CHAPTER 1

Towards a Hermeneutic Conception of Social Work Practice (1): The Myths of Positivism and the Strong Thesis of Value Involvement

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In the first two chapters, the author makes use of critical theory and hermeneutics to construct a "strong thesis of value involvement" in social inquiry and then on that basis examines the nature of social work practice. The two chapters contain four sections. The first section outlines the myths of a positivist conception of social work. It considers the inadequacies of such a view, as well as the misunderstandings incurred by researchers and workers of this persuasion. The second section introduces the "strong thesis of value involvement," and through it outlines the moral essence of social work practice. It then explains the thesis that "social work is itself a moral practice." The third section analyzes the relationship between value involvement and the principle of self-determination on the one hand and the relevant social context on the other. It points out that the principle of "client self-determination" is closely allied to the idea of being value-free which is emphasized by the rather narrow epistemology of positivism. It proceeds to examine the relationship between the principle of self-determination and the context of secular society development. With reference to this broad developmental context, it investigates how self-determination came to be the leading ideology of the modern time and the guiding principle of social work.

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The fourth section re-emphasizes the importance of value involvement. It argues for the thesis that "moral beliefs form the main foundation of social work skills." Once this thesis is established, then the moral foundation of social work becomes self-evident. The author then further explores the relationship among understanding, self-interpretation and social work skills in order to reveal the close relationship between value-embedded interpretive understanding and social work skills.

1. The Myths of the Positivist Conception of Social Work

From a bird's-eye view, we can group conceptions about the nature of social work into two main categories. The first is the positivist conception of social work: it places stress on doing social work from the angle of professionalism and science. This view is shared by the majority of social workers and can be regarded as the mainstream conception of social work. The second category may be called the "alternative social work paradigm"; it differs from the mainstream model and involves more debates, even controversies. In fact, the so-called "alternative social work paradigm" has more than one sense and can be understood in different ways. In the discussion that makes up this chapter, we shall concentrate on that school of social work that places emphasis on moral practice. A rather curious fact is that although quite a few non-mainstream schools of social work emphasize the moral element in their practice, social work academic circles have not yet advanced a clearer discussion of the nature of social work as moral practice. Lacking a perspicuous critical viewpoint, advocates of social work as moral practice remain at the stage of criticizing the positivist model. Even when some scholars attempt to set up an "alternative" intervention model, they lack a deep understanding of the role and meaning of moral practice in social work. As a result, their interpretation of the clients' predicament and hardships and their methods of intervention are in nature not markedly different from those of the mainstream positivistic model. The best among them could only follow the idea of "social construction" posited by post-structuralism and postmodernism, and put forward notions like "constructive social work." But most of them fail to expound, from the vantage point of meta-theory or

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social science, the true significance of the concept of "construction" in social work. Still less can they delineate the link between it and moral practice.[1] These questions will be discussed in detail in the next section. For the moment, we will focus on the characteristics of the positivist conception of social work, both as a profession and as a science.

a. Misunderstandings of the Positivist Conception of Social Work

Before we proceed, it is worth emphasizing that due to various reasons and misunderstanding, quite a lot of social workers whose position coincides with positivism do not see themselves as positivistic. They might think that they belong to the non-positivist camp. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the Chinese social work community.[2] It is therefore necessary to first explain this phenomenon.

Due to a number of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, compared with other social sciences, social work among the Chinese community has paid scant attention to discussion at the meta-theory level. In reality, even with the positivist model which many social workers subscribe to, most of the practitioners in the field, social workers and scholars alike, to a large extent know only the "how" but not the "why". The works on case studies published in the Chinese scholarly circle clearly testify to this lack of understanding.[3] Sometimes an intervention model that is clearly positivist-oriented would be interlaced with a non-positivist view of human beings and theoretical postulates. Naturally, we know that practical social work is not the same as theoretical discussions in social sciences. Practical social work depends on the accumulated experience of the workers. It is impractical to apply wholesale a monolithic theory or intervention model to a concrete situation. This is because there is a lack of fit between concrete practice and theory, which highlights the complexity of the job of a social worker. However, it is precisely this lack of fit or contradiction that writers or lecturers in the classroom are obligated to explain clearly. They should not whitewash the lack of congruence between theory and reality, nor impose a uniformity where none exists.

The following scenario is only too common. Perhaps out of misunderstanding, social workers or researchers adopt an intervention model based

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on positivism yet at the same time deny certain basic postulates of that theory. They will openly exclude certain basic assumptions of positivism, for example, the postulates about human nature, or a conception of social work drawn from the natural scientific model. They will demonstrate that they are using non-positivist models in their work in practice and in theory, and propound such basic social work values as "person-centeredness," "acceptance of others," or insist that workers build up a good relationship with their clients, achieve empathy, and find ways into the clients' inner world. What they are not aware of is that such notions are not necessarily in conflict with positivism. A positivist social worker can, in theory or with logic, base their social work practice or academic investigation on the stance of "person-centeredness" or "acceptance of others."

Of course, we are not denying the importance of such values or stance in the relationship between worker and client. But if we examine closely, we can see that the stance of "person-centeredness" or "acceptance of others" may have the main purpose of strengthening the trust that clients have of social workers so as to tell them their inner feelings so that the workers can get to the crux of the problem and solve it. All the actions taken emanate from a technical-rational perspective. It still leads to a situation where the weight of the interaction is placed on the professional's command of the situation. The clients do not work on an equal basis with the professional to construct their problems. The worker's empathy, whether emotional or intellectual, is not empathy of a moral or value-based nature.

This kind of social work, though involving emotional empathy on the part of the worker, does not necessarily reflect a mode of social intervention that is opposed to positivism. This emotional intervention may be regarded as the deployment of certain techniques to achieve certain knowledge, to solve a problem or to make the behavior of the clients conform to the wishes of the social worker. This approach does not contradict a positivist view of social work. Yet it is precisely here that workers and academicians mistakenly think that they have escaped the pitfalls of positivism. They have, instead, fallen deeper into its snare without realizing it. The effect is to block a correct and deeper reflection of the nature of social work practice.

The position taken up by this book is non-positivist, belonging to an alternative social work paradigm; it emphasizes that the foundation of

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social work rests on moral practice. "Moral" cannot be interpreted in a facile way as meaning "respect for others" or "person-centeredness." To move from a positivist path to a moral practice path is not simply a change at the cognitive level; it involves changes in attitude and behavior. To a certain extent, it asks of social workers a certain change in moral conduct — to interpret with an open-minded attitude the different conceptions of social work based on different epistemological assumptions, and with that same attitude, to understand the situation of the clients. This might involve just a switching of perceptions accomplished in the wink of an eye, but to get to this point requires strenuous work in cognitive re-orientation such that a new consciousness and mode of behavior will emerge.

This is the point of this book which advocates a conception of social work as moral practice. We will expand this theme by and by, but in this section, we will examine the essence of a positivist social work and its implications for the wider sphere of ideology. We will begin with the narrower question of methodology or epistemology, to examine some main tenets of the narrow definition of positivist social work which puts a lot of store on technical rationality. Then we will broaden the discussion to the macro level, to discuss what the definition means in the wider sphere of ideology and attitude towards life in contemporary society.

b. The Positivist Conception of Theory and Practice

If we start our discussion with the relationship between theory and practice, we can see that the mainstream thinking as represented by positivism places stress on adopting a value-neutral attitude towards the construction of theories with which to explain social phenomena. It also adopts an attitude of value-detachment in the daily practice of social work. As far as verification is concerned, the verifiability of a theory hinges on how accurately it can explain social phenomena. An "accurate explanation" is one that can accurately predict occurrences relevant to the phenomena. The proposed explanation belongs to the realm of theory, while the application of the theory to specific circumstances belongs to the realm of practice. If "theory" belongs to the domain of fact, then "practice," an application of the theory, should also belong to the

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same domain. If a theory can be successfully applied to practice, then the theory would have stood the test of practice. This is a somewhat simple summary, yet one can see that in the positivist conception of social sciences, the relationship between theory and practice can be understood as a relationship between two sets of facts. The relationship refers to a value-neutral objective attitude in understanding the external world.[4] On the other hand, in the field of social sciences, the specific application mentioned above can also mean using the theory to make some policy decisions, such as the implementation, extension, and operation of social or economic policies. These can be said to be applying theory to explain relevant phenomena. The predictive power of the theory then can be interpreted as the extent to which the theory can be put into practice.

Now we can extend the above analysis to the practice of social work. Social workers, following mainstream thinking, will adopt a value-neutral objective attitude to interpret the clients' situation, then select an appropriate intervention model to help solve the clients' problems. The interpretation phase belongs to the theory level; the intervention phase belongs to the practice level. Whether in the interpretation of the clients' needs, or in the choice of a corresponding intervention model, social workers should avoid assiduously any interference from their own value judgment.[5] Obviously, in actual circumstances, workers will find it very difficult to be completely value-neutral in interpreting the predicament and problem of the clients. But in traditional social work, that remains an ideal to aim at.[6]

With such a conception of social work as the one described, social workers are like other scientific researchers. Both believe that the problems and the reality out there that they manage can be objectively mastered. Both the treatment and the results are objectively verifiable. Thinking along such lines, social workers believe that they have mastered objective and professional principles as well as a professional language with which they can correctly interpret and deal with clients' problems. They approach clients in the role of an expert, a professional like in other sciences.

When social workers see themselves as experts and act like one in their work, certain consequences will follow. They will of course listen to the clients and talk to them. But in reality, the social workers are trying

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to interpret the problems of the clients as an expert. They will interpret or reformulate the clients' words in professional jargon. Let us take the analogy of a physicist. A physicist uses a mathematical language to express his/her concepts and communications, whereas the lay person uses everyday language. Ordinary people see the changes in nature through intuition and senses; they may see nature as full of contradictions and not very orderly. They see the surface phenomena. Physicists think that they see the real phenomena of nature, because their technical language is rigorous, systematic and universal. Generally, social workers do not compare themselves to physicists, but the pride in being a professional and the sense of professionalism are nearly the same. For many social workers, their clients use garbled, unclear, illogical language when talking about their problems, which betrays a lack of understanding of their true situation. Therefore, from the academic or therapeutic viewpoint, social workers have to approach the problems of the clients as an expert, using an expert's language to reformulate the clients' problems or the articulation of their problems.

The term "professional," as commonly understood, refers to people like lawyers, accountants and doctors. By stressing that social workers are professionals, the social work community to some extent sees its workers as joining the professional league. In other words, it connotes that social workers possess some unique knowledge about the existential human condition, in particular human predicament and troubles, one that the clients do not possess. It is true that generally speaking, social workers have the advantage of being trained in social sciences and the humanities in an academic setting, unlike most of those who seek their help. Their education makes them think that they have a more truthful and systematic understanding of the existential human predicament and suffering. To some extent, this self-appraisal cannot be faulted. The question is whether this knowledge differs in essence from that held by ordinary people, including the clients. The answer is quite the contrary.

We notice that as social workers, their use of language, their understanding of the pain and difficulties in human relationships, or their choice of intervention models, are not that different from the general public's common daily language, understanding of pain and suffering, and solutions to problems. The differences held are only a matter of

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degree. Social workers use the same everyday language just like ordinary people. Hence, to liken the status of the social work profession to those of natural scientists, lawyers and doctors not only distorts the nature of the social work knowledge and its development, but also blurs the reality of the relationship between social workers and clients. A clear trend that we can see in social work — in particular its language, theory and techniques — is that these elements are developing into expressions that are quantifiable and generalized, into something akin to psychology. In addition, there are tensions in resource distribution and in the trend of managerialism. Combined, they reinforce the trend towards quantification in social work, both in its operational procedure and in its assessment of effectiveness.

The analysis of the professionalism and the professional status of the workers in social work above enables us to see more clearly the relationship between theory and practice in a positivist view of social work; it is a relationship between "fact" and "fact." It does not involve the subjective value judgment of the social workers. Herein lies the crux of the matter. Positivists think that the main difference between statements of fact and value judgments is that the former are objectively verifiable while the latter only express personal subjective feelings, not objectively verifiable. There is no logical entailment between them. We cannot deduce a conclusion about value judgment from a premise of fact. Therefore, in matters involving moral value, theory and practice do not exist in a relation of necessity. Clarification of facts does not necessarily lead to the resolution of conflicts of value.

To return to the affairs of social work, one finds that what social workers often encounter are arguments and conflicts involving value. The social work profession has used and emphasized the notion of "client self-determination" in an attempt to solve the problem of value involvement in the practice. A client has a problem and seeks help from a social worker. This can be called "self-determination" of the first order. Then, the social worker examines the problem and, with an objective attitude and method, finds out the causes of the problem, then proposes a solution for the client to consider. In this process, social workers would say that no personal value judgment of theirs has been injected into the process. They only follow the clients' "own decision"

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and follow it through. The analysis and the solution proposed are simply presented to the clients and it is the clients who decide on their own whether to accept or reject them. This is "self-determination" of the second order.

Let us rephrase the situation from the point of view of positivist or traditional social work. In the counselling process, the ideal situation is that clients decide all the matters involving value judgment. Social workers only follow the decisions made and provide the analysis of the factual matters as well as the corresponding solutions to clients. Therefore, social workers must try their best not to insert their value judgment in the counselling process.

Following this line of reasoning, we will find that the positivist conception of social work, like its conception of social science, has the same postulates about the nature of social science and social phenomena. Among the many postulates, a crucial one is the one that imitates natural science research, and proposes concepts like "brute sentence" and "brute phenomenon."[7] According to the positivist view of the structure of natural science, the process of verification in natural science assumes that any complicated natural phenomenon can be reduced to a set of "brute phenomena." The understanding of brute phenomena requires no interpretation; it can be accomplished simply by sensual perception. This view presupposes that human perception has the quality of objectivity or inter-subjectivity. It also presupposes the existence of an objective world apart from humans. "Statements of fact" have objectivity because humans can come to know the phenomena of the objective world through their senses. This process of understanding does not need to involve the values of the perceiver, so it can be verified objectively.[8]

The positivist outlook summarized above — its views of natural science and social science, its view on the relationship between fact and value, or that between theory and practice — has come under severe attack from different schools of thought and in different circles as far back as the 1960s. From the 1980s onwards, in the circles of philosophy and social theories, few scholars have subscribed to a positivist epistemology. However, in the social sciences, especially those disciplines that rely on empirical investigation, and in the academic study and practice of social work, positivism still holds sway. Putting academic study aside, we see

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that in practical social work, the positivist viewpoint and its conception of social work commit social workers to a serious misunderstanding of their profession and of human existence and predicament, as well as the misunderstanding about the relationship between theory and practice in the social work discipline.

As stated above, to the positivists, social inquiry and the understanding social workers have of their clients' problems both belong to the realm of factual analysis. Researchers and social workers should maintain a value-neutral attitude to their best ability, so that they will not impose their value judgment onto the phenomenon in question or the clients' problems. Only then can they achieve an objective understanding of what they are concerned about. But the question is, can researchers or workers maintain a value-neutral attitude in the course of getting a handle on the problems? This is especially problematic with social workers in their practical work. Very few people would claim that social workers are able to maintain a value-detached attitude in dealing with the predicament and suffering of the clients. The heart of the matter is whether value-detachment should be upheld as an ideal or standard to direct social work practice and research. The answer is not as straightforward as it seems. In the practical world, faced with human predicament and suffering, one will not be unmoved by humanistic concerns. Yet the universality, systematicity and verifiability of knowledge make one feel an inclination towards a paradigm of knowledge free from human bias or emotion. In the field of social work, be it teaching, research or practical work, the problems are compounded. In the following section, we shall make use of a popular textbook on social research as an example to illustrate our point.

c. A Misunderstanding of the Rigorous Research Procedure of Positivism

Scholars engaged in empirical research know that it is very difficult to use a purely positivist model to do social investigative work in reality. If one observes carefully, one will find that in carrying out social research or in doing social work, researchers or social workers often do not deliberately adopt any one academic orientation or model in their work. However, in post-hoc reflections, in teaching or in supervising practical work, people

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often follow religiously the so-called formal "standard" mode, mostly that derived from a positivist paradigm of knowledge. They do so in the belief that positivism embodies the structure and investigative procedure of natural science. Natural science commands respect because of its predictive efficacy. On top of that, we are inclined to think that knowledge, especially the kind transmitted in academia, should have a rigorous and systematic form. For these reasons, academic researchers as well as the general public believe, consciously or unconsciously, that positivism provides the model for knowledge. That is why textbook writers and academic scholar-writers, or lecturers teaching in class and assessing students' work, usually follow positivism as an ideal model to support their work. This is what the observation above means: although no one can follow positivist presuppositions and methodology step-by-step to carry out their work, that does not stop social work researchers, especially professors in academic institutions, from regarding positivism as a model for social work.

In some ways, the immensely popular textbooks, e.g., Earl Babbie's textbooks on social research, illustrate rather well the situation I have described. Babbie's *The Practice of Social Research* and co-authored *Research Methods for Social Work* are college textbooks written in the positivist mode.[9] Following that model of knowledge, he puts down what he considers to be rigorous and systematic research procedures. In the section on quantitative research, especially when detailing the quantitative questionnaire research method, he appears to be able to demonstrate with clarity that the positivist model of research leads to a rigorous research method for social inquiry. However, problems arise in the section on qualitative research, in the discussions about such methods as participant observation and in-depth interview. He repeats concepts like "validity" and "reliability" in the relevant chapters. As scholars engaged in empirical research know, when they make use of such methods as participant observation and in-depth interview to study a problem, they are faced with many and varied social contexts. This complexity of meaning crops up throughout the entire process of formulation of research questions, data collection and analysis. It is impossible to use a positivist model of knowledge generation to guide such research. When Babbie deploys a positivist approach in writing that section of the textbooks, the

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exposition distorts and misleads in an extreme manner. The effects are obvious in undergraduate study and particularly so in doctoral candidates' research. When they carry out qualitative research and try to conform to the so-called rigorous requirements, they ignore or simplify the human relationships and social contexts that are inevitably present. This is especially apparent in the collection and analysis of data. They follow the quantitative method and press data into the service of the method. They are not aware that to conduct participant observation and in-depth interviews is to use a method of narration that depicts the situation and invokes the readers' imagination to achieve the end of a deep understanding. This is of course not to say that such research methods should abandon concepts like validity and reliability. Rather, such concepts should be understood and constructed differently from their meaning in positivism. We shall not discuss such problems of meta-theory now. We shall further delineate the nature of the positivist conception of knowledge, especially its "rigorous research procedure." Such a step will help us understand the following sections on alternative social work paradigms.

What does positivism regard as rigorous research in social science? There are two aspects to this question. One denotes the techniques used in research. The other denotes the verification procedures. The ideal model that positivists think of is quantitative social research, pride of place being given to quantified questionnaire survey. They use this as the standard with which to measure the efficacy and reliability of other research methods. They also use this yardstick to criticize non-positivist social research for lacking a scientific basis. This illustrates one rather popular misconception in social research: many people regard quantitative social research as belonging solely to positivist social research. They think that non-positivist social research will use only qualitative methods. They confuse positivism with empirical research. But the former is a philosophical school or paradigm, while the latter uses observable data as the basis of research. As a matter of fact, social investigations in any school of thinking make use of observable data as the materials for study. They all use "empirical" methods to collect data. All investigative methods, whether quantitative or qualitative, including questionnaire survey and participant observation, are ways of collecting data; they are methods

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for researchers of different persuasions to use. Thus, quantitative social investigation, or quantitative questionnaire survey, is not the private property of positivists, and cannot be used to prove the rigor of positivist social research.

In other words, the rigor of positivist social research refers less to the technicality of research methods but more to whether a discipline has a rigorous verification procedure. This is a point often missed by empirical social researchers. They often fail to see that from the positivist angle, no matter what method researchers use in their investigative work, as long as their results are objectively verifiable, then their research meet the criteria of science. Of course, we are not denying the relationship between research skills and objective verifiable procedures. But a basic question is this: what is the rigorous verifiable procedure that positivists approve of? This is a key question, one that many empirical researchers do not have the answer to. The so-called rigorous verification procedures in fact amount to some basic postulates that positivists have about social phenomena and social knowledge. They can be regarded as postulates of positivism at the meta-theoretical level.

We can further explicate the problems inherent in positivist social research by examining the three basic meta-theoretical postulates of the positivist conception of knowledge.[10] First, the truth value of a statement depends on whether it matches the external world that it describes. This is the "correspondence theory of truth." Second, phenomena in the external world are independent of human existence. This is the assertion of "naïve realism." Third, what humans experience through their senses is the same. Therefore, sense experiences have objectivity or there is inter-subjectivity of sense perceptions. These three basic postulates underline the positivist conception of social phenomena and the nature of knowledge. They underline too the positivist view of social science and from it the so-called "rigorous" research or objective verification procedures are derived. What makes such a stand problematic is that all three postulates of positivism have long been discarded in the fields of philosophy and social theories. The verification procedures which they espouse correspondingly lack theoretical support.

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d. From a Narrow Positivist Conception of Knowledge to a Broad Positivist Conception of Society

From a positivist conception of knowledge such as the one delineated above, we get an idea of its formulation of the relationship between ideal and reality. From that, we can divide social work into two aspects: one is academic, including the activities of the academics, writers and teachers; the other is practical, including activities by social workers and students at practice. Teaching and research are guided mostly by the ideal positivist model. The latter is more complicated. A positivist model is not applicable to practical social work, just as there is a lack of fit between it and participant observation or in-depth interview. In general, social workers in their daily work will meet two kinds of situations. First, when their work runs reasonably smoothly, when workers and clients are able to communicate, discuss proposals and partake in intervention activities in a satisfactory way, then theory or intervention models do not loom large; social workers just go by their intuition and past experience. Of course, when things run smoothly, the practitioner does not need to and will not reflect on the work at hand, for the smooth unfolding of "confronted" events means that there has been a professional technical quality to the execution. It is necessary to point out, though, that sense of professionalism felt applies only to the "then" situation.[11] Even so, in day-to-day social work, things rarely go smoothly. In fact, the smooth execution of social work problem-solving appears more in case studies in books, and in videos and CDs in experimental classrooms, than in real life.

In another scenario, when there are glitches or more serious problems, then workers will have to re-examine the various aspects of their work. The scholars, students and workers concerned are apt to do so using the model of positivism that they regard as ideal, since that is what they consider as the proper theory of knowledge. In other words, workers may not utilize a positivist model in their practical work, but all the while may appeal to such an erroneous view of social work and study in their reflection. We may now introduce the two senses of positivism: the narrow and the broad meanings. When one examines the nature of the positivist theory of knowledge, what we see is narrow positivism. When that

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narrow meaning of positivism is situated in the broader context of contemporary society, then a broad positivist conception of society emerges.

We can rephrase our conclusion like this: narrow positivism deals more with the nature of knowledge, whereas broad positivism encompasses attitude to life, ideology and worldview. How do the narrow and broad conceptions combine to influence contemporary people's way of life and the practice of social work? We shall use Max Weber's concept of means-end rationality to explain it.[12]

According to Weber's view of means-end rationality, social action can be divided into two parts, "means" and "end." The end is defined by each person, and there are no objective criteria to measure whether an end is appropriate or not. On the other hand, we can use the "end" of the behavior to objectively measure whether the "means" is appropriate. Weber points out that in trying to make sense of social action, we can only verify the "means" part objectively. This can be done either by the actor or any observer, and the criterion used will be identical, i.e., the end of the action. The means can be judged by how well it accomplishes the end.[13]

Weber's analysis of social action pays heed to instrumental or means-end rationality as an analytical framework. From the viewpoint of positivism, a similar sharp distinction appears to exist: fact (means) and value (end). The means taken is something that can be objectively verified, but the end is subjective.

The early critical theorists of the Frankfurt School are at variance with Weber in their political orientation and many specific analyses of society, yet in their discussion about the rational development of Western society, they also use the analytical framework of means-end rationality just like Weber. The development of rational society in the West in the past three hundred or so years is to a large extent well captured by Weber's depiction: it has proceeded in a manner describable by means-end rationality. However, from the perspective of Critical Theory, the truth value of a theory or statement cannot be solely determined by the actual societal development.[14]

To assess the objectivity and rationality of means by looking at the end of a behavior and then to understand society through this equation is to put the weight of analysis on how individuals use all kinds of means

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to satisfy their predetermined ends. This presupposes that human actions are motivated mainly by satisfying individual ends. Things external to individuals are regarded as tools or methods to be weighed and utilized to satisfy personal objectives. From the perspectives of methodology or epistemology, this assumes a split between individuals and the external world, that is, social phenomena exist independently of the individuals' existence. Individuals' understanding of the world is similar to the "means" they employ to achieve their ends, and is open to objective verification. In this way, instrumental rationality or means-end rationality becomes a general analytical tool to guide individuals to objectively appraise the means in social behavior, and to further guide people in assessing the results of social research objectively.

Seen against a wider backdrop, this is a method using a "monological approach" or a process of "monological understanding."[15] According to this orientation, in terms of specific behavior, individuals behave in a way mainly to satisfy their own objectives, and not to communicate with others. In terms of understanding society, researchers attempt to target social phenomena external to themselves. As long as one has the correct research methods, one can achieve a correct understanding without the involvement of one's own or others' value judgment.

Using the instrumental or means-end rationality as the analytical framework to interpret society involves a deeper philosophical argument, and that is the "Cartesian paradigm."[16] This is a complex issue. In brief, Rene Descartes believes in the existence of objective truth. To find truth, it is necessary to pursue it without the contamination of authority, prejudice and value bias. He tries to find such a platform on which to erect absolute objective truth. In other words, the Cartesian paradigm not only seeks absolute truth, it also postulates that seekers of knowledge and the subject they want to get to know are in a subject-object dichotomy. The knowing self attempts to understand the object of interest in a monological way. Descartes' philosophy is quite different from positivism in many aspects, but in the pursuit of objective truth, his analysis provides support for positivist social inquiry.

If we combine the narrow and broad positivist views, we will be able to see even more clearly the structure of the mainstream social work research model and its direction of development. As mentioned before,

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there have been severe criticisms of the positivist conception of knowledge, yet paradoxically, the rise of managerialism in recent years has deeply influenced the academic circles in every aspect, and affected, even shaped, the developmental direction of social work institutions and the assessment models in social work. Managerialism is now combined with means-end rationality. The fusion results in a system of quantified accountability criteria in terms of economic effectiveness being applied to all areas, including resource allocation and the assessment of human economic and non-economic activities. No other factor has distorted social work more than this development.[17]

2. The Strong Thesis of Value Involvement

To distinguish themselves from the mainstream social work model, other schools are sometimes grouped under the rubric of an alternative social work paradigm. That can include quite a number of schools, schools that are non-positivist but different from each other in approach and orientation, so it is not easy to give them an all-inclusive definition. But for quite a few non-positivist social work researchers, a characteristic among these schools and commonly accepted by them is that they set great store on "moral value" as an important component of social work. A curious point is that these schools seldom state outright in what way social work involves morals. Most just vaguely assert that social work does touch on matters of morals; few would pay attention to the consequences of involving morals in social work practice, for example, in the practice and research of social work with regard to the problem of objectivity.[18]

The fact is that quite a number of schools in this paradigm set their sight on the macro-social aspect of society. For example, such scholars use theories like social criticism, social construction, post-modernist deconstruction or feminist liberation to try to establish social work theories different from those of the mainstream. They also use them to analyze the state of social work and its direction of development. Research based on such theories deals largely with power, distribution of resources, ideology, etc. No one will deny that these are legitimate concerns of social work because the problems encountered in social work are not limited to micro matters of techniques; they are often inextricably linked with the larger

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context of social development. On the other hand, no one will disallow that the daily, current, existential predicament of humans make up the bulk of the problems social workers have to deal with. The micro level of participatory work may be more important than the macro level of social analysis. It is true though that in the micro level of participatory work, the various schools of the alternative social work paradigm have not shown a relatively distinctive and systematic development.[19] We think that one of the main causes is that the alternative social work paradigm has not been able to locate the place of moral value in social work, and therefore cannot develop a corresponding conceptualization of social work techniques.

a. Social Work is Itself a Moral Practice

Many social workers of the alternative paradigm consider social work as moral practice, which is similar to the notion of social science as moral inquiry advocated by some non-positivist social theorists. These advocates, however, seldom demonstrate how social science is a moral inquiry. What exactly does "social work as moral practice" mean? Does it mean that social work researchers or social workers have to deal with moral problems in their profession, or that when social workers are engaged in their job, their actions are to be regarded as some sort of moral practice? In other words, there can be two interpretations of "Social work is itself a moral practice." The first one is that while going about the business of their work, social workers will have to deal with problems that are of a moral nature. The second one is that while social workers are engaged in practical tasks, their very activities are a kind of moral practice. These two meanings are distinct from each other.

Positivists will accept the first interpretation of the statement that "Social work is itself a moral practice." This interpretation is in line with their principle that in doing practical work, social workers should take a value-detached or value-neutral attitude. Consider the following example: a social worker is dealing with a marriage break-up. This clearly involves morality. A social worker might take the role of a third person, and objectively analyze the rights and wrongs of the case to the client.

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This is no different from a social scientist doing research on topics such as "the moral views of Chinese" or "the moral views of undergraduates." They would not feel that they themselves are engaged in a moral practice. In other words, a social worker might help a client to understand the moral dilemmas involved in a situation and might help in providing a solution to the problem, yet does not come down one way or the other in making a moral judgment. The worker would only give opinions and assistance to the client according to his or her needs.

Taken this way, the belief that "Social work is itself a moral practice" will not constitute an alternative social work and research paradigm. We think that what it really means is that when social workers or researchers are engaged in practical work, they are engaged in moral judgment, moral practice, or moral intervention activities, as in the second meaning above. If one sees "Social work is itself a moral practice" as a key point in alternative social work paradigm and yet gives it only the first meaning, then the statement is pointless. What needs to be stressed is that a social worker should intervene morally in the situation of the client. Moral intervention means that social workers should make moral judgments in the role of the first person. This might imply that workers will place their own value judgment on the clients, an act that clearly goes against the long-held principle of "client self-determination." If this viewpoint is accepted, then its relevance is not limited to social work but will be extended to the social sciences and humanities. This is quite an emphatic view of the place of value involvement in social inquiry. I call this position "the strong thesis of value involvement."[20]

A question naturally follows once this position is taken. Given this "strong thesis of value involvement," does it mean we can no longer separate factual statement and value judgment in our interpretation and intervention work with the clients? The answer depends on a proper understanding of the relationship between factual statement and value judgment. In the last section, we have discussed the positivist's position in this matter. Positivists think that in the real world, in dealing with human relationships, social researchers and social workers can hardly withhold their own human concerns. But in theory, there is no necessary relationship between the human concerns or the worker's value orientation and the human relationship at hand. Indeed, the more one can maintain

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a value position of being value-neutral, the more one can attain a better understanding of the situation and the better one can devise the proper intervention. Thus, postulates of being value-neutral and of maintaining the logical divide between fact and value can act as guidelines to a social worker's practical work. However, this view reflects only the first meaning of the claim that "Social work is itself a moral practice." We want to stress the importance of the second meaning. Social workers cannot but be morally involved in their work, otherwise they will just not be able to understand the world of the client. It is imperative to put the matter in such unambiguous, strong form; otherwise, the claim that "Social work is itself a moral practice" will lose its meaning.

In a nutshell, "the strong thesis of value involvement" states that to achieve any understanding of social phenomena, certain corresponding value beliefs must be involved. These value beliefs include those value judgments made in the first person whether consciously or unconsciously. Furthermore, if researchers can consciously spell out those value judgments with clarity, that will help them to achieve a clearer understanding of the subject of their research. Similarly, social workers should spell out their value judgments in relation to the clients' problems for appropriate assistance to be proposed.

To be sure, this is not a proposition easily accepted by all. In fact, it is not even a proposition easily delineated by any means. People will ask the following questions: If the strong thesis of value involvement is accepted, how can we make a distinction between statements about the social world and value judgments? When we verify the truth value of statements about the world, are we also verifying a value judgment? Moreover, in both academic inquiry and daily tasks, it is both convenient and practical to separate factual statements and value judgments into two camps. Some people might think that in passing a value judgment on something, they are playing the role of a participant or adopting a first-person attitude in the activity. On the other hand, they would say that in explaining a social phenomena or making a statement about it, they are playing the role of an observer. The separation into participant and observer roles appears to be an essential element for any social inquiry or daily tasks. As for social workers, this distinction gives credence to the important social work principle of "client self-determination." The strong thesis of value

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involvement seems to go against all these and blur the distinction between participant and observer roles. Thus, it seems to upset the very conditions that make research and practical work possible. The crux of the matter hinges on whether there is a relationship of logical necessity between understanding and value judgment. The following sections will answer these queries so as to explain the purport of the strong thesis of value involvement and related concepts as applied to social work practice.

b. Theory, Practice and "Value Relevance"

In the positivists' perspective, when social workers or researchers try to understand or interpret a client's problem, they are dealing with analysis at the level of fact. In theory, the workers should adopt a value-neutral attitude and not impose their own value judgment on the factual analysis or the client's problems because only by not imposing can they reach an objective understanding of the phenomenon or problem. The question is this: can social researchers and social workers understand the clients' problems, society, and the world at large with a value-neutral attitude? Positivists themselves would admit that in reality it is difficult for researchers to insulate themselves from value concepts. Maybe we can rephrase the question: in social research, should researchers minimize the degree of their value-involvement? On this point, there are broadly speaking two kinds of responses: one represented by the German sociologist, Max Weber, with his interpretive sociology; the other, the views of critical hermeneutics.[21]

When social scientists look on a world so complex and diversified, they need some principles with which to decide on the subject of their enquiry as well as to assess the significance of their research question. Weber advances a criterion called "the principle of value relevance." Value relevance does not refer to personal value judgment but the value system that is generally accepted by the society the researcher belongs to. Value relevance, then, is not the same as researchers' subjective "value judgment." It has an objective basis.[22]

Weber goes on to point out that the kind of value judgment involved at the level of "the principle of value relevance" does not undermine the objectivity of research. The reason is that once a research question has

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been selected, the question will then become a kind of objective criterion to direct data selection and data analysis. The veracity and validity of the research results are determined by the objective external world and the social research methodology. This view implies that the kind of value involvement espoused by the principle of value relevance does not depart from the traditional epistemological view about the relationship between theory and practice.[23]

When one probes a little deeper, one will see that value involvement does not take place only in the selection of research questions. Indeed, Weber himself points out clearly that social research is more about interpreting the significance of behavior or phenomena than revealing the causal relationships. Researchers should make connections between social behavior, its cultural tradition and value norms, before they can understand its deep meaning.[24] It is quite clear that researchers should in the first place define the significance of their question with reference to the cultural community they belong to and its value system. In fact, we can say that in the interpretation of any social phenomenon, the researchers must involve their related value system or they cannot hope to grasp the meaning of that phenomenon. We can go even further and say that it is not only in the definition of research questions that value beliefs get involved, the processes of data collection and data analysis and all other steps in the process are similarly value-laden.

However, Weber and positivists still insist that there is such a thing as a value-free verification process. They would concede that in selecting the phenomenon to study and in defining the research question, researchers bring their value beliefs with them. But once the question has been selected, the subsequent methods, procedures and steps can be made objective, and ensured to stay objective, with reference to the research question and the objective facts that exist in the external world. There is a problem with this argument. If Weber stresses that the aim of social research is to get at an interpretation and a deep understanding of society and human affairs, and that such an attempt has to be contextualized in the relevant cultural and value systems, then why is the verification procedure in social research above and beyond the influence of value?

Positivists will counter the above queries with two points. First, although value involvement is unavoidable in social inquiry, in the

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verification process, objective facts that have an independent existence will filter out any value judgments that the researchers might bring.[25] The lesser the value involvement, the greater the chance of reaching a correct interpretation. Second, the kind of value involvement inevitably present in social research is not the individual researcher's value judgment but rather a reflection of social and cultural norms. That is, "the principle of value relevance" applies. This invests the value judgment with an objective meaning rather than an individual meaning.

The key to the positivists' first line of defence lies in the assumptions that there are "brute phenomena" which can be understood through the senses, and that the corresponding interpretive theories can be reduced to "brute sentences." Thus, through our sense perception, we can examine the "brute sentences" to see if they match the "brute phenomena" in the external world. That will be the test for the veracity of research results. In this way, the individual researcher's subjective values will be filtered out.[26] This argument is a rather complex question. We will not discuss it in detail here but will highlight the main points of the argument.

According to Weber's principle of value relevance, the understanding of any social phenomenon necessarily involves its corresponding value system. From this view, we may infer that any interpretive understanding entails the corresponding value beliefs. All social phenomena, then, are perceived through the glasses of value involvement. It follows that value-neutral, uninterpreted "brute phenomena" do not exist. What positivists hail as objective verification procedures for social research have no valid basis of support.

Since value beliefs make up one element that constitutes social phenomena, the traditional view regarding the relationship of theory and practice as one between fact and fact, free from any value involvement, cannot be justified. The same applies to the relationship between theory and practice in social work. When a social worker deals with a client's problem, or applies some theory and intervention model to the practical work, value is inescapably involved.

Positivists will produce a second response. Even if one accepts that there is value involvement, it does not make any changes to the current practical social work model. Social workers may not be able to avoid

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value involvement, yet these "values" are not the personal values of the workers; rather, they are the "value relevance" generally accepted by the community. They are what social workers and clients in the larger society accept as value norms. In the end, when social workers carry out their tasks, they just follow what has been traditionally practised. There is, as far as possible, a detachment of personal values but an attachment of the normative principle of "value relevance."

Such a rejoinder reveals a misunderstanding of the place of value involvement in "the principle of value relevance." "Value relevance" may appear to involve only the value system of a culture and society, but the universality of such values is not different in kind from the researchers' value judgment. There is only a difference in degree. In fact, according to the positivist analysis, when two value systems are in conflict, there may not be objective criteria for deciding which is right or wrong. This demonstrates that the value system, similar to value judgment, does not possess an objective basis as Weber supposes. Besides, the so-called subjective value judgments of individuals are often derived from the value system in the context of their society. As such, we can see that it is inescapable that in social work practice, social workers' personal value judgment will be brought to bear on their tasks. If this point is understood and allowed, then there will be momentous consequences for practical social work. This topic will be elaborated later. We need to look now at value involvement from another angle: how it is linked to value judgment. It is here that the view of the relationship between theory and practice different from the traditional one is most pronounced. The following sections will develop the author's "strong thesis of value involvement."

c. Theory, Practice and "the Strong Thesis of Value Involvement"

Different from the viewpoint of "value relevance," "the strong thesis of value involvement" maintains that in social research, researchers will of necessity, whether consciously or unconsciously, involve their own value judgment in their work. Different from positivism, this idea of value involvement encourages researchers to fuse their value judgment with

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the theoretical framework of their research in a deliberate way, taking into account the relevant circumstances. A good example is the research on the role of women in contemporary society. For most researchers, if they do not approach it in a way critical of the dominance of patriarchy in contemporary society, they will not have a clear understanding of women's conditions.

If we consider practical social work, the role of value involvement will become even clearer. Here, we need to differentiate two interpretations of "value involvement" in social work. For social workers of the traditional school, they will of course encounter situations which require value judgment relating to the situations. However, they will maintain that such value judgments are not their subjective opinions but rest on objective ground. As mentioned earlier, in the definition of the client's problem, in the adoption of the intervention model and in the advice proffered, the decisions are said to be based on the client's objective situation and self-determination. Therefore the values of all the decisions involved are related to those two factors. They form the "ends." The effectiveness of those means is judged by whether they lead to the desired ends. In this way, all decisions involving value are reduced to the means-end relationship, and the value judgments or the means can be assessed in an objective way with reference to the specified end.

The "strong thesis of value involvement" presents a different view. In practical social work, when workers are engaged in a job, what is engaged is the workers' value judgment which is not entirely determined by the "means-end" relationship. Often, the values involved are ones that the workers bring with them, in a first-person perspective. Therefore, social work in real-life practice entails "moral practice." It should be noted that what is meant by "moral practice" here is not that social workers endeavor to realize their own ideals or value conception through their job; rather, it means that values are implicit in their daily practice. For example, in the definition of problem intervention procedure, there is moral judgment and reflective practice on a first-person perspective.

Referring to the earlier discussion about the "Cartesian paradigm," Descartes was interested in finding a starting point untainted by authority, prejudice and subjective value from which to build up absolutely correct knowledge. This approach presupposes a division between the

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existential condition of the knowledge seeker and the object to be understood. The two parts form a subject-object dichotomy. In other words, there is logically no relationship of necessity between the two. The cognitive investigator only goes about monologically apprehending his object of study. This is a monological approach and the model is one of monological understanding. The claim is that as long as the method of study is correct, the researcher will thus achieve a correct understanding without using or involving his/her own value judgment. The mainstream view of positivist social research reveals the nature of this model of monological understanding very well. It counters the viewpoint adopted by the strong thesis of value involvement.

There is an important issue in the Cartesian paradigm which the strong thesis of value involvement has to tackle. The monological understanding is based on a model of cognition that makes a clear distinction between subject and object. The strong thesis of value involvement then has to demonstrate that, in social research or in explaining social phenomena, researchers would inevitably have their existential conditions implicated in the framing and formation of the questions, in data collection and analysis, as well as in the verification process. In other words, the value judgment of the researchers has become part of the meaning of the object under study. This will refute the cognition model of the subject-object dichotomy of the Cartesian paradigm. In other words, the task at hand is how to prove that researchers undertaking social research must of necessity involve their value judgment in the capacity of the first-person.

In the field of contemporary philosophy and social theory, probably few people will accept the view that fact and value exist in an unbridgeable logical divide. But this is far from accepting the arguments of the strong thesis of value involvement. The view that our understanding of the external world is premised on our value or moral conception is one that has to be proved. As far as we know, Charles Taylor is one of the few contemporary scholars who have made a detailed and perceptive analysis of the issue.[27]

Taylor points out that one of the main differences between humans and other creatures is that humans possess the ability of reflective self-evaluation of their own desires. Such evaluations may be divided into two

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kinds: "strong evaluation" and "weak evaluation."[28] In weak evaluation, one assesses the goodness or badness of something or else makes a choice between two alternatives to satisfy a desire. Take the example of a man deciding to have a meal in a café beside a beach instead of in a restaurant in town. He wants to go for a dip after his meal. In this choice, the decision is made according to the consequence of the choice. The two available alternatives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Say on another day, the man does not want to swim, so he goes to town and has his meal in a restaurant there. In a weak evaluation, the choice is made because of some chance factors. Neither the choice nor what is chosen has any intrinsic value or significance. Their value or significance exists simply because of some chance circumstances.[29]

The choice made in the strong evaluation is quite different. The assignment of good or bad is not dependent on whether the choice satisfies a desire. It depends instead on the motivation. Take the case of someone who sees danger coming. He may decide to confront it or run away from it. The decision is not based on chance factors as in the weak evaluation. When a person sees danger and chooses to face it, it signifies that he has chosen an ideal or a moral commitment. The choice presupposes the choice of a value orientation or way of life, and at the same time precludes another value conception or way of life.[30]

The choice made in the strong evaluation has intrinsic value and significance. The choice of a certain object implies giving up other objects under any circumstances. This may require elaboration. One who has chosen to face danger has made the decision to embrace a certain value or ideal way of life. Because facing danger is an act of bravery, that person chooses to face danger. For such a person, no matter what the circumstances, s/he will choose to face danger and not run away like a coward. The decision is not based on chance factors or consequences; it is because bravery and cowardice are two mutually exclusive ways of life or choices. It is of course possible that after the event, the person found out that under those previous circumstances, running away was in fact the brave choice. The next time the same circumstances emerge, s/he would run away. This new choice does not mean the person has given up being brave; it only means that s/he had a misunderstanding as to what was brave in the previous circumstances, and therefore chose mistakenly to face danger.

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The discussion above might give rise to a query: would the choices made in the strong evaluation not indicate a way of thinking that pays scant regard to the consequences of a choice? The fact is it would not. Someone who makes a choice often does so with reference to its consequences. This is a usual scenario: when people have to make a choice between two acceptable moral decisions, they will most likely take foreseeable consequences into account. The discussion above serves only to demonstrate that a choice made in the strong evaluation must postulate a certain attitude towards what is evil or virtuous, good or bad, right or wrong, and that attitude is one first taken in the original consideration without being swayed by the consequences of the action.

Taylor is of the view that a strong evaluation can be understood as an "inescapable moral framework."[31] It is "inescapable" because this moral framework or strong evaluation is a necessary condition for humans to understand the external world, whether it be the self or human communication. In this sense, strong evaluation can also be understood as a human universal.[32] This universal characteristic forms a necessary condition enabling humans to understand themselves and the world. In other words, to a rather large extent, Taylor employs a form of "transcendental argument" to prove the existence of strong evaluation.[33] Taylor also calls this form of proof a "phenomenological account."[34]

Taylor then points out that such a human characteristic does not exist objectively like the organs inside a person's body. Its existence is manifest only through human interaction, or comprehension of the social phenomena, or reflection about one's identity. The outside world, including the observing self, emanates meaning because we have the ability to make a strong evaluation. This is also one of the main reasons why a researcher can make sense of the world. This view will be elucidated by way of the following example.

Suppose there is a man who holds "liberal" attitudes towards sex. He thinks that sexual behavior itself is neither moral nor immoral. As long as no law is broken, it is quite alright for teenagers to have sex. There should not be any pre-set value judgment in the way we view sexual behavior among teenagers. Let us further suppose that one day, this man is walking on the street and sees a pregnant woman in her thirties. He will very likely not cast a second glance at her. The encounter will not leave

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any impression on him; it is an ordinary occurrence and he will soon forget about it. Suppose this man then meets a girl only about fifteen years old, belly big with pregnancy. The situation is now quite different. He will notice it and make a mental note of it. Why does this man react differently to the two pregnant women? The reason is that even if this man has liberal views about sex and thinks teenage sex does not raise any moral question, he is aware that there is a difference between "teenage pregnancy" and "adult pregnancy." His awareness comes from the moral value system in his subconscious mind. It is this awareness that causes him to pay attention to the pregnant teenage girl. To view this example in reverse, supposing he walks on the street and meets the two pregnant women and he sees no difference between them, and his mind does not register anything special, then this man has a value system that will make it difficult for him to communicate appropriately with other people concerning related moral issues.

Human communication in society is possible chiefly because people have accepted sets of value concepts correlated to that society, for example, plump and thin, beautiful and ugly, mean and kind, impatient and patient and such sets of values. These sets of values are the pre-requisites for communication. Moreover, communication means exchanging ideas in a specific societal context, and society is made up of sets of societal rules or values. To put it in another way, it is the networks of human relationships that make up society. Therefore, to communicate with others requires a familiarity with the vocabulary of values in a network of human relationships. Values by their nature are judgmental. Learning to use the vocabulary of values means learning to make the corresponding value judgments. For instance, when we teach children what a lie is, we would not simply say lying is when you know something is the case and you tell people it is not. We would go further and tell them that lying is not right. If children only know that lying means telling people something which it is not, but do not feel that lying is not right, then clearly they have yet to learn the meaning of lying, nor can they communicate with others with such a concept. In other words, without the corresponding ability of making value judgment, communication is not possible.

From the angle of interpretive understanding, researchers proceed according to their strong evaluation, that is, their inescapable moral

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framework. With it they interpret the phenomena of the world to make sense of them. On the other side, the humans who are the objects of the understanding also have their own strong evaluation or obligatory moral framework. We can say that researchers interpret the behavior of the target of study from their own strong evaluation or moral framework. In the process, they consciously or unconsciously also interpret the strong evaluation or moral framework of their target.

Both researchers and the targets of research have their own inescapable moral framework which forms the normative foundation of their behavior. From the viewpoint of the researchers or interpreters, they are able to comprehend this phenomenon or that, mainly because they share similar value norms with their objects. Through this sharing, they can attain an understanding of them. However, this sharing of similar value norms is not something the researchers are always conscious of. In most cases, it is only when comprehension or communication breaks down that the interpreter becomes conscious of correlative value constraints and activates his/her process of reflection. In other words, strong evaluation may be at work in an unconscious way while the researcher is working.[35]

d. The Normative Foundation of Behavior and the Process of Dialogical Understanding

The above discussion about strong evaluation should have clarified to a considerable extent the close relationship between moral framework and the understanding of social phenomena.[36] The discussion so far has been conducted from a broad perspective. Indeed some people may accept the above analysis from such a perspective. They would say that someone's personal moral framework will of course influence his/her behavior, but even so, there is no need to go to any length to explain such an obvious thing. Paradoxically, when one deals with something more specific and particular, say to explain a certain social phenomenon, these people would say that such an activity does not and need not involve the value judgment or moral framework of the researcher. In order to present the problem in sharper outline, I shall make use of Jürgen Habermas' analysis of the relationship between social action and its correlative rationale,[37]

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augmented by our interpretation, and explain the problem further with another example.

Let us assume there are three students who arrived at an examination hall late and were not allowed to write the examination. Moreover, the school requires the presentation of a good reason before a make-up exam is given to an absent candidate. Student A explained that her mother had a sudden illness and she had to go to the hospital with her. Student B said that on his way to school, traffic was so terribly congested he could not get to school on time. Student C explained that when he got out of bed that morning, he saw a bird fly by, causing him to be late.

The meaning of the words uttered by the students are very clear. However, we are at a loss as to why Student C gave such a reason for his lateness. Unless he explained himself further, we would be hard put to it to imagine any "reasonable" explanation to support such a statement. In other words, we understand the literal meaning of the words, but not the real meaning of his behavior. Not so in the cases of Student A and Student B. We would take those explanations to be "reasonable," sufficient to support their cases. We can say that we understand not only the literal meaning of what Student A and Student B said, but also the point of their words.

This analysis shows that the comprehension of a sentence or certain behavior is closely connected to the underlying rationale of that sentence or behavior. Whether we properly understand a person's behavior depends on whether we can imagine the sort of "reasonable" explanation that person can give when someone questions him/her as to the meaning of that behavior. What is meant by "reasonable" is that the person concerned can provide a rationale sufficient to make sense to the interpreter. Thus, to understand certain behavior implies that the interpreter accepts that the rationale behind the behavior is "reasonable." It does not necessarily mean that the rationale is sound; rather, it means that the interpreter can find in the related cultural value system a reason supporting that behavior. In other words, the interpreter has to link up the rationale for the behavior with the relevant cultural value system before s/he can fully comprehend the meaning of the action. Otherwise, why is it that it makes no sense to us to see someone going to a wedding banquet bare-footed? Why do we not think that clapping our hands three

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times a day constitutes noble behavior? The reason is that we cannot see the rationale for such actions in the context of the related cultural normative system. When interpreters cannot understand an action, it is because they do not understand the rationale behind it; they do not see the appropriateness of the action to the context of its occurrence. We can see, therefore, that the understanding of an action is based on an assessment of whether the rationale behind the action is "appropriate" or not.

One should note that when an interpreter sees something as "appropriate" or "reasonable," it does not mean that s/he thinks it is correct. It means that the interpreter thinks that the rationale activated in a certain context fits the correlative context of value norms. From this we can say that for an interpreter to assess the appropriateness or reasonableness of the rationale of an action is also for him/her to understand or make sense of the correlative value context. This understanding and making sense of something is achieved from the interpreter's point of view: s/he accepts the appropriateness of the rationale behind the action with reference to certain value norms or context. The interpreter's acceptance of the appropriateness of the activation of a certain rationale does not imply that s/he thinks the rationale is correct. However, since the appropriateness is connected with or conforms to the relevant context of value norm, assessing whether a rationale is appropriate is more than a matter of technicality. It involves the interpreter on a higher and more universal level to accept or agree with the legitimacy of the relevant context of value norm. In this way, the assessment of the appropriateness of a rationale necessarily involves the value judgment of the interpreter. Therefore, when an interpreter or anyone makes a statement about whether a rationale is "reasonable" (appropriate) or "not reasonable" (inappropriate), s/he reveals personal value judgment. In this aspect, we say that in the process of understanding social phenomena or any phenomena involving humanity, the interpreter's value judgment is inescapably implicated.

Someone may still raise the following objection. An observer can understand the reasons why Student A and Student B are absent, but does not have to arrive at a value judgment of the reasons.[38] Our response to this objection is this. As argued in the above paragraphs, we think Student A and Student B's reasons are appropriate or reasonable because we accept at a more general level the appropriateness of the use of the rationale.

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This definition and usage of "appropriate" is not just a matter of the technicality of defining a word. It requires that the user of the word shares with interlocutors a parallel value system before the word "appropriate" can be used correctly.

To use the same example, the following scenario might occur. If the teacher in the examination hall has to decide whether to send the students to the discipline master for a decision, s/he is more likely to send just Student A and Student B but not Student C. The teacher does so because s/he thinks that the rationales or behavior of the first two students are reasonable or appropriate. Not allowing Student C to see the discipline master is obviously a value judgment. The example serves to demonstrate that deciding whether an explanation is appropriate or not calls into play the interpreter's own value standpoint.[39]

Now we can see that to understand social phenomena or human action, the interpreter has to assess the rationale of an action before s/he can grasp the meaning of that action. Whether to assess the rationale behind an action or to grasp its meaning, the interpreter has to take into account the relevant background, which is the social cultural context and value system. But to interpret also involves both the interpreter's and the subject of study's social cultural backgrounds and value systems. Therefore, whether it be Weber's value relevance or the value judgment of the strong thesis of value involvement, both should take into account two cultural contexts and value systems simultaneously. In many cases, the investigator and the subject of study belong to the same social cultural context. Yet, even there, if one looks at social cultural context at the personal micro-level, people growing up or living in the same culture accept a common value system but at the same time will have developed personal value conceptions or a personal network of meanings.

The above exposition brings out an important question. Any kind of understanding involves the value judgment of an interpreter, yet clearly not all involvements of value judgment lead to a more accurate understanding. The interpreter may misunderstand the value postulates of the subject to be understood, or completely miss such postulates. This might first appear to be a relatively simple matter, just a problem at the cognitive understanding level. All that has to be done is to correct the interpreter's understanding of the subject's value postulates, or re-discover

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what those value postulates are. Upon further scrutiny, as stated earlier, we will find that during the process when the interpreter changes, adjusts or re-discovers the value postulates of one or both sides, s/he will also have to make changes to his/her own value orientation, and not just make some changes at the cognitive level. The changes are not effected just at the technical or cognitive level; they involve the interpreter's choice at the moral level. That indicates that the interpreter will have to follow or obey some more general value norms in order to adjust the value postulates of the two sides. This is a pre-requisite to gaining a better understanding of the social phenomenon in question.

We see from this that "value relevance" can mean the contexts of meaning separately developed by the interpreter and the subject to be understood. The process of achieving apprehension involves the understanding of both meaning contexts: the interpreter interprets, from his/her own meaning context, the meaning context of the subject. In other words, comprehension of a social phenomenon is often achieved by the adjustment of two different networks of meaning. From this, we can see that a more desirable way of adjustment and comprehension is for both the interpreter and the subject to be understood to be engaged in a dialogue and a mutual interpretation. We can put it this way: "understanding" is a "dialogical" communication process constructed by both the interpreter and the interpreted. It is a non-static process and an ever-evolving process. We witness this kind of process in practical social work quite clearly. In the following, we shall use the example of defining the client's problem in case work as a way to explicate this process.

When social workers try to understand and construct a client's problem, they will first interpret it from their own viewpoint. Different theoretical orientations will influence the interpretation process. Starting from a traditional positivist angle, a social worker assumes that the client's problem is an objective and independent "fact" or "phenomenon." They will use every means to adopt a value-neutral attitude and "correct methodology" to understand the client's problem. "Correct methodology" may mean professional social work training and knowledge. As the social workers talk to the client, they do so in the role of an "expert," using their professional methods to understand the words of the client. From our earlier exposition of the nature of a dialogical

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communication, they are really adopting a "monological" approach and using professional language to come to an understanding of the client's situation. The whole process will be conducted in such a way that will try to avoid involving the workers' subjective value judgment.

In contrast, if social workers accept "the strong thesis of value involvement," they will see understanding as a dialogical process. Any interpretation and definition of a problem is to be achieved co-operatively between interpreter and the interpreted. Although a problem may happen to a client, and is brought forth by the client, the process of interpretation and construction of the problem is shared by both parties. The social worker and the client communicate on an equal footing. What's more, the viewpoint of the social worker becomes a constituent part of the client's problem.

What is the meaning of "on an equal footing"? It does not mean that a social worker and a client have equal status in the relevant field of knowledge or in authority. In fact, in practical terms, a social worker has more knowledge in the relevant field; his/her opinion is more authoritative than that of the client. But as explained in the first section, a social worker uses language on the same plane as the client. There is no professional knowledge or technical language like that in natural science.

In practice, social workers are often too conscious about their professional advantage and approach the definition of a client's problem too much from their own perspective; they ignore the client's perspective. Social workers should be more aware of the existence and importance of "equal footing" and communicate with the client accordingly. With this understanding and communication, social workers will better develop an open attitude to listen to the client's talk and reflect critically on their own judgment and decisions.

In this kind of interpretive understanding of the client, social workers do not just get to understand the client's situation, they take over the client's perspective to assess and widen their own network of meanings. On the one hand, the workers are defining the client's problem through a sympathetic understanding of his/her situation; on the other hand, they are transcending their own existential situation by being critical and reflective. By way of such a dialogical process of interpretive understanding, the client will get a clearer perception of the problem as well as

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clarify and construct a "self-concept." In such a process, practical social work partakes of the character of a moral practice in the steps of interpretation, problem definition, and model of intervention. It follows that the relationship between theory and practice in social work is no longer a relationship between fact and fact, and the practical action taken by social workers in their job can be interpreted as moral practice.

e. Understanding, Dialogue and Universal Value Beliefs

The paradigm for understanding proposed above has "dialogue" as its core. Such a conception is one which has been accepted by quite a number of modern Western scholars. Among them, Hans-Georg Gadamer has advanced the most detailed analysis. "Dialogue" is a concept that rectifies the traditional Western model of monological understanding. It breaks down the dichotomy between subject and object and transforms the opposition into a mutual assimilation in order to reach understanding. We shall take Gadamer's concept of "dialogical understanding" as a point of departure for discussion.[40]

To Gadamer, understanding cannot be arrived at by the sole perspective of the interpreter; it can only be achieved through the "co-operation" of both the interpreter and the interpreted. That is to say, any communication is a dialogical process, and there is no such thing as objective understanding. Researchers will have to constantly adjust their understanding and interpretation *vis-a-vis* the reactions of the subject of research. In this way, the perspectives of the researcher and the subject are harmonized and there is, in Gadamer's words, a "fusion of horizons." An understanding of social phenomena will then be achieved.[41]

"Fusion of horizons" is an important concept in Gadamer's theory. The central idea is that the interpreter and the subject of understanding should accomplish a kind of mutual assimilation of viewpoints before an understanding of a related social phenomenon can occur. "Dialogue" here does not have to be direct verbal conversation in speech or writing. From a social research point of view, apparently, many social activities do not presuppose a direct verbal exchange between researcher and the subject of study. The so-called "dialogue" here refers mainly to the researcher's imaginary construction of a possible conversation between the researcher and

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the subject of study. As said earlier, that understanding or communication is possible means that the interpreter possesses the requisite ability of strong evaluation. S/he can make moral judgments, distinguishing between good and bad, virtuous and evil, noble and mean, etc. That is the starting point of the interpreter's perspective of understanding, or what constitutes his/her perspective of understanding. When the interpreter finds the understanding or interpreting process as applied to the subject of study a smooth process, we can say that to some extent, there is fusion of horizons between the interpreter and the subject under study. When the interpreter finds problems in that process, then we can say that the dialogue is unsuccessful. Of course, this judgment of success is done from the viewpoint of the interpreter.

As far as social research is concerned, such "problems" as occurring to the dialogue form precisely the entry-points for researchers to research into or understand the subject of study. They should try to imagine how the other party would respond to those problems. The whole process can be thus described: interpreters go about the work of understanding from their own perspective, but at the same time engage in reflection from the angle of the subject of study so as to judge and be critical of their own moral framework and existential situation. The reflection can only be partial, since no one can have a complete self-knowledge of one's own existential situation. Despite this fact, the partial reflection from the angle of the subject under study will lead to the interpreters' understanding more clearly the nature and limitation of their own indispensable moral framework. They will then achieve a deeper understanding of themselves and may be able to construct or renew the construction of their self. As such, we can see that understanding or interpretation is dialogical in nature; it has a basis in moral regulation, and it can spur people to go beyond their limitations.[42]

An issue that arises right away is this: does hermeneutics consider its perspective on understanding a universal standard? If the answer is yes, then what rationale is there to justify that claim? Why should we not adopt the standards of behaviorism, or balance of power theory or other angles to achieve understanding and communication? These questions are complex. They touch on such issues as how the argument of the strong thesis of value involvement is established and what perspective, attitude and orientation an academic researcher takes. These questions

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have been answered in the discussion above to some extent. The following paragraphs will attempt to answer them from the aspect of empirical social research.

Positivism has lost its luster in the philosophies and social theories of today; yet it still retains a strong hold on mainstream contemporary social inquiry, especially in empirical social research. The main cause is the apparent fit between the positivist view and people's common ideas about knowledge. In general, we hope that there is an independent objective world out there — this is "naïve realism"; that theories that explain the world can be evaluated by how well they match the world they delineate — this is the "correspondence theory of truth"; that we can know the world through our senses objectively or through inter-subjectivity. These are the three postulates of positivism.[43] Irrespective of the truth or falsehood of these postulates, in our daily affairs and academic research, we have taken them, whether consciously or not, to be the tenets of the theory of knowledge. In terms of attitude towards the world, these three postulates together are crucially different from that of hermeneutics. A positivist adopts a value-neutral, objective bystander stance to view the world. A hermeneutic researcher is an active participant in it with value involvement. Obviously, academic researchers generally would hold the view that when they are conducting research, they would not be making value judgments in the domain of morality, whether consciously or not. Academics and the public alike can point out the differences between a value judgment and a factual statement. The situation seems clear enough. As for the proposition advanced by dialogical understanding and the strong thesis of value involvement — that any understanding entails the value judgment of the interpreter — that seems so unacceptable.

In more general terms, one reason why human communication and understanding is possible is that the external world appears to humans to be ordered and to operate in a stable manner. Positivism's basic postulates appear to offer a satisfactory explanation of such operations. This is what makes positivism so persuasive. However, this apparent fit is precisely where positivism falls short as a methodology and a guide for academic research. On the surface, positivism certainly seems to offer a sensible explanation, but on further investigation, we can see that its

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three postulates presuppose a basic postulate, a view on the construction and essence of the things in the world. The reason why our understanding, prediction, and view of argumentation seem so compatible with the positivist postulates is that we have long been habituated to certain value norms. We have formed the wrong impression that human action operates like natural phenomena in the physical world and is subject to universal principles that humans can discover and formulate. That is to say, positivism offers accuracy of predictability to a certain extent due to the fact that the subject of study exists in a relatively repetitive and stable relationship. It does so because s/he has accepted, consciously or unconsciously, a set of correlative value norms. This acceptability in turn reinforces the repetition and stability of the behavioral pattern.

Let us assume that the phenomena under study consist of two classes. The first class is made up of "social norms" (or "social regulations") which make the existence of the social phenomena and the understanding of them possible. Most social scientists would agree that what constitutes social phenomena is their related social norms. They would quite likely agree too that the identification of social regulations is not done through direct observation; it requires the researcher's subjective interpretation. The second class is made up of macro cultural and ecological factors that are relatively "objective" and that influence human psychology and behavior. Positivists may accept that meaning interpretation and understanding is an important way to explain some social phenomena such as those that belong to the first class. They may even accept that the existence and nature of such phenomena imply an interactive relationship between interpreter and phenomena to be interpreted. But they would be hard put to understand this point of view: the apprehension of the way macro factors like culture and ecology influence humans requires an interpretation based on subjective meaning. Positivists will argue that these factors are objective facts that exist outside personal interpretation.

Hermeneutic practitioners, like positivists, believe that there are objective factors which influence human behavior, but they dispute the latter's view that these factors and their influence should be understood objectively. They argue that the understanding of social phenomena is itself a process of interpretation. It is impossible to take all relevant

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factors into account, and there is no way of gauging the relationship between human behavior and the influencing factors with any accurate prediction. Thus, while agreeing that these objective factors exist, to determine their relationship with human behavior, one has to start the interpreting and understanding process from the viewpoint of the researcher. Such a viewpoint may be itself the consensual result of a long process of social regulation.

Positivists are inclined to accept social phenomena as something like natural phenomena, with a stable cause and effect property. Their research process or explanation of social phenomena tends therefore to be conducted with a view to uncovering the cause-effect link. Therefore they treat the three postulates as final axioms, and do not reflect on their validity or further explain them. Not reflecting on their validity or further explaining them means that even when problems crop up in research, these three axioms will be treated as final. The positivists' confidence rests on their view that the postulates match the structure of social phenomena, especially their properties of stability and repetition. Contrary to the positivists, hermeneutic practitioners do not regard the three postulates as final. When they encounter problems, they will reflect on the validity of those postulates. Another more succinct way of characterizing their differences is to say that hermeneutic theorists regard the nature of social phenomena differently from positivists; they do not insist on or are not bound by the causal model of explanation. Towards the three axioms or postulates, the hermeneutic attitude could be described as taking a meta-position. That is to say, hermeneutics does not see these as unquestionable postulates, but only seeks to understand them from the angles of acceptability and of consensual understanding achieved through norms. This "meta-position" not only allows hermeneutic theorists not to treat these three postulates as final but also to transcend the straightjacket of positivism when necessary, to break free from the cause-effect way of explaining society and human behavior, and to understand fully the rationale for so doing.

If we are careful, we will find that up to now, we still have not provided an adequate answer to the question of why we should adopt hermeneutics and not behaviorism or a balance-of-power theory to

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conduct social research. Even if we are able to justify the tenets of the strong thesis of value involvement, and accept that understanding involves the value judgment of the interpreter and that such value judgment is based on an inescapable moral framework, we have not yet said a word about the substance or the concrete content of the moral framework. Different societies and different peoples have different moralities. Some groups might regard the killing of enemies in a war as the highest ethical behavior; other groups might see unconditional obedience towards elders as basic to moral behavior. Hermeneutics or the dialogical mode of understanding emphasizes the importance of sympathetic understanding of the other party as a way of seeing one's own limitations, and this may lead to some sort of self-criticism. This then constitutes a starting point for conducting social inquiry to understand moral or social behavior different from one's own. This attitude clearly indicates a certain kind of morality, one that emphasizes sincerity, equality and autonomy.[44] To put it another way, the dialogical mode of understanding which hermeneutics stresses presupposes a kind of modern Westerners' value conception. A question arises naturally: in this day of cultural pluralism, what reason do we have to consider this value conception as being universal? That is, what reason do we have to insist on the use of the hermeneutic perspective to conduct social research or human communication?

Approaching these questions from another perspective, we admit that dialogical understanding implies a human characteristic outside knowledge or understanding, and that is human "multiplicity" or "diversity." This characteristic is a prime reason for advocating cultural pluralism. The fact is that human multiplicity or diversity is one of the main causes of problems in communication. Bridging the differences is a necessary step in achieving understanding. Following the line of reasoning above, we can see that bridging the differences means engaging in dialogue and through it, achieving mutual sympathetic understanding, related self-critical evaluation, and the transcendence of one's limitations. In a turnaround, the differences and diversity have a positive meaning. If humans had no diversity, then problems of value would not appear. Only when there are differences will mutual understanding come about. Furthermore, the noble qualities that humans display, such as tolerance, forgiveness, respect, love, are only evident when human existence is filled

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with differences and multiplicity. This is another dimension that displays a deeper meaning of dialogical understanding, which is in sharp contrast to monological understanding with respect to both the issue of methodology and of morality.[45] To develop the point more, we can say that human differences form the essential condition for the occurrence of dialogical understanding. From a broader perspective, the cultural diversity so much emphasized in modern-day world is built on the phenomenon of human diversity. Out of this diversity could develop the possibility of mutual understanding. We can say then that the perspective of hermeneutics or dialogical understanding occupies a prior or more fundamental position in research into society and humanity phenomena.

Generally speaking, problems about understanding and communication in social inquiry among people with similar cultural value standards can be solved satisfactorily. The reason is that even though there may be problems caused by differences in opinion, at the higher level one can understand the appropriateness of the rationale behind the behavior of the opposite side. Under such conditions, whether research or communication is conducted from the angle of behaviorism or balance of power, few problems concerning understanding and communication will arise, because the researcher and the subject of research have accepted the correlative moral standards imperceptibly over a long period of time, and have used these standards for communication and interpretation without knowing it. The above analysis shows that, if there does not exist a consensus of a higher level of value norm, not only are understanding and communication impossible, any causal analysis or balance of power type of communication is rendered nonexistent. The reason is that any academic research or daily activities presuppose the possibility of understanding and communication.

A good deal of anthropological research has demonstrated that without a higher or more basic consensus on norms, researchers will not understand the subject of their study. It has been pointed out that in extreme cases, for example, anthropologists working in a radically different ethnic society can only appeal to some basic human emotions like the joy of living, avoidance of death, as the basis of communication.[46] In such circumstances, they can only hope that such emotions are shared by all humans and can lead to mutual sympathetic understanding. This attitude towards interpretation is exactly the process of dialogical

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understanding that hermeneutics advocates. For behavior or phenomena that are completely different in value orientation, the dialogical approach to understanding is an essential method to make sense of the subject under study.

We can now see that although the above analysis still falls far short of establishing the existence of some universal value concepts, and only grapples with the nature of any interpretation of social phenomena to reveal the value of dialogical understanding, yet from the point of view of understanding, dialogical understanding is a necessary condition for achieving understanding and communication. In the last part of this chapter, we will follow this line of reasoning and cite one example to show the practical use of dialogical understanding in practical social work.

f. The Application of Dialogical Understanding: The Case of a New Immigrant

In the first section, we see that the traditional or mainstream view of social work has social workers take the attitude of a professional technician to deal with their work. It encourages workers to adopt an objective, value-free attitude to understand the client's problem and predicament. Social workers will communicate with the clients, but they would translate a client's own narrative of his/her situation into professional language, thereby hoping to understand objectively and systematically the client's condition, then come up with a solution. The main goal for the worker in the whole process, be it noted, is to enable the client to understand his/her predicament, how it comes about and what form it takes now. The worker then recommends a solution and tries to let the client decide personally whether to accept it or not. This course of action indicates clearly a way of understanding based on the positivist theory of knowledge applied to society and a positivist intervention model. The workers use the model of monological understanding, a model that presupposes a demarcation between fact and value. Understanding and practice are supposed to belong to the realm of fact. The relationship between the two is mainly a matter of technique. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of the worker co-operating with the client to

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achieve dialogical understanding. The following part discusses these differences based on a simulated case study.[47]

Since the 1980s, quite a large number of Chinese working-class men in Hong Kong have gone to China to find a spouse. The husband is generally much older than the wife. There are all kinds of differences between them in the marriage — age, culture and lifestyle, which when exacerbated by the economic factor, often lead to tragedy.[48]

Imagine a woman aged around 30 who has not yet completed primary education. She is married to a male Hong Kong laborer over 50 years old. He constantly ill-treats her. The woman eventually finds her way to a social worker. Imagine the following scenario. The wife who is ill-treated by her husband has a job. She has never had any kind of love towards her husband. Although she is often beaten by him, she has no intention of leaving him. Here we have a Chinese social worker who is a Western-educated university graduate. How would she interpret the situation? What is to be done?

On the surface, the social worker has no difficulty understanding the client. Experience tells her that such cases come up frequently. The social worker is herself Chinese; she knows that in traditional society, especially rural society, the practice of "follow the husband whatever he is like" is the attitude most women have towards marriage. On the other hand, the social worker lives in a modern city, Hong Kong, and she has had Western education up to tertiary level. Naturally, she has a view of marriage closer to that of Western middle-class couples. That view asserts that the union of two persons should be based on feelings for each other. A couple should respect each other after marriage and treat each other as equals. The social worker could not understand why the woman, who has no love for the husband and who can work to support herself, does not want a divorce even when faced with the prospect of more bullying by her husband.

The social worker will use various professional concepts and theories to try to understand the matter. She might persuade the client to be strong and leave her husband. In other words, the social worker is, consciously or unconsciously, using the value concepts of the Western middle class, something she believes in herself. Her aim is to free the woman from torture. The question about that approach is this: Does the social worker understand the client's situation and feelings in a deep way? We

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can characterize the encounter this way. The long-held beliefs of the social worker blind her to the client's belief — "follow your husband whatever he is like" is a belief that binds the client to her husband despite her sufferings. This indicates that the social worker does not regard the client's reasoning not to leave her husband as a "reasonable" rationale. As explained earlier, "reasonable" here does not mean that the social worker agrees with the client's view; rather, she does not take that view as an appropriate reason for not parting company with the husband. Under a different set of circumstances, if the client has a child and does not want a divorce, the social worker might not agree with that reason but would think that it is a "reasonable" or "appropriate" rationale.

The differences between the social worker's and the client's views lead to a lack of effective communication between them. We could conjecture that this social worker is perplexed and worries about the client's situation. After a period of time, her reflection on the matter might lead her to question her own value position. In other words, if one day, the social worker begins to realize that the directive "follow the husband whatever he is like" is not as unreasonable as she previously thought, and on that basis critically reflects on her own middle-class view of marriage, then she will discover that the client's rationale is backed up by her own correlative value conceptions and lifestyle. A woman from the rural countryside believes, over a long period of imperceptible absorption, in the value norm that puts a premium on harmony in human relationship and acquiring security by sticking to one's role. On the contrary, the social worker adheres to a value system that elevates personal feelings.[49] In short, the differences can be traced to their different views about ultimate concern. Once the social worker sees this point, then she would understand the reasonableness or appropriateness of the rationale of "follow the husband whatever he is like." The social worker would still not agree to this view but would have gained a better understanding of the woman's concern. Her communication with the client will also be different from before. Worker and client will have achieved to a certain extent what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons." Only at such a stage can the client be more willing to accept the worker's analysis and suggestions. The worker will be able to make the client understand better some factors that contribute to her predicament. Whether the client can break free of her predicament

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or not, she will have been able to see her situation with fresh eyes, or one might even say, with perceptive eyes. As for the social worker, that she can gain a new understanding of the client signals a revaluation of her own value system. This revaluation is carried out through the lens of the value system of the client. We see then that there is a process of dialogical understanding. The process accords to each party a critique of the self, and promotes a transcendence of the limitations of the self.

One point in this process is worth our attention. Whether the social worker and the client can achieve a dialogical understanding, self-critique and transcendence depends on their communication being conducted with sincerity and equality. The worker has to give up the sense of superiority of a "professional" and treat the client as an equal interlocutor before she can see her own limitations through the eyes of the other person. If she can do that, she will achieve a certain degree of self-transparency.

Notes

1. See Malcolm Payne, *What is Professional Social Work?* (Birmingham: Venture, 1996); Nigel Parton and Patrick O'Byrne, *Constructive Social Work: Towards a New Practice* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).
2. See Janis Fook, *Radical Casework: A Theory of Practice* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1993); Robert P. Mullaly, *Structural Social Work: Ideology, Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1997). The following are some examples from Chinese social work: Lam Ng Ho Yee, "Exploring Family Belief Systems: A Constructional Approach to Therapy," *The Hong Kong Journal of Social Work* 28, no. 1 (1994), 13–21; Kar-chun Shui, "Qingnian Gongzuo: Houxiandai Zhuanxiang" (Youth Work: A Post-Modern Change of Direction), *Qingnian Yanjiu* (Research on Youth) 1, no. 1 (1998), 159–172.
3. The following are some examples: Lau Po-chee Ko and Chak-kwong Au, eds., *Geren Gongzuo Yu Jiating Zhiliao: Liluan Ji Anli* (Personal Casework and Family Therapy: Theory and Case Studies) (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1997); Lau Po-chee Ko and Chak-kwong Au, eds., *Gean Gongzuo: Liluan Ji Anli* (Doing Casework: Theory and Case Studies) (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001); Chi-kwong Lo *et al.*, eds., *Qingshaonian Chengchang Yu Huodong Anli* (Case Studies of Youth Growing

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Up and Their Activities) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Services Society, 1999).

4. Christopher Bryant, *Practical Sociology: Post-empiricism and the Reconstruction of Theory and Application* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), chap. 5. For further discussions on this issue, see Colin Peile, *The Creative Paradigm* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), chaps. 2 and 6; W.D. Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1983), 32–37; and Brian Fay, *Social Theory and Political Practice* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), chap. 2.
5. For a discussion of the influence of positivism on social work, see Frederic G. Reamer, *The Philosophical Foundations of Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), chap. 4; and Peile, *The Creative Paradigm*, chaps. 2 and 4.
6. As far as I know, this is also the mainstream thinking of social work education and social work practice in Hong Kong. Wing-sun Chow, ed., *Shehui Gongzuo Xue Xinlun* (New Writing on Social Work) (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1994) contains articles that to a certain extent reflect the fact that mainstream social work in Hong Kong is based on positivism. An article there, Chi-kwong Lo's "Shehui Gongzuo He Shehui Kexue Lilun De Yunyong" (Social Work and the Application of Social Science Theories), clearly shows a typical positivist viewpoint. In fact, some quite well-known US social work scholars still make use of outdated logical positivism to construct models of social work intervention. See Bruce A. Thyer, "Social Work Theory and Practice: The Approach of Logical Positivism," *Social Work and Social Sciences Review* 4, no. 1 (1993), 5–26; Eileen Gambrill, "What's in a Name? Task-centered, Empirical, and Behavioral Practice," *Social Service Review* (December 1994), 579–599; Gambrill, "Behavioral Social Work," *Research on Social Work Practice* 5, no. 2 (October 1995), 260–284.
7. For an in-depth discussion of this issue, see Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and Science of Man," in *Philosophical Papers, vol. 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–57.
8. For further discussion, see Sun-pong Yuen, "Pipan Quanshilun De Lilun Juchu" (The Theoretical Basis of Critical Hermeneutics), in *Pipan Yu Quanshilun Shehui Yanjiu* (Critical Hermeneutics and Social Research) (New Jersey: Global Publishing Co., 1993), 13–19.
9. Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 10th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004); Earl Babbie and Allen Rubin, *Research Methods for Social Work*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001).

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10. See Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), Introduction. Here, Hesse's third postulate, "universal language," has been changed to "inter-subjectivity."
11. For further discussion, see Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus, "The Relationship of Theory and Practice in the Acquisition of Skill," in *Expertise in Nursing Practice: Caring, Clinical Judgment, and Ethics*, ed. Patricia Benner, Christine A. Tanner and Catherine A. Chelsa (New York: Springer Publishing Co., Inc., 1996), 29–47; Sun-pong Yuen, "Zhishi Yu Shijian: Yujia Xueshuo, Zhexue Quanshixue Ji Shehui Gongzuo Zhi Keneng Qihe" (Knowledge and Practice: The Possible Integration of Confucianism, Philosophical Hermeneutics and Social Work), *Shehui Lilun Xuebao* (Journal of Social Theory) 4, no. 2 (2001), 315–316.
12. The discussion that follows, on Weber's means-end rationality, is a re-written version of a previous book. See Sun-pong Yuen, *Pipan Quanshi Yu Zhishi Zhongjian: Habamasi Shiye Xia De Shehui Yanjiu* (Critical Hermeneutics and Knowledge Re-Construction: Social Inquiry from Habermas' Perspective) (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Publishing House, 1999), chap. 6.
13. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 2 vols., ed. Guenthere Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 3–28.
14. For a brief account of the Frankfurt School's view on this topic, see Yuen, *Pipan Quanshi Yu Zhishi Zhongjian* (Critical Hermeneutics and Knowledge Re-Construction), chap. 3.
15. See Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 16–20, 115–118; and Thomas McCarthy, "Translator's Introduction," in Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), vii–x.
16. *Ibid.*
17. See John Clarke, "After Social Work," in *Social Theory, Social Change and Social Work*, ed. Nigel Parton (London: Routledge, 1996), 36–60; Jim Ife, *Rethinking Social Work: Towards Critical Practice* (South Melbourne: Longman, 1997); Gary Hough, "The Organization of Social Work in The Customer Culture," in *Transforming Social Work Practice*, ed. Bob Pease and Jan Fook (London: Routledge, 1999), 40–54; John Harris, *The Social Work Business* (London: Routledge, 2003).
18. See Michael Whan, "On the Nature of Practice," *British Journal of Social Work* 16 (1986), 243–250; Parton and O'Byrne, *Constructive Social Work*; Sarah Banks, *Ethics and Values in Social Work*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), chap. 4; Payne, *What is Professional Social Work?*

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19. Fook, *Radical Casework*; Adrienne S. Chambon, Allan Irving and Laura Epstein, eds., *Reading Foucault for Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Mullaly, *Structural Social Work*. Although some alternative social work scholars have tried to develop some less specific intervention techniques, these turn out to run counter to their postulates at the moral level without their knowing it. For instance, Parton and O'Byrne's constructive social work makes use of a solution-focused approach and narrative therapy, and they consider these different from the positivist model of social work techniques; yet they are not really different. The reason is that they have not concerned themselves much with meta-theory, and they have not fully grasped the meaning of "social work as moral practice."
20. This conception of social knowledge is something the author has constructed mainly on the basis of critical theory and philosophical hermeneutics. See Yuen, "Zhishi Yu Shijian" (Knowledge and Practice); Sun-pong Yuen, "Qianglie Jiazhi Jieru Lun" (The Strong Thesis of Value Involvement), in *Xiandai Houxiandai, Quanqiuhua* (Modernism, Postmodernism, Globalisation), ed. Rui-qi Huang (Taipei: Left Bank Culture, 2003).
21. The term "critical hermeneutics" can be used to refer generally to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. See William Outhwaite, *New Philosophies of Social Science* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).
22. "Value relevance" was first advanced by Heinrich Rickert. Later, Weber applied the concept to his interpretive sociology. See Heinrich Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science: A Logical Introduction to the Historical Sciences*, ed. and trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 88–99. For a discussion, see Guy Oakes, *Weber and Rickert: Concept Formation in the Cultural Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).
23. It has to be pointed out that Weber's view on value involvement in social inquiry is more complicated than stated here. Many scholars have pointed out that Weber's views on the matter are quite different from the positivist's. See Christopher G.A. Bryant, *Positivism in Social Theory and Research* (London: Macmillan, 1985), chap. 3; Sun-pong Yuen, "'Jiazhi Xiangguan Xing,' 'Qianglie Jiazhi Jieru Lun' Yu Shehui Kexue Zhongguohua De Guifan Jichu" (Value Relevance, the Strong Thesis of Value Involvement, and the Normative Foundation of the Problem of Sinicization in Social Sciences), *Shehui Lilun Xuebao* (Journal of Social Theory) 2, no. 2 (1999), 105–137. In the context of this chapter, we only use Weber's discussion of "value

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relevance" to introduce the discussion about mainstream conception of knowledge and value involvement.

24. Max Weber, "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: The Free Press, 1949), 50–112; and Roth and Wittich, eds., *Economy and Society*, 4.
25. See Yuen, "Pipan Quanshi Lun De Lilun Jichu" (The Theoretical Basis of Critical Hermeneutics), 13–19.
26. *Ibid.*
27. The following discussion is modified from my article "Zhishi Yu Shijian" (Knowledge and Practice).
28. See Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?," in *Philosophical Papers, vol. 1, Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–44; Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17–26.
29. Taylor, "What is Human Agency?," 19–20.
30. *Ibid.*, 26.
31. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3–24; Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 33–35.
32. Charles Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 249. For a further discussion on Taylor's question, see Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), chap. 3.
33. Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), chap. 2.
34. Charles Taylor, "Precis and Reply to Commentators," in symposium on *Sources of the Self, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LIV 1 (1994), 209.
35. Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation," 249; and Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 21.
36. The following discussion is modified from my article "Zhishi Yu Shijian" (Knowledge and Practice).
37. This argument is developed from Habermas' analysis. See Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1*, 115–116.
38. This is Thomas McCarthy's criticism of Habermas. See Thomas McCarthy, "Reflections on Rationalization in the Theory of Communicative Action," 183–186. For Habermas' response, see Jurgen Habermas, "Questions and

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Counterquestions," 204–205. Both articles can be found in Richard J. Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1985).

39. We can supply another example by way of clarification. Does the interpretation of a phenomenon like "Mr. Chan is teaching in the classroom" of necessity involve the interpreter's value judgment? We would agree that to understand "teaching," the interpreter will have to accept the value norms governing and defining the concept of "teaching." On the other hand, this sentence seems to have a clear objective content, and there seems to be no ambiguity. We may be tempted to accept the activation of Weber's value relevance in the understanding of this behavior or phenomenon, and consider that value judgment is not involved. The question is, when the process of understanding is not problematic, then value involvement can be understood as the involvement of value relevance. But once problems occur, then such value relevance might change to value judgment.

    Let us assume that Mr. Chan had not been doing his job as a teacher well, and he was rude to his students. The students were unhappy with him. Supposing one day, a student talked to someone over his cell phone during class time. Mr. Chan scolded the boy for not having manners and ignoring the rules of the classroom. But the student retorted, "And are you teaching?" Clearly, the student did not think that Mr. Chan had been discharging his duties as a teacher, and therefore he was not wrong to not behave like a student in class. This illustrates the point that in a problematic or conflict situation, the statement "Mr. Chan is teaching in the classroom" is to be interpreted with reference to correlative value judgments.

    If we take simple societal phenomena such as the one cited and put them together to form complex social phenomena, then the involvement of value judgment becomes even clearer. In fact, we constantly make sense of society and the human world from the starting points of value judgment, strong evaluation and our inescapable moral framework. It is only in academic discussions that we often employ simple or micro phenomena as examples, and consider them as examples of the existence of objective or unquestionable understating.

40. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 345–366.
41. *Ibid.*, 333–341.
42. To some extent, the argument here blends the ideas of Gadamer, Taylor, Habermas and my interpretation of them.
43. For a more detailed discussion of the basic postulates of positivist social inquiry, see Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science*;

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Yuen, *Pipan Quanshi Yu Zhishi Zhongjian* (Critical Hermeneutics and the Reconstruction of Knowledge), chap. 6; Sun-pong Yuen, "Shihui Yanjiu De Benzhi" (The Nature of Social Research), in *Dangdai Zhongguo Nongcun Yanjiu: Lilun Tansuo* (Studies in Contemporary Rural China: Theoretical Explorations), ed. Sun-pong Yuen and Pui-lam Law (New Jersey: Global Publishing Co., 2000), 12–19.

44. In philosophical hermeneutics, dialogical understanding holds intrinsic relationships with "self-empowerment," "self-determination," and "self-realization." For further discussion on this point, see Hans Herbert Kogler, *The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics after Gadamer and Foucault*, trans. Paul Hendrickson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996); and Hans Herbert Kogler, "The Self-empowered Subjects," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 22, no. 4 (1996), 12–44.
45. This discussion is developed from Taylor's writing. See Charles Taylor, "Concluding Reflections and Comments," in *A Catholic Modernity*, ed. James L. Heft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 110–114.
46. For a more detailed discussion on this issue, see Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 93–108.
47. The following discussion is modified from my article "Zhishi Yu Shijian" (Knowledge and Practice).
48. For an empirical research on this issue, see Kun-sun Chan, Jing Li, and Chi-kwan Fong, "A Lan De Gushi: Zhongguo Xinyimin Funu De Daode Kunjing" (The Story of Ah Lan: The Moral Predicament of Chinese Women Immigrants), in *Xinyimin Funu, Zhongxuesheng Yu Daxuesheng: Dui Dangdai Zhongguoren Ziwoguan De Kaocha* (Observations of the Contemporary Chinese Self: Women Immigrants, High School Students and College Students), ed. Yuk-ying Ho and Kun-sun Chan (Singapore: Global Publishing Co., 2006), 49–126.
49. For a more thorough discussion of the condition of women in contemporary rural China and their conception of marriage, especially in the Pearl River Delta district, see Sun-pong Yuen, Pui-lam Law, and Yuk-ying Ho, *Hunyin, Xingbe Yu Xing: Yi Ge Dangdai Zhongguo Nongcun De Kaocha* (Marriage, Gender, and Sex in a Contemporary Chinese Village) (New Jersey: Global Publishing Co., 1998); and the expanded English edition, Sun-pong Yuen, Pui-lam Law, and Yuk-ying Ho, *Marriage, Gender, and Sex in a Contemporary Chinese Village* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004).

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