

Editorial

“Scientific knowledge, like language, is intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all. To understand it we shall need to know the special characteristics of the groups that create and use it.”

~Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1996 (p. 210)

When we created this journal four years ago, we chose the name *Praxis: Where Reflection & Practice Meet* because we felt it captured an important characteristic of the process of knowledge generation that occurs in our profession. The word “praxis” comes from the Greek “practice,” and it connotes *practice that is inextricably entwined with theory*. If we look at the history of the development of theories in social work, we can see that our profession has a whole heritage of praxis. Social work theory has always developed through a process of dialogue between empirical data from practice, and generalizing from that to thinking about a theory of practice. We can see this dynamic interplay between practice and theory whether we think about Jane Addams and the settlement house movement, Mary Richmond and Jesse Taft and their respective diagnostic and functionalist approaches to casework, or Helen Perlman’s attempt to bridge these two paradigms by developing a variant of ego psychology that was more problem-solving in its orientation. Although the empirical basis of social work practice has at times been pejoratively and inaccurately described as “practice wisdom,” Mary Woods and Florence Hollis clarify:

The term “practice wisdom”... does not sufficiently convey the continuous study process through which practice is observed and examined, both case by case and in groups of cases. As in any other healthy profession, practice theory was built up on widely debated premises derived from *scrutiny by practicing social workers of actual experience*. (Woods & Hollis, 1990, p. 16)

Thomas Kuhn’s significant contribution to our understanding of the process of scientific discovery is that he placed this process within a social context. The hallmark of scientific knowledge, according to Kuhn, is that it occurs within a community; as Woods and Hollis describe, social work, like any other field, has developed its knowledge base within a scientific community of practicing social workers. For a community to nurture the development of scientific knowledge, however, it must possess certain characteristics – one of these being praxis. In other words, the professional community has to be connected to the everyday life of the people it serves. Jane Addams and her fellow Hull-House settlers

were quintessential in this regard. By immersing themselves in the day-to-day lives of their neighbors, the settlers became intimately familiar with the deleterious effects of socio-economic oppression on the well-being of their immigrant neighbors. Juxtaposed against the prevailing view of the time that poverty was the product of individual deviation, this data from practice inspired the settlers to advocate for profound social reform. Similarly, in her pivotal book, *Social Diagnosis* (1917), Mary Richmond set forth an alternative view of the etiology of poverty. Using her casework method, she emphasized the impact that the social environment has on an individual’s psychosocial functioning.

The body of knowledge created by these social work pioneers is a wonderful illustration of how new theories are often inspired by a dissatisfaction with the fit between prevailing theories and observations from practice. Harry Stack Sullivan’s interpersonal theory (1953) and Heinz Kohut’s self psychology (1971) were also the result of perceived discrepancies between tenets of dominant theories and what they saw in practice. More recently, the strengths perspective in social work was inspired by a concern with the mismatch between pathology- and deficit-focused clinical theories and social work’s value of nurturing client strengths (Saleebey, 1992). Responding to similar concerns that traditional practice theories can disconnect clients from their capabilities, postmodern, constructivist theories, such as narrative theories, conceptualize the therapeutic relationship as a collaborative partnership where the client is viewed as an author and an expert of his own experience (e.g., White & Epston, 1990). In Jane Addams, Mary Richmond, Harry Stack Sullivan, Heinz Kohut and Dennis Saleebey, we have a series of people who developed their ideas because their contact with clients led them to be dissatisfied with prevailing conceptual frameworks. In response, they changed the conceptual framework. Praxis has always been a part of social work tradition, and this gives us a tremendous advantage in the generation of scientific knowledge.

Along with praxis, another important characteristic of a scientific community is that the community has to be open to people disagreeing with prevailing conceptual frameworks. Kuhn (1996) makes this point with his list of ingredients for “extraordinary research”: