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MEVLANA’S CONCEPTION OF HUMAN BEING AND SOCIETY, AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

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Introduction

*“Come again, please, come again,
Whoever you are.
Religious, infidel, heretic or pagan.
Even if you promised a hundred times
And a hundred times you broke your promise,
This door is not the door of hopelessness and frustration.
This door is open for everybody.
Come, come as you are.”*

Mevlana Jalaladdin Rumi

For the last two decades the profession of social work has been challenged on its reliance on Eurocentric paradigms. The profession has been criticized due to its inability to cope with diversity and even being an agent of “colonization.” Social work’s preference for modernist and Eurocentric paradigms through “professional imperialism” replaced the tremendous diversity of traditional models and understandings of social care (Midgley, 1981; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2001; Coates et al., 2005; Keefe, 2003; Canda and Furman, 1999; Koenig, McCullough and Larson, 2001). Therefore, social work must engage in ongoing critical reflection about its current values and actions (Besthorn, 2002; Cox, 2001; Fisher and King, 1994; Leonard, 1997; Specht and Courtney, 1994). The profession is also in a position to begin a professional dialogue to find ways of honoring long held traditions sugge-

sting, in profoundly metaphysical ways, that earth and spirit are inherently interconnected (Besthorn, 2002).

The new terminology in critical approaches to social work practice emphasizes cultural frame of reference, culturally appropriate interventions, and self-reflection and sensitivity to one's own biases. In this sense, the profession needs to focus more on diverse traditions of understanding self and interaction originated in non-Western world. Therefore, Mevlana's understanding of human being opens the door for a more pluralist and humane practice.

Spirituality provides an interpretive framework for understanding reality that informs them of who they are and how they should live (Maslow, 1968). Spirituality can be viewed as ontologically driven, striving for union or relation with God, or ultimate transcendent reality, therefore it needs to be understood without any direct link with religion which can be understood to be the external expression of faith that unites an individual with a moral community (Hodge, 2004; Joseph, 1988; Stanard, Sandhu and Painter, 2000).

What makes spirituality acquire a central place in social work intervention is also the demand from the clients who desire to have their spiritual beliefs and values integrated into counseling settings (Hodge, 2004; Arnold, Avants, Margolin and Marcotte, 2002; Larimore, Parker and Crowther, 2002; Privette, Quackenbos and Bundrick, 1994). Hodge also argues that (2008), although the profession of social work has traditionally been based on the values of enlightenment, many clients today demand their spiritual inclinations and inspirations integrated into intervention.

This shows that there is growing realization that for many clients spirituality is fundamental to their existence (Hodge, 2002). Graham and Al-Krenawi (1996), in particular, point out the similarities between social work's philanthropic heritage in the West and contemporary traditional healers outside western societies.

Getting rid of the binary oppositions in the world (such as the ones between the social worker and the client, the helper and the one in need, etc.), Mevlana offers a cosmological challenge. His comprehension of self reflects both diversity and oneness, but not oppositions. Being a reflection of God in the world, and comprising all the qualities of him, human being is both the cause and end of all happenings. In this sense, the social worker and the client constitute the faces of one existence. This necessarily brings about a self-reflective practice.

Mevlana, a Universal Thinker

Mevlana Jalaladdin Rumi was born as the twelfth century newly begins. Mevlana was born in Balkh in North Afghanistan into a family well known by its Islamic scholars and Sufis. His first teacher was his father Bahaeddin Walad who was a famous philosopher of Islam (*kalam*) scholar and known as 'king of scholars'.

When the Mongols invaded Central Asia between 1215 and 1220, his father set out towards the West and migrated to several places of rich intellectual background in the Middle East, and finally settled in Konya, capital city of the Anatolian Saljuks. There Mevlana reached a very high level in Islamic law (*fiqh*) and *kalam*. He had been interested in "secular" and juridical sciences until his father's death, and then he joined to Sufi order and deepened his knowledge on this field (Onder, 1990,p. 1-2). This was a break from "reason" in favor of "heart" and initiation.

The next part of the paper discusses Mevlana's views on the value and honor of human being, the perfect man, social order/ideal society, and social problems. These topics are apparently not sufficient to examine all of his philosophy, but for the purposes of this paper, they are supposed to represent the main points of it.

The Value and Honor of Human Being

In Mevlana's perception, human being is both the most honorable of all the creatures and a small example of God. God's qualities are perfectly immanent in human beings. In his book *Fih-i Mafih*, Mevlana argues (1994) that complaining the created means complaining the creator. So, hatred and hostility must be hidden.

Reaching the value and honor of human being is only possible by exploring these qualities in him/her. Mevlana describes human being as the holder of the qualities of God. Thus, it is the perfect man who deserves to be called as human being (Yigitler, 2005, p. 335).

If human being is a small example of God and, in the last analysis, they are reflections of one existence, human nature cannot represent malice. According to Mevlana, from their creation men are good. Their wickedness is not an unchangeable element in their makeup but a mere temporary occurrence which proves and registers the existence of the good.

Let's trace the ideas of Mevlana in his own words: "The aim of the (creation of) universe is man" (Majalis-i Sab'a, cited in Can, 2005).

The Perfect Man (*Kamil Insan*)

Mevlana argues superiority and beauty of human being as a potential; activation of this potential is possible only by deserving such a nature. Thus, deserving this potential is to become a perfect man (Ozturk, 2000, p.51).

Kamil Insan is a human being who is modest, patient, tolerant, and generous, can stand malicious actions, sees them as maturing miseries, encourages goodness and discourages badness, aids the poor, and covers the errors of others. According to Mevlana, there is no man independent of errors by nature, but human nature is essentially based on the goodness of human beings. In order to keep human nature as good one must always try to clean his/her bodily appetites and enrich morality.

Kamil Insan is a total spirit. While Nietzsche's "super man" is a model of power, domination, appetite and victory; Mevlana's *kamil insan* is characterized by service and compassion (Ozturk, 2000, p. 52). Therefore, the way to the perfect man is built upon dedication to others. Human beings have no right to blame others before being aware of his/her own faults:

When a man accuses others he is really seeing only his own faults. First, a man must rid himself of malice, envy, hatred, cruelty and other vices before he may blame others (Fih-i Mafih, 1994).

The path to the perfect man is the path to discover one's own self. Self is nothing in itself without any rational connection to and simultaneousness with other beings, and at the same time, comprises all the existence, creates the meaning and constitutes the reference for all creation. Without any reference to self, in Mevlana's thought, neither be universe understood nor the self be unchained from duality in the Cartesian sense. Sufi understanding of self is both a challenge to the individuality as a particular form, though it proclaims independency, and manifests all being immanent in it – the particular comprising the universal.

Self is the center of existence. And if all the existence is only understood via self so is God. Self is the only gate for a perfect comprehension of God. There is no such probability of understanding God and his creation of the universe before exploring the mysteries of the self since the later hides the meaning of the creation in itself. Mevlana suggests that discovering one's own self is to discover all s/he seeks:

"There is another soul in your soul, seek out for it.

There is a treasury in the Mount Body, seek out for that treasury.

O mystic who goes on ! If you are really capable then seek.

Not outside, but seek what you are seeking for in yourself."

(Rubais, 22, cited in Ergin and Johnson, 2005)

“Since a raw (immature) man is unable to perceive the state of a ripe (mature) man, it is better to cut a long story short and bid him farewell.”

“An immature man” means a person who is preoccupied with sensory pleasures and is detained from journeying further on the path of love, while “a ripe man” is a person who has gone further towards Truth (Turkmen, 2007).

According to Mevlana, the one who is aware of his/her self cannot harm others:

*„Let us implore God to help us to gain self-control:
one who lacks self-control is deprived of the grace of the Lord.
The undisciplined man does not maltreat himself alone,
but he sets the whole world on fire”*

(Mathnavi, 79-80)

Social Order/Ideal Society

Mevlana’s understanding of society puts human being into the center. It is the individual who determines the society and the state, so change is realized through individual. For a peaceful society, individual must be the focus of change. Change is so essential that even the destiny of human beings can change. Change is a conscious activity to re-build the world. Three causes of change are creation, divine love and education (Douglas-Klotz, 2002).

Mevlana describes social order as the compliance of the individual interests. Social order is essential. In the absence of order anomy appears and sets barriers for human perfectness. In an ideal society, productivity fundamentally determines the functioning. People must be placed into roles according to their skills and equipment (Beytur, 2005).

A perfect social order requires the respect for human diversity. Keeping the differences as they are is for the benefit of society. Human beings are different from each other as a divine blessing. Freedom of expression is the essence of a diverse community. Mevlana versifies diversity in the following:

*„Single breath of man is worth that of a life;
A hair that falls down from him (or her) is worth that of a mine”*

(Rubais, 76 cited in Ergin and Johnson, 2005)

Social Problems

Problems in society should be coped with gradually. Empowerment/encouragement is the best strategy to deal with social problems and “faults” in Mevlana’s terminology. Mevlana gives a great inspiration to all helping professions in that he suggests people who claim to “correct” the society first start with themselves. Only the people who are in the process of perfection may help others see the clues of this path.

As the ideal of humanity is to reach the perfect man so that goodness and badness do not constitute a binary opposition anymore, a society comprised of such intentions would be a solidarist one. As Mevlana defines “human being” as the perfect man, the ones who do not assist the ones in need cannot be called as human being. Moreover, assistance should be offered to everybody without discrimination. Assistance is not a sign of superiority nor a symbol of power, but a sharing of wealth and human capital for a more just society. Let’s look at Mevlana’s own words:

*„Go, help others; time will appreciate your help.
It never forgets those helps.
Everybody left his or her wealth behind, so yours will be left, too.
Then, one's leaving goodness behind is better than his leaving wealth.”*

(Rubais, 88 cited in Ergin and Johnson, 2005)

As to criminality, Mevlana argues that nobody is criminal potentially, so they must be treated smooth and compassionate. Furthermore, nobody can be accused without any act or proof just due to his/her thoughts or doubts. In addition, punishment requires a good examination of the individual’s own situation/context. Contextuality of punishment is the key to Mevlana’s encouragement strategy. Punishment in Mevlana’s understanding is a way of showing compassion. Punishing especially the exploiters of rights and labor is the most supreme compassion for them (Ozturk, 2000).

Relevance of Mevlana’s Ideas for Social Work

According to the definition of IFSW (2007), the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to

alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion.

The profession of social work is dedicated to consolidate and improve the value and honor of human beings. All social work practices can essentially be evaluated in this basis. Core values and beliefs of the profession are the right of all people to freedom and well-being; treatment with dignity and respect; the acknowledgement of their strengths, resilience, and the capacity of change; the acceptance of diversity and difference as enrichment; mutual responsibility; need of belonging; uniqueness; and self-determination (Witkin, 1999, p. 297; Levy, 1973; Bisman, 2004; Pinto, 2002; Allen-Meares et al., 2000; Chow, 1987; Silavive, 1995). However, based on modernist paradigms, the profession of social work has been criticized for changing society without any sensitiveness to diversity and plurality. In these grounds, the professional practice disregards individual and cultural complexity. In order to avoid an engineering endeavor the profession must focus on the individual as a valuable and honorable human being as its very definition suggests. Today, if the profession of social work is to become an agent to transform the world for a peaceful and just one as its beginnings had foreseen, it must be seeking for alternative paradigms from all over the world. Alternative paradigms would contribute to a more inclusive practice. Let's pay attention to his words:

“We are all the branches of a single tree, all fellow travelers.”

(Divan-i Kebir)

“My brothers, my brothers. Do not allow yourselves to be restrained by a power or an emotion. If you want your hearts to be opened to the truth, then love one another, give your hand in friendship. Those who are enemies are trapped in an ambush...”

(Rubais)

As an alternative thinking system, Mevlana would enrich our practice as social workers. His basic argument of human beings as essentially valuable and honorable is closely related to the social work's belief of respect for human value and honor. Any endeavor which does not aim at maximizing human value and honor cannot be regarded within the scope of social work. Thus, the starting points of Mevlana's philosophy of human being and the profession of social work are exactly the same.

Mevlana's conception of human being is the one which sees human being as open to change and development. In appropriate conditions, all human beings have the capacity to change and improve. In Mevlana's thought,

human being is good by nature, but the conditions in his/her environment sometimes put him/her in negative positions. The responsibility at this point cannot be attached to the individual. In opposition to the individualistic modern societies, Mevlana's thought suggests a solidarist social life in which everybody has the responsibility for each other. Mevlana's perfect man (*kamil insan*) is the one who avoids desires, feels responsibility for the society, and dedicates himself/herself to the service of others with compassion. According to Mevlana, one can reach perfectness by exploring/understanding his/her self. Without an awareness of the self nobody can be categorized as the real human being. So, what the profession of social work aims at is to create an awareness of the self and potential of all as human beings. Such an individual is at the same time conscious of social problems, knows how to contribute to the solution of those problems, and feels responsibility for the common enrichment of the society. The profession does not define social problems as originating from the faults of individuals, but locates the causes in environmental factors. In this sense, it advocates for human rights and social justice by empowering the individual. As Mevlana emphasizes the importance of change capacity, the profession of social work is also built upon the belief in the capacity of human beings for change.

Mevlana's understanding values human beings as having the potential to contribute to the society regardless of their sexual, ethnic, religious, cultural background. This addresses multiculturalism. His philosophy calls for the acceptance of every single person without any discrimination because he invests upon the potential of each for all. This is similar to the intention of social work intervention. Deprived groups can never be excluded from the mainstream of the society because they can enrich the society by their significant contributions. In this sense, social workers are not normalizing agents to rehabilitate these groups by transforming them within the mainstream, but they are the agents to make the mainstream benefit from the potentials of the deprived. This approach of the profession gets rid of the binary oppositions within the society as the mainstream and the peripheries, but brings all the elements together to build one whole comprising of the diverse (unity in diversity). This is in harmony with Mevlana's conception of unity. Moreover, the formula in Mevlana's thought for living with others is love which is the constituting faculty of unity:

*„Luck becomes your sweetheart, if it becomes helpful.
Love helps you in your daily routines,
Consider not the loveless life as life.
For, it will be out of consideration.”*

(Majalis-i Sab'a, cited in Can, 2005).

Self determination is an ethical principle in social work that recognizes the right and needs of clients to be free to make their own choices and decisions. Inherent in the principle is the requirement for the social worker to help the client know what the resources and choices are and what the consequences of selecting any of them will be. Usually, self-determination also includes helping the client implement the decisions made. Self-determination is one of the major factors in the helping relationship (Barker, 1999). Mevlana argues that the individual determines everything. S/he can also change his/her destiny. This complies with the basic principle of social work: self-determination. Nobody can act on behalf of the client unless s/he does not allow to be so. Just like social work's understanding of the client, the individual in Mevlana's thought holds the right to self-determination with his/her innate capabilities. Valuable and honorable human being – and the perfect man in Mevlana's sense – is the one who decides on among various alternatives and determines his/her life using his/her free will. It could also be put that being a true human being in Mevlana's sense means being aware of and using the right to self-determination. Otherwise, the individual would never be the actor/subject of his/her life. What the profession of social work is built upon is this ideal for everyone.

Especially as to the individual and social problems, Mevlana's analysis is in harmony with social work's person in his/her environment approach. He classifies problems in relation to their interactions with other systems in the environment instead of "blaming the victim." Indeed Mevlana sees the problems we face as not an unchangeable element in our nature but a mere temporary occurrence which proves and registers the existence of the good. Thus, human being is good by nature, and all the opposite are the means to make us discover the good. So, the bad is not the bad in itself, but a mere reflection of the essential good. The profession of social work does not focus merely on the results of human behavior, but on interactional factors that affect occurrences. The goal of the profession is not to search for the guilt, but put forth the very causes of the problems within wider systems. So, human beings cannot be perceived as the very cause of problem situations.

Last but not the least part of the discussion is the quality of the helper. According to Mevlana, the one who assumes the role to help others should first and foremost know his/her self because knowing the self is the key to understanding all existence. Just like in Mevlana's thought, an efficient social work practice is the one which is self-reflective. In this position, the worker is not the "other" side of the helping relation, but an indispensable part of and insider within it. Perlman (1979) conceptualizes such a relationship as "disciplined use of the self in interaction."

Conclusion

According to Hodge (2002) as the NASW Code of Ethics stipulate, it is important for social workers to increase their understanding regarding the unique characteristics of spiritually-based cultures to be able to provide culturally competent services to clients.

Given that the majority of social workers appear to address spirituality in practice settings, it is critical that resources be developed that can be used to equip practitioners to work with spirituality in an ethically consistent manner (Hodge, 2002). So, what Besthorn argues (2002) is deeply relevant for our discussion. He suggests that a diverse spirituality that the profession has to achieve must recognize the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things as the fundamental biological and spiritual norm rather than the exception and must encourage the rightful, non-anthropocentric place of humankind in the cosmic/spiritual order.

It seems mandatory under the light of the discussion that social workers integrate spiritual resources and demands into their intervention. This would bring social work practice new envisagement and opportunities to be an inclusive practice.

The focus of social work practice is the interaction between human beings and society, which creates problems and constantly changing needs. The profession of social work is based on the presumption that all its professional activities aim at increasing the quality of life of human beings and society. Despite the fact that human beings and their environments are constantly exposed to various problems, the profession invests upon the capacity of human beings for development. It believes such a capacity is inherently available. It is vitally important that wider social conditions be changed in order to make use of this capacity. In this point, human being is the key to change and determine his/her own life. The profession of social work deals with human and social problems in a way that it respects human value and honor.

Having the individual and society as its focus, the profession of social work aims at enhancing social justice and human rights. This is also an expression of human value and honor. In doing so, the basis of the profession is human diversity. Human value and honor can only be achieved and respected through the respect for diversity. Every single human being has the capacity to change the conditions surrounding both himself/herself and a wider society. This brings about a feeling of responsibility of individuals to each other and society they live in. In this point, the very essential mission of social work is to improve this capacity and responsibility of human beings without any discrimination. Diversity cannot be refrained from,

but it should be relied upon because it is the very source of enrichment and democratic society.

Based on the highest respect for human value, the profession of social work must be open to every single philosophy deriving from different cultures in order to be fully effective in the helping relationship. This paper tries to suggest one of those philosophies, which has potentially significant effects on social work practice. Originating in Turkey, but influential throughout the world, Mevlana's ideas on human beings and society are in line with the basic values of social work.

What constitutes the basis of social work is the premise that human beings are good by nature. This shows a harmony with Mevlana's views on human beings and society. His fundamental axioms on human beings such as human being as the center of the universe, respect for human value and honor, a solidarist society, the right to self-determination, human diversity, the belief in human potential for change, self-consciousness, and person in his/her environment have a great inspiration for social work practice. Social work profession may be vitally influential for the lives of ordinary people if it achieves to make all these concepts alive in every sphere of life by refining and purifying their theoretical bonds. These concepts are essentially intrinsic into the lives of ordinary people, so what the profession is supposed to do is to re-conceptualize its framework by referring to the living concepts and philosophies. Let's give the final words to Mevlana:

*“Blow the horn of unity and let us all gather together,
And join as one
Let us forget our differences, if only for a moment.
If we are carried away beyond ourselves, we will become the color
of water.”*

(Rubais, 126 cited in Ergin and Johnson, 2005)

Abstract

While we, as the children of the twenty first century, witness an atrophying conscious of empathy for others in an age of cruel experiences all over the world, what we urgently need is the all encompassing universal values of humanity for peace. This paper addresses the implications of Mevlana's thought, one of the greatest thinkers of history, for social work practice which has been criticized for almost two decades on the grounds that it has traditionally been based on the values of the Enlightenment that brought about a strictly modernist practice which excluded the values and subjectivity of the client disregarding her/him as an “actor”. This paper also

celebrates the 800th anniversary of his birth, which UNESCO decided to be associated with during the year 2007.

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