Social Work and Social Justice: Past, Present, and Future
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Thank you, Tracy, for your gracious introduction and to Dean Davis for the honor of

asking me to speak today. I want to extent my heartfelt congratulations to you, the faculty, staff,

students, and alumni of the School of Social Work. A century is a long time and the

accomplishments of the school during that century are significant and worth celebrating.

I have a personal connection to the School of Social Work: My late father-in-law, Harold

Lewis, received his MSW from the School in 1948. He was a student of Marion Hathaway and a

witness to the events Dr. Davis described. He later went on to become Dean of the Hunter

College School of Social Work for 20 years and received an honorary doctorate from Pittsburgh.

The NASW *Code of Ethics* explicitly states that the pursuit of social justice is not

optional; it is an obligation of all social workers, whatever their methodological focus and field

of practice. The International Federation of Social Work makes comparable assertions about the

profession's goals. In other words, the pursuit of social justice is not merely one of several

competing values; it is an ethical imperative - a precondition for all professional social work

activity.

Given the centrality of social justice to the profession's mission and goals, it is ironic that

the profession continues to define the concept in ambiguous, often misunderstood terms, and to

apply it inconsistently to our practice. A major source of this ambiguity is the conflict between

definitions of social justice that focus primarily on economic inequality and those that emphasize

inequities based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. As a result, throughout U.S. history,

the discourse on social justice has largely occurred on two parallel tracks that only intersect

occasionally. Today, demographic changes that soon will make the traditional meaning of

majority and minority obsolete further complicate this issue. The roots of these problems lie in the origins of the social work profession and its evolution over the past century and a half of rapid economic, social, and political change.

One of the major early contributions of social work was the substitution of the principle of social justice for the hierarchical model of charity that had prevailed for centuries. This occurred during the Progressive era in the form of a synthesis of religious and secular ideas. As expressed at the time, the principle of social justice established universal standards of decency that government would enforce and social science would rationalize.

This new emphasis produced some significant accomplishments during the Progressive era. Robert Hunter, a settlement house worker, completed the first comprehensive study of poverty in the U.S. He found that many, if not most of the immigrant poor, were poor as a result of illness, unemployment, or old age, not moral failings. His research also demonstrated the extent of poverty, its impact on immigrants' cultures, and the limitations of existing social services.

Other studies by Mary van Kleeck and Josephine Goldmark on child labor, unemployment, and working conditions in factories, mines, and mills led to legislation banning child labor and regulating the working hours of women. Goldmark helped write the precedent-setting Brandeis Brief in *Muller v Oregon* that used social science data for the first time in a Supreme Court case. Research and advocacy by Grace and Edith Abbott on juvenile delinquency and tenement housing helped produce such social welfare innovations as the juvenile court and municipal housing codes. Research by the Children's Bureau on maternal and child health ultimately lead to the landmark Sheppard Towner Act – the first federal health care legislation. African American social workers like George Edmund Haynes and Chandler Owen, and African

American allies of the profession, such as Ida Wells Barnett and W.E.B. DuBois, brought issues such as lynching and institutional racism in employment to the public's attention.

Yet, despite these considerable accomplishments, competing ideas of social justice soon emerged. In their definition of social justice, the elites who dominated the Charities Organization Societies and public welfare agencies emphasized individual rights and responsibilities, while the settlement house movement focused on social democratic principles. The resolution of these differences ultimately produced a hybrid concept of social justice that merged efforts to reduce social inequalities with the profession's self-interested goal of restoring a lost, largely mythical "organic community." This unusual synthesis formed the basis of social work's dual focus on individual self-determination and social equity, and shaped a model of practice that, to this day, reflects both conceptual ambiguity and tenuous professional unity. In addition, from the outset, institutional racism and the denial of citizenship rights to significant portions of the population created obstacles to the translation of social justice principles into practice

These diverse values and the profession's failure to challenge racial, ethnic, and gender inequities contributed to the development of a patchwork social welfare system in the U.S. that continues to stigmatize dependent populations and reinforce gender and racial hierachies even as the profession's rhetoric heralds the ideal of social justice. Now, why did this occur? The early leaders of the social work profession – who were largely white, wealthy, and privileged – defined social justice in terms of equality before the law, rather than equality of social rights and resources. Their physical and cultural isolation from the diverse populations with whom they worked reinforced this narrow perspective and sustained their inability to acknowledge their own racism, ethno-centrism, sexism, class prejudice, and anti-Semitism. With a few notable

exceptions, their interpretation of social justice contrasted sharply with the view of social justice racial, ethnic, and religious minorities professed. In response to the neglect and paternalism of elites, these populations forged a concept of racial or ethnic uplift that combined elements of cultural pride and social assimilation. While this conception of social justice enabled these excluded communities to retain their heritage, it also sharpened the division between the social work mainstream and those at its margins and made it more difficult for the profession to develop an all-encompassing vision of a socially just society that could be translated into policy and practice.

The dominance of mainstream definitions of social justice also meant that, with a few noteworthy exceptions, the vision of social justice embraced by the organized social work profession did not include full social equality, even in organizations like the YWCA that was far more racially progressive than other agencies at the time. The profession consistently failed to recognize that the policy reforms it championed during the Progressive Era and the New Deal had minimal impact on persons of color, because the obstacles they faced were significantly different from those of poor, native-born whites and European immigrants. In addition, through the 1960s, many public and private social welfare agencies continued to be racially segregated, and the profession's major organizations largely ignored issues that affected racial and sexual minorities and women. Today's social workers would like to forget or overlook how many of our professional ancestors sought to exclude "undesirable" immigrants, monitor relief distribution more closely, tattoo alien felons, and considered people of color incapable of being fully assimilated into American society.

The failure of the mainstream profession to recognize the multiple forms of injustice that existed in U.S. society produced several important consequences. Since the 19th century,

excluded and marginalized communities have created their own service organizations, advocated for "identity-based" rather than "universal" definitions of social justice, and drawn attention to specific social and economic issues ignored by the dominant culture. For example, African American churches, Latino *mutualistas*, and the associations developed by various Asian immigrant communities infused concepts of mutual aid and self-help into their services – concepts that most mainstream social workers did not consider integral to social justice-oriented practice until recently. These communities rejected the equation of social justice with coerced assimilation and paternalistic benevolence and criticized the social work profession for its inability to embrace full social equality. They refused to abandon their cultural heritages and traditional means of responding to individual and community needs because they provided the safest and surest path to economic and physical security in a hostile world. A century ago, they articulated a broader conception of social justice, which included fair political representation, decent wages, housing, and schools, and the end of police harassment – issues that are still relevant today. In the words of Roosevelt Wright at the 1919 NCSW, they wanted "a democracy, not a whiteocracy."

Ironically, the contradictions between the profession's social justice rhetoric and its often myopic translation of that ideal into practice were most glaring during periods of social reform. During the New Deal, for example, social workers were instrumental in expanding government provision and establishing the social rights of citizenship as critical components of social justice. The radical Rank and File Movement, which had more members in the mid-1930s than the mainstream American Association of Social workers, attempted to translate social justice principles into more egalitarian forms of social service. Yet, these efforts at reform primarily benefited white men and European immigrants. Although the American Association of Social

Workers and other social welfare organizations were far ahead of other professional groups in banning racial discrimination and promoting women to positions of leadership, New Deal policies in the areas of income support, labor rights, housing, and child welfare reinforced the structural and cultural inequities that maintained people of color and women in second-class status.

To be fair, political repression has been another major impediment to the profession's fulfillment of its promise of social justice. After both world wars, well-organized right-wing attacks on social work leaders, even moderate reformers, prompted the profession to abandon most of its modest social justice efforts. During World War I, the Chicago Tribune, of the nation's leading newspapers, called for Jane Addams, "St. Jane," to be hung from the highest lamppost in the city because of her opposition to American entry into the war. In the aftermath of the war and in the late 1930s, legislative committees in Congress and several states investigated prominent social workers for alleged subversive activities, and in the 1920s the Department of War circulated a pamphlet naming Addams and Florence Kelley as the leaders of a "Bolshevik/Feminist" conspiracy to undermine American society.

By the late 1940s, influenced by the growing acceptance of the idea of the American "melting pot" during the war against fascism, social workers helped produce several concrete, social justice-oriented achievements. They included outlawing restrictive housing covenants, abolishing segregated education for Mexican American children, annulling anti-Japanese laws, reducing discriminatory employment practices against African Americans and Jews, and revoking the ban on voting by Native Americans. Soon, however, the anti-Communist environment of the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s produced renewed and sustained attacks on social justice advocates within the social work field. Once again, this lead the field to focus

on professionalization and individual adjustment and retreat from its advocacy for social change. During this period, government agencies, private social service organizations, unions, and universities purged and blacklisted progressive social workers. I am sorry to point out this occurred at the University of Pittsburgh as well.

This retreat from social justice caused the profession to respond belatedly to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, the first NASW *Code of Ethics* did not address race and ethnicity specifically. It took NASW over a decade and a half after the modern civil rights movement emerged to finally take a forceful position against institutional racism and for schools of social work to assess the practice implications for women and people of color of social justice ideals. Even then, most social work research and policy advocacy stressed – explicitly or implicitly – the deviant features of so-called minority cultures. This provided the intellectual foundation for policies that focused more on "fixing" these cultural deficiencies than on addressing the structural roots of people's problems.

During the past two generations, these conflicts about the application of social justice principles to practice theory, research, and education have remained unresolved. The professional mainstream continues to emphasize consensus approaches to social change, equality of opportunity rather than equity of outcomes, and individual adjustment (now termed "resiliency") or problem amelioration (aka "evidence-based intervention") instead of structural change. Courses on racism and social work, created during the 1970s and 1980s, have now evolved into courses on diversity. To some extent, this represents increasing multicultural awareness in such areas as sexual orientation and gender identity. It is also, however, an accommodation to the neoliberal ideas that have dominated American society and politics for the past several decades.

The underlying values of neoliberalism have transformed the basic tenets of social work practice. They have promoted the privatization and reduced funding of social services, transformed the mission of public and nonprofit agencies, and established scientific, empiricist objectivity as the primary criterion for respected scholarship. The growing emphasis on measurable program outcomes and cost efficiency, goals predetermined by elites in isolation from the historical and contemporary contexts, often precludes an analysis of the structural bases of people's personal issues. For example, although NASW has recently embraced the concept of racial equity through broad policy statements, it still defines social work's primary goals as "*individual* well-being in a social context" and embraces theoretical constructs that continue to assume a benign relationship between individuals and their environment. In addition, under the guise of promoting the use of science to inform public policy and social work practice, social workers have resuscitated the Social Darwinist tendency to address social issues by essentializing group characteristics.

Today, most of the criticism of this incomplete and timid application of social justice principles comes from outside the U.S. Jan Fook, for example, points out that the "central problem for social work [is] the struggle to balance its dual focus on social action and individual change...[This] has recently been complicated by a shift from the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition." Like other critics around the world, she argues that the profession will be unable to resolve this conflict until it develops "an analytical practice framework that addresses both individual and social well-being."

In the U.S., persistent questions further complicate this conceptual debate: "How is social justice to be achieved?" "To what issues should social justice principles be applied?" "How can we reconcile the pursuit of social justice with the emerging interest in universal human rights and

respect for cultural diversity?" Resolving these dilemmas and translating the solutions into practice constitute delicate problems we need to negotiate both intellectually and practically.

To summarize: For over a century, several major themes have influenced the relationship between social work and social justice. One is the tension between the desire to implement social justice ideals through social and political action and social work practice, and the goal of acquiring and maintaining elite sanction as a profession. Even when we addressed issues like unemployment, health care, and civil rights, the professionalizing impulse caused most social workers to view these problems in terms of individual adjustment rather than structural change. The pursuit of enhanced occupational status continues to frustrate efforts to implement the profession's ethical imperative to pursue social justice and, perhaps more than any issue, maintains the gap between the profession's rhetoric and practice realities.

Another theme is that the profession's ability to narrow this gap appears to correlate with its advocacy for universal rather than selective policies and programs. I know this position is somewhat controversial, especially today, because this approach to social justice often overlooks the specific needs of marginalized and excluded populations. Nevertheless, I believe it has the potential to create the conceptual and practice foundation for more comprehensive, equitable change efforts in the future. Conversely, I also believe that social workers have been most successful in applying social justice concepts to practice when they have included marginalized populations as full and equal partners in *all phases* of policy and program development and implementation. Social justice in social work, therefore, must be *both* ends and means.

A third theme involves the challenge of reconciling the two distinct philosophical roots of social work's definition of social justice. The liberal tradition in social work emphasizes the preservation of individual freedom, self-reliance or agency, and the importance of a social

contract – between the government and the governed, agencies and the communities they serve, and social workers and clients. This tradition is the basis of social work's principle of self-determination and for many of its contemporary ideas about individual and community empowerment. It is the core of social work's master narrative, reflected in the profession's vocabulary, concepts of normal behavior, and assumptions about the human experience and the goals of practice.

By contrast, the social democratic tradition in social work focuses on principles of mutuality and greater equality through the expansion of social, political and, more recently, cultural rights and the more equitable distribution of material and non-material goods. For most of social work's history, the profession has attempted to balance these two traditions. However, it has also applied this synthesis primarily to white, heterosexual men from privileged classes and Northern and Western European ancestry. The profession continues to struggle to apply these principles more broadly – a challenge that has become more complex and contentious in today's hyper-partisan environment.

A fourth theme – the profession's failure to overcome the influence of its hierarchical origins – further complicates current efforts to address this challenge. Despite our well-intentioned, benevolent motives, professional dominance persists. We see it in the growing number of involuntary clients from socially excluded groups, the use of increasingly prescriptive interventions in many fields of practice, the determination of what constitutes "evidence" in our research and knowledge in our practice, in our reluctance to become involved in the political arena, and in our inconsistent examination of how power and privilege influence our application of social justice to practice. Today, even advocacy for social justice can maintain professional

dominance by channeling social change efforts within predetermined boundaries and strategies and excluding meaningful democratic participation by our constituents.

This brief overview of social work's ongoing struggle to clarify the meaning of social justice and how to apply it to practice reveals several lessons that may serve as guides in the future. First, we cannot achieve our goal of social justice on either the micro or macro level unless we conceive it as a means and an end. Second, we can translate socially just principles into practice only if we recognize both our mutuality and collective responsibility. Our most effective advocacy for social justice occurs when our efforts balance our self-interests as workers and those of the people with whom we work. We have been most successful in translating social justice principles into practice when we have not assumed that difference equals deviance and when we have resisted the temptation to impose standardized, mono-cultural criteria to our analysis of pressing social issues. Our challenge today is to develop responses to the unique needs of historically marginalized communities within an equitable policy and practice framework. This will require us to rethink our relationship with government, the market economy, clients, constituents, and professional colleagues.

Finally, we must recognize that the profession has made the greatest strides towards social justice and acquired the most public support for this goal when it acts with courage even in the face of considerable political risk. A social justice orientation to social work in the 21st century would promote a counter-narrative that recognizes the relationship between people's complementary needs for economic assistance and non-material supports. It would engage in a structural analysis of society's problems and recognize the significance of history, culture, and context and the interconnectedness between domestic and global issues. It might even question

the assumption that a universal idea of social justice exists and adopt a revised conception of social justice that recognizes the implications of increasing demographic and cultural diversity.

James Baldwin wrote, "History does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past…We carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways. [It] is literally present in all that we do." To weave an awareness of our history into contemporary practice, we need to refocus the profession's discourse from the mitigation of the consequences of inequality and injustice to a discussion of what constitutes a socially just society. This vision must be comprehensive and avoid the trap of appearing to promote the needs of some excluded populations at the expense of others. It will require us to redefine the meaning of professionalism and clarify how maintaining our professional function is consistent with the attainment of our social justice mission. To do so will involve considerable risks. But I believe that taking these risks is at the core of what we aspire to be -- socially just social workers in a socially just society.

Thank you very much.