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The Loss of Political Mandate in Social Work: Implications for Practice

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Abstract

The article examines the erosion of the political mandate in social work due to juridification, managerialism, and institutional dependency. It argues that the profession is being redefined from a transformative force into an administrative function, leading to 'structural helplessness' among practitioners and a loss of critical capacity to challenge systemic inequality.

Keywords: social workpolitical mandatemanagerialismjuridificationstructural helplessnessprofessional identitystreet-level bureaucracyadvocacy

Introduction

From Political Profession to Administrative Function

A central driver of this development is the juridification and managerialization of practice. Social work is increasingly embedded in legal frameworks, audit cultures, performance indicators, and standardized procedures that define not only what counts as legitimate intervention but also how professional success is measured (Brodkin, 2011; Evans, 2011; Hood, 1991). These developments are not neutral. While they enhance accountability and procedural consistency, they also narrow professional discretion and redirect attention away from structural critique toward rule-governed implementation. Lipsky's (2010) account of street-level bureaucracy remains highly relevant here. Frontline professionals operate under institutional constraints that force them to translate complex social problems into administratively manageable cases. In such contexts, social workers may still witness the structural production of distress, but their operative role becomes increasingly executive rather than transformative. The profession is thus repositioned within the state apparatus as a mediator of policy consequences rather than a force capable of challenging policy foundations (Brodkin, 2011; Lorenz, 2005).

Institutional Dependency and Depoliticization

This administrative turn is intensified by institutional dependency. Social work is typically funded, regulated, and authorized by state agencies or quasi-public welfare organizations. Such dependency creates a structural tension: the profession is expected to respond to the damage generated by social inequality while remaining embedded in the very systems that organize and reproduce it (Evers, 2005; Powell & Geoghegan, 2004). Under these conditions, overt political critique may appear professionally risky, organizationally disloyal, or practically futile. Depoliticization therefore rarely occurs through explicit prohibition. More often, it emerges through adaptation to institutional logics. As Evans (2016) shows, discretion in social work is shaped not only by formal rules but also by organizational expectations that reward compliance, case throughput, and procedural reliability. Over time, this fosters an implicit self-limitation of the profession. Political judgment is displaced by administrative rationality, and structural analysis becomes secondary to service delivery. In this sense, the political mandate is not denied in theory; it is neutralized in practice.

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Implications for Professional Identity and Practice

These structural conditions reshape how social workers understand themselves. If professional education and organizational cultures prioritize methods, documentation, and evidence-based intervention without equal emphasis on power analysis, policy critique, and advocacy, the profession risks producing technically skilled but politically disembedded practitioners (Dominelli, 2002; Ferguson, 2008; Gray et al., 2012). The consequences are not merely theoretical. A depoliticized professional identity weakens the capacity of social work to interpret individual suffering in relation to social structure and thereby reduces its critical and emancipatory potential. One useful concept for describing this condition is structural helplessness. Social workers often possess detailed knowledge of systemic failures because they encounter their consequences daily. They see how inadequate housing, punitive welfare rules, fragmented services, and chronic underfunding shape clients' lives. Yet they frequently lack authority, resources, or collective platforms to intervene at the level where these conditions are produced. The gap between professional insight and actual influence can generate frustration, cynicism, and burnout, not as merely individual reactions, but as effects of structurally constrained practice (Kim & Stoner, 2008; Lloyd et al., 2002). If social work is to retain its professional integrity, this trend must be confronted directly. Political literacy, policy analysis, and collective advocacy should not be treated as optional supplements to practice, but as integral components of the profession itself. Without reclaiming this dimension, social work risks becoming a stabilizing instrument that manages the social consequences of inequality while leaving its institutional causes largely untouched.

Conclusion

The contemporary crisis of social work is not that it has lost all reference to justice, but that its political mandate has become increasingly hollowed out by juridification, managerialism, and institutional dependency. What emerges is a profession that continues to work in the field of social problems while becoming progressively less able to challenge their structural production. Reclaiming the political dimension of social work is therefore not an ideological luxury. It is a professional necessity if the field is to remain more than an administratively efficient response to systemic failure.

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