

# Integrating the understanding of theory, practice, and values

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## Introduction

In its broadest sense, 'social work is about helping people in society' (Evans & Hardy 2010, p. 1). However, the kind and level of service provided by social workers is complex, varied, and encompasses a wide range of areas. According to the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), social work is a profession that:

'...promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environment. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work' (Lishman 2007, p. 27).

The above definition provides a deeper context of social work. It implies that the core of social work concerns the plight of individuals, with an emphasis on issues of human rights, inequality, social justice, and the use of political and professional power (Lishman 2007). This definition provides a more critical approach towards social work and takes into consideration current issues and developments in this field.

Social work entails the improvement of the quality of life and well-being of individuals, groups, or communities through various forms of interventions such as research, policy, advocacy, capacity building, community organizing, counselling, teaching, etc. These interventions are made on behalf of people who are: (a) Vulnerable in some way, e. g. persons with disabilities, street

children, aged people, etc.; (b) Excluded from society, e. g. marginalised minorities, etc.; (c) Cannot fully participate in society, e. g. people living in poverty, women, etc.; (d) Suffering from stigma and discrimination, e. g. HIV/AIDS patients, sex workers, etc; and (e) Victims of social injustice, inequality, and violations from human rights (Kane 2010). As such, social workers usually work in a complex social and political environment and must deal with both public issues and private dramas. Again, this aspect of social work is embedded in the concepts of critical social work theories.

Taking all these into consideration, this paper analyzes the theoretical underpinnings and key elements of critical social work. This will be supported by understanding how a critical social work approach influences advocacy in actual practice. These objectives will be achieved by a discussion on anti-oppressive perspectives and ethical awareness and through an examination of the complexities of social work practice.

Table 1. Research Objectives, Questions and Rationale

Objectives	Questions	Rationale
·To understand what are the theoretical foundations and key elements of social work	·What are the theories behind critical social work?	
·What are the integral elements of critical social work?	·Understanding the foundations of critical social work will aid in developing an analysis of how they relate to actual practice	
·To understand how critical social work approach influences advocacy in		

actual practice·How does a critical social work approach influence or shape advocacy endeavours?

·Is a critical social work approach effective in promoting advocacy agendas in social work?·By analysing critical social work in the specific context of advocacy, the theories behind the approach will be tested and will help to determine how effective critical social work approach is in actual practice

### Understanding the foundations of Critical Social Work

The definition of social work posited in the introduction borrows largely from the theoretical underpinnings of Conflict Theory and Critical Theory Perspectives. The combination of these perspectives can be said to have shaped important elements of the Critical Social Work Approach and how it is being implemented in actual practice.

The focus of Conflict Theory is how power structures and disparities affect people's lives. Popular theorist of the conflict perspective are Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and C. Wright Mills. There are also a number of feminist and GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) theorists who have contributed significantly to the study of this perspective (NCSSS 2008). The Conflict Perspective 'adopts a more critical approach to understanding the structure of society and how social structures mediate social life' (Oko 2011, p. 22). It argues that society is ordered based on the lines of inequality, such as affluence income, and health. These factors can provide people with different outcomes in life, which consequently results in varying qualities of life experiences. In this case, the concept of a shared belief

system is highly improbable due to the social differences, which undermine the opportunities to have a shared common identity. From this point of view, it can be surmised that social conflict is unavoidable and a justifiable response to social inequality (Oko 2011).

The main concepts of Conflict Perspective regarding human behaviour are as follows: (NCSSS 2008):

All societies enable and propagate some forms of oppression, injustice and inequality

Power is unequally distributed; some groups dominate other groups

Social order is based on the manipulation and control of a few dominant groups

Social change is primarily driven by conflict and periods of stability are interrupted by periods of change

Human life is characterized not by consensus but by conflict

From the point of view of Critical Theories, social problems arise due to different forms of oppression. Critical perspective is founded on theories of Marxism and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, notably the works of Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Jurgen Habermas (Dalrymple & Burke 2006). Critical Perspective 'questions the existing social order. It views this order as unequal, socially divisive, and unjust' (Lishman 2007, p. 33). Moreover, the Critical Approach argues that the state's support and maintenance of the interests of dominant groups upholds inequality and other forms of oppression.

The Critical Perspective holds the view that critical theory can change society - and ' the changed society is one that is no longer characterized by exploitation, inequality, and oppression but is emancipatory and free from domination' (Dalrymple & Burke 2006, p. 10). This indicates that an important aspect of critical theories is that they emphasize that people can achieve a changed society through conscious and collective action.

Although the early influences on Critical Theory Perspectives focused on the concept of social class as the main determinant of inequality and oppression, later contributions from anti-oppressive, feminist, and critical social work perspectives have widened the scope of knowledge to include the disparate and intersecting dimensions of power, inequality and oppression within the context of contemporary society (Lishman 2007).

By putting both the Conflict and Critical Perspectives into the context of social work, then social work can represent either of the following views: (Oko 2011, p. 22)

Social work is an agent of state control and used by the state to manage and maintain the socially excluded and vulnerable.

Social work can represent a radical activity, concerned to mobilise those socially excluded groups through group and community action.

In the Critical Social Work Approach, social workers must question the notion that the state should maintain a neutral, humanitarian role in dealing with its citizens. This is based on the argument that the maintenance role assumed by social workers, with regard to state welfare policies and institutions, aids

in perpetuating inequality and its related oppressions, injustices, disadvantages, and stigma. Critical social work approach must therefore involve transforming the relationships of social workers and service users into one that empowers, emancipates, and gives voice to under-represented groups of society (Lishman 2007).

Critical Social Work Approach advocates that social work should shift from just being state regulators into mobilisers of social change, in behalf of marginalised and vulnerable sectors. This view is described as the Emancipatory Approach, wherein social work takes on a clear commitment to social justice (Oko 2011). In this regard, the major focus of critical social work can be summarised into the following areas: (a) poverty, unemployment, social exclusion; (b) discrimination; (c) inadequate provisions of basic services such as housing, health care and education; (d) crime and social unrest; and (e) abuse and exploitation.

#### Anti-oppressive Perspectives and Ethical Awareness

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on anti-oppressive social work and ethical awareness. This may be attributed to the fact the social work profession is highly influenced by institutional inequalities. To illustrate: the encounters between the service user and the social worker, the social worker and the agency, and the agency and the state - are all formed in the framework of unequal power relations. As such, due to the imbalance of power in social work relations, social work inadvertently supports the emergence of oppressive practices (Strier 2006).

Many academics and social work experts have studied and advocated for anti-oppressive social work. A number of studies have focused on strategies that can help to overcome the systemic constraints, which social workers face while forming emancipatory agendas with service users. Some works have concentrated on the effects of 'symbolic and discursive constructions on practices of oppression' while others recommend discarding of the cultural sensitivity approach and instead to adopt a more engaged, dynamic and critical anti-discriminatory and anti-racist perspectives (Strier 2006, p. 2). Over the years, the literature on anti-oppressive social work continues to grow as more studies are being conducted to investigate this further. However, despite this growth in anti-oppressive social work research, the reality of applying this perspective into actual practice is not quite straightforward.

Given the various constraints that have become deeply entrenched in the social work arena, in reality, it is extremely difficult to liberate social work practice from oppression. As much as the social worker wants to free service users from oppression, they are restricted by the mandates of the agency and the state - which continue to uphold a neutral, humanitarian role towards its citizens. In most cases, social workers are forced to take on a maintenance role instead of actively mobilising and emancipating service users. This view is supported by McLaughlin (2005) in his statement that:

Influenced by a Marxist view of the state and Foucauldian insights into both the power of discourse and controlling aspects of the 'helping professions,' it is argued that what were considered radical measures have now become



institutionalized and in the process lost their original meaning. Anti-oppressive social work, rather than being a challenge to the state has allowed the state to reposition itself once again as a benign provider of welfare, and via the anti-oppressive social worker is able to enforce new moral codes of behaviour on the recipients of welfare (p. 283).

Additionally, the problems related to lack of funding and support from the state limits what social workers can do. Moreover, there are just not enough number of social workers to handle the huge load of social work cases. As such, many social work practitioners feel overstretched by staff shortages and frustrated by the limitations imposed by bureaucracy (Social Work Task Force 2009).

In terms of ethical awareness, social work professionals are faced with various difficulties and dilemmas, which challenge their ability and commitment to act ethically. Some of the issues that complicate the situation for social workers are as follows: (Strier 2006; IFSW 2012)

Multiple and conflicted loyalties of social workers - social workers are often in the middle of conflicting interests

Duality of roles as helpers and controllers - social workers function as both helpers and controllers

Institutional framework mandating the actions of social workers - refers to the conflicts between the duty of social workers to protect the interests of service users with whom they work against the societal demands for efficiency and utility

Limited or lack of resources

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As such, there is a need to renew the sense of ethical awareness among social work professionals in order to encourage them to reflect on these challenges and to come up with ethically informed decisions.

### Examining the Complexities of Social Work Practice

Social work requires the social work professional be adequately able respond to complex situations that reflect both public issues and private pain. Social work essentially involves taking on a 'mediating role between the individual and society' (Oko 2011, p. 4). Social workers are mandated by the state to intervene with individuals, groups or communities in order to effect change. Additionally, social work practitioners seek to balance individual self-interest with social responsibility, while at the same time working within the legislative and policy frameworks (Dominelli 2009). All these contribute to the complexities of social work practice.

There are many instances wherein the social worker is torn between the desire to help the service user versus adhering to the rules and regulations set by the state. In other scenarios, the social worker may have the legal mandate to aid a service user; however, the lack of funding, support, tools or human resources limits what he/she can do. The harsh reality being that not all service users who need help are being provided for.

Social work encompasses a vast array of sub-fields such as education, child care, women's rights, poverty, etc. and involves many kinds of expertise for example advocacy, forensic social work, counselling, etc. Moreover, social work involves a myriad of job functions and performing a wide range of

interventions, e. g. case management, administration, training, etc.

(Dominelli 2009). This is another source of complexity for social work practice. The social work practitioner is faced with the challenge of whether to engage in a particular field of expertise or to take on a more generalist role.

The social work profession has multiple accountabilities - to employers (e. g. state agencies, private institutions), service users, policymakers, professionals in related disciplines (e. g. medicine, psychiatry, psychology and law), and the public. Donnelly (2009) aptly summarizes some of the complexities of social work, which are greatly changing the social work practice and the roles of social workers. This only serves to complicate matters and places a greater burden on social work professionals.

' Social work is a constantly changing profession whose role and purpose in society is often disputed and subjected to professional and governmental regulations. Its constantly fragmenting boundaries and changing nature enable social work activities to be appropriated by other professionals: for example, the completion of risk assessments in child abuse cases by child psychologists and the opening up of mental health work formerly undertaken by approved social workers to any professional without a social work degree...Social work is constantly being restructured by the state and emerging in different forms, while retaining its core tasks of caring for people and regulating behaviour' (p. 15).

A study conducted by the Social Work Task Force (2009) reveals other complex issues that are being encountered by social work practitioners in

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England. The findings from the study show that social workers have several key issues, which they feel are complicating and negatively affecting their work. These are as follows: (Social Work Task Force 2009, p. 6)

Social workers feel that they do not have sufficient time to dedicate to the people they want to help. They feel strained by staff scarcity and limited by bureaucracy.

Social workers feel very frustrated by some of the tools and support that are given to them to do their jobs. The support and tools are either lacking or inadequate.

New social workers are usually unprepared for the demands of the job. Additionally, the education system does not effectively support ongoing development and specialisation for social work students.

Social workers feel that their profession does not have a strong national voice and that they are not well-supported at the national level.

Systems for managing the performance of social work practitioners are not driving and improving quality.

Social workers feel that their profession is underrated, highly misunderstood, and under constant media attack. This makes it difficult for them to do their jobs and to attract people into the profession.

Despite some efforts by the government, these issues continue to be a major concern for the social work arena. These issues are complex and require extensive effort not only from the state and social work practitioners; it also involves a paradigm shift and the re-framing of social work practice to change public and media perceptions.

## Critical Social Work and Advocacy

Nzira & Williams (2009, p. 29) defines advocacy as ' the representation of a need or an idea, either by a person or group on behalf of themselves, or by someone or an organisation on behalf of another person or group.' Advocacy is usually associated with political action because it often involves asking for greater influence in decision making. However, advocacy also encompasses other actions, for instance, helping people to assimilate and participate in the community. Advocacy is also often used as a vehicle in helping to recognise injustices so that people can become more involved and respected. Moreover, advocacy helps to find remedies for the oppressed. As such, the role of social work practitioners usually involves an element of advocacy.

One of the primary aims of social work ' is to promote social justice in practice and policy' (Dalrymple & Burke 2006, p. 17). As such, advocacy fits right into this framework and has occupied a large role in its approach. Indeed, social work has a long tradition of advocacy and social action, which leads to social reform (Hepworth et al 2010).

Marrying the two together, social work advocacy, from the perspective of critical social work, can be defined as the ' exclusive and mutual representation of a client(s) or cause in a forum, attempting to systematically influence decision making in an unfair and unresponsive system' (Hepworth et al 2010, p. 430). As such, social work advocacy involves persuading decision makers to take a particular course of action.

From a critical perspective, social work advocacy is not merely representing

the case in behalf of the client, but also to make sure that the client's voice is heard. The goal of advocacy is not simply to represent the views of another but also to mobilise and enable the person to speak themselves (Wilks 2012 ).

In social work advocacy, a case advocate is one who is working on behalf of a service user to ensure that they receive the benefits and services to which they are entitled to, while at the same time safeguarding their dignity (Hepworth et al 2010). The intent and outcome of advocacy should be: (a) to boost the individual's sense of power; (b) help the person to be more confident; and (c) to encourage the individual to be more assertive and expand his/her choices (Wilks 2012).

One of the main principles of anti-oppressive practice is the belief that social work has the capability to empower the individual and to change power relationships between individuals, communities, and society through the adoption of approaches that are sensitive to the impacts of difference. Advocacy's links with empowerment may provide an approach to social work practice that is consistent with the aims of the anti-oppressive perspective (Wilks 2012).

Social work's core value and principle is the dignity and worth of the individual. This understandably leads social workers into advocacy efforts, as they work with oppressed sectors in order to reform power structures so that all are represented and have a share in the welfare of society (Pearson Higher Education 2012).

There are various types of advocacy with their own strengths and limitations. Moreover, advocacy can be applied into various areas of social work. Appendix 1 shows a summary of the different types of advocacy and examples of how they are applied into social work practice.

### Summary and Conclusion

Critical social work is founded on the theoretical underpinnings of Conflict Theory and Critical Theory Perspectives. Conflict Theory focuses on how power structures and inequalities affect people's lives. This is based on the argument that society is structured along the lines of inequality (i. e. wealth, income, health) and as such, these provide people with qualitatively different lives. Critical Theories, on the other hand, hold that social problems arise due to various forms of oppression. This perspective also emphasises that people can change society through conscious and collective action.

Based on these perspectives, critical social work approach emphasizes the transformation of relationships between social work practitioners and service users into one that is empowering, emancipating and mobilising.

Anti-oppressive perspectives have become an important facet of critical social work. This perspective holds that the imbalance of power in social work relations only serves to support the emergence of oppressive practices. However, in actual social work practice, it is very difficult to liberate service users from oppression due to various reasons, such as the lack of funding, support and tools from the government, legislative limitations, etc.

Ethical awareness refers to the challenge faced by social work professionals in terms of their ability and commitment to act in an ethical manner. The various challenges and dilemmas confronting social workers are sometimes making it difficult for them to come up with ethically informed decisions.

Social work is a very complex profession. Social workers are required to respond to both individual cases and public issues. They are mandated by the state to intervene with people who need help; while at the same time, they must work within administrative and legislative parameters. Social work also has multiple accountabilities, which may be conflicting and overlapping. Moreover, social work is constantly being restructured and redefined by the state but its core responsibilities must remain the same. Lastly, the negative experiences of social workers in their practice (e. g. lack of state funding and support; feeling undervalued and poorly understood, etc.) are complicating the situation even more.

Social work has a long tradition of advocacy. Critical social work advocacy involves influencing decision makers to take a specific course of action. Additionally, advocacy is not just to represent the service user's case, but also to enable the person to speak for themselves.

Taking all these together, it can be concluded that engaging in critical social work requires a strong foundation in theoretical perspectives combined with an in-depth understanding of actual practice scenarios. The complexities of the social work arena and the various issues faced by social work practitioners provide huge challenges. As such, knowledge must be



combined with commitment to the work, as well as passion for social justice and empowerment.

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## Appendix 1. Advocacy

Type of Advocacy	Example	Strengths	Limitations
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Paid advocacy	Solicitor	Expertise, especially on legal rights; powerful representation	Costly; often an unnecessarily 'heavy' response
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Advocacy as part of a professional role  
Social worker; nurse  
Influence within services; time allocated as part of job; experience and knowledge of needs  
Usually working with more than one person, so attention limited that can be given to individuals; bound by conditions of employment; possible conflict of interest, e. g. if a person needs help to complain about colleagues or employers

Advocacy by an organisation on behalf of a group  
Mencap; Royal National Institute for the Deaf; Age Concern  
Expertise; power deriving from membership; influence on national policy  
Usually concerned with general rather than individual issues

Formal problem-oriented advocacy  
Ombudsman; Citizens' Advice Bureau; local councillor; MP; patient advice (PALS)  
Formal or legal basis; independence; authority by virtue of role  
Often oriented towards complaints of specific problems

Informal single issues unpaid advocacy  
Crisis or instrumental, outcome-oriented  
Citizen Advocacy  
Flexible; informal; expression of citizenship and social capital; minimises conflict of interest since unpaid and voluntary  
Concerned with single issues rather than long-term needs

Informal long-term unpaid advocacy  
Relationship-based  
Citizen Advocacy partnerships; advocacy by family and friends  
Same as informal single issue unpaid advocacy; plus: long-term; relationship-based; protective as well as empowering  
Great trust required that the relationship will pursue the person's best interests

Self-advocacy by individuals on their own behalf  
Creative arts; taking part in own reviews; expressing wishes; involvement in person-centred

planning Empowering; ensures relevance; participatory; enhances self-esteem  
Lacks power; depends on adequate support

Self-advocacy by a group on behalf of its members People First; National Pensioners Convention; British Council of Disabled People Gives a voice to the otherwise unheard; expression of basic rights; supportive to members Likely to be concerned with general rather than individual issues; depends on financial and advisory support for success.

Advocacy by individuals on behalf of a group Elected representatives; Partnership Board; Advisory panels Contribution of relevant views; expression of democratic participation and rights Individuals may not be representative; views expressed may not be those of the group as a whole

Source: Nzira & Williams 2009, p. 30)