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Political Engagement, Skill Application and Creativity in Social Advocacy

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Abstract. Social advocacy is a core component and routine activity of social work. This paper focuses on several important elements in social advocacy. It discusses the necessity of political engagement in social advocacy, explores the application of advocacy skills with a case analysis of Wet'suwet'en solidarity advocacy of Indigenous Peoples, and examines the use of creative advocacy strategies in social work practice. It argues that a good social advocate should positively engage politics, effectively apply diverse and appropriate skills, and actively demonstrate creativity for achieving the advocacy aim and adjusting to the social change.

Keywords. political engagement, skill application, creativity, social advocacy

Introduction

Social advocacy for marginalized people has always been the cornerstone of the social work profession. Social workers are responsible for fighting for the rights of the vulnerable people and helping amplify their voices. Social advocacy is not an abstract concept; the attitude towards politics, the familiarity to advocacy skills, and the thoughts to innovation correlate with social advocacy. This paper discusses political engagement in social advocacy, analyzes advocacy skills using a case analysis, and explores creative advocacy in practice. This article serves to illustrate the significance of social advocacy in social work.

Political Engagement in Social Advocacy

The importance and necessity of political engagement in social advocacy are important because social workers must never be blind to how influential politics are as it permeates peoples' lives. Unfortunately, the current literature suggests that the profession's focus on social justice and social action is weakening and being replaced by individualism and therapeutic interventions (Mattocks, 2018).

Regretfully, not all social workers prioritize the importance of social justice in their philosophy of practice. Social workers come across many issues related to social injustice in their everyday practice. For example, in a recent case, a social worker who advocates for abused seniors was interviewed. When asked about relationships between the agency's responses and related social policies, the advocate refused to discuss any political policies. She insisted that answering questions related to politics was not her responsibility and she suggested going to ask the agency leader. This example illustrates how some front-line social workers may be

disengaged with or disinterested in talking about politics, implicitly suggesting that social work is more focused on a micro level of practice rather than a macro level involving political engagement. Some social workers regard advocacy that engages in politics as a “dirty arena” (Hoefler, 2019), which may partly explain why they distance themselves from politics. However, if advocates focus only on micro operations, advocacy practice may lose its way and veer in dangerous directions.

Social advocates must understand why active political engagement is needed and how it influences the outcome of advocacy. Politics is constitutive of social life (Martinez, 2018). Social workers are not outside of social life that covers politics. At times, macro-level, mezzo-level and micro-level social work overlap as individuals, small groups and larger communities are interconnected. Social workers need to identify the meaning and values of politics for reinventing social work around the world (Martinez, 2018). A social worker needs to fully realize the importance of integrating advocacy practices into social work practice. Advocacy practice involves an explicit attention to power dynamics in policymaking and political mechanisms for eliciting social change (Pritzker & Lane, 2013). One compelling reason for political engagement in social advocacy is, “enacting a politics of decolonization also necessitates an undoing of the borders between one another” (Walia, 2013, p. 238). Decolonization is a significant topic and challenging task in advocacy and social work practice. Decolonization cannot proceed without political engagement.

Advocates need to identify the larger institutional context, understand the larger public discourse and consider particular policy before initiating advocacy. Walia (2013) states that real political engagement can help an advocate find dynamic solutions to problems within a collective. For example, anti-imperialist and anti-oppression politics are the means of advocacy activities for NOII groups in fighting against systems of injustice (Walia, 2013). Hoefler (2019) proposes several factors, which value the extent of political participation including time, money and skills which are spent on politics. These factors offer a set of criteria for evaluating a social worker’s political engagement in the practice for social justice.

A Case Analysis of Skills Application in Social Advocacy

In addition to active political engagement, excellent skills application is important to a successful social advocacy practice. Hoefler (2019) introduced some of the skills used in social advocacy and provided a social worker with keen insights on the behaviour of advocates in practice. The case of the advocacy activities of the Wet’suwet’en of the Indigenous Peoples against the Coastal GasLink pipeline project is a typical example, which positively illustrates how advocates apply advocacy skills in their social work practice.

Firstly, the response and communication approaches when faced with positive or negative outcomes in social advocacy can be discussed here. Cialdini (2008) suggests that negative events may trigger more social change than just concentrating on possible positive outcomes. “A negative message means to call attention to the bad things that will ensue if the desired action is not done” (Hoefler, 2019, p. 121). In protest of the pipeline project in northwestern British Columbia, the advocates used negative appeals and emphasized the pipeline project’s destruction of the natural environment. On January 7, 2020, a solidarity rally was held in Toronto where over 300 people came to support the Wet’suwet’en land defenders. The slogan used by advocates was “We don’t drink oil”. It sent the public a clear message that the water resources of the Wet’suwet’en are being damaged by the project. Hoefler (2019) believes that a negative message may be more persuasive. The negative outcome attracted the public’s attention and helped advocates gain support from beyond the community members.

Secondly, the use of different advocacy styles can be analyzed here. The Wet'suwet'en have initiated a series of advocacy activities against the Coastal GasLink pipeline project. Some of these activities are based on a collaborative style of advocacy. For example, the hereditary chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en have agreed to negotiate with the province for a de-escalation of the dispute through a seven-day meeting (The Canadian Press, 2020). Unfortunately, the peaceful talks failed after only two days. In this case, The Wet'suwet'en used confrontation as a means to present their advocacy efforts. Walia (2013) points out that "envisioning bold strategies of confronting the state" (p. 2381) can help social movements move toward coordination of revolutionary struggle. Confronting usually is the last resort in advocacy skills because "using confrontational tactics at every opportunity could quickly burn bridges with decision-makers whose support you need to achieve your goals" (Hoefler, 2019, p. 121). When gentle persuasion and negotiation failed, the Wet'suwet'en chose to use confrontation to "obtain any movement in the target's position" (Hoefler, 2019, p. 121). They gathered on Yonge and Dundas in Toronto to block traffic during rush hour (Rocca, 2020). Furthermore, they ramped up the confrontation level by holding up railway traffic (The Canadian Press, 2020) to protest the arrest of proponents and to call for a change in attitude from the politicians.

These advocacy efforts had maximum effect. The impact of these protests was great enough for Trudeau to convene the Incident Response Group, an emergency committee to deal with the national crisis (The Canadian Press, 2020). The advocates applied the appropriate advocacy skills and achieved real change in protecting Wet'suwet'en lives, land and well-being and fought the social injustice afflicting their community. "Reflection of meaning and interpretation/reframing are the most important influencing skills of all" (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2016, p. 198). Reflection is necessary for every social worker and it plays an important role in application and improvement of social advocacy skills.

Creativity and Social Advocacy

Creativity plays a vital role in advocacy practice for social justice. Walia (2013) highlights that undoing border imperialism requires "our communities to think and act with intentionality, creativity" (p. 2846). It is important to continue the tradition for bringing about social change (Pearlmutter, 2008). However, a social worker can continue the "tradition" with "untraditional" advocacy strategies. Although more traditional advocacy methods including writing open letters still play an important role, social advocacy needs a new creative approach and new tools to adjust to a changing world.

Many creative forms of advocacy are related to art including music, drama and dance. Alternative forms of advocacy provide rich options for social action. However, effective use of these forms is a test to the competency of our advocacy. In the Wet'suwet'en solidarity fundraiser activity in March 2020 at York University, an Indigenous mother and daughter performed a wonderful ritual dance while her husband was drumming. They wore tribal costumes and sang traditional songs. Although there were no words, their song, dance and drumming were so powerful and moving that people gathered, applauded loudly and donated actively.

Sometimes, the inspiration of creative advocacy comes from daily life. To some extent, advocacy has similarities to the art of advertising. Both need to rapidly capture the attention of a target group, present ideas, and persuade with appealing or frightening messages. Advocates who can be open, creative and flexible will learn skills from the field of advertising. Also, knowledge of consumer psychology can be helpful in analyzing the targets' psychological activities, predicting targets' possible behaviours, and choosing corresponding forms of advocacy.

In making social advocacy more creative, Hoefler (2019) insists that brainstorming can stimulate creativity. For example, when advocating with Pandemic Rapid-response Optimization to Enhance Community-Resilience and Health (PROTECH) for Chinese Canadians experiencing racism related to COVID-19, a social worker suggested the group employ brainstorming and found this very helpful. Hoefler (2019) sparks creativity “by injecting unusual images or ideas” (p, 67). During a brainstorming session, some advertising strategies may be tried including designing attractive posters, contacting TV stations for setting up an interview, making slides and videos. The racism experienced by Chinese Canadian related COVID-19 is a “public secret”. Applying art to advocacy is possible because “art processes have an extraordinary power to unveil the ‘public secret’” (Lellio, Rushiti, & Tahiraj, 2019, p, 1543). A social worker’s innovative proposal aroused the other group members’ interests and they actively participated by giving their ideas and advice. Creativity enhanced the planning and made the advocacy exciting and successful.

A social worker needs to take every opportunity to incorporate creative competence in the advocacy practice. Focusing on the characteristics of advocacy activities and the needs of the clients are significant when considering creativity. For example, when advocating at Cross Cultural Services for immigrant women, a social worker can use music, video, photography and voice to get the messages across. When advocating at Polycultural Immigrant & Community Services for Chinese Seniors, a social worker may employ the WeChat platform because it was more practical for Chinese clients than Facebook or Zoom. Several factors need to be considered in order to innovate in one’s own social advocacy practice including scales of activities, characteristics of participants and targets.

Advocates currently face an unprecedented challenge with the outbreak of COVID-19. Many clients obey physical distancing policies and stay at home. Offering social services and social advocacy from home has become the new norm for advocates and electronic advocacy will be even more common in the future.

Conclusion

How can a social worker be a good advocate? A good advocate should have an astute political sensitivity and an active political engagement, employ a wide variety of advocacy strategies, and use creativity to respond to challenges. Creative advocacy will be a vital part of the practice in adjusting to this changing world. A social worker needs to greatly enrich his or her knowledge and ability to engage actively in politics and enhance the confidence to facilitate change.

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