

A discussion of consensus building in social work practice

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Abstract

Although self-determination of clients is paramount in social work practices, respect for it often runs counter to social benefit when providing assistance, and difficulties frequently arise when it is prioritized exclusively. Accordingly, measures have become necessary for avoiding opposition between the diverse senses of values of e.g. clients and social workers. After first elucidating what characterizes values in social work practices, we consider concrete measures for consensus building in such cases.

Although subjects possessing values vary widely, normative values play important roles in supporting social work practices when viewed in terms of standards of normalized values and those of real phenomena such as decisions and consequent actions. However, processes by which real phenomena affect normative values also exist.

We revealed that consensus building approaches where the client's sense of value diverges from others' can be divided into three types: 1. Measures to rethink senses of values dominant in society; 2. Measures to create novel, shared senses of values; and 3. Measures to make clients internalize changed senses of values. These three measures do not unilaterally coerce one side to a specific sense of values, but rather involve cooperation among all related parties to

find a shared course of action, as in consensus building. If consensus building in social work practices is understood from a sense of value perspective, it can be considered as a process for discovering best practices that incorporate various senses of values and achieving mutual understanding while respecting individual senses of values.

Introduction

The values of social work must guarantee the respect of the dignity of the individual. Social welfare is considered to be founded on the importance of self-determination within the ideological context of social work, and guaranteeing the self-determination of the client has been identified as the principle that embodies this respect [1]. This has been debated in a great number of preceding studies including Biestek's principles. However, when it comes to the actual provision of assistance, there are cases when the self-determination of a client runs counter to social interests, and so when the self-determination of a client is maximally respected, difficult situations frequently arise accordingly [2]. In recent years, these kinds of challenges and dilemmas of practice have become reality, and the necessity has been identified for social workers and clients to overcome them by mutual discussion and reciprocal collaboration to iron out

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discrepancies in their respective senses of value. However, in the context of the client–social worker relationship, because there are so many occasions when the social worker is authorized to make substantial decisions concerning the provision of services, there is a high risk of paternalism-based “benevolent coercion” on his/her side. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the high likelihood of authority asymmetry (i.e., power imbalance) [3]. For this reason, measures to achieve consensus building that incorporate diverse senses of values while respecting self-determination and acknowledging individual differences in them are sorely needed [4].

Against such a background, in practice social work seeks to avoid conflict between differing senses of values and to secure the client–provider service relationship by mutual assent of concerned parties. Consensus building is a desirable way to achieve this; it incorporates not just the senses of value of clients and social workers, but also those diverse senses of value of the many parties concerned such as families and other professionals. Clarifying techniques for realizing this goal is an issue of paramount concern.

Purpose

In this paper, first we clarify the characteristics of value (s) in the context of social work. After this, we aim to discuss concrete measures for consensus building that incorporate diverse senses of value in cases within social work practice where multiple senses of values are in conflict or opposition -e.g., when the senses of value of the client and the social worker are in conflict- without radicalizing social work practices.

Method

This paper undertook a literature review targeting chapters and articles that had themes

related to values research in the social welfare domain from among the literature published in Japan. I used CiNii Articles, CiNii Books, Japan Medical Abstracts Society, J-STAGE, and MAGAZINEPLUS, and in each database employed the search terms social welfare, social work, value, consensus, and self-determination. I selected each chapter or article after searching the keywords, abstract, and title of each. In cases where the decision to include a work was difficult, I appropriately verified the contents of the abstract and full text, and judged whether its immediate theme pertained to consensus-building and social values relating to social work and social welfare. In addition, I consulted references cited or otherwise described in each work. Moreover, while the target of this paper is basically limited to the literature published within Japan, I have also consulted overseas literature when the Japanese literature was based on overseas research. However, I have excluded literature on specific problems such as methods of consensus-building when local residents create opposition movements to social welfare facilities, literature on personal assistance methods (individual support methods) for service users, as well as literature on values research unrelated to social work practice. In addition, in this paper I have described only the representative references cited and consulted for reasons of space.

Results

1. Features of values in social work

Before discussing consensus building in the context of social work practices, we must summarize “values” as subjects of study because of their important connection with the matter.

For the first feature of values that relate to social welfare, we can mention that the contents of concrete values can broach an extremely wide range of topics. As pointed out by Fujimura, it is problematic to define social welfare based on unique values [5]. In the social welfare domain,

many advocates have discussed distinct viewpoints concerning the questions of “What is meant by a value that relates to social welfare?” and “In what sort of matters is such a value present?” Because the subjects that have been thus derived as possessing value variously comprise ideas, phenomena, and actions, complete semantic coverage is nearly impossible.

However, although matters deemed to possess value in the social welfare domain were exceedingly diverse, they had a strong tendency to be discussed in light of their connection with social welfare systems and social welfare practices. We can identify this commonality as the second feature. Especially in relation to social work practices, there is an accumulation of values research from early on in the literature in the context of its connection with social work in England and America. Values have been discussed as the foundation for deriving practice implementation [8], where values are considered the basis for its essential components and foundations [6] and ethical principles [7].

As for social work research in Japan, Nagaoka has described a variety of value contents from their relationships with social welfare systems and social work practices. He has argued that there are ideologies and value orientations supporting these systems and practices within social welfare, and that integration of such values with knowledge and skills is necessary. Further, he has said that social welfare includes value orientation in its foundation, and at the same time has an actual, objective existence within the reality of social constructions. In addition, Nagaoka has argued that the ideas and values of social welfare, by helping to advance social welfare, amount to the most important foundations over the wide-ranging field, and that they comprise an ethical basis for social workers [9].

Moreover, Ohta has stated that the basis for social welfare -in terms of both its

institutionalization as policy and its embodiment in implemented activities- is none other than the realization of accumulated values, and considered social work as the work of putting values into practice in order to realize them. He also argued that the values and ethics of social welfare must be shared by a wide range of ideologies and cultures, and only come to possess practical efficacy through their integration [10].

Furthermore, the value formation process has been argued from early on in the literature as being not limited to universal values of social welfare, but also related to individual cases of social work practices. The fact that value orientations of social workers influence the implementation of values has been pointed out [11]. Value judgment has also been regarded as one component of social work [12], and a close relationship between it and social work practices has been argued for. In Japan, Shimada said that because values are formed by human evaluation, they are not mere objective attributes independent from human volition, and pointed out that divergent value judgments will arise depending on the value orientations of the people making them [13]. On top of that, he has said that although professional social work is established in the context of its relationship with its background social values, there is not necessarily a unique and universal sense of values, or even a predominantly recognized one, because the sense of values held by the profession differs according to societal demands. He thereby revealed that the criteria for value judgments change in accordance with situational changes, and that the entirety of values in social work is formed by the accumulation of such individual judgments [14].

Further, Hiratsuka has said that social work practices are the combination of how they are really applied and how they are actually cognized, and the process whereby various value-related phenomena take place happens in this nexus. The involvement of professional/occupational senses

of values of social workers, their personal values, and the senses of values of clients makes the objectives of actions precise, guides the measures that must be adopted, and clarifies matters that lead to actions in practice. As a result of this narrowing down and selecting those values to be realized, a process can be obtained for conferring novel meaning to values. In this new meaning not only are client senses of values implicated, but social workers' professional senses of values also come to play a larger role. It has also been pointed out that in the context of this process, discord between and opposition of values arises—not only of the client versus the social worker senses of values, but of the wide range of processes within all social work practices [15].

In addition, Akiyama has stated that what affect a client are the proactive value judgments of social workers, and that evaluative determinations of attitudes must be conducted in social work practices. He discussed the due problem of how to support children with disabilities as an example concerning such value judgments [16].

In addition to all of this, there are numerous studies identifying a close relationship between social work practices and values. Shigeo Okamura argued that *ab initio* social work studies are a way to recognize a problem then determine its solution. To question a viewpoint to recognize problems inherently related to social welfare [17, 18], first one must perceive it in the light of some sort of normative values so that one can see the problem [19]. In social work practices, an inquiry into the validity of that value judgment is the stimulus for this. In other words, the background of this process is a series of steps whereby when specific values are acknowledged by members of society and become socially normalized, each member internalizes these values, then actions are produced based on those kinds of normative values.

Consequently, if one perceives the matter from the relationship between standards of normalized

values and those of real phenomena (judgments, actions, etc.) based on such values, one viewpoint is that what is derived from fundamental values that form the basis of social work is the ethical code of social workers [20]. Normative values fulfill the necessary role of supporting social work practices as real phenomena on the one hand, while on the other hand a process also is generated for these real phenomena to exert influence on normative values. In other words, the entirety of values in the context of social work practices can be said to be formed according to these kinds of interactions.

2. Measures to avoid conflict and opposition between senses of values

1) Rethinking values dominant in the society in question

In recent years, skepticism has been cast on the objective reliability of not just social work practices but phenomena that have been assigned values as culturally appropriate and ethically normative. The instability of value-assigned phenomena and the active role of the assigning entity have likewise drawn attention [21]. For example, Bennett has argued that for the possession of a value by a particular object or action, the subject that assigns that value to that object must exist, and the value arises as a result of experiencing value assignment from social relationships [22]. To this effect, he pointed out the necessity of understanding a particular object from its formation process, rather than by perceiving its value as a possessed intrinsic quality. In the context of Japanese social work research as well, the necessity of so-called “value rethinking” has been identified to question the grounds on which values can be said to be present, and on their veracity and validity [23]. Additionally, when conflict or opposition arises between the senses of values of many concerned parties in actual social work practices, many commentators have advocated the importance of

social workers perceiving their own senses of value through self-reflection and questioning those senses of value treated as dominant in the society in question.

For example, Hiratsuka stated that an important point for social welfare is the detailed analysis or inspection of the relationship between various values and their implementation: specifically, whether social work practices have their basis in values, and whether these values are veracious. She also noted important points that must be examined surrounding the object of discussion or study in research into values in social work. First, one must investigate what to treat as values, and second, one must analyze and inspect the mechanisms of the creation process of values in the context of their implementation, and elucidate their meanings. She also stated that to understand the generation and transition processes of values in these contexts, approaches where they are grasped from a historical point of view should be included. She noted that following these approaches makes the scrutiny and inspection of various values becomes possible. She also argued that values that can be regarded as ultimate and universal are matters that absolutely must be investigated in terms of whether they have significance in reality or not. The senses of value of the professions organized with these values at their core must likewise be considered [15].

In addition, after an examination of self-determination in social work practices, Kojima discussed values and pointed out that values and norms (ideologies) exist as the superstructure of a society, and identified the importance of considering the mechanisms behind how values and norms (principles) appear, and why they appear that way [24].

Moreover, Maruoka also focused on the relationship between social work practices and values, stating that social welfare is in reality supported by embodied values through their practical implementations. However, he added

that when treating these values in scholarly social work research, researchers must be attentive to the scope of self-awareness and mutual recognition towards the basis of objectivity and value concerns. Within these, he argued that conscious perception of objectivity must include disciplined reasoning based on the foundation of the researchers' own value judgments but without obscuring it [25].

In this way, while recognizing the influence that normative values exert on social welfare systems and practices, the necessity was identified of questioning anew the basis of values that form that premise. That questioning means deciding to not perceive value as an intrinsic quality possessed by a particular subject, doubting the obviousness of a normative value, and identifying the importance of understanding the process by which it was established. In other words, the standards for a value judgment change in accordance with situation, and by the accumulation of those kinds of individual judgments, being conscious of not only of the senses of values of social workers, but also of changes in societal value judgments that have occurred, is indispensable. In light of these facts, it can be said that the rethinking of values taken up in this section is an approach that focuses on processes of consensus building between several differing senses of values.

2) Consensus building approaches

In situations where individual rights and freedoms run counter to social benefit and justice, when the appropriateness of existing normative values is unilaterally claimed and when people cannot be thus persuaded to obey them, then authorities force changes to the behavior of individuals. Given the lack of the consent of the individual, the behavior is non-spontaneous, the freedom of the individual is compromised, and the possibility rises of a similar situation reoccurring. Furthermore, the compulsion itself is

difficult to implement in many situations. For example, in cases where clients do not want to utilize a welfare service even though professionals conclude that its use is desirable, ethical issues aside, forcing them to utilize the service is difficult.

Therefore, for situations where there are several differing senses of values -e.g., when the senses of values of clients and professionals (including social workers) differ- reaching consensus between the various parties concerned and utilizing and providing the service upon mutual consent become necessary. In these situations, consensus building does not refer to one of the sides reaching a unilateral agreement to meet the other side's sense of values. It is a creative process for finding out a strategy for obtaining mutually satisfactory solutions based on the diverse senses of values of the parties concerned. This process can be explained as consensus building by means of agreement based on a sense of values manufactured by all parties concerned: i.e., created consensus building [26].

As one practical means aimed at building consensus through the creation of such a new sense of values in the context of social work practices, Shimpo has proposed reducing antagonism between values and differences in situational definitions, and forming a "situational value system" that leads to consensus building [27]. This is a method for overcoming opposition in values and differences in diverse opinions from among the parties involved in assistance activities (clients, families, other professions, etc.) and finding out resolution strategies. Specifically, this is a method for ultimately forming a situational value system that incorporates diverse values and promotes the cooperation of the client and social worker. It exerts its effectiveness through new, changed realizations involving the mutual understanding of all parties and of values and behaviors, the sharing of purpose, multilateral cooperation, and the strengthening of feelings of

solidarity. The consensus building approach via this kind of client-professional cooperation is not limited to social work practices, and is frequently utilized in medical care settings where ethical values are in opposition: in particular, in situations of decision-making through informed consent made difficult by associated insufficient communication. In the setting of choosing medical actions, there are sequences of events in which consensus building has been advocated as an approach to overcome the limitations of informed consent. For this purpose, the most important thing in consensus building for the resolution of opposition is the analysis of the people who have concerns about the issues where there is a possibility of opposition. For the circumstances that pose these issues, points in need of clarification have been variously identified as: the matters of what kinds of concerned parties there are, what the opinions held by each of them are and on what grounds or reasons they are based, what kind of antagonism is present between the opinions and the rationales behind them, etc. [28]. In this way in the context of consensus building, conducting decision-making in light of the differences among the varied opinions of the multiple parties concerned is stressed; in particular, the importance of the process of finding out the best practices through dialogue is emphasized [26].

However, the approaches for consensus building presented in this section, while exhibiting efficacy in individual cases in clinical settings where a defined time and space can be shared, have limitations when the client group scale is large. That is, on the one hand, for scenarios where related parties are limited to designated people (such as clients and families, social workers, and other professions), such measures may be effective. (Settings within social work practices of developing individual support are a good example.) On the other hand, when encouraging the use of welfare services that

pertain to many citizens, assembling the large numbers of parties concerned in a defined time and space is difficult. Because of this, we deem necessary measures that differ from the approaches presented in the present section. Therefore, we next examine methodologies that avoid opposition and discrepancies in senses of values while leading to consensus building in cases when the group scale of concerned parties is a little larger.

3) Behavior Change Theories

In social work practices, the premise is adopted that respect for the self-determination of the affected party is important. That being so, behavior change theories seek the possibility for consent for cases when the senses of values of social workers and clients differ, operating through gentle changes of the client's sense of values without radicalization of his/her opposition. What is herein referred to as "behavior change" is the acquisition of appropriate behaviors (or loss of inappropriate behaviors) for the promotion, maintenance, or recovery of health. Focused in the field of health care, various models and approaches are being utilized to understand people's behavior changes and to develop effective interventions and assistance [29]. Specifically, we list the health belief model, the self-efficacy approach, the theory of planned behavior, and social cognitive theory, among others.

First, the health belief model is a model proposed by Rocenstock and developed by Becker & Maiman [30, 31]. The method makes a subject feel a sense of risk to their health, and he/she accordingly becomes very cognizant of the efficacy of a behavior and understands that its benefit is greater than the "hurdle" barring its action. It is an assistance method characterized in particular by how it makes a subject concentrate one's efforts on creating a new behavior [32].

The self-efficacy approach proposed by

Bandura [33] is another method. It is based on a way of thinking whereby a person adopts a behavior and anticipates the connected, favorable results for himself (i.e., the outcome expectation); when he is confident he can perform this behavior well (self-efficacy) the probability of adopting it rises [32]. This theory is based on social cognitive theory, described below.

Ajzen centered the theory of planned behavior on the theory of reasoned action [34]. The approach emphasizes the necessity of behavioral intention. In order for a person to adopt a certain behavior, he/she is asked to think about performing that behavior in the near future. The approach supposes that three factors—attitude towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control—influence and give rise to behavioral intentions [32].

Finally, social cognitive theory is a theory frequently utilized in intervention programs with the purpose of changing people's behavior, such as in initiatives of exercise behavior continuation and smoking cessation. Reciprocal interactional relationships of the three components of behavior, cognition, and social environment are emphasized in this approach; the above-mentioned idea of self-efficacy is central in this theory [29].

In addition to these, the theory of reasoned action, the ecological model, the transtheoretical model, and self-determination theory have been utilized as theories relating to health behavior change and maintenance.

In this way, diverse approaches and models have been utilized under the umbrella of behavior change theories, and it is not uncommon for several techniques to be combined for use. However, what they have in common is that they are utilized with the aim of maintaining the behavior of users. The defining feature of behavior change theories is that they encourage not only changes in user behavior but also changes in senses of values by appealing to the beliefs, motivations, and intentions that constitute

the premise of user behavior. Furthermore, while behavior change theories were developed centered on the field of health care, in recent years they have also been actively introduced in social work practice.

Furthermore, if professionals including social workers target specific behaviors resulting from values, these theories can be utilized as methods to tie such behaviors to spontaneous behavior by increasing the endogenous motivation of clients. The theories could also be called systematized processes of consensus building, which is derived by the client's internalization of social senses of values as his/her personal sense of values.

Discussion

As discussed to this point, various objects have been unpacked as subjects possessing values in the context of social work practices. These objects fulfill an important role as supporting foundations of social work practices by acting as normative social values, and exert strong influence on real phenomena. On the other hand, Frow noted that values arise only where value is assigned within processes constructed for entities and social relationships having various attributes: in other words, absolute values do not exist [35]. In addition, Imada argued that value orientation *ab initio* constitutes all judgments of subjects of values, and that value orientation is not necessarily consistent because the various value judgments among individuals, groups, and societies exist in contradiction and opposition to one other [36]. In this way, it was made clear that real phenomena are not subordinate to normative values. That is, in addition to change due to the accumulation of influences from various social factors, including the vicissitudes of periods and societies, normative values also allow for the possibility of change from experiences of consensus-building processes. We can thus understand that processes also exist whereby real phenomena exert influences on normative values.

In this paper, we have considered consensus building due to these kinds of changes in senses of values. While assuming respect for the sense of values possessed by a client, in settings where they differ from the senses of values possessed by other people, including social workers, we found that measures to avoid ensuing opposition could be roughly divided into three types. Namely: 1. Measures to rethink senses of values dominant in the society in question; 2. Measures to create and share a novel sense of values among parties concerned; and 3. Measures to make a client gently change and internalize his/her personal sense of values. Additionally, we understand that these measures are not matters of unilaterally coercing one side to a specific sense of values, but rather of the technique of consensus building, which involves cooperation and efforts among clients and related parties, including social workers, to find a single shared course of action.

However, values are assigned to specific targets after the determination of the presence of values in various aspects. Although normative values are formed through the accumulation of these kinds of value judgments, it is necessary to understand that variability in peoples' senses of values does not deny the existence of specific values that continue to be supported by members of society. This is because normalized values become internalized in each subject accompanying norm changes in a given society e.g. by means of socialization processes. Legitimacy is conferred to actions based on these kinds of shared values, and they come to possess stability through their systemization. Therefore, values uncontrolled by the influence of various primary social factors (like the vicissitudes of periods, societies, and cultures) continue to be assigned: these values can include conceptual-level items such as fairness and equality and practice-level items like concrete action guidelines. Sometimes these can be understood as universal values. Nonetheless, these matters should not be unilaterally compelled

by a central authority. Values are assigned more regularly, even by mere repetition of value judgments, in order to keep a society persistently stable. On top of the fact that values are *ab initio* based on subject determinations, their existence in subjects is neither universal nor absolute. Social work practices too are no exception. When re-thinking of a value dominant in a given society, rather than calling attention to viewpoints asserting the self-evidence and absoluteness of normative values, it is important to apprehend values assuming instead their variable nature.

In that sense, we should discuss consensus building in the context of social work practices from the side of senses of values. We can thus say that consensus building is both a process of stressing relationships with others even while respecting an individual's sense of values, and of discovering ways of feasibly implementing the integration of the senses of values of various entities through mutual understanding.

Future Challenges

In this paper, we have considered as our main point discussion concerning measures for consensus building when variance among or opposition between senses of values occur in the context of social work practices. However, in the future we would like to understand the subjects of social services defined by the actions accompanying value judgments and to grasp the resultant scope of the accumulation of such judgments. By these means, we hope to analyze what are defined as subjects and the definition process in not just social work, but the wider-ranging domain of social welfare. Further, while normative values play an important role supporting social work practices as real phenomena, there are also processes by which real phenomena exert effects on normative values. Because of this, we would like focus on these kinds of feedback routes when considering the processes of integrated accumulation of values

and the processes that effect their change.

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