

Dilemmas involving women, children, family life as seen through the lens of social work

Abstract:

The scope of problems here indicated is nothing short of immense; it makes up one of the key segments of the social area and contributes to the identity of social work as a discipline. It is both "objective" as it covers some crucial manifestations of concrete, real human and social reality, and "subjective." This latter description refers primarily to the broadly defined sphere of human thought: beginning from basic axiological systems grounded in philosophy, theology, or culture, to established trends in defining social norms, to situational feeling and attitudes. Again, on both sides the essential quality is what is happening between and among people, in their social relations and ways of communicating.

Key terms: family issues and dilemmas, social work.

May I be allowed to begin with a remark **which** is as commonplace as it is necessary. The scope of problems here indicated is nothing short of immense; it makes up one of the key segments of the social area and contributes to the identity of social work as a discipline. It is both "objective" as it covers some crucial manifestations of concrete, real human and social reality, and "subjective." This latter description refers primarily to the broadly defined sphere of human thought: beginning from basic axiological systems grounded in philosophy, theology, or culture, to established trends in defining social norms, to situational feeling and attitudes. Again, on both sides the essential quality is what is happening between and among people, in their social relations and ways of communicating. In distinguishing between both terms I wrapped them in quotes to suggest that they do not really exist as separate entities but are bound up in a close relationship. The theory behind this reasoning is offered primarily by **general sociology; it is applied conclusions** that I suggest we first link with social work, its diagnostics and methods.

A very short explanation is in order for this short paper. I treat these remarks as something of an addendum to other, more detailed presentations especially by our German colleagues. It is therefore going to be a free, general, essay-like comment, one effect of which is that I omit bibliographic references; these are included in a separate section at the end. More of a sketch, it asks more questions than it offers definitive answers for it is hoped to offer some food for reflection.

Let us start out by stating that we deal with two pairs of seemingly contradictory and yet complementary values. The first pair is continuity and change. On the one hand,

what can be more stable than the essence and nature of family life, and within it, the essence of maternal roles? But on the other hand, one of the most notable trends in today's social sciences is the emphasis on truly fundamental change in this respect; "from family to families" is a telling buzzword. The other pair is universal and particular. Again, on the one hand it is the all-embracing character of ways of life involving the family. On the other, there are astoundingly variable customs, habits, ways of formal institutionalization, means of social control, mixtures of the folkloristic and the modernized, etc. All this combines to create an interesting canvass but a rather shifting ground for research and application.

Let us stake a line across this territory according to the concept and practical consequences of social problems. Here again, we are looking at two sides: dominant norms and patterns of behavior vs. rejection and departure from such values; consent to dominating interconnected standards and conditions vs. opposition when disparities between them become acutely felt; acceptance of existing realities vs. readiness to counter what is objectionable. Social problems are in particular those happenings that are felt as a threat to society, to its fundamental interests. At the same time, they can and must be addressed and attempted to be solved. A recognition in some groups and communities, or in society at large, of certain events, happenings, and processes as problems is of crucial and influential importance. As a result of such acceptance, public opinion and resources are focused in specific ways, and these ways become important (if not the most important) in social awareness and social functioning, they define the rules for public debate and corresponding actions.

We may note that it is the theme of social problems that binds sociology and social work perhaps better than any other. The combined theoretical-practical context is obvious, offers broad possibilities for empirical research, and generates desires for practically applicable conclusions.

Let us stress then that the point of departure should be a question about the circumstances in which there have arisen and continue to arise almost constantly the questions of women, children, entire families, which are posed on the agenda of publicly named problems: when, where, and how they become problems. That problems they are is rather unquestionable. An answer to this question is, I believe, to be sought in macrosocial and macrocultural properties.

Child labor can serve as an example. Children have always done work (at least in what is by far the prevalent occupation in human history – farming) and to a large extent continue to do so now. At some point in history, however, as capitalist industrialization progressed, this widespread phenomenon began to arouse increasingly deep reflection and concern about health, education, happy (whatever it meant) development of individuals and entire generations. Responses to such budding and eventually prevailing views were and are obvious, with child labor subjected to sharper than ever social control and of course consequently restricted. But that is not all. Even if such points of view prevail, and the purely economic context seems less crucial today, relatively reinforced is the cultural context which points to the socializing role of practical actions, opportunities to learn

involvement, initiative, responsibility. Therefore, there exist problems related to child labor, but so do counterproblems as well.

An interpretive point of departure for this problem range, again treated as a whole, may be offered by concepts of minority groups and special populations. There is no need here to dwell on them in detail. Suffice it to say that they conceal an assumption of a highly special position of women and children, a situation that imposes on them greater limitations, difficulties, or dangers that may actually or potentially affect them. Let us also ignore any ideological aspects of this approach that could incite some lively dispute. It will be enough to note that the consequence is increased diagnostic and practical involvement and development of various intervention tools such as laws, pedagogics, cultural models, and of course sundry proposed social actions (which are proper for social work).

Now some selected themes. Women's question is probably chiefly the process whereby women aspire to full occupational and civic roles in conjunction with their family responsibilities especially as mothers. Not to be overlooked here are some fundamental, global processes and circumstances like, once more, development of urban economy, particularly in services, changes in educational systems, or the great wars that drew women out of home and into the workplace to fill in for now combatant men. In this connection we see many sinusoidal variations reflecting the pulsation of respective trends. Still, the general direction is again quite clear, with out-of-home participation and activity of women leaving its mark on the functioning of society and family. In responding to this trend, social workers are increasingly present, frequently in the midst of raging disputes such as those concerning single mothers. On the one hand such mothers are now accorded more perceptibly and sympathetically a right to live the way they do and an entitlement to external supports, but on the other they come under criticism for allegedly abusing the social welfare system. As a consequence, in different societies this paved the way for a peculiar confluence of social policymaking tenets, specialized legal and financial instruments, and isolation of this path in social workers' responsibilities. Importantly, such disputes by no means confront only "men's" and "women's" worlds, they also cut across women's movements and organizations.

Are women unilaterally the subjects and victims of hostile pressures, violence, etc? This poses a fresh set of dilemmas in social work, a new difficulty in commentary and in practice. In several circles, observed especially in Western societies, this position has won much currency and influence. Simultaneously, there is a ruling of the United States Supreme Court which has limited links between violence and sex. A difficult question is put before social workers about their "right" to such action and intervention as would lead to interruption of such interpersonal relations, including marital relations. A pragmatic-sounding argument is sometimes quoted to the effect that seriously dysfunctional relations may cause the women involved to experience difficulty achieving economic self-reliance, and consequently to be in greater and longer dependence on social welfare. One may easily be led to conclude that this argument carries limited conviction, while there are still questions out there about ethics, qualities of social order, etc.

More obvious are such natural women's issues and interests as health, in particular reproductive health, and therefore also support to women when they medical help in

illness, counseling for appropriate behavior during pregnancy, access to institutionalized convalescence. In such matters at least we are validating the general principle of meeting women's needs in terms that enjoy much public support.

Let us conclude this theme by asking if there is a need for a specifically women's social issue that would consist in a range of social activities targeted directly at women. From the point of view of the feminist orientation, for one, the answer is yes, although naturally in its background it would involve various professional intricacies. There is in it much axiological expectation such as emphasis on inclusion, mutual understanding, tolerance, building a qualitatively "better" existence. This entails qualitative social work practice and has certainly brought about many interesting, concrete solutions. Yet overall, the question stands as, again, doubts may be voiced as to the compatibility, or perhaps incompatibility of this point of view with a more comprehensive treatment of family life and other patterns of social life.

To continue with my selected details, let us return once more to children's issues. Various expressions of violence are increasingly saliently identified as a painful, unacceptable social problem (at least from this interventional point of view). We may add that the practical implication of this is dramatic as the number of reported cases and at least preliminary interventions has grown immensely. Arguably, this has improved the situation of children. However, a reservation must be made here that quite conceivably there has been a corresponding rise in cases and interventions that are thought unjustified, counterfactual, and, worse still, contributing to conflicts in families and local communities. I will risk a platitude when I repeat that almost nothing is social welfare and social work is simple and unquestionable.

One more point I find important. My remarks and examples so far may suggest that the social welfare involvement we are talking about has primarily "negative" aspects in being an interventional response to such threatening and obviously negative occurrences as the violence highlighted above. It is not so, or at any rate such one-sided interpretation would be wrong. Social work is essentially "positive" as it participates, in an affirmative sense, in the life of individuals and families, in building and restoring hope, in attempting solutions to improve conditions and ways of life under circumstances that are more or less difficult but that open new opportunities.

Let us consider a seemingly banal example: household functioning. Its is a task probably more complex today than it used to be, with many women having to (choosing to?) combine career and domestic life, with the complicated system of bank accounts and credit cards, with the growing number of increasingly heeded recommendations from dentists and dietitians, etc. Perhaps it is natural that this or that woman is more confused and embarrassed by such circumstances (by which I am absolutely not suggesting anything negative – these simply are some realities of everyday life). Cooperation in the functioning of a household, providing its members with additional useful skills and hints may seem prosaic but it is an effective mode of conduct.

While this example is indeed down-to-earth, there is another, much more extraordinary although at the same time deeply rooted in human history, namely adoption.

On the one hand, adoption constitutes a radical intervention in the life of individuals and families as it creates new family relationships, formalizes them, and introduces such a new family arrangement in officially accepted social order. On the other hand I may risk saying that there is in adoption something basically natural, that in this way the natural value of family life is gained and regained, with its consequent positive practical consequences. It is rightly pointed out that the theory and practice of adoption are undergoing great change, that earlier barriers of community, culture, and race and being challenged. It is also noted that adoption has been overgrown with a context of professional involvement in a way that was not only unknown but inconceivable in the past. Still, the core is the same old though obvious and natural desire in people to introduce a positive mark in their lives with qualities of family community and to build on this ground a positively experienced existence. Thus, on the one hand, there are a surprising number of regulations, formalized rules of conduct, professionally controlled factors. On the other, simple human dreams, desire of affection, happiness, fulfillment in a way that is "as old as the hills."

As for family in itself, it is singled out in social work as a self-contained, comprehensive amalgam of multiple factors and as a potential problem needing support and help in solving. The prime dilemma – we are still on the topic – probably involves the extraordinarily dynamic process of moving "from family to families."

The question is at once patently obvious and highly disputable. In a purely external dimension, it refers to an overwhelming and, some sociologists think, irreversible process of an emergent plurality of many alternative forms of family life in place of the previous dominance of a single form which we may conventionally call traditional family. Single life, single parenthood, relatively stable cohabitation, other forms of adult life together, homosexual unions – these are those various new ways of life that are here in social life, perhaps to stay, as increasingly more officially identified and accepted alternative forms of marital/family life. In an empirical sense, of course, they are nothing new for they existed long before now. What is new is their rapidly rising number and official character that is finding a place in mainstream social organization. There is no need to go to lengths about how this tendency has an exceptionally strong ideological underpinning with different, even radically opposed systems of values and with consequently different conclusions about what it means to the life of individuals, family groups, and entire societies.

The circumstances being as described, social work and social workers are far from being comfortable. They are in the midst of obvious controversies, and all the while (in some societies more than in others) they should and must take a neutral position, bound as they are by their professional duty to respond to people's needs and problems regardless of ideological context. Given all that, we will probably not be in error to believe that also contemporary social work, and in the Western world, too, emphasizes stability and affirmative aspects of the family life that binds parents and children; it recognizes the social resources found in the extended family circle and the consequent advantages to society. Those more specialized tasks that are often emphasized in this connection include strengthening of families by facilitating communication between their members, mutual

adjustment of individual narratives and experiences, assistance during changes in the group life cycle, help in the family's relations with surrounding systems including the social welfare system. The factors that come into play here, and are considered crucial, include sense of belonging, communication, sense of security, experience of something particularly important.

As to an ending for this outline, there can be many. As others have said before me, in social work all endings are beginnings. Even in the most satisfactory conclusion of social endeavors, neither party attains a definite end, and they get on with their pursuits. For social workers – those who have committed themselves to helping – it is another step in their accumulated experience and a desire to settle one thing before moving on to others. Part of such experience are efforts in research and education in institutions and communities of higher learning and abilities to communicate what we know. Such is the lot of this profession and its representatives. Such it is everywhere, including in Poland and in Germany.

Selected bibliography

The range of publications concerning this subject is extremely wide and varied. Most assuredly, it will be beneficial to do more specialized bibliographic research in this field. Here, I propose doing the opposite by recounting just a handful of highly characteristic and valuable publications in the thematic order as in this title. All the articles I quote are American. I choose this focus for three reasons. First, it is to enhance the international dimension of this book; secondly, it points to the trilateral American-Polish-German cooperation we so value in Krakow; and thirdly, it lists items I would personally recommend as particularly informative.

For women's issues seen from the standpoint of social work, this is a sampling of voices concerning various finer points made over the last years, a period marked by especially great dynamics in this respect. Women and social work, some of women's fundamental "interests," in this case health, and their place in society's structure and functioning with due consideration of their unique roles and responsibilities in motherhood – these are some of the issues with which to document this bibliographic selection:

Jalna Hanmer and Daphne Statham. 1989. *Women and Social Work: Towards a Woman-Centered Practice*. Chicago, IL: LYCEUM BOOKS;

Lois Millner and Eileen Widerman. 1994. "Women's Health Issues: A Review of the Current Literature in the Social Work Journals, 1985-1992," in: *Social Work in Health Care*, Vol. 19, Nos. 3-4, pp. 145-172;

Emilie Stoltzfus. 2003. *Citizen, Mother, Worker: Debating Public Responsibility for Child Care After the Second World War*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Now for children's and childhood issues. Not only are they crucial, but also "hot," as suggested by the word "crusade" in the first title below. So is diagnosing of particularly acute dangers affecting children, and finally a suggested textbook-style summary:

Walter I. Trattner. 1970. *Crusade for the Children: A History of the National Child Labor Committee and Child Labor Reform in America*. Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books;

Douglas J. Besharov. 1990. *Recognizing Child Abuse: A Guide for the Concerned*. New York, NY: The Free Press;

Anthony N. Maluccio, Barbara A. Pine and Elizabeth M. Tracy, 2002. *Social Work Practice with Families and Children*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Finally, problems of the family as a whole and related lines of social work's duties and responsibilities. A gamut of issues and problems, again posing a challenge to social work, addressed in works that principally differ in points of view. The subjects covered include the condition of families and the chief difficulties they encounter, trends and ways of social action in this matter, specialized scopes and methods of therapeutic intervention:

James Q. Wilson. 2002. *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers;

Robert Constable and Daniel B. Lee. 2004. *Social Work with Families: Content and Process*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books;

Joseph. H. Brown and Dana N. Christensen. 1986. *Family Therapy: Theory and Practice*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

Because these names stand for real people with biographies, in one case I want to inject a personal note and say that Bob Constable is a great friend of our social work community in Krakow and a person who stands as an example of how to cooperate internationally.

Practically all these works have the shared quality of combining elements of theory and practice. This can hardly be surprising, given the nature of this subject and its respective social phenomena. Nonetheless, to close this list, here is one more: in many ways an exceptional publication which comes in four volumes and in which the applied function is foremost. Published under the sponsorship of Child Welfare League of America (Washington, DC) and Institute for Human Services (Columbus, OH), the work offers a meticulous presentation of how analytically and practically to approach the all-important task of ensuring children's well-being:

Judith S. Rycus and Ronald C. Hughes. 1998. *Field Guide to Child Welfare*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press,

Vol. I: *Foundations of Child Protective Services,*

Vol. II: *Case Planning and Family-Centered Casework,*

Vol. III: *Child Development and Child Welfare,*

Vol. IV: *Placement and Permanence.*

It is not suggested that this otherwise valuable discussion does not raise any additional questions. The helping system and its intervening representatives – yes, but on the other hand there are parents, family, their autonomous rights, roles....

But as I have tried to emphasize, such is the sphere of our interest, such are, and are going to continue to be, our dilemmas that we must try to respond to. An international dispute in this field, as conducted predominantly in publications of course, has taken on an increasingly dynamic form. As we turn to our colleagues in Berlin, we hope and wish for continued cooperation.