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Introduction and Context for Grand Challenges for Social Work

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Introduction and Context for Grand Challenges in Social Work

What are the nation's major social challenges? The purpose of the Grand Challenges in Social Work initiative is to chart an agenda for social innovation in the 21st century. To lay the groundwork, we begin by introducing the social work profession and assessing the current social context.

The Social Work Profession

Since its start more than a hundred years ago, social work has been an interdisciplinary profession. Its intellectual bases have drawn from public finance, social psychology, urban sociology, and welfare economics as much as from philanthropy and advocacy for child saving, suffrage, civil rights, and community development. To understand social work is to understand the discovery of innovative methods for addressing challenges, at every level, by designing, testing, and implementing programs and policies that promote human protection, dignity, and social justice.

Social work has matured from a set of family and community practices to an evidence-based profession, relying on systemic data, though with continuing commitment to human decency and social justice. Founded in part on the traditions of critical scholarship and empirical investigation, social work now operates as applied social science. Social work builds knowledge for positive change in human lives and social conditions (Brekke, 2012). The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare is organizing the Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative in order to apply rigorous research evidence to critical social issues (Barth et al., 2013; Uehara et al., 2013).

Social work and scientific research have not always been conjoined; however, social work has achieved its greatest triumphs at the nexus of science and social action. The social sciences emerged from the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment, which pointed to the use of systematic inquiry for the purpose of achieving a better world, and social work is very much a product of this tradition (Soydan, 2012). For social work, the scientific approach assumes that society can be studied and understood. Emphasis on application assumes that the combination of systematic knowledge and purposeful effort can lead to improvements in social conditions.

In this regard, both the past "grand accomplishments" and future "grand challenges" in social work emphasize *inquiry, innovation, testing,* and *application.* The overall strategy emphasizes evidence and innovation in seeking creative and effective means for dealing with social problems and opportunities.

Innovation occurs in the context of core social work values and commitments. These core values are social justice, social inclusion, social development, and social well-being. These reflect a deep commitment to social caring and social development, and can be simply translated into decency, fairness, participation, and growth.

For social work, values are reasons for action. Social work aims for innovation and change in social and economic conditions so that people, especially the most vulnerable people, can lead more fulfilling and productive lives.

In social work, people are seen in context. The person-in-environment perspective of social work recognizes the *full range of change potential* for persons, relationships, families, communities, organizations, social institutions, and governments at all levels (Gordon, 1969). At the heart of social work is the worth, dignity, and agency of the individual. Regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual orientation, all peoples are seen as imbued the capacity to achieve. When that capacity is conditioned, the full range of social, environmental, and geo-political constraints are considered. Accordingly, change strategies occur across the spectrum of social work practice, including individual and family casework, delivery of social services, group organizing and problem solving, promotion of human rights and social advocacy, community development, and social policy.

As in the past, social work scholars will ask daring and sometimes unpopular questions. Being provocative without positive change has no merit, but critical inquiry is valuable inasmuch as it leads to *practical* innovations that have wide applications and positive impacts on social and health conditions.

In social work, human differences are valued. A successful society finds ways not only to tolerate and accommodate differences, but also *to take creative advantage of the range of human differences* in backgrounds, outlooks, practices, and potential. From the outset, social work has embraced differences as a resource from which effective solutions to complex problems may arise.

A core concept in social work is capabilities (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). Grand Challenges in Social Work is guided by a vision of a world where people develop their *capabilities to be and do* to the fullest extent across the life course.

Grand Challenges in Social Work addresses core areas of human well-being and social environment. These include: identity and recognition, love and nurturing, nutrition, shelter, family responsiveness, social protections, public health, medical care, education, opportunities for life experiences, information, employment, economic resources, financial services, systems for safety and justice, meaningful participation in society, and personal fulfillment.

How can social work "intervene" successfully in these major areas? For the most part, successful innovations require substantial institutional reforms that create positive change. Yet, following this logic, the Enlightenment and modern science—including the applied social sciences—may have been too optimistic. To be sure, science and technology have created the wonderments of modern "civilization," but social stability and development remain fragile. We humans are very clever in creating technologies with massive impacts. However, our social and technological institutions are not always fully equipped to deal with large-scale and long-term conditions such as global warming, nuclear weapons proliferation, mass urbanization, aging societies, and rising inequality. We are just beginning, for example, to understand the emergence of older adulthood and the challenges it presents for families, health care, housing, and

transportation, as well as defining new means for healthy older populations to contribute to society (Morrow-Howell et al., 2001). If we are to face these challenges successfully, science is among the best strategies we have.

Turning now to social context, we start by understanding the basic nature of human beings, so that we can build on the best strengths we have.

The Social Is Fundamental

"If you want to travel fast, go alone. But if you want to travel far, go together."
—African proverb

Although some modern societies, including the United States, have become highly individualistic, the long record of human biological and cultural evolution, and the progress of civilization, is not a story of accomplishments of individuals. It is a story of working together.

Humans are highly social animals. Although the roots of sociality are found in non-human primates, it is humans who developed social interaction to evolutionary advantage (Enfield & Levinson, 2006). The eminent biologist Edward O. Wilson, in *The Social Conquest of Earth* (2012), surveys evolutionary development of social behavior and concludes that social behavior is the key to exceptional progress among animal species. The dominant terrestrial species among invertebrates are the social insects (especially ants), and among vertebrates, human beings.

Wilson traces the series of adaptations that led over some three million years to advanced sociality among humans. Walking, grasping, hunting in groups, use of fire, campsite organization and protection, and division of responsibilities contributed to increased inter-dependence and social capacity among small groups of early humans.

Interactions among small human groups led to abilities to "read" the intentions of strangers, make judgments regarding likely future behavior, and collaborate toward shared goals. Eventually these complex social adaptations led to the emergence of what Wilson singles out as the basis of human advancement: sociality (see also Herman et al., 2007). There is reason to believe that social behavior is highly adaptive (Runciman et al., 1996; Shaller et al., 2007). Sociality led to language and language in turn led to advanced cognition. It is advanced cognition that makes humans most distinctive among all animal species. The ability to encode and interpret cues in the social and physical environment is rooted in sociality. The result is today's "epigenetic" tendencies of humans to work together. Although this epigenetic human nature plays out in many different forms, it is always highly social.

The emergence of human sociality led, over very long periods of time, to the creation of more elaborate, large-scale social institutions (Ostrom, 2000; Powers & Lehmann, 2013). Today these institutions make up the dazzling fabric of social organization that we think of as civilization. To be sure, modern civilization has its plusses and minuses, but it is inarguably a remarkable social achievement.

Thus, major human advancements are not simply technological and economic, they are more fundamentally social. Human achievements have depended on *massive social innovations,* for example in:

- Living together peacefully
- Shaping and protecting a permanent settlement or "hearth"
- Exploring unknown territory
- Generating visual art, music, and shared stories
- Specializing in tasks and functions within a group
- Organizing work and production of all kinds
- Distributing supplies, resources, and goods
- Developing systems of contracting, recording, and accounting
- Defining guidelines for conduct, and implementing rule of law
- Investigating, recording, and using knowledge
- Passing knowledge across generations and geographies
- Governing fairly and effectively
- Resolving conflicts and promoting cooperation among groups
- Establishing systems of defense and security
- Inventing systems of diplomacy
- Protecting health and well being

This is a stunning list of human social achievements, though we take so much of it for granted. It is important to note that, in the long story of human history, *massive social innovations have created conditions that make technological and economic advancements possible.* It is not the other way around.

Claiming and Accelerating *the Social* in Social Work

The social matters. Humans are made to work together. This is how we have evolved—both biologically and culturally—and how we have succeeded. What lessons can we gather from the experiences of "the social" in human existence?

Though *social* innovations are often taken for granted, they are not innate or automatic. To be sure, humans are deeply social, but social innovations nevertheless have to be created and put into practice. In other words, social innovations require *work.* This *social work* includes designing and testing, and then moving successful models into widespread application.

Social innovations do not arise easily or even naturally—they have to be continually created and recreated by human invention and cultural evolution. In the past, this has occurred largely through trial and error. Fortunately, today we have the tools of systematic testing and scientific assessment, which enable us to be more efficient than trial and error.

Understanding this profoundly social context for human success is a central tenet of the profession of social work and the designing of grand challenges. Spurring social progress is never automatic. Indeed, it requires enormous effort. Again we arrive at the core theme of Grand

Challenges in Social Work: *The social requires work*. No other profession addresses social conditions and social innovations as directly as social work.

To be sure, none of this is ever "settled" and completed. As conditions change, social work must always adapt to new social challenges. Social work faces changing circumstances in the world today. We live in an age of rapid developments and major transitions. Successful social innovations—after testing and documenting—will be very much needed and welcomed.

The "Grand Context"

The Grand Challenges in Social Work project focuses on social issues in a rapidly changing world. Social work in the coming years must understand major conditions and challenges in order to create and test responsive innovations. This "grand context" includes several key themes. We divide these into large global trends and conditions, and specific areas of the U.S. context. First the large global trends and conditions:

Information technology. We have entered a new era defined by unprecedented access and speed in information technology that enables millions of individuals to share information with millions of others. This signals greater interconnections among people than has ever been dreamed in the past, creating fertile ground for innumerable social innovations for positive change. It is not overstating to say that we live in a time of *emergence of new social worlds* via social media, social networks, and other social engagement via internet technology. These greatly increase the potential impact of many forms of education, training, and intervention. Social work's historical effort to reach underserved populations has powerful new tools and pathways.

Globalization. Greater interaction among the world's peoples, economies, cultures, and religions are creating a whole new set of advancements, along with new tensions and conflicts. Going forward, human conditions will be no less challenging and complex than in the industrial era, and solutions to a whole new set of problems will have to be invented.

Rising inequality. Rising inequality is a hallmark of our era. Globalization and the shift to information-based economies are causing economic and social strains around the globe. Competition in global labor markets puts downward pressure on wages, and an increasing portion of global economic returns are claimed by wealthy owners of capital. With inequality rising in most countries, there is a major question regarding how people in the bottom half of society will be able to lead stable lives. This is a humanitarian question, and also goes to the heart of opportunity and participation. Social work may be redefined and re-dedicated to meet these challenges.

Increased interactions across nations, races or ethnicities, religions, and cultures. As indicated above, increasing interconnections continue to generate greater contacts and mixing of peoples who are different from one another. Unfortunately, the historical record in human interactions is often troubled. Humans evolved in small bands and we have a deeply rooted in-group vs. out-group nature (Efferson et al., 2008; Fu et al., 2012). We are not "wired" for full appreciation of many different kinds of people, and this significant limitation underlies conflicts, oppressions, destructions, and deaths. Fortunately, the basic in-group vs. out-group nature of

humans is highly malleable. Humans can and do generate multiple and flexible in-groups that add positive value. These flexible groups include clubs of all kinds, professional associations, sports teams, political parties, and topical interest groups. The potential for increased tolerance, cooperation, and celebration of differences appears to be almost unlimited. How can we accentuate this positive value? Social innovations in diversity will be fundamental to problem solving and productive integration.

Environmental change. The scientific community is in strong agreement that global warming is real, caused primarily by humans, and greatly threatens environmental stability (Cook et al. 2013). The century ahead will be critical regarding how much warming can be avoided, and how humans and other species are able to adapt to climate change. Focusing on the social issues, the dismal historical record is that the most disadvantage people pay the highest price for climate change in terms of lost livelihoods, lost homes, and damaged health (Park & Miller, 2006). Social work has key roles to play in advocating for reductions in global warming, promoting "environmental justice," and creating positive adaptations to inevitable changes in climate (Kemp, 2011).

We turn next to specific challenges within the U.S. context, though many of these also are global in nature:

Aging populations. One key theme is that humans will live longer and have healthier life spans, resulting in a "next age," often several decades in length, after childhood and adulthood (Kinsella & He, 2008). This next lifespan age—sometimes called a "third age"—is yet to be fully defined. It will present unusual challenges for families and communities in the design of living arrangements, economic support, health care, transportation, and social services. At the same time, older adulthood will become a period of more active engagement in the society and economy, more than simply withdrawal into "retirement," which was the creation of the industrial era. To an extent unimaginable today, a large proportion of older adults will remain engaged, active, and productive (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherraden, 2001).

Well-being of children. The United States is underinvested in the development of children (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). American children have poverty rates among the highest in the western world and, relatedly, low literacy skills (Merry, 2013). Since 2007, childhood poverty has increased in 49 of 50 states. It now ranges from a high of 35% in Mississippi to a low of 13% in North Dakota (Carsey Institute). At the same time, the value of cash assistance to families has fallen in real terms. Indeed, it is now at least 20 percent below 1996 levels in 37 states (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities). This is not simply an issue of decency and fairness. In this most fundamental respect, the United States is not investing enough resources in childhood to ensure a successful national future (Danziger & Waldfogel, 2000). This significant challenge presents an opportunity to re-shape and dramatically energize our future by investing in the well-being of our children.

Racial separation in residence and schooling. Notwithstanding global trends toward racial and cultural integration, U.S. domestic conditions are marked by sharp racial/ethnic segregation in residence and schooling. Segregation of residence may be the U.S.'s most fundamental social challenge, because so many things follow from it—including educational success, employment

opportunities, income, and wealth accumulation (Sharkey, 2013). People of color disproportionately live in "inner city" neighborhoods, in rural enclaves, and on tribal lands. We have an opportunity in the 21st century to do far better, and to reap the social benefits of greater integration, equality, and opportunity (Robinson, 2010).

Unemployment and disconnection. Related to rising inequality are massive changes in demand for labor in advanced economies. Since the turn of the 21st century, the employment to population ratio in the United States has fallen from 64.6% to 58.6%, and appears resistant to meaningful improvement (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2013). Long-term unemployment exceeding one year now describes 27% of the U.S. unemployed. Many adults who would like to be working cannot find employment, and U.S. policy has insufficiently focused on creating jobs. This stands in stark contrast to the Great Depression of the 1930s, when government engaged in *active labor market policy*, to create millions of jobs and civil service positions in the Works Progress Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, and other programs. As Harry Hopkins, the great social worker and aide to President Roosevelt, realized at the time, jobs are not only about having income, but also about having purpose and meaning. Jobs nurture confidence and self-worth, They build stronger communities (Hopkins, 2009). Today, large portions of the U.S. population—especially among people of color and the young—are unemployed and increasingly disconnected from expectations, living patterns, and rewards of mainstream society. These circumstances have very high economic and social costs. New strategies for employment and engagement in society will be essential.

Mass incarceration. The United States has become an incarceration society. Over a 30 year period, the U.S. prison population increased 500%. We have locked up more people per capita than any other economically advanced nation (Drucker, 2013). Moreover, the people in U.S. jails and prisons are disproportionately people of color. The American way of mass incarceration is more destructive than many human diseases, because the combining of people who are experiencing the adversities of society into mass settings is exactly what public health has shown to be the least effective way to control the transmission of health problems. Moreover, with severe strains in federal, state, and local budgets following the Great Recession, it is also clear that mass incarceration is not only morally wrong, but also unaffordable. America is beginning to de-incarcerate its prison population (Goode, 2013), though how rapidly and significantly this will be done is yet to be determined. This impending change will create huge challenges, as well as opportunities to build a better society and to expand our ways of reintegrating former prisoners back into families, education and job training, and stable and productive lives.

Access and effectiveness in health care. Heath care policy and services are in transformation. Arguably, no other area of social or economic policy so greatly challenges the nation. The rapid growth in health expenditures—now approaching 18% of GDP in the United States, is not delivering good value, and is very likely not sustainable. In a recent comparative survey among 20 economically advanced countries, the Commonweatlh Fund (2013) reports that 37% of American adults went without recommended care, compared to 4% in Britain, and 6% in Sweden. Americans waited longer for care and filled out more health-related paperwork. And nearly a quarter of Americans had health bills that were difficult to pay, a much higher proportion than in any other country in the study. Moreover, comparing social vs. health expenditures, the ratio averages 2.0:1 among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD) countries, but is only 0.8:1 in the United States. In the OECD, more social spending is also associated with better health outcomes. In the United States, "health spending is crowding out social and educational spending" (Kaplan, 2013). In this regard, social work can play a major role. Social conditions and health, behavioral health, primary care, community-based care, and aging in place will be wide open for innovation. Anticipated shortages of personnel in behavioral healthcare will create much greater demand for social services and opportunities for change.

Financialization. Modern economies have become highly financialized. Ordinary people, and even the poorest people, cannot live efficiently in the absence of sound financial services. But financial services are not always available or affordable, and the poor can be victims. Relatively new conditions between governmental regulators and financial institutions have contributed to financial instability and greater inequality for millions of Americans. In particular, there is a growing gap in access to credit and the ability to accumulate wealth, which are necessary for individuals to invest in education, homes, enterprise, and otherwise achieve a foothold in the competitive economy. Social workers historically have played a role in financial affairs of households, and this professional capacity is re-emerging with new initiatives in asset building financial capability (Birkenmaier, Sherraden, & Curley, 2013).

Vulnerable populations. The trends described above have increased social and economic pressures on vulnerable populations, including the physically disabled or mentally ill; those who are targets of discrimination by race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation; immigrants; and the urban and rural poor. These groups are more at risk in a context of income and wealth disparities and financialization. They are still more vulnerable when excluded from advances in information technology, encounter costly health care, and face barriers to educational opportunity. The social work profession—and all of society—faces the challenge and opportunity to re-build social commitment to vulnerable groups, create valued roles for all members of society, and in doing so, enrich the social fabric that distinguishes us as humans.

Looking Ahead

This is a sobering list of the conditions that form the context for the Grand Challenges initiative. We do not mean to overlook or understate. We could have been more complete in identifying opportunities for change in the social context (this comes later in the "grand challenges"). Perhaps the above dozen or so conditions lay out the key features on the social landscape, and can serve as context and, indeed, a rationale for the specification "grand challenges" going forward.

The Grand Challenges initiative in Social Work aims for changes that are very large and for which meaningful and measurable progress can occur within a decade, and much greater progress across several decades. Each challenge must generate interdisciplinary or cross-sector collaborations if it is to lead to sustainable social innovation. Solutions to challenges will require creative and bold innovations that build on evidence and past success. Although these are daunting expectations, social work has a proud history of successfully responding to major challenges.

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