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# A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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A belief in the scientific method as the only valid approach to knowledge has dominated Western thinking and has significantly influenced the rest of the world. Those professions most closely aligned with science have the most status and, as Saleeby aptly put it, those *not covered under the canopy of science scurry to seek its shade* (1991:51). Increasingly however, the concept of a single source of truth or understanding is being questioned. Scientific, rational approaches and methods have not lived up to their promises of certainty and progress. Social work practitioners complain that much social work theory is irrelevant as they are constantly faced with a lack of certainty, with multiple perspectives and with diversity. How should social work education respond to this?

This paper suggests that social constructionism provides an attractive alternative to the scientific paradigm. It begins by placing the relationship between social work education and the scientific method in its historical context and goes on to provide an overview of social constructionism. The application of social constructionism to educational aims, teaching methods and choice of syllabus, as well as the challenges that this presents, is then discussed. It is argued that such an approach to social work education would help students to develop an appreciation of and an ability to deal sensitively with the complexities of human problems.

## BACKGROUND: SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

This section traces the development of social work education, specifically in South Africa, and illustrates how social work education, like social work, has been influenced by the socio-political and historical context in which it has found itself.

The development of social work education in South Africa has closely mirrored that of other Western countries. Initially social workers seemed to rely more on personal conviction and intuition than on any scientific methods (Atherton 1993). The training of social workers in those early days adhered closely to the needs of voluntary agencies (George 1982; Muller 1968; Rothman 1977). In the late 19th century the Charity Organisation Society of New York, for example, began courses for volunteers. These and other courses offered by family casework agencies eventually led to the establishment of schools of social work which offered formal training to social workers. Similarly, in South Africa, the first course in *social work* was initiated by a voluntary organisation. In 1929 the Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie (the South African Women's Federation) financed a child guidance clinic attached to the Transvaal University College (now Pretoria University) and the head of this clinic delivered social work lectures and provided extra mural training for groups from the SAVF.

Several years later, in 1932, came the first formal request for social work training in South Africa. This arose from the Carnegie Commission into the *Poor White* problem. The Commission stated that *thoroughly trained social workers who are capable of making a sound diagnosis will be required* (Muller 1968:3). By that time Mary Richmond's book, *Social Diagnosis* had been widely acclaimed. She had identified casework as a science and had advocated the collection of accurate information in order to make a sound diagnosis which would guide appropriate interventions. The Commission clearly identified the need for social work to be closely linked with science, as evidenced by the following quotes: ... *the scientific study of individual cases of destitution and proper differentiation between*

*various types are essential* and ... *there is a lack of a sound scientific study of the wide and complicated problems of genuine poor relief* (Muller 1968:3). This Commission thus strongly influenced the development of social work as a subject of university study and social work was placed firmly within the university setting.

As pointed out by Weick (1993), social work's connection with universities inevitably shaped the profession. Firstly, in order to achieve professional status in society at large social work set itself up as the *expert* on people's personal problems and sought systematic ways of working with clients. Secondly, in order to gain status within the university, social work increasingly adopted a positivist orientation and has consistently attempted to maximise its links with a scientific model of knowledge (Chikanda 1988; Fraser *et al.* 1991; Weick 1993).

Increasing demands in the 1960s and 1970s to answer criticisms regarding social work's effectiveness saw the development of an empirical clinical practice model. This was a further attempt to elevate the profession and foster the development of scientific social work knowledge (Fraser *et al.* 1991; Witkin 1990).

Whether this reliance on a positivist, empirical paradigm benefits social work and whether in fact social work is a *science* has become the focus of considerable debate (Peile 1988). Heineman Pieper (1985), for example, referred to the *fiction* of empirical data and objective researchers. She argued strongly in favour of a view that acknowledged that reality was complex and interactional. While the positivist paradigm has also been the dominant paradigm in social work education in South Africa, there have been calls for a move to a more constructionist perspective. Speaking at a conference organised by the Inter-University Committee for Social Sciences, Batson suggested as far back as 1954 that social work was an art, based on applied sociology (Muller 1968). More recently, Woods (1995) pointed out that linear analytic and value-free thinking, which is a basic feature of positivism, is not necessarily a feature of all the cultures found in South Africa. There was even, he said, a feeling of discomfort among many white South Africans, who are probably the most closely associated with Western thinking.

Witkin (1990) suggested that a social constructionist view was attractive to social work. It is compatible with the *person in environment and ecosystem* perspective, which stresses the inter-relationship between people and their environment. It is also consistent with the value position of social work, which claims to operate within a vision of what is morally and socially just. Values and ethics have always occupied a central position in social work and values such as self-determination, dignity of the client, empowerment and social justice have long been held dear by social workers. These values are more comfortably accommodated within a social constructionist framework than a positivist one, which sees the helper as neutral, objective and value free.

## A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE

A scientific or positivist view of knowledge suggests that there is an objective world *out there* which has a reality of its own and which is independent of the individual. Social constructionists, on the other hand, hold the view that the reality in which we live is socially constructed and has a strong subjective dimension (Berger & Luckmann 1966). The truth about the world is not independent of individuals, but depends on their perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about the world and one therefore has to take into account values, meanings and intentions in understanding human behaviour and the social context in which it occurs (Atherton 1993).

Social constructionism is based on the following assumptions (Gergen 1985; Witkin 1990):

1. What we observe and experience does not fully account for our understanding of the world.



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Linguistic conventions, cultural assumptions and historical precedents contribute to our understanding.

2. How we describe the world is the result of social processes which are historically and culturally situated. For example, our understanding of concepts such as marriage, women, family and children have changed over time. The old adage *Children should be seen and not heard* is not accepted by many modern parents, who encourage children to be full participants in family life. Different cultures may also view these concepts differently. Paying *lobola* for a bride is culturally acceptable in many traditional South African societies, but is seen by many other South Africans as demeaning to women. Cultural and historical factors thus influence our understanding of concepts.
3. The degree to which a particular view or understanding of the world is held depends more on social processes such as communication and negotiation rather than empirical validity. There was no empirical evidence, for example, that sexual relationships between consenting adults of different races was immoral, but the values and goals of the ruling party ensured that this view became the dominant one in apartheid South Africa and was enforced through legal processes.
4. Forms of negotiated understanding are crucial in social life. They are not just reflections of the way things are, but constitute modes of social action. For example, if we perceive people who are disabled as being unable to do anything for themselves we will not provide opportunities for them to live independent lives. If we think that people who have AIDS deserve it because of their immoral lifestyle, then we will not provide support and understanding for these people. How we understand others thus comes to justify how we behave and treat others.

## AIMS OF EDUCATION WITHIN A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW

If one adopts a social constructionist approach to education, the main aim of education is not just to transmit knowledge but to negotiate the meaning of multiple perspectives. This type of teaching assumes that students are active in the process of learning and that they participate in their own construction of knowledge (Caffarella & Barnett 1994). Students and teachers bring to the learning situation their own personal life stories and views of reality. In addition, there exists a body of knowledge *out there* which, although socially constructed, has taken on an objective reality. Learning thus becomes a process of exchange between the life world of the learner and the complex world *out there*.

Education can thus be seen as a dialogue or conversation between student, educator and knowledge. Schmitz (Wildermeesch 1989) suggested that this conversation is characterised by three functions. Firstly, through conversation the educator helps students to interpret and make sense of their own subjective realities and the world *out there*. Secondly, the educator also adopts an expert function. Sometimes the material being discussed is far removed from the student's life experience. The educator, by adopting the expert role, needs to develop ways of helping the students gain this understanding. Thirdly, the educator also has to create a context in which students are comfortable and supported in the learning process. Educators thus need to organise the educational process in a structured and ordered way so as to facilitate learning.

## TEACHING METHODS

A social constructionist approach requires that educators adopt a more active teaching style that encourages students to participate and to discover knowledge for themselves. This requires less reliance on lectures and more attention to small group discussions and experiential exercises. Social work education has always valued experiential learning. For example, fieldwork placements have offered students the opportunity to learn social work knowledge, skills and attitudes by working in social work settings with *real* clients. The *real life emergencies and paradoxes that characterise the field practicum* (Goldstein 1993:179) help students to realise that there are many interpretations of reality and that there



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no quick fix solutions. For fieldwork to succeed though, students need guidance to reflect on their practice. Merely *doing* is not sufficient.

Teaching methods which can be used in the classroom as well as in the practice context should, according to Lee and Caffarella (1994), be selected for their ability to: Help students connect their existing beliefs, affective characteristics and experiences to a new set of knowledge, skills, beliefs and attitudes; contribute to a shift in the power base between lecturer and student with students being encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning; and help students transfer knowledge from the instructional context (the classroom) to an application context (the practice arena).

The following methods (Lee & Caffarella 1994) are useful in achieving these aims:

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS: Small group discussions provide a forum for students to work in different groups and to gain exposure to a wider range of opinions and ways of expressing these. Discussions can be task oriented, for example, reading various texts and developing a definition of a concept. Discussions can also centre on specific aspects of students' fieldwork practice in which the group offers varying interpretations of a client's reality and discusses options for intervention.

CASE STUDIES: Case studies provide a link with real life and an opportunity for students to discover the different ways in which problems can be approached. Carefully chosen case studies with which students can identify provide rich material for engaging students in the problem-solving processes as well as clarifying their values and positions. The following case study was developed after a picture and story appeared in the local newspaper:

> *Albertina is 35 years old. She makes a living from hawking fruit and vegetables alongside a busy city street where she has erected a shelter and where she lives. She has a 2-year-old son, who she ties to her shelter with a long rope.*

A case study such as this provides opportunities for students to consider many aspects such as child development issues, community resources, policy and legislation regarding child protection, their own values and those of the clients. Is Albertina, for example, abusing her child by keeping him tied up? Or is she in fact acting responsibly and in the child's best interests by ensuring his safety?

ANALYSIS OF PRACTICE: Actual examples of practice provide students with opportunities to examine real life situations. The following example, taken from a student's fieldwork experience, provides opportunities for students to consider theories and models of community work, the applicability of underlying assumptions that communities welcome development, the impact of a number of systems (the demands of external funders, traditional values and cultures) on a project, and the possibility that sometimes social workers, despite their best efforts, will not succeed.

> *The community in question is sharply divided geographically with supporters of one political party living in area A and the supporters of another political party living in area B. Residents from both areas identified the need for a literacy project and survey figures revealed that a large percentage of the adults in the community were illiterate. A community committee with representatives from both areas was established, a programme was set up and a funder found. In an area without electricity and where classes would have to be held at night, the only suitable venue in which to hold the classes was in area A. Learners from area B who wanted to join the programme refused to attend this venue because they claimed that they were afraid of walking through area A. Talks were held and a system whereby community leaders from both areas would escort residents of area B to and from area A was organised. They still refused and insisted that a separate programme be held in their own area (despite the non-existence of a venue.) The funders refused to fund a programme that seemingly divided the community and the programme never got off the ground. Months later it became apparent that a community leader from area B had sabotaged the*



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*programme. She had wanted to join the programme but had felt that it would be demeaning and humiliating for her and her position in the community if people in area A knew that she was illiterate.*

ACTIVITIES AND GAMES: Activities and games help students to participate actively in learning many skills, and are particularly useful in encouraging students to work together, to problem solve and to develop decision-making skills. Helping students to understand the concept of empathy can be done through a game called *swopping shoes* (Rooth 1995). Students are required to place one of their shoes in the centre of the room and then have to literally walk in someone else's shoes for a short while. Sharing their feelings (*I felt funny walking in such big shoes*) and making connections between their own experiences and those of others helps students experience the essence of empathy.

Fun ways of dividing students into smaller groups contributes to a happier more productive classroom environment. A favourite which never fails is to write a number of sounds (piep-piep, moo-moo, etc) on pieces of paper which the students draw out of a hat. Students then have to find their group members keeping their eyes shut and making the noises they have drawn!

CRITICAL INCIDENTS: Students can be asked to describe a critical incident from their own lives, which then becomes the basis for reflection and discussion. This can be particularly useful when helping students to understand and develop empathy. For example, students can be invited to share a story about their first day at university and other students are asked to think about similarities and differences and why these exist. Students who have had to negotiate financial aid often spend much of their first few days at university in long frustrating queues, while other students participate in exciting and interesting orientation programmes. The fact that the former group are mainly black students and the second group mainly white does not escape notice and this then provides the impetus for discussions about students' experiences of inequalities, insensitivity of systems to individual problems, and about the long-term effects of negative beginnings.

DEBATES: Debates enhance learning by helping students to justify different points of view. This is particularly so when they are asked to justify a point of view with which they do not necessarily agree. One of the on-going issues in social work education in South Africa today is trying to balance the need for teaching therapeutic intervention strategies with the need for community development strategies. A useful way to help students become sensitive to these issues is to have them list the major problem facing South Africans (poverty, crime, unemployment, prejudice among others) and then to have them debate the relevance of casework in our society. Students begin to think about social work values which recognise the worth and dignity of individuals, about the political and policy issues that influence social work practice and the financial constraints that limit social work programmes.

STORIES, POETRY, ART: In South Africa, where our students come from many different walks of life and cultures, learning about each others' experiences can be a good start to learning to understand that there are many ways of knowing and experiencing the world. Understanding about the symbols we use to explain our world is an important part of understanding people. Stories and poetry that reflect the varied experiences of people help students become aware of similarities and differences between their own experiences and those of others. This excerpt from a story by a young person, Musha Gumeda, called *Lindelani* provides rich material for discussing the importance of place in a person's life and for discovering and evaluating different personal problem-solving styles.

*Lindelani is a beautiful name and this is where I live ... This name 'Lindelani - we love it so much because it means we should wait. When we are faced with problems and frustrated, we always think of this name, and we cool down and resort to waiting. When we are faced with situations where we become angry we again think of this name, and we say the best way out is to wait. This name gives us hope every time ...* (Malange *et al.* 1996).



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Art, too, can reflect different experiences and examining the symbols used provides opportunities for students to begin to understand that there are different ways of depicting the world. For example, at the beginning of a counselling course students make collages of the *ideal* social worker and, while many of the same qualities are depicted in the collages, the symbols used to illustrate these are often very different. One group used a diamond to show how multi-faceted a social worker needs to be. Some students, however, interpreted this negatively, saying that diamonds were cold and sharp, not what they would expect a social worker to be!

JOURNALLING: Requiring students to keep a reflective journal regarding their learning experiences helps students to integrate course content and readings with their own experiences, learning needs and personal preferences. The following excerpts from student journals illustrate just how useful a tool this can be in helping a student to integrate these aspects.

> *I took part in a market survey this weekend and had to ask people at the supermarket about the brands of tea that they use. I thought I would try and use some of the skills we have been talking about in class. Active listening definitely encourages people to carry on talking!*

> *Keeping this journal has helped me realise that I definitely want to be a social worker. I know that I still have lots to learn and I am looking forward to the rest of the courses.*

ROLE PLAYS: Role plays have long been used in social work education to help students practice skills. However, role plays can also be used to place students in situations that they would not normally be in. A student role playing an abusive parent, for example, has a chance to see things from that person's point of view, to perhaps experience the social worker's judgemental attitude and to reflect on what it is really like to be in such a position. Considered reflection on these experiences hopefully encourages students to become aware that there are no easy answers.

## VIEW OF THE CURRICULUM

A social constructionist approach to teaching would also influence the content of teaching. A social constructionist approach, for example, rejects the notion that social work is objective, neutral and value free, and thus courses focusing on values and ethics should be a central feature of social work education (Allen 1993). Students need to be encouraged to examine value biases and ethical dilemmas inherent in the different research and practice theories and models. They need to examine how their own values impact on how they approach various situations. For example, a particularly relevant issue for South African students at present is how the legislation regarding abortion might impact on their practice as social workers.

A social constructionist approach would also influence the type of practice models taught. Social constructionists would prefer practice theories that stress a humanistic approach rather than an empirical clinical practice approach. Students need to learn that one of the main tasks as social workers is to understand the reality of the clients, rather than to see themselves as *experts* who hold objective views of the clients and their problems (Dean 1993a). The process of establishing helping relationships, of defining problem issues and setting goals, of working out strategies for intervention and of evaluating progress thus becomes a far more shared and negotiated process with the worker respecting the client's view of the situation. Questions such as *Is the client's purpose in coming being served? What are the signs of progress towards the client's goals?* focus more on the client's perceptions and from a social constructionist view they are more relevant than strict behavioural methods (Dean 1993b).

Teaching research from a social constructionist approach would require challenging the positivist view of reality that underpins quantitative research methodology. More attention would need to be given to qualitative research methodologies.



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## SOME CHALLENGES

Adopting a social constructionist framework for teaching presents many challenges, not least of which are the technical issues of how to organise courses and how to assess student performance. This section, however, focuses mainly on some of the *human* issues and the difficulties of helping students to acknowledge that there are many ways of knowing.

Not all students respond positively to teaching methods that are very different to what they have been used to. Many of our students, for example, come from educational backgrounds which have emphasised rote learning of vast volumes of content. The teacher was seen as the authority figure and as the fount of all knowledge. Being confronted with a different approach, often presented in their second (or even third) language makes learning for these students very stressful. They resist this way of teaching and they want lecture notes, *how to do it* prescriptions, and precise guidelines for what will be examined.

A further problem is that some students do not have the confidence to see themselves as self-directed learners. The following incident illustrates this. After a particularly frustrating session during which nothing I did seemed to succeed in obtaining student participation, I threatened to spend the next session talking nonsense to see who would challenge me. One student (rather bravely) replied that no-one would challenge me because how would they know whether or not I was speaking nonsense? This provided the impetus for a fruitful discussion with students and emphasised the need to affirm them right from the beginning of the course. I now always spend some time at the beginning of a course talking with students about how they learn and about how I like to teach. Learner autonomy, as Horwitz (1989) commented, *is not something one is born with*. It is learned and as educators we need to provide on-going opportunities and support for students to develop this capacity.

Another problem arises when students do not fit the assumption that as adult learners they are self-directed and motivated to learn. It is an unfortunate reality that some students see a social work degree as a *passport* to a better future and are not really committed to the profession. Very often these are the students who would be considered unsuitable for the social work profession. Social work education serves in some respects as the *gatekeeper* to the profession, which means that value judgements need to made. Whose construction of reality is the most valid?

While a social constructionist approach to education encourages a creative and fun way of learning, there are times when learning can be emotionally difficult. Painful feelings, conflicting ideas and opinions are likely to emerge when students from very different backgrounds begin to discuss their experiences of growing up in apartheid South Africa and living in a country which still has huge discrepancies in the living standards of black and white people. The approach therefore calls for supportive and caring teachers who are able to guide students as they grapple with these thorny issues.

## CONCLUSION

Many variables are present in any social work encounter. The client systems and their problems, the individual social workers and their backgrounds, experiences and values, plus the social and political context of the moment all impact on the process of problem management. This paper has suggested that a social constructionist view which takes into account the subjective nature of reality provides a useful paradigm for understanding the complex meanings people attach to their situations. Social work educators have an important role to play in helping students become aware of and to appreciate the complex nature of the human condition. The challenge is to adopt teaching methods which encourage students to become aware of the multiple ways in which people experience the world.



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