In his professional work, he can only take on a helping role, often directed toward the same end as the legislator, but moving at a slower pace. In this capacity he is truly the cultural change agent. Culture changes only slowly, often imperceptibly. New attitudes must enter deeper, often unconscious levels of human thought and emotions. The social worker is concerned with this *process* of change. The political citizen opens the way for cultural change.

Without such political action hardly any change can occur, especially not change related to power structure. The social worker as a professional is frequently far too dependent on the established power in society to be able to break through those bonds. Only as a citizen together with other citizens can he help produce this condition of change.

[4] *Ibid.*   [5] *Ibid.*

The first example of the Negro-white neighborhood bears this out. Legislation, citizen action, had made it possible, for Negro and white citizens to live side by side. This was a necessary prerequisite for justice and for change. But true culture change needed the continuous help of conscious effort which produced opportunities to change inner emotions. The iconoclast in society are artists, writers and citizens in all walks of life. Cultural change agents are educators, social workers, parents, all those who help to integrate change by building on the understanding of what *is*. *Individuals* in different professions will incorporate both functions in themselves. The profession itself can only carry one or the other function.

To summarize:

Social work agrees with the attitude accepted by cultural anthropology of genuine acceptance of the right of human beings to adhere to and develop differing cultural forms.

As an acting profession in the area of human relations it cannot only describe phenomena impassionately. It must act and become a culture change agent, especially in its task with groups and communities.

How can the line be drawn between imposition of one's own arbitrary values and justified introduction of cultural change?

The answer lies in:

1. A clear distinction between primary and secondary values, the primary ones being the dignity of each individual human being and their responsibility toward each other.

2. The demand made on the practitioner to gain insight into the origins of the value judgment, and

3. In the acceptances of the fact that means and ends are interrelated and must be determined by the primary values.

The role of the iconoclast belongs to all citizens and some highly creative spokesmen. Social workers help with true culture change in daily practice. Both approaches are important to the continued effort of humanity to increase the dignity of each of its members.

The optimistic Carl Sandburg quoted from Remembrance Rock, when he recently spoke in Minnesota:

> "Man is a changer. God made him a changer. You may become the witnesses of the finest and brightest era known to mankind. The nations over the globe shall have music, music instead of murder. It is possible. That is my hope and prayer — for you and for the nations." [6]

In this lies the justification of accepting the task of culture change.

[6] Carl Sandburg message delivered at the dedication of Carl Sandburg Junior High School in Golden Valley, Minnesota.