



WHAT IS A MODERN SOCIAL WORKER COMFORTABLE WITH - UNIVERSALISM OR RELATIVISM? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE ARTICLE, “POSTMODERNISM, CRITICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL WORK” BY JIM IFE*

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The author, Prof. Jim Ife, starts this article claiming that, “in the current social, economic and political climate of change and instability, many of the old certainties of social work practice no longer seem relevant. The apparently unproblematic commitment to ideals such as human rights and social justice, the idea that empirically verified social science could guide practice, and the assumption of a universalist and prescriptive code of ethics no longer seem to meet the needs of practitioners” (p. 211). In such a situation, the author believes, the postmodern worldview provides a comfortable practice framework.

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However, while postmodernism provides some comfort, the most serious concern is that it too may contradict certain social work values. In it, the oppressive power of “Meta Narratives” which reinforce the notion of a universal reality is rejected. Instead it accepts the multiple realities proposed by Relativism. It does not focus on human factors interpreted through positivist or empirical social sciences because of the belief that human factors cannot be understood by being away from them. It must be a subjective interpretation and a process of understanding in which they are deconstructed and reconstructed. Postmodern thinking rejects the notion that there is no single medicine for all human “ill-beings” prescribed by a uniform and dominant discourse of modernist thinking which is characterized by economic rationalism, managerialism, professionalism and conservatism.

If we negate universalism or one single reality, as suggested by the postmodernist view, we may accept certain human rights abuses in various places in the world. This is contradictory to key social work values – ensuring social justice, promoting equality and safeguarding

human rights, and social workers may again find themselves in an uncomfortable practice situation. For example, social workers will not be comfortable at all to accept the fact that young girls are deprived of education, just because it is a culture-specific “reality” prevalent in certain parts of the world. So, the suggestion from the postmodern perspective is, as the author says, “social workers require that values which form the very core of social work practice be abandoned” (p. 211).

Then the question is what should be done? Where do they, social workers, find a comfortable practice context? Postmodern comfort is somewhat contradictory, though it values difference and promotes the very idea of multiple realities rejecting oppression of an imposed universal reality, it challenges and contests some of the fundamental values of social work. Social workers will not be comfortable at all with the idea of multiple realities in relation to social justice and human rights.

The author continues to quest for an alternative. Where is the compromising point for modern social workers? He develops a proposition and continues to elaborate on it in a very fascinating way. It starts succinctly explaining how social workers are disillusioned as many of the older certainties of social work practice no longer seem relevant in the current social, economic and political climate of change, and then suggests that a comfortable practice context will emerge if we, social workers, appropriately conjunct ideas from both universalist and relativist perspectives that supports key values of the social work profession. This suggestion pervades right through the author’s sequential yet profoundly convincing elaboration in this article on the differing views of postmodernity and postmodernism; problems of postmodernism; postmodernism and social work; and, critical theory and social work.

So, the more comfortable practice context for social work in the current hostile social-

political environment is an appropriate and more reasonable conjunction between modern and postmodern discourses. It will be a more fitting contextualization of relevant aspects of universalism and relativism. For example, the author says, “it is necessary, therefore, for social workers to retain some kind of universal vision, while at the same time accepting the significant and legitimate contribution of postmodern thinking” (p. 217). Again, the author suggests that this can be achieved by interpreting “universal rights” in statements of “needs” (p. 218). Statements of needs imply an underpinning of rights, and interpretation of rights in a needs context counterbalances the extreme positions of both universalism and relativism.

This provides a proper contextual conjunction for social work practice, without contesting the profession’s strong value base. A good example is ‘education’, which is a universal right. How to realize it is the ‘need’ and it can be achieved by means of processes which would differ from place to place, culture to culture. One of the new social issues of our (post) modern age, euthanasia, I believe, can also be interpreted in universal ‘rights’ and specific ‘needs’ contexts. Euthanasia has been a culturally endorsed and socially accepted way of voluntary suicide prevalent in a few cultures. While the purpose of practicing euthanasia can be understood within a rights context, the way that purpose is met in different cultures, the process, can be understood in a needs context. One may of course argue that voluntary suicide cannot be contextualized in a universal rights perspective but, nevertheless, one may also counter-argue that freedom of choice falls within that scope. However, the important fact here is that understanding such complex situations call for an application of frameworks in which the concept of multiple realities enables us to explore the existence of different realities underneath facts that superficially seem to be universal.

This conjunction requires, as the author says,

that both an exclusive modernist universalism and exclusive postmodernist view of relativism be rejected. A balanced view provides us with a more effective or, in the author's opinion, comfortable practice model for social workers. In that, we, social workers, are able to focus on the "process" in which "how we get there rather than where we are going" is important (p. 219). For example, the idea of a universal right to education may be materialized in different cultures in different ways. The process in which it is achieved is important though it is different from culture to culture. It is achieved however and in this sense the idea is universally accepted. This helps social workers retain some kind of universal vision while at the same time accepting the significant and legitimate contribution of postmodern thinking regarding multiple realities and valuing the difference. The author argues that this sort of appropriate, more understandable, proper conjunction between modern and postmodern discourses will provide a much more comfortable practice context for social workers.

The author's contribution to explore a comfortable footing for modern social work practitioners is commendable. The author suggests that social workers are probably disillusioned in a more uncertain, more hostile, and constantly changing practice context where the older certainties do not provide a secure basis (p. 211). But a proper and appropriate conjunction of older certainties and postmodern interpretations, away from the extremes that both discourses suggest, may take account of universal values, moral and ethical principles, even if the way in which these are defined and operationalized will vary over time and across cultural settings (p. 222).

For me as a social worker, this idea provides a valuable impetus for thinking conceptually about what would actually be the relevant model of social work practice for us in Sri Lanka. The idea of "appropriate conjunction" between modernity and post-modernity

stimulates me to carefully consider a synthesis of the Western model of social work practice and our own traditional community-based helping and caring systems, to come up with a model of social work practice that would maximally benefit the communities we strive to serve.