Within recent social work literature, the concept of empowerment as a practice perspective has received wide endorsement. In this article, I argue that adopting the notion of empowerment as a framework for practice requires not only that we think differently about professional practice but, more fundamentally, that we think differently about professional knowledge. Using the work of philosopher Jürgen Habermas, particularly the distinction he makes among three arenas of human activity—work, interaction, and power—I outline ways in which the functional and cognitive interests associated with these arenas dictate differing orientations to practice, alternate commitments to various forms of knowledge as applicable in practice settings, and different accounts of practitioner error. Implications for professional education are addressed.

Historically, the social work literature has made repeated efforts to reconcile differences between theoretical knowledge for the profession and the pragmatics of practice. One of the most fundamental issues has been epistemological: the relationship between knowledge and human action. Attempts to address this issue have resulted in a number of models for structuring education in a profession that is both a discipline and a practice. Although the basic question is an epistemological one, there has been little attempt to define the assumptions about knowledge that underlie these educational frameworks. Yet it
seems reasonable to suppose that what social work educators believe about knowledge will influence the models and prescriptions they adopt in educating new professionals.

Two frameworks for resolving the concept-to-practice dilemma appear to have had the widest currency over time—the "technical" and the "practical" approaches. The technical approach emphasizes the centrality of conceptual knowledge and procedural rules acquired in formal settings. In this framework, the experiential component of professional education provides a convenient opportunity to apply and test formal knowledge. The practical framework takes as its starting point the student’s or the professional’s store of cultural and experiential know-how, which is refined largely through guided practice. When recourse is made to relevant theory, it is assumed to be in the novel or problematic instance. Thus, the technical framework emphasizes "concept," and the practical framework focuses on "action." Although not necessarily identified by name, the two perspectives have coexisted in the profession’s applied and educational practices, usually in some uneasy combination.

Recently, the professional literature has advocated the notion of "empowerment" as a practice framework. Despite the growing literature on this topic, there has been virtually no attention to the epistemological and educational implications of an empowerment perspective. That is to say, there has been little note of its potential significance for the ways we have historically structured and taught knowledge for practice. This article is an attempt to address this issue.

To make my case, I draw on the work of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, adapting his schema to fit the context of social work practice and education. Of particular relevance is the distinction Habermas makes between three domains of human activity—work, interaction, and power. I will outline areas of conceptual overlap that link Habermas’s three arenas of human activity with the technical, the practical, and the empowerment frameworks. After outlining the conceptual background and rationale, I will go on to compare and contrast some of the philosophical presuppositions of the technical and practical frameworks. Although recognizing that proponents of these two frameworks have something valid to say about social work practice and education, I will argue that neither adequately addresses two crucial philosophical issues: the relationship between concept and action in practice, and the relationship between knowledge and power. Finally, I will outline how the "empowerment" perspective, when conceptualized as a practice metaframework, addresses these central epistemological issues more thoroughly than either the technical or practical framework. Essentially, I will argue that the empowerment perspective does not oppose or supplant the technical and practical frameworks but rather subsumes them within a larger and more encompassing practice knowledge schema.
Philosophical Background for an Empowerment Metaframework

By contrast with strictly philosophical approaches to the nature of knowledge, in the work of Habermas a philosophy of knowledge is firmly wedded to a sociology of knowledge. Habermas suggests that people hold the beliefs they do about knowledge not because of their particular epistemological positions but, primarily, because they are committed to certain types of human activity and to certain kinds of human accomplishment. In other words, Habermas links ways of knowing with pragmatic commitments of individuals acting in their "world." Thus, instead of appealing to differing epistemologies to explain differences in approaches to knowledge (basically a tautological argument, similar to explaining fatigue by exhaustion), Habermas argues that the functional and cognitive interests of human beings engaged in particular activities determine the form in which the knowledge used in those activities is structured and advanced.

According to Habermas, there are three principal ways in which human beings attempt to manage or alter their material and social conditions: through work, through interaction, and through power. Each of these domains presupposes the influence of fundamental human interests. Through the activity of work, individuals and societies attempt to manage the physical and social world to meet their needs and desires. Hence, the basic, human interest involved is an instrumental one, making changes in some aspect of the human environment in order to meet an identified need. In social work practice, this interest is operationalized in the technical framework. Through interaction (or symbolic activity), individuals and communities of individuals try to give meaning and order to their collective existence. The interest here is communication, that is, shared meaning and consensus in the broadest sense of the term. In professional practice, the communicative interest is identified most closely with the "practical framework." Finally, through the exercise of power, individuals negotiate and legitimate their claim to material, social, and symbolic resources in the service of their own identified priorities. The interest is an emancipatory one; that is, it is oriented toward maximizing the freedom of individuals and groups to pursue a future they choose for themselves. I will argue that in social work practice the emancipatory interest is expressed in what has come to be called the "empowerment perspective."

In Habermas's view, the activity domains of work, interaction, and power and the basic interests with which they are associated are "knowledge constitutive." What Habermas means by the term "knowledge constitutive" is that differences in the natures of the activities and in the pragmatic interests of those engaged in such activities determine fundamentally different ways of structuring knowledge and inquiry.
John Dewey offers a simple, yet effective, example of the concept of knowledge-constitutive interests. "A . . . traveller whose end is the most beautiful path," he suggests, "will look for other signs and will test suggestions on another basis than if he wishes to describe the way to a given city. The nature of the problem fixes the end of thought, and, the end controls the process of thinking." According to Habermas, it is the nature of the problems typically posed within each of the activity domains that determines the most appropriate aim, structure, and process of thought.

Habermas originally developed his three-category distinction among the sciences to describe how differing human interests—the instrumental, the communicative, and the emancipatory interests—are decisive in determining ways in which inquiry is conducted. Although Habermas did not address the relevance of his schema specifically for professional education and practice, the case may be made that these fundamental categories also structure the ways in which knowledge is organized for application and for dissemination in the professions. For example, what is the assumed relationship between conceptual knowledge and knowledge in practice? How is the relationship between discipline and practice structured in the academic setting? What counts as "necessary" knowledge, and who defines what is "necessary"? Answers to these and similar questions concerning the purpose, commitments, and structure of professional education will vary depending on the knowledge theory adopted, and theories of knowledge, as Habermas argues, are tied directly to fundamental interests and commitments.

The Technical and Practical Frameworks Reconsidered

As outlined above, in the domain of human activity that Habermas terms "work," the primary human interest is an instrumental or technical one—that of managing or altering the material or social environment in some systematic way to meet specific human needs. In the activity domain that Habermas calls "interaction," the basic interest is the achievement of shared meaning, understanding, and consensus through competent communication. Habermas refers to this latter interest alternatively as the communicative or the practical interest. When Habermas's notions are adapted to fit professional social work practice, we find that the distinction between these two fundamental interests tends to generate differing orientations to the field of practice, alternate commitments to various forms of knowledge as applicable in practice settings, and different accounts of practitioner error.

Orientation to the Field of Social Work

Each of Habermas's fundamental human interest categories corresponds to a particular orientation to human activity. Thus, orientations
Empowerment as a Practice Framework

to social work practice differ depending on the interest that is being pursued.

When the human interest is an instrumental one, the aim is to alter some aspect of the social or material environment. In furthering this interest, the functional commitment of the practitioner is necessarily technical and pragmatic: determining how to make things work, or work better. The predominant issues of practice take the form of problem-posing questions—for example, how to deliver better services to clients; how to make the system more responsive to needs of those it purports to serve; or how to improve an individual client's or family's economic, social, or emotional condition. Problem solving is defined by systematic and theory-informed interventions intended to produce a specified change in conditions. Within the current literature, the technical framework is epitomized by advocates of “empirically based practice.” The assumption is that the practitioner, borrowing from current theory and research findings, will locate the most strategic point to intervene in order to achieve the desired result. It follows that this commitment to improved services would be operationalized in terms of effective interventions and measured by an observable improvement in conditions. From this perspective, the practice arena becomes a “delivery system,” an objective phenomenon to be investigated and improved. It should be added, primarily because the position is so often mischaracterized by those who subscribe to an alternate view, that commitments to scientific approaches are advocated not simply as a way of controlling outcomes but as a necessary condition for ethical practice.

In contrast, when the primary human interest is focused on the interaction between human subjects (i.e., Habermas's communicative or practical interest), the pragmatic issues of practice are posed in relational terms: how to develop the kind of interpersonal rapport, understanding, and consensus that facilitate positive change for clients. In order to form the relationships necessary for change, the most essential issue for the practitioner is that of informing his or her judgment with reliable understanding—understanding of the other, of the self, and of the emerging relationship. To understand is to grasp the subjective meaning that the self or the other person is constructing out of a particular situation. Without an accurate understanding of self and other, there would be no basis for meaningful human transaction. In human transactions, including practice situations, action is assumed to flow from understanding; if action and the response it evokes are correctly interpreted, action may be said to inform subsequent understanding. In this way, a kind of transactional, self-and-other awareness provides the basis for taking corrective steps should presenting issues remain unresolved or should problems develop in the relationship. To the extent that the judgment of the practitioner is informed by his or her ongoing understanding of what is occurring
between parties in the relationship, evaluation of practice becomes a continuous process. The practitioner is assumed accountable in two ways: first, to the client for the quality of the whole relationship, and second, to the self for the competence and integrity of professional conduct. However, the notion that the worker is responsible for client outcomes is viewed as incompatible with a fundamental belief in client self-determination. Thus, in the practical framework, as in the technical account of practice, accountability is both a practice prescription and an ethical responsibility, although, of course, there is wide divergence between the two perspectives in the way accountability is conceptualized.

Assumptions about Knowledge

These two different orientations to the world of practice are significant for the kind of knowledge deemed necessary to practice effectively. These orientations generate (a) alternate forms of knowledge and (b) commitments to differing cognitive achievements and modes of rationality.

Type of knowledge.—In the technical framework, the metaphor of choice for the presumed relationship between knowledge and practice is captured by terms such as “use,” “application,” and “translation.” According to the formula, a central problem faced by the social worker is that of using or applying the most effective method, technique, or theory in the individual instance. To be available for “use” in solving the problems of practice, knowledge must meet several important requirements: (a) it must be external to the one who knows, that is, available to more than the singular knower; (b) it must be generalizable across a specified range of instances; and (c) its claims to be valid and applicable must be supported by the use of systematic methods of inquiry accepted within the relevant “knowledge community.” Knowledge that meets these criteria is termed “formal knowledge.” Abstracted from experience, formal knowledge is extrinsic to experience and hence, mutatis mutandis, exportable across situations.

In the technical perspective, professional knowledge is formal, explicit, and discursive. It is “out there” in textbooks, in professional journals, in research reports, and in lecture notes. From the disciplinary perspective, professional knowledge is defined in terms of knowledge that has been sanctioned by the profession as legitimate for discourse and transmission; from the perspective of the student, this knowledge is “received” from the academic and scientific experts who attest to its value as “necessary” learning. In this frame of reference, instruction becomes the transfer of relevant information, and learning is the receiving, remembering, and applying of information thus transferred.
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Just as knowledge associated with the technical framework is formal and externally given, knowledge associated with the practical framework is, for the most part, colloquial and implicit. We are all, to varying extents, competent as we act and interact in specific social contexts.\(^{31}\) Seldom consciously aware of the subtle cues we learn to offer and receive, we transact business as usual in interaction with others whose worlds of meaning are much like our own.\(^{32}\) Which behavior will be rewarded, which prohibited? How do members communicate needs, wants, affection, hurt, anger, solidarity, and social distance? What constitutes success, and who qualifies; what constitutes failure, and who qualifies? Our everyday behavior demonstrates our knowledge in these matters, even as we routinely and, for the most part, unreflectively take our knowledge for granted.

This kind of everyday, interactional knowing is acquired through processes that are culturally situated, contextual, and usually unmediated by conscious attention. It is learned through living and interacting within particular enculturating communities: first of all, of course, in our communities of origin (families, kinship networks, and neighborhoods), and later in our communities of choice, such as work groups and professions. When defined in terms of its origin, knowledge that becomes embodied in the routine activities of daily life may be termed cultural or “lived” or indigenous knowledge.\(^{33}\) Indigenous knowledge is, of course, what clients bring to the practice situation. From the perspective of the practical framework, a large part of the knowledge social workers bring to practice is also based on this store of ordinary cultural know-how. Thus, embedded in everyday interaction, practice knowledge becomes what competent social workers know and know how to do when they are involved in the practice of social work. From this perspective, learning is equated with “learning how,” especially under the guidance of a professional who demonstrates the excellence to which the student aspires.\(^{34}\)

Cognitive commitments and their form of rationality. — The scientific practice orientation advocated in the technical framework is furthered by a kind of rationality in which decisions are made by weighing alternate theories and alternate means relative to expected outcomes.\(^{35}\) This pragmatic interest in achieving particular outcomes is logically accompanied by a cognitive commitment to processes of explanation, prediction, and control. Without the ability to explain and predict, the practitioner would have no confidence that alterations in specific features of a practice situation would actually increase the effectiveness of outcomes.\(^{36}\) Without control, there would be no way for the practitioner to influence outcomes in any systematic way. Following Max Weber, who, to my knowledge, was the first modern thinker to identify the concept, this fundamental, means-end orientation may be termed “technical rationality.”\(^{37}\)
By contrast, within the practical framework, practice is predicated on understanding. To understand is to grasp how the meaningful world of another is constructed. Some common experience of meaning is a necessary condition for communication to occur; indeed, it is the requirement for any successful social interaction. Thus, shared meaning and interpretive understanding, rather than explanation, are the major cognitive commitments when the communicative or practical interest is the focus. The form of rationality pertinent to these commitments is best defined as heuristic. In heuristic-based rationality, decision rules are not given algorithmically and a priori, as they are in technical rationality; rather, they emerge as part of a process in which human subjects gradually discover patterns of meaning and value that particular circumstances hold for those involved. Although “heuristic” rationality is personal and particular, it is not arbitrary; at its most effective, it is objectified by the immediate feedback received in interaction with others.

Presumed Sources of Practitioner Error

Despite their fundamental epistemological differences, partisans of the technical and practical perspectives agree in recognizing that in an applied field such as social work, knowledge is always knowledge used or enacted by concrete human beings who are capable of error.

From the technical perspective, knowledge is intimately tied to thought. Sound thinking is exemplified in accepted tenets of good reasoning that assist the practitioner and student in avoiding common errors in logic. Reasoning for empirical practice is often equated with scientific thinking and its principles of argumentation and proof. Error results when the practitioner’s thinking is unscientific. To assure greater likelihood that the practice judgment is a sound one, practitioners are urged to apply principles of scientific reasoning as they use knowledge to solve the problems of practice. Prescriptions for social work education advocate the teaching of scientific reasoning, skills for critical thinking, and a research orientation to practice that is said to counter practitioner bias and subjectivity with empirical evidence.

For the proponent of the practical framework, by contrast, error is conceived not in terms of fallacies in reasoning but, rather, in terms of misunderstandings and misconstructions in our understanding of self and other. Because there are inevitably gaps and stresses in the socialization histories of all of us, the practitioner’s own experience may result not only in understanding and reciprocity but also in interpretative distortion, projection, and misconstruction. For example, the practitioner may uncritically project onto the helping situation meanings and perceptions that were originally learned in his or her
family of origin, even though these understandings may be inaccurate or inappropriate in the practice context. To minimize the potential for such error, the practitioner is urged to examine his or her practice reflexively. In reflexive practice, the social worker comes to see that the world as he or she understands it is a world with the self in it; therefore, the practitioner’s understanding of the other must include an understanding of the self. From the reflexive position, the practitioner affirms, “I understand what I do about you in part because I am who I am in relation to you.” As a reflexive strategy, students and professionals are urged to make best use of supervisory techniques aimed at increasing awareness of self in relation to client.

Empowerment as a Metaframework

Prescriptions and principles for action derived from both the technical and practical frameworks have guided social work education and practice over the years. Epistemological differences between these two practice perspectives are similar to differences identified in the theories of knowledge underlying the two major research paradigms historically adopted in the profession. Yet, although a great deal of effort has been put forth to reconcile epistemological differences vis-à-vis the knowledge-building process, limited attention has been given to finding some larger standpoint from which to reconcile the two perspectives as they shape the knowledge acquisition process—the process by which the student and the professional come to know what they need to know to engage in competent and ethical practice. The notion of empowerment as some sort of overarching or unifying concept for professional practice is not a new idea. Empowerment has been identified variously as the goal of practice, as an approach with the potential to unify practice, as a set of strategies that define the essential tasks of social work, and as an embodiment of the purposes of the profession. Furthermore, the concept of empowerment is thought to be relevant for work with various client groups, including the poor, people with mental disabilities, people with physical disabilities, persons living with HIV or AIDS, members of ethnic or cultural minority groups, refugees, women, children and adolescents, the elderly, and gays and lesbians. It is also suggested that social workers themselves can profit from strategies aimed at self-empowerment. Finally, empowerment is considered a fruitful concept whether applied to micro or macro practice—at all the systemic levels where social workers function. In short, the empowerment perspective has been described as applicable to practice with virtually every client group social workers encounter in the course of practice, and it is widely viewed as having “salience to the explicit missions of social work” and related professions. Thus, the suggestion that the empowerment
perspective has the potential to become an encompassing practice framework receives support in the literature. In the next section, I will show how empowerment, when conceptualized in terms of Habermas's third category of human activity, the domain he calls "power," also has the potential to become a unifying epistemological framework.

**Orientation to the Field of Social Work**

In the human activity arena that Habermas terms "power," the functional commitment is emancipation. Emancipation is defined operationally in terms of action that is undertaken by people for the purpose of freeing themselves from barriers placed on the exercise of their autonomy. Emancipatory activity may be directed toward constraints that are material, social, or psychological in nature, as autonomy can be restrained just as effectively by one's own self-misunderstanding as by external forces or lack of resources. It is clear that for Habermas, the emancipatory interest is not on the same ontological level as either the instrumental or communicative interest. Instead, emancipation is defined as a larger, metaintere$t, toward which the other two interests are appropriately directed.

Applied to the professional arena, the claim that emancipation is a metaintere$t means that all other aims and activities of practice support one ultimate aim: that individuals and groups who are served by social work practice become as free as possible to decide for themselves what is in their best interest and how they wish to pursue that interest. It is this emancipatory orientation to the world of practice that serves as the basis of what I term the "empowerment metaframework." Whether empowerment is defined in terms of self-determination, self-help, participation in the life of the community, ability to influence decisions in organizations or communities, or interpersonal influence, there is a direct link between principles of empowerment and the emancipatory interest. When individuals or groups lack the power to make their influence felt in arenas where decisions are made and resources allocated, others make the decisions without them. When individuals or groups become empowered, they become active agents, more effectively directing their lives in keeping with their own needs and purposes.

From this perspective, both technical effectiveness and interpersonal competence are tools to advance the fuller participation and self-determination of individuals in the life of the community and are not to be purchased at the expense of such values. In terms of social work practice, this is no small matter. The practice world provides us with daily examples of ways in which the autonomy of individuals is sacrificed to efficiency and in which the true interest of individuals is pre-
emptied, without recourse, to ensure harmony and consensus. The nursing home resident who is convinced by a "kind" and understanding health-care worker to accept her daily doses of Haldol for "her own good," when the more determining reason has to do with staffing patterns, is one example of the misapplication of both technology and interpersonal competence. The same is true in the case of the single mother to whom the informal suggestion is made that by accepting an intrauterine device she may increase her chances to keep her children out of foster care. As we well know, the benevolent goals of the social work profession are no guarantee against the covert or overt exercise of power.

Within the empowerment metaframework, the most essential and most interesting problems of practice have to do with competing claims to material or symbolic resources and differential capacities to press one's claim in decision-making arenas. Problems of practice are also concerned with how individuals and groups explain their perceived power (or lack of it) to themselves and to others. These questions about power and participation may occur in the context of a family, an organization, or society at large—in any setting or relationship in which power is distributed unevenly. Difficulties arise when situations that are essentially about the exercise of power are treated as though they were simply technical problems or problems in communication.54 Those of us who are in an applied field should have some appreciation for this point: for us, knowledge is always knowledge for some purpose, and skill is always skill put to use in the pursuit of some end. But what about choice of purposes and ends? Whose interests will prevail? Whose perspectives? And who will decide how alternate claims are to be resolved? These are questions that pertain to power, not simply technical skill or interpersonal understanding. With this conceptualization of the practice arena, social work is defined as critical praxis.55 As used here, the term "praxis" refers not just to any sort of practice but specifically to professional practice characterized by "informed, committed action."56 For Habermas and others, the overarching commitments of praxis are emancipation and empowerment for self and other. In this orientation to the world of practice, accountability is defined in terms of the fidelity, consistency, and competence with which the commitment to emancipation and empowerment is pursued.

Assumptions about Knowledge

The emancipatory orientation to social work requires an investment in cognitive processes, forms of rationality, and a type of knowledge that differ from those processes and forms constituted within the technical and practical arenas.
Type of knowledge.—More than any other profession, social work has made explicit its commitment to include, in the professional curriculum, content regarding groups that have been marginalized and disempowered within our society. What I am proposing here is that the emancipatory approach to practice requires not only that we think about course content differently but, more fundamentally, that we think about knowledge itself in a different way. This does not mean that we have to repudiate whatever gains we may be able to claim in our efforts to build knowledge for a profession. However, it does imply that we may need an expanded definition of what constitutes knowledge and a more systematic account of the role of power and interests in the way knowledge is defined and disseminated.

To appreciate the type of knowledge called for in the arena of “power” we must first grapple with the relationship proposed to exist between knowledge and power. There are at least three assumptions concerning this relationship that are important to consider. (1) Formal knowledge is knowledge that has been produced historically by individuals socialized into particular strata in society and into the power and privilege that attach to those strata. Less powerful or more marginalized groups have been generally excluded from the knowledge-generating and legitimation process, except as objects of inquiry. (2) The practitioner frequently works with individuals who have emerged from enculturating communities that are different from his or her own and whose social (and political) position is less powerful. Thus, not only formal knowledge but also the store of local cultural knowledge on which the practitioner draws in his or her effort to understand others becomes problematic. This means that not even the supposedly benign process of negotiating interpersonal understanding is free from the potential influence of power. (3) Finally, the interests and power embedded in knowledge are most clearly revealed in the consequences of that knowledge for those who use it and for those whose experiences it purports to offer an account.

The three assumptions about the relationship between knowledge and power are probably best understood by illustration. A dramatic example is provided by feminist historians Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English in a book that documents over a century’s worth of expert advice given to women. In their narrative, the authors cite medical expertise that proposed a causal link between high levels of intellectual activity in women and women’s diminished physical stamina and mental health. Middle-class women were discouraged from engaging in intellectual pursuits lest they do harm to their “delicate constitution” and, above all, their ability to bear children. The expertise supporting this kind of advice was backed by “empirical” evidence. For example, the authors report a study conducted in 1902 that “showed that 42 per cent of the women admitted to insane asylums
were well educated compared to only 16 percent of the men—'proving,' obviously, that higher education was driving women crazy. From the safe distance of almost a century, the faulty logic and obvious ideological base of this “scientific” interpretation is relatively easy to identify. In historical context, however, statements and “findings” such as these were simply accepted as orthodox medical knowledge. They were also part of the store of popular knowledge women came to hold about their own lives and potential. The essential issues about power in relation to knowledge were not considered. Who generated this “expert” knowledge? Whose interests did it serve? By what processes did women come to entertain this understanding of their own opportunities and constraints? What were the consequences for the medical profession? What were the consequences for women, especially for those women who challenged this “expertise”? These are some of the critical questions that would have required an answer in order for women to move toward empowering action, assuming that these questions could be answered objectively in context.

In the technical account of practice, formal knowledge, as authenticated by the discipline, is regarded as less problematic than other forms of knowledge, and students and practitioners are urged to “apply” or “translate” this theoretical knowledge in practice. In the practical framework, knowledge implicit in experience is considered relatively unexceptionable, the standard against which formal knowledge is judged to be either useful or irrelevant. In the empowerment framework, by contrast, neither formal knowledge nor local knowledge stands alone. Formal knowledge and contextualized or local knowledge are each critiqued, challenged, or corroborated in the light of the other and in the light of their relationships to power and interest. The kind of knowledge that emerges from this critique may be described as critical, always provisional, and, above all, dialectical. That is to say, it is always knowledge in process; it is constantly being constructed and deconstructed, revised or discarded in a process of dialectical inquiry. It is a form of knowing that refuses to be reified. Although literature in other disciplines—for example, in adult education and feminist studies—has explored the implications of this kind of emancipatory epistemology for teaching and learning, we have yet to systematically mine its significance for the practice of social work education.

*Cognitive commitments and their form of rationality.*—The dialectical kind of knowledge associated with the emancipatory interest is supported by a form of reasoning we may term critical rationality. The practitioner who engages in critical reasoning seeks to discover correspondences and distortions that exist (a) between the objective (i.e., structural) conditions of individual and group life and the interpretation or understanding of those conditions by the people who live them, (b) between how people actually behave and how they believe them-
selves to be acting, and (c) between reality as defined by others and reality as understood by actors. For example, the unemployed, homeless individual who understands his or her condition to be the result of a character flaw and, therefore, unalterable will not seek an alternate reality. At the same time, the high unemployment rate and lack of low-cost housing in a community are structural realities with which the homeless individual must contend, realities that are not reducible to psychological constructs. In order for the social worker to serve this homeless client effectively, both an objective and a subjective account of "reality" are necessary.

For this reason, in the empowerment framework, cognitive commitments to explanation and to understanding are retained. However, they are subsumed under a larger cognitive project termed discernment, in which the explanation of objective conditions and the understanding of subjective realities are critiqued in the light of their relationship to power and powerlessness. Discernment, like explanation and like understanding, is a cognitive achievement. Discernment is the achievement of a survivor of domestic violence who once erroneously believed herself to be responsible for her spouse's behavior and who now has a more discriminating and reality-based appreciation of her situation and her options. It is also the achievement of tenants in a housing project who thought there was no recourse from the dehumanizing conditions in their neighborhood and who now find that by coming together they are able to question their "reality." Coming together in dialogue, they begin first to discover the structures and relationships of power that have benefited from their unquestioning acceptance and then to decide what action is required to improve their conditions. Finally, discernment is the accomplishment of the practitioner, working alongside people, as together they attempt to locate and then alter either systematic distortions in understanding or constrictive social conditions. At the risk of oversimplifying to make a point, in one sense it would be correct to say that whereas explanation is about establishing cause and effect, and understanding is about discovering meaning, discernment is about attempting to become conscious, in particular attempting to become conscious of one's real condition and of the action needed to transform that condition.

Presumed Source of Practitioner Error

In the empowerment framework, the goal of increased clarity and rational, self-directed action belongs as much to the practitioner as to the client being served. It is scarcely an arguable point that empowerment for clients cannot be furthered by individuals who are themselves disempowered—that is, individuals who are not aware of how their understanding of self and of their own practice has been shaped.
by the forces and relationships of power in their lives. In this framework, error results not only from faulty reasoning, lack of knowledge, or misunderstanding; more important, error occurs when power is exercised, perhaps unreflectively, in a way that serves the priorities of others at the expense of the client's valid needs. Error is most clearly recognized whenever there are contradictions between what the practitioner professes to others or to the self and what he or she actually does. The social worker whose stated goal is greater independence for the client, but whose practice behavior actually fosters a dependent relationship, exemplifies this kind of contradiction. The worker who has not come to terms with the gendered relationships of domination and subordination in his or her own life, and who unreflectively duplicates these relationships in interactions with clients, provides another example. It should not be surprising, then, that the prescription for attempting to minimize this potential source of practitioner error is the same kind of discernment process considered essential to client empowerment.

Implications for Professional Practice and Education

Even though the literature in disciplines such as education, adult education, and feminist studies has explored the relevance of an emancipatory/empowerment perspective for teaching and learning, the literature in social work education has not given systematic attention to its potential for educating the new professional. I will outline just a few of the many implications that an emancipatory epistemology holds for social work practice and education.

Formal Knowledge and Local Knowledge: A Necessary Unity

From the perspective of the practical framework, the argument is sometimes made that formal, technical knowledge has little place in working with human beings who are both complex and self-determining. This position would be tenable if, in fact, human behavior was largely arbitrary and singular, and if there were never occasions for which prediction, explanation, and effective control were relevant to the practice situation. Yet, common sense suggests that at least some human behaviors, some of the time, do exhibit what appear to be regularities and patterns; in certain kinds of situations, prediction and control serve valid practice interests. Similarly, from the perspective of the technical framework, practitioner reliance on popular/indigenous knowledge is often assumed to be the most obvious source of practitioner bias and error. Laudable as efforts may be to point out ways in which practitioner use of local, commonsense knowledge can lead to faulty judgment, we must not be blind to the fact that most of
the time our efforts to understand, to interpret, and to make meaningful are met with success. Our success is due largely to the achievements of the indigenous knowledge that guides our interactions with others. By proposing a reciprocal relationship between formal and indigenous knowledge and by connecting both kinds of knowledge to critical reflection on power and interest, the metaschema developed here acknowledges the contribution of the various forms of knowledge that practitioners must bring to bear if they are to deal effectively with complicated issues of power.

**Whose Knowledge Counts? Lived Experience as Cultural Knowledge**

Formal knowledge is most often defined and sanctioned by those who are in privileged positions. It is not surprising, then, that theories purporting to explain aspects of human life have been shown to systematically underrepresent or misrepresent the voices and experiences of those in less privileged positions. The history, the culture, and the perspectives of groups not empowered by the economic and social patterns of our society have been frequently missing from the theorizing and knowledge-building process. When we promote an understanding of professional practice knowledge that explicitly accounts for both formal knowledge and knowledge derived through “lived” cultural experience, and when we insist on the importance of critical reflection on the sources of knowledge in relation to power and privilege, we are providing an important corrective to our inevitably imperfect efforts at knowledge building and knowledge dissemination. Even our most time-honored theories and frameworks need to be resubmitted again and again to critique and correction over and against the experience of those whose behavior they profess to explain. This task is as much the responsibility of the practitioner as of the educator, if our efforts at building knowledge are to be more inclusive of diverse and less powerful “voices.” It is a task for which we need to prepare more adequately students of the profession.

**Discernment and Self-Awareness**

The social work profession has long been aware that knowledge and skills are never completely severed from the personal and particularist orientations of the practitioner. Even excellent skills and a technically sound application of knowledge may be misdirected by those orientations to become a source of disempowerment. However, as a profession we have been very cautious about asking our students to engage in the kind of reflective activity required for them to make more explicit the sources of their own power, as well as of their own powerlessness—that is, to identify where their own practice may be “distorted by taken-for-granted assumptions, habits, custom, precedent,
coercion, or ideology." The usual fear is that we might tread over the fine line between the transformative potential of education and activities more properly considered therapy. Yet, our understandable caution ought not keep us from working toward greater refinement of definitions along this critical boundary. The framework advocated here suggests one alternative to psychodynamic interpretations in the supervision of students. In this framework, self-awareness as a psychological concept becomes superseded by the notion of critical discernment, the term used for a dialectical process in which objective circumstance and personal understandings of that circumstance are considered, each in relation to the other. If practiced correctly, critical discernment as a supervisory tool has the potential to keep student supervision and self-reflection within the arena of learning (as opposed to therapy), where, in most cases, it appropriately belongs.

Empowerment in the Arena of Professional Education

When academic knowledge and practices are examined as social constructions, it suggests a good deal about the academic community that defines and transmits that knowledge. As the literature in the sociology of education has argued, academic knowledge is very much a social product and, as such, attached to the interests and priorities of various stakeholders. The fact that curricular content, arrangements, and structures are seldom matters of ready consensus within the social work community lends support to this argument. It would be naive to suggest that the exercise of power in the service of particular, and sometimes self-serving, interests is any less a factor in the academy than in the practice arena. If, as has been suggested, the interests that constitute knowledge are most clearly revealed in the consequences of that knowledge for those who produce and transmit it, for those who use it, and for those whose experiences the knowledge is said to explain, then the invitation for us all is to become even more critically reflective and discerning than we have been regarding our educational structures and practices. We certainly have little to lose and much to gain in this process in terms of an increasingly empowered and empowering educational practice.

Notes


3. I make a common distinction between the term "framework" and the term "theory." By theory, I mean essentially an assertion or a coherent set of assertions purporting to offer an account of how some aspect of the world actually operates. My meaning here is similar to Karl Popper's "nets cast to catch what we call 'the world'" (Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* [New York: Harper & Row, 1965], p. 59). By contrast, "framework" refers to a set of organizing guidelines or strategies to translate sets of ideas or beliefs into action. In this definition, frameworks derive from overarching theories; frameworks serve as intermediate constructs between theory and practice. In this article, I argue that the technical, practical, and empowerment frameworks may be conceptualized as applications of Jürgen Habermas's three-category theory of knowledge to the pragmatic world of social work practice. The term "practical" is used here, not in the sense of "down to earth" or "pragmatic," but specifically to refer to the kind of deliberative knowledge required for complex interpersonal and ethical decisions in actual practice. The definition of "practical" knowledge traces its roots to Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which he contrasts with both *techne* (technical skill) and *episteme* (theoretical knowledge). See Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thompson (New York: Viking Penguin, 1976). Habermas uses the term "practical" knowledge in a sense similar to that of Aristotle. See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971). The concept of practical knowledge in the practice of a profession has been treated extensively in the education literature. Most frequently cited in this body of literature is the seminal article by Joseph Schwab, "The Practical: Arts of Eclectic," *School Review* (August 1971), pp. 493–542. See also Mary Ellen Kondrat, "Reclaiming the Practical: Formal and Substantive Rationality in Social Work Practice," *Social Service Review* 66 (1992): 237–55, for applications to social work education.


5. At least one exception to this generalization is the thought-provoking editorial by Ann Hartman in which she urges social workers to come to terms with the connection between formal knowledge and power (Ann Hartman, "In Search of Subjugated Knowledge," *Social Work* 37 [1992]: 483–84).

6. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (n. 3 above), and *Theory and Practice*, trans. J. Viertel (Boston: Beacon, 1974).

7. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (n. 3 above).

8. In the contemporary, postmodern mood, it is common to reject all forms of boundary setting and categorizing. I am aware that in elaborating this three-category distinction, I open myself to the charge of "either-or" thinking. For related themes, see Sharon B. Berlin, "Dichotomous and Complex Thinking," *Social Service Review* 64 (1990): 46–59; and Colin Peile, "Research Paradigms in Social Work: From Stalemate to Creative Synthesis," *Social Service Review* 62 (1988): 1–19. The claim is usually made that because there are few individuals who wholly subscribe to any one theory of knowledge, the presentation of discrete categories is misleading and oversimplified. See esp. D. C. Phillips, *Philosophy, Science and Social Inquiry: Contemporary Methodological Controversies in Social Science and Related Applied Fields of Research* (New York: Pergamon, 1987), and
The Social Scientist's Bestiary: A Guide to Fabled Threats to, and Defences of, Naturalistic Social Science (New York: Pergamon, 1992). This line of reasoning reflects the Aristotelian slant of Western psychological thought, which does not support the independent impact of ideas, concepts, and beliefs except as examples of individual, cognitive behavior. Taken to the extreme, the arguments are examples of psychological reductionism, treating philosophical arguments as instances of psychological ones. The counterargument suggests that the identified categories do represent clusters of beliefs about the nature of knowledge, clusters sufficiently recognizable to engender and sustain rather intense debate. The present article treats the defined categories as ideal types rather than discrete positions, with the understanding that any one individual thinker may be more or less exclusively attached to various elements that make up the category gestalt.

9. My argument here is not that the two reigning frameworks do not take explicit note of the importance of values and interests in relation to practice knowledge but that the empowerment framework gives a more satisfying account of this problem. It is common to find the literature in the so-called knowledge paradigm debates suggesting that the positivist version of knowledge (which is reflected in what I have termed the technical framework) ignores the role of interests and values. This suggestion is a mischaracterization of recent postpositivist thought, which recognizes that objectivity is more of an ideal than it is an empirical accomplishment. See, in particular, Egon G. Guba, The Paradigm Dialogue (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1990); and Phillips, The Social Scientist's Bestiary (n. 8 above). Phillips makes an especially compelling case in arguing that many of the criticisms leveled against positivism have misconstrued the positivist agenda. (Although, if Phillips is to be believed, there have not been any "real" positivists since Auguste Comte, and even he is suspect.)

10. In an earlier article, I developed a two-category epistemology based on the work of Habermas (Kondrat [n. 3 above]). I argued then, as I do now, that the technical and the practical interests require different forms of rationality in practice. However, I did not address Habermas's most critical contention concerning the centrality of the emancipatory interest in human activity and relationships, a limitation that I myself acknowledged.

11. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (n. 3 above), and Theory and Practice (n. 6 above). On his sociology of knowledge, see Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (n. 3 above), p. 43.


13. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (n. 3 above), p. 76.

14. Carr and Kemmis (n. 12 above); Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (n. 3 above); Mezirow (n. 12 above).

15. Carr and Kemmis (n. 12 above); Brian Fay, Critical Social Science (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (n. 3 above); Kondrat (n. 3 above); Mezirow (n. 12 above).


17. Although Dewey comes from a different philosophical tradition than Habermas, there are fundamental convergences in their thought. See Richard J. Bernstein, The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 199–229.

18. Habermas's notions are best viewed in relation to the tradition of German humanists such as Wilhelm Dilthey (Selected Writings, ed. H. P. Rickman [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976]) and Karl Mannheim (Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952]) and, of course, the hermeneutical tradition exemplified by Hans Georg Gadamer (Truth and Method, trans. G. Bardon and J. Cumming [New York: Seabury, 1975]). Like these thinkers, Habermas supported the notion of a discontinuity between cultural and natural science. Unlike these thinkers, however, Habermas argued that both the empirical-analytical and hermeneutic forms of inquiry that characterize the natural and the cultural sciences, respectively, are susceptible to systematic distortions of knowledge in the service of particular interests. To correct this
deficiency, Habermas elaborated a third form of science that he called the “critical social sciences.” Although recognizing that not even critical science is entirely immune from distortions imposed by ideology, interest, and human error, Habermas gives priority to critical social science, because it is through critical inquiry and reflection that scientific and cultural forms are critiqued and their biases exposed.

19. Kondrat (n. 3 above); Mezirow (n. 12 above).


21. When aspects of these two dominant frameworks are presented in the literature it is not unusual for arguments to take on a polemical cast. See John S. Brekke, “Scientific Imperatives in Social Work Research: Pluralism Is Not Skepticism,” Social Service Review 60 (1986): 538–54; Heineman (n. 20 above); Imre (n. 20 above). I want to be clear at the outset that I will be attempting to give a nonideological account of the main points of these two approaches to practice and knowledge. Although my attempt is to remain nonpolemical, I am aware that the very staunchest partisans of each position may still find the account problematic, under the time-honored rubric: “If you’re not for it, you’re agin’ it.”

22. Kondrat (n. 3 above); Mezirow (n. 12 above).


25. See esp. Gibbs (n. 2 above).

26. The emphasis here is on relationship qua relationship. Of course, almost all social work practice, no matter what the guiding framework, recognizes an important place for relationship, just as almost all practitioners would want to see improved outcomes for those seeking their assistance. As shall become apparent, I am talking about differential emphasis on these elements and the implications of these differing emphases for practice considerations.


29. Lantz, Existential Family Therapy (n. 28 above).


33. Michael Polanyi refers to this embodied knowledge as "tacit" to underscore its unreflective availability to human action. See Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

34. Ibid.

35. Eileen Gambrill, Critical Thinking in Clinical Practice: Improving the Accuracy of Judgments and Decisions about Clients (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990); Gibbs (n. 2 above).

36. Fay (n. 15 above); Howe (n. 24 above); Kondrat (n. 3 above).


38. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (n. 3 above); Kondrat (n. 3 above); Mezirow (n. 12 above).


42. Gambrill (n. 35 above).

43. Gibbs (n. 2 above).

44. Leonard Gibbs summarizes the position of teaching scientific reasoning when he suggests, "For our purposes, reasoning well means applying basic principles of scientific thinking to common problems in social work" (Gibbs [n. 2 above], p. 45). Eileen Gambrill (n. 35 above) advocates teaching skills for critical thinking. William Reid (n. 1 above) summarizes the arguments put forward by proponents of the empirical practice perspective.

45. Lammert (n. 27 above).


50. Dodd and Gutierrez (n. 47 above); Lee H. Staples, “Powerful Ideas about Empowerment,” Administration in Social Work 14 (1990): 29–42; Solomon (n. 4 above); Pinderhughes (n. 4 above).

51. Simon (n. 4 above), p. 27.

52. Kondrat (n. 3 above); Mezirow (n. 12 above).

Empowerment as a Practice Framework

For authors who focus on empowerment as defined in terms of ability to influence decisions in communities and organizations, see Dodd and Gutierrez (n. 47 above); Hegar and Hunzeker (n. 48 above); and Staples (n. 50 above). Barbara Solomon (n. 4 above) stresses interpersonal influence as the critical ingredient in empowerment. Brian Fay (n. 15 above, pp. 203–15) outlines a clear connection between people's empowerment and their self-emancipation.

54. Hannah Arendt (The Human Condition [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959]), and Habermas (Knowledge and Human Interests [n. 3 above]) argue against the position that problems in the political arena are solvable by the application of technical knowledge. Habermas (Knowledge and Human Interests [n. 3 above]) also argues that human communication and interpersonal understanding is vulnerable to the covert or overt exercise of power.

55. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (n. 3 above); Carr and Kemmis (n. 12 above); Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Continuum, 1983). The origin of the term as used here lies in Aristotle's definition of praxis as purposive conduct (Aristotle [n. 3 above], p. 369). The term praxis as used by Habermas is close to Arendt's term "action," a form of human involvement in the world that she views as calling on the highest capabilities of human beings (Arendt [n. 54 above]).


57. Hartman, "In Search of Subjugated Knowledge" (n. 5 above).


60. Hartman, "In Search of Subjugated Knowledge" (n. 5 above); Hasenfeld (n. 47 above); Parsons (n. 47 above).


62. For poor and working-class women, of course, and for women of color, there was an entirely different account. See ibid.; and also Giddings (n. 58 above).

63. Ehrenreich and English (n. 61 above), p. 128.

64. Although most careful scholars appreciate the provisional nature of all research findings, scientifically derived knowledge is often treated as (at the very least) less problematic than other kinds of knowledge, such as clinical wisdom and interpersonal understanding. See Gambrill (n. 35 above); and Gibbs (n. 2 above).

65. Paulo Freire, Education for Critical Consciousness (New York: Continuum, 1982), and Pedagogy of the Oppressed (n. 55 above); Mezirow (n. 12 above); Kathleen Weiler, Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class, and Power (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1988).

66. Carr and Kemmis (n. 12 above); Fay (n. 15 above); Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (n. 3 above).

67. Dodd and Gutierrez (n. 47 above).

68. Fay (n. 15 above).

69. Hasenfeld (n. 47 above).


71. Ibid., p. 7.

72. For an example of an emancipatory approach in education, see Michael Apple, Education and Power (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), and Ideology and Curriculum (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979). This approach has also been applied in adult education. See Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (n. 55 above), and Education for Critical Consciousness (n. 65 above); and Mezirow (n. 12 above), and "Perspective Transformation," Adult Education 28 (1978): 100–110. A number of feminist educators have also adopted an emancipatory perspective to their work. See Weiler (n. 65 above); Gaby Weiner, ed., Just a Bunch of Girls: Feminist Approaches to Schooling (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985); Patti Lather, "Critical Theory, Curricular Transformation and Feminist Mainstreaming," Journal of Education 166 (1984): 49–62; and Barbara Gates,
73. See Heineman (n. 20 above); Imre (n. 20 above); and Lantz (n. 28 above).


75. Gibbs (n. 2 above); Gambrill (n. 35 above); Gibson and Nurius (n. 1 above).


78. Carr and Kemmis (n. 12 above), p. 192; see also Dodd and Gutierrez (n. 47 above).