

**The nature of social work: Reflection over humanistic practice  
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# The nature of social work: reflection over humanistic practice

Patrick O'Leary & Ming-sum Tsui

As the editors of the *International Social Work* journal, it is our duty to look into the nature of social work, or at least encourage the discussion and debate on it. When we explore the nature of social work, we need to identify and clarify the concept, content, context and construction of the meaning of social work practice locally and globally.

Let us ask a simple but basic question: Why social work? We believe that social work comes from values: it is a value-based profession, it strives for preserving and pursuing the humanistic values, and it is supported by professional values. However, when we talk about values, we need to be clear about what kinds of values we are talking about. Are they personal, professional, organizational, social, political or spiritual values? Different values exist at the same time, but they are not the same. Sometimes, there are tensions and even conflicts with one another. The journey to how we have come to have particular values is also important to acknowledge. Indeed, the same values can exist with different epistemological standpoints.

This explains why the practice of social work by its very nature is dynamic and complicated. In the processes, we need values to be the guide for our direction and to sustain our efforts. Otherwise, the means may overshadow the meaning – we shall be fully engaged with doing but forget thinking and dreaming. We need this critical reflection as our compass. Without a commitment to values, social work professionals will become only social technocrats. The roles and functions of social workers are to prioritise well-being of the people from birth to death. Sometimes we may not be able to solve the problems for our clients. However, at least we can serve as partners to listen and help, to empower and advocate, of course, with the belief in love, self-determination and social justice.

With more than 60 years of practice in the field, both of us would like to share the following ideas and ideals with our fellow social workers all over the world:

1. The client is not only a customer or a service user, they are part of a collective with us of the human condition.
2. Staff are not just employees; we are all professionals.
3. Managers should not be the only decision makers.
4. Life experience, common sense and professional knowledge (not just management knowledge) should be taken as important components of human service technology.
5. Our society and community (not markets and sales outlets) should be the primary environments for our professional practice.
6. Service effectiveness is always more important than managerial efficiency.
7. Care and concern are more fundamental than cash and contracts in social work practice.
8. Social work is professional care plus personal concern.
9. The client is a human being with an identity and individuality, not just a case in a file.

10. Emphasis should be put on both the process and the outcome.
11. We need IQ, EQ, and AQ to become social workers.
12. We should try to give more time and space to our clients; to listen, engage and discuss, rather than monitor and manage.
13. We should provide choices instead of just imposing standards or directives.
14. Money is earned for providing services, rather than services being provided in order to earn money.
15. Money comes from the people. It is public money, not our own money. We have to be accountable to society, to the people and to our heart.
16. Human services should focus on life and quality of life (i.e. the well-being of our clients). Remember the value of life cannot and should not be counted in terms of money.

When we 'walk' with our clients and communities, let us always bear all of this in our mind. Let us think, discuss and reflect together.