

Pushing the Boundaries in Social Work: Establishing the Place of Creativity in Disciplinary Knowledge Creation

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Abstract

Though most social work scholars would agree that creativity is central to social work, creativity has yet to find its rightful place in social work theory and practice. Creativity is not explicitly expressed in social work education and practice. Similarly, there is no theory of creativity in social work practice. Furthermore, the creativity of the disciplines early pioneers is little discussed in the literature on the history of social work. This paper offers a re-reading of early social work history and examines it through the lens of creativity and the processes involved in the creation of disciplinary knowledge. Aided by two process-focused frameworks, the history of social work is reanalysed. Social work is considered first in light of the systems view of creativity developed by Csikszentmihalyi and then the propulsion model of creativity developed by Sternberg. The influence of creativity on the development of knowledge in social work is discussed and compared to the practice-based model of knowledge development advanced by Flaskas. The paper argues that creativity operates in a manner consistent with this process of knowledge creation suggesting a 'pushing of' and 'pushing across' boundaries in social work.

I. Introduction

The systems view of creativity refers to creativity as 'changing the world' or reshaping the already crafted world (Feldman, Gardner, and Csikszentmihalyi 1994, 35). This resonates with the view of social workers as *change agents in society*, and the perception of social work as a process of *planned change*. Within this planned and purposeful engagement, constant reference is made to the need for creative, flexible, and culturally-appropriate responses. The need for creativity in the practice response has been documented by successive social work authors across time. This began with

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Rapoport (1968) and was followed by Gelfand (1982), Siporin (1988), Peile, (1993), Turner (2002), Burgess (2004), George, Coleman, & Barnoff (2010) and Nicolas (2012). All of these writers have stressed that creativity is central to the social work role. This collected history is examined in some detail.

II. The history creativity in social work

As part of a broader study on creativity in social work, a chronological analysis of the literature identified five key historical periods where creativity was discussed. The literature examined was located using the truncated search terms (creative*) and (social work*). These five periods are briefly outlined as discovery, initial exploration, growth, critical integration and expansion. Discovery of the place of creativity in social work emerged between 1900 and the 1930s. Further exploration and the initial attempts at theory development occurred during the 1950s through to the 1970s. A period of further growth where creativity was brought more firmly into the profession happened during the 1980s. A process of critical integration of what had gone before occurred during the 1990s, while a further period of expansion of the creativity literature has been evident from the early 2000s onwards. Throughout each of these periods, *creative practitioners* (Gelfand 1988) have introduced innovations in practice. Successive innovations have shaped the body of social work knowledge. The examples that follow pertain to the early periods of discovery and exploration, prior to the emergence of any direct discussion of creativity in the social work literature. A noted absence of specific literature on creativity during the early period of the discipline signalled the need to explore examples of social work practice and writing for examples of discover and innovation in an attempt to determine why this absence was evident. Early ideas and practices in the social work literature were examined for resonance with concepts of creativity.

On examining the social work literature against that on creativity it became evident that attempts to include discussions of creativity within the social work discourse started almost simultaneously with the emergence of theorising about creativity in other fields. Thus, timing provides a clear rationale for the absence of direct

discussions of creativity in the early social work literature. Boehm (1961) provided the first direct discussion and highlighted the importance of the creative practitioner at approximately the time theories of creativity emerged (Gordon 1961; Mednick 1962; Osborn 1953/1979; Rank 1960; Roe 1963; Rogers 1954; Stein 1953; Taylor 1959; Watson 1958; Vgotsky 1962). Boehm (1961) emphasised the 'quality response' (152) of a creative practitioner, which, he said, did not force people to 'abide by standards' but rather to 'fashion life patterns' that 'foster variety and support differences in ways of living' (152).

Some earlier statements within the literature hint at creativity, for example, Richmond's (1917, 25) distinction 'between going through the motions of doing things and actually getting them done' (in Munson, 1983/2012, 25). Another example is visible within Smalley (1967) and the development of the functional approach with its emphasis on the creative potential of the worker in the context of socio-cultural factors supporting growth. A similar notion was echoed by Dorfman (2013). First developed by Jessie Taft (1919) and Virginia Robinson (1937), Smalley (1967) saw the functional approach as creative because of its departure from the medically influenced diagnostic school (Richmond 1917).

An historical analysis of the existing literature revealed that creativity is present in practice but often not explicitly expressed. This may be due to the apparent difficulties social workers experience in articulating the exact nature of creativity in their practice. This problem is exacerbated by the absence of a theory of creativity. The absence of a theoretical framework makes it doubly difficult to articulate what creativity in social work practice involves. This is not surprising given that the articulation of creativity appears to be challenging even for those who address it specifically. In some instances, metaphor is used to aid description. Metaphorically, creativity has been associated with breaching or extending boundaries (Csikszentmihalyi 2014; Feldman, Gardner, and Csikszentmihalyi 1994). In the context of extended boundaries, new discoveries and expanded knowledge become increasingly possible. New discoveries ensure that a return to prior understandings becomes unconscionable and lead to further

discoveries in time. In light of this Robert Sternberg's (2013) propulsion model of creativity in which innovation variously involves *replication, redefinition, forward incrementation, advance forward incrementation, redirection, reconstruction, redirection-reinitiation, and synthesis* (see also Nicolas 2012; Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz 2004; Sternberg, 2013) has relevance. This model seeks to explain how domains expand by introducing new ideas which support, reject, or synthesise existing *paradigms* (Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz 2004).

Sternberg's theory (2013) might help to explain how early social work pioneers sought to distinguish the burgeoning profession's scope and role from the neighbouring professions of medicine, law, and psychiatry. It may also shed light on why social work thinkers borrowed from the multidimensional theories of these professions as they sought to develop a knowledge base for social work. For social work's earliest theoretical pioneer, Mary Richmond (1917), there was never a doubt that social work had to professionalise. She saw it as necessary to establish scientific credibility for social work. From these early roots, social work practice has continued to be informed by an amalgam of problem-focused approaches that are often in tension with one another. Such tensions continue to be evident within current social work debates about mission and method, science and art, strengths and deficits, and so on. Implicit within these debates are differing beliefs about the nature of the knowledge required for social work practice. The motivation to define a disciplinary system of expertise has led to rigid prescriptive methods and an anti-theoretical stance (Trevithick 2000). Evidence of this motivation can be seen within competency-based approaches that some believe alienate the social worker from the service user, and the values of a helping professional (Pamperin 1987; Nicolas 2012). The dynamic of professionalization might be seen as one reason for creativity having been pushed to the periphery of social work (see Martinez-Brawley & Zorita 1998; Martinez-Brawley & Zorita 2007). Despite the strength of the professionalization of social work a number of social workers across time have reiterated the importance of creativity in practice. These authors hint that creativity continues to hold a place within social work practice and therefore is deserving of further exploration. It is these two approaches to

creativity, which have potential to add new understandings for social work that this paper now turns.

The systems view of creativity (Feldman, Gardner, and Csikszentmihalyi 1994) and the propulsion model (Sternberg, 2013; Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz 2004) are examined and used to investigate parallels to the expansion of knowledge in social work. Knowledge expansion in this instance is achieved through borrowing knowledge from neighbouring disciplines to define the discipline of social work. This process shaped the knowledge required for practice. To date, the use of these theories of creativity has been limited with the exception of a study on creativity among Filipino social workers (see Nicolas 2012). What follows is an overview of these theories and their potential for providing a framework for considering knowledge creation in social work.

III. Pushing boundaries: A systems view of creativity

Social work has a long association with systems theory (Green & McDermott 2010; Michailakis, and Schirmer 2014; Payne 2005, 2002; Stein 1974; Wirth 2009; Zastrow 2017). It is a theory which is widely used and understood. Therefore, a systems approach to creativity (Feldman, Gardner, and Csikszentmihalyi 1994) may serve as a logical extension to established disciplinary knowledge and fit well with current understandings.

A systems view of creativity takes a social epistemological stance, breaking away from prior understandings of creativity as rooted in the individual. For Csikszentmihalyi (2014), focusing on the individual alone was equivalent to trying to understand how an apple tree bears fruit by merely looking at the tree. In so looking, one ignores the elements within nature, such as the sun, the soil, and the air, that support the life of the apple tree. Within a systems view, creativity requires the examination of interactions and processes in three supporting subsystems: the *domain*, the *person*, and the *field* (Feldman, Gardner, and Csikszentmihalyi 1994). Each subsystem fulfils a necessary function for the dynamic process of creativity to occur and new developments to be integrated into a system. The interaction between these three

subsystems explains their functions which have been likened to the evolutionary processes of *variation, selection, and transmission* (Feldman, Gardner, and Csikszentmihalyi 1994). Thus: The *person* provides *variation* in the *domain* through traits and attributes seen as characteristics of an actor in a creative system. It is the *person* who produces the *variation*. There is also a *field* which *selects* the *variation* that is most acceptable for inclusion in its *domain*. Once accepted, the *domain* transmits the *selected variation* to its members and propagates it to next-generation members. This describes the way in which the *individual-variation* likeness is drawn. The *domain* is a symbolic system or an organised body of knowledge about a certain *field* which is governed by a set of rules. The main function of the *domain* is 'to preserve the desirable performances *selected* by the *field* and *transmit* them to a new generation' (Feldman, Gardner, and Csikszentmihalyi 1994, 146 emphasis added). This describes the likening of *domain* with *transmission*. Finally, the *field of selection* is the subsystem where power plays occur. The primary function of the field is to preserve the *domain* as it is, while its secondary function is to help the *domain* to 'evolve by the judicious *selection* of new content' (Feldman, Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi 1994, 146 emphasis added). This outlines the *field-selection* likeness.

Applied to social work, the *field* comprises professional organisations, government and non-government practice agencies including international nongovernment organisations, funding bodies, and the profession's regulating bodies. The *field* also includes social work educational institutions which encompass teaching and research academics, authors of social work publications and textbooks, the editors and peer reviewers of academic journals, and so on. Importantly, the *field* comprises people who are considered *gatekeepers* of the domain of social work. The seeking to extend the knowledge regarding creativity in social work might be seen as an example of an attempt to assist the domain to evolve through the judicious addition of new content.

IV. Pushing across boundaries: The propulsion model of creativity

Informed by systems theory, the propulsion model (Sternberg 2013) also challenges the idea that creativity is an individual trait. It suggests that creative contributions in

a certain field – or domain as Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi 2014; Csikszentmihalyi 1988; Feldman, Gardner, and Csikszentmihalyi 1994) define it – propels that field from ‘wherever it is in the multidimensional space to wherever the creator believes it should go’ (Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz 2004, 10). Thus, it proposes that for creativity to occur movement from one space to another is required. This movement from one multidimensional space to another implies breaching and redefining existing spaces. This is consistent with the idea of pushing across a boundary. Sternberg (2013; Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz 2004; Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz 2013) argued this occurs through eight specific forms of creativity which can be grouped into three categories:

1. Creativity that accepts existing paradigms and attempts to extend them through processes of replication, redefinition, forward incrementation, and advance forward incrementation.
2. Creativity that rejects existing paradigms and attempts to replace them through processes of redirection, reconstruction-redirection, and reinitiation.
3. Creativity that integrates existing paradigms and creates new ones through a process of synthesis (Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz 2004).

The propulsion model has been applied in leadership, science and technology, arts and letters, and popular culture but has not been directly employed for the analysis of creativity in social work. The propulsion model adds the possibility of radical change to the systems view - a revolutionary form of creative action (Joas 1996). As the author imagines it, propulsion of a field takes a circular motion, while it moves forward or even upward in a manner similar to the motion made by subatomic particles. The field may move within a plane or across planes then return to the original plane from which it started. In this process, the field reforms with different boundaries and properties. This means that constant redefinition may happen while moving forward or backward in seeking new directions for a field. As integration occurs, the field becomes stable but remains dynamic as new ideas arise. Thus, as these

changes occur it can be argued that creativity is a constant requirement for the existence and development of a domain. While these ideas have been absent within the social work literature to date, they are akin to the notion of homeostasis found within systems (Parsons 1951) and ecological systems theories (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Both are familiar ideas within social work and resonate with existing understandings and afford an opening for further theoretical exploration and expansion. Considering systems theory in this way serves as a departure from the existing paradigm. This departure may be seen as a small break from convention which has been initiated via a process of redirection and reinitiation (Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz 2013).

V. Relevance of the two models of creativity to social work

The processes involved in the discoveries and innovations introduced by social work's pioneers are similar in nature to those discussed by creativity theorists in terms of breaching and extending boundaries within a system. This is what Sternberg (2013) called *forward-incrementation*. In this process a field is propelled in the direction it is meant to go but is pushed to a position it has not been before. One example of this is social casework. Its derivations lie in the early work of friendly visitors, social workers' predecessors in the Charity Organisation Movement. In the USA, this movement has long been associated with the work of Mary Richmond (1917). Charity organisation societies, however, originated in England with Thomas Chalmers (Pierson 2011). They were introduced to the USA by Stephen Humphrey Gurteen through the Buffalo Charity Organization Society in New York, where Mary Richmond was employed as an assistant treasurer. From this position, she observed daily the system of 'friendly visiting', which had been adopted from the European model. She discovered that these visits to individuals were rather haphazard, with no systematic method of investigation. Consequently, she compiled a list of questions to ensure that the correct information was collected on the individuals who needed help. She also suggested that the ambit of this social investigation be widened to family members, neighbours, and community members to get a sense of the *person in situation* (Richmond 1901; also in Specht and Courtney 1994) from interviews undertaken with each. Providing precursory clues to ecological systems theory that would appear

sometime later in the social work lexicon, her seminal work *Social Diagnosis* (1917) was clearly based on the medical model with its scientific emphasis. It was her answer to Abraham's Flexner's (1915) challenge for social work to prove it was a profession in its own right.

In Chicago, however, social work's other foremost pioneer, Jane Addams, favoured a very different approach associated with the Settlement movement popularised through Hull House (Leighninger 2008). Like charity organisation societies, settlement houses originated in England. The first settlement house was in East London. Toynbee Hall was established by Canon Barnett (Lymbery 2005). Jane Addams, on a trip to England with Ellen Star, was impressed with the settlement model and its capacity for bringing about change. Stirred by the suffering she had witnessed while watching a bullfight in Spain, soon after her visit to Toynbee Hall, she vowed that humans should never experience such misery and suffering. This a-ha moment of 'illumination' (Wallas 1926) marked an important discovery for Addams. She went on to establish Hull House, buoyed on by her creative collaboration with educator and pragmatist, John Dewey (John-Steiner 2006). This collaboration led to several novel writings on social settlement, bottom up participatory democracy, peace, the youth and significant contributions to feminist and pragmatist theory (Seigfried 2013, Whipps 2004), empirical sociology (Schneiderhan 2011), the ethic of care (Leffers 1993), context-sensitive dialogue driven action-based pedagogy (Lake 2015) and public administration (Shields 2006). These two very different early models of social work imported into the USA, produced the individual-social dialectic which has continued to generate constant tension.

Hull House focused on early immigrants to the USA and on the importance of culture, art, and education to their settlement in Chicago. It attracted the attention of social activists, thinkers, and artists and became a venue for the artistic expression and exchange of ideas. Hull House provided a venue for experimentation consistent with Stergberg's notion of an *advance forward-incrementation*. In this environment there was a pushing within the fledgling profession of social work in another direction,

extending it beyond the community organisation model toward social activism. The 'social workers' of the Settlement movement were reformers, advocates, and political activists. Jane Addams did not favour the professional route of Mary Richmond, which won the day, and so hers was a *road not taken* (Reisch and Andrews 2001), with radical social work remaining non-mainstream in US social work.

While Hull House was the first, there have been a series of break-away movements in the course of social work's history. The separation of the functional school from the diagnostic school being just one of many other examples. Sternberg et al. (2013) describe these kinds of breakaways as instances of creativity that signify the rejection and replacement of existing paradigms through *redirection, reconstruction, and reinitiation*. These breakaways appear to occur as a means of disrupting the tensions present within the profession. It takes the form of a turning away from what can sometimes be seen as the constraints created by increasingly techno-rational approaches. This turning away from, or tension with, the scientific approach of the medical model is also a constant theme in the creativity literature (Dorfman 2013; Gitterman and Knight 2013; Goldstein 1992; Martinez-Brawley and Zorita 1998; Smalley 1967). In social work another early episode of breaking away can be detected in the work of Bertha Reynolds (1951/1975). Her work can be viewed as a criticism of the psychoanalytic approach and its adoption of, and dependence on, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM).

Another example more directly related to systems theory in social work is that which is discernible in the work of Ann Hartman (Hartman 1978; Hartman 2003) and Carol Germain's (Germain and Gitterman 1987; Germain 1979; Germain 1991). Their work as graduate students led to the development of two separate versions of the ecological framework in social work. Carol Germain (1991) combined Bronfenbrenner's (1979) idea of the ecological environment with Bertalanffy's (1968) social systems theory, thus arriving at an ecological theory of human development based on Carole Meyer's (1983) earlier work (Friedman and Allen 2010; Grief and Lynch 1983). By contrast Ann Hartman (1978) took systems theory in another direction influenced by family

therapy, thus inventing the eco-map, an assessment tool to understand family dynamics, which is still widely used. Sternberg (2004, 2013) considers inventions such as those of Hartman and Germain as *advance forward incrementation* which accept existing paradigms from another field which are then modified into new forms for application in social work practice and theory.

VI. Links to knowledge in social work

Several authors have established the link between social work and knowledge production (see Flaskas 2007; Gray and Schubert 2013; Trevithick 2008).

However, none of these authors have explicitly provided links with creativity. There is however evidence of links between knowledge production and creativity outside of social work. Nonaka (1994) emphasises creativity in his theory, and it may be argued that the process of knowledge transformation intersects with both the systems view and propulsion model of creativity. Creativity in both Csikzentmihalyi's and Sternberg's models and knowledge creation are seen as a process. In knowledge creation, this process is explained as resembling a spiral involving a series of conversions between explicit and tacit knowledge (see Gray, Schubert and Heinsch 2012, 78). These conversions include: socialisation (tacit-to-tacit), externalisation (tacit-to-explicit), combination (explicit-to-explicit) and internalisation (explicit-to-tacit). These knowledge transformation conversions which lead to knowledge creation may be argued as occurring simultaneously in the interaction of three subsystems: the person, the domain and the field. The ideas introduced by individuals from practice or tacit knowledge are tested through socialization and further evaluated through a continuing process of combining existing knowledge and new knowledge until eventually accepted (internalised and codified) in the domain of social work. In the same way, Sternberg's explanation of how creativity may propel a field to imitate, combine, initiate, redirect or synthesise or move forward by expanding its domain occurs through knowledge production. Nonaka's depiction of the knowledge production process as a spiral is also true for the dynamics between person, domain and field in the systems view of creativity.

The spiralling of knowledge production is further explained by Flaskas (2007) in her practice-based model which follows a 'theoretically-driven practice based approach' (Gray, Schubert, and Heinsch 2012, 66) to the creation of knowledge. Flaskas (2007) explains a circular model which is similar to that of Nonaka (1994) and Trevethick (2008). Unknowingly, Flaskas describes a process which parallels the way creativity operates within the systems view of creativity. The so-called *gatekeepers* of the *field* of social work evaluate emerging practice informed theories for any challenge it offers to existing theory. A social worker practitioner or a group of practitioners may generate theory from practice which in turn 'informs and shapes practice' (Flaskas 2007, 142-143; Gray, Schubert and Heinsch 2012, 66). This theory is further challenged in practice through its use which then leads to further development of the theory. In turn this refined theory further informs practice. The process of how theories in social work are informed by practice and vice versa is consistent with those which describe creativity and knowledge production.

From this historical analysis, five themes in theory development are evident. First, early theories were drawn from medicine, psychiatry (psychoanalysis), sociology and adult education. These differing perspectives have been a source of ongoing tension in social work between those favouring clinical and community modes of practice; between casework and activism; and between science and art. The role of intuition and practice knowledge important in creativity is seen to be in tension with scientific modes of knowledge creation. Second, the anti-theoretical stance in social work resulted in a greater focus on 'doing' over 'thinking about' social work. Theories borrowed from various disciplines were used to explain human behaviour and the social environment, while more radical and critical theories gained a lesser foothold in social work theorising. These behavioural and social science theories were seen to give direction and substance to social work practice because of their scientific foundations. Third were the creative discoveries in social work which are products of exchanges of ideas among like-minded colleagues influenced by societal events and the surrounding context. Creativity was seen as experiential and relational, as promoting collaborative exchange of ideas, while behavioural science explanations

offer grounds for certainty. Fourth, a number of ideas come from the improvement of existing social technology referred to as *replication* and *forward incrementation*. In any case, imitation, improvisation, and invention are considered creative once the individual members of the field accept such innovation as beneficial and these are transmitted to other practitioners through education, research, and publications. In social work, however, the scientific model has prevailed. Finally, the series of breakaways from existing social work approaches at various periods are a form of 'breaching boundaries' through *redirection*, *reconstruction*, and *reinitiation*. Despite several efforts to redirect the social work domain, the social work field is left to engage in an ongoing process of redefining its boundaries.

VII. Conclusion

The creativity implicit in the practice of the early social work pioneers has been interrogated for resonance with the processes of creativity as outlined in the respective frameworks of Csikzentmihalyi and Sternberg. This re-reading of early social work history highlights the creativity embedded in the way in which knowledge was created in early social work practice. The way in which creativity drives the production of knowledge appears to be consistent with the model of knowledge production in social work developed by Flaskas. The history of social work has been reanalysed aided by the lens afforded by these two process-focused frameworks. The dynamic process of creativity has been seen to be parallel and simultaneously occurring with the process of knowledge production in social work. It has been argued that the systems view and the propulsion model creativity can help to explain the way in which knowledge has been created in social work. Shifts within and across a system that inspire breakaways serve as a form of 'pushing of' and 'pushing across' the boundaries in social work. Further, theorising creativity in social work contributes to the breaching of new boundaries in articulating the inherent creativity that lies within the values and practice of social work.

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