SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL VALUES

Readings in Social Work, Volume 3

Edited by
Eileen Younghusband

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Volume 41

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Taylor & Francis Group

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READINGS IN SOCIAL WORK

VOLUME III

COMPILED BY

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London
GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD
RUSKIN HOUSE · MUSEUM STREET

PREFACE

This volume is the third in a series intended to preserve in more permanent form some of the most valuable articles which have appeared in British and American social work journals in the last few years. There are certain articles which are widely used and quoted, which have indeed become standard works but are not always easily available to busy social workers. The aim of the present series is thus twofold, both to preserve such articles and make them more widely available and at the same time to combine together the best that has been written on a given theme by social workers on both sides of the Atlantic which draw attention to recent developments in thought and knowledge.

The present volume includes articles which are directly concerned with cultural and ethical values, or with increased understanding of people whose behaviour is pathological, in relation to western value systems. It also contains articles on the relation between an administrative structure and professional goals. It concludes with four articles which give particularly sensitive accounts of social work with people under acute stress, and which thus illustrate in action social work's concern for those suffering from deprivation and conflict, whether as would-be adoptive or foster parents or in the face of illness and death.

It is hoped that this collection of articles will be widely used by practising social workers, by social work teachers and by students not only in Great Britain and the United States but in those many other parts of the world where the profession of social work is advancing towards higher standards of practice.

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

1

ETHICS AND THE SOCIAL WORKER*

DOROTHY EMMET

SOCIAL workers occupy an uncomfortable but potentially creative position where social science and psychology meet and bear on the practical situations of human life. In these situations advice has to be given and decisions made and, as Aristotle said in distinguishing the practical from the theoretical sciences, 'the last step is not a proposition but an action.' The situations in which social workers have to reach decisions are often baffling, but they can hope that their training in social science and psychology gives them an intelligent skill in understanding people and helping them to live in a real world.

But what about *moral* judgement? Can this also be an acquired intelligent skill, and should it be directly brought to bear on the decisions social workers make, and on those they help their clients to make? If we say that it can, are we not saying that social work itself has in part at least a moral aim, and that moral persuasion and even moral pressure may be among its methods? Yet in these days the professing of moral, as distinct from scientific aims and still more pressing them on others, is felt to be embarrassing, if not impertinent.

The pioneers in social work were not so embarrassed. They were clear that there were certain standards of moral, and generally of Christian, behaviour that ought to be upheld; that many people were failing in these, through their own fault or through circumstances not their own fault (though I doubt whether many would have been prepared to allow that a person's moral will could be completely defeated by circumstances). It was the job of those more fortunately placed to encourage the less fortunate, either by exhortation or practical help or a mixture of both, to live up to these standards. Nowadays we have less self-assurance. The down-grading of the expression 'doing good' is a symptom of this. When we are told in the Authorized Version translation of Acts x, 38 that Jesus of Nazareth 'went about doing

good', this must surely have been meant as commendatory. Benjamin Franklin mentions in his *Autobiography* (1771) how impressed he had been by a book by the New England preacher Cotton Mather entitled *Essays To Do Good.* Writing about it in 1784, he says: 'When I was a boy, I met with a book, entitled *Essays To Do Good . . .* It had been so little regarded by a former possessor, that several leaves of it were torn out; but the remainder gave me such a turn of thinking, as to have an influence on my conduct through life; for I have always set a greater value on the character of a *doer of good,* than on any other kind of reputation; and if I have been, as you seem to think, a useful citizen, the public owes the advantage of it to that book.'[1] Perhaps a reason for the contemporary down-grading of the expression is suggested in an early Victorian children's book: 'For Mary truly understood the luxury of doing good.'[2] Here 'doing good' is clearly something that ministers to self-esteem. It may also have strings attached to it, or become a vested interest. My colleague Mrs Barbara Rodgers has told me of a report of a certain home for unmarried mothers which contained the remark, 'How sad it will be if after a hundred years of service this Home has to close down for lack of girls needing help'. The image of the 'do-gooder' is not that of someone notably informed by intelligence and is a label social workers seem anxious to repudiate.

Yet if the notion of 'doing good' is under suspicion, I suspect that the nerve of social work is still a deep concern, sometimes religiously rooted, to *help* people who are in various kinds of difficulties; and there may be a sense of embarrassment, even sometimes of guilt, if one feels that this is not quite scientifically respectable.

Here I want to say quite explicitly that I see no reason to feel apologetic about a concern to help. And certainly 'help' nowadays cannot be effectively given merely by good will. Apart from the fact that effective remedies for social distresses may call for political measures, help for people's individual and personal difficulties calls for expert skills, including in our Welfare State the skill of knowing which social agencies can supply the special services needed. Thus the giving of help becomes dependent on acquiring certain kinds of expert knowledge and skill, and so is being professionalized. Does the notion of a profession itself include a notion of moral responsibility to help one's fellow men?

The view that it does has been well put by Robert Merton, Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, writing of 'the threefold

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[1] Benjamin Franklin (edition of 1906), *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, Macmillan Co., New York, Vol. IX, p. 208.
[2] C. R. Attlee, *The Social Worker*, G. Bell and Sons, London, 1920, p. 9.

composite of social values that makes up the concept of a profession'. He lists these as 'first, the value placed upon systematic knowledge and the intellect: knowing. Second, the value placed upon technical skill and trained capacity: doing. And third, the value placed upon putting this conjoint knowledge and skill to work in the service of others: helping. It is these three values as fused into the concept of a profession that enlists the respect of men.'[1]

If I were pressed to hazard an opinion in the controversy over whether social workers are a profession, on the way to becoming a profession, a cluster of professions, or not a profession at all, I should say that they look like a cluster of different professions surrounded by many auxiliaries, but that they are well on the way to becoming a more unified profession. A considerable diversity of types of occupation is also found in the teaching profession. If none the less it makes sense to speak of 'the teaching profession', this is not because there is a single certified standard of training, still less because there is any single professional organization, but because there is a notion of a purpose which can be pursued at a number of different stages, all of which require a certain amount of expertise. It is not easy to define this purpose: if one were to say it was the imparting of knowledge, then kindergarten teachers and university teachers would join in rising up and saying that this is not what they are exclusively or even mainly trying to do. But presumably all members of the teaching profession are engaged in some sort of exercise which involves giving instruction to people who are in some sense *in statu pupillari*. A profession demands expertise in carrying out some broadly recognizable purpose, which, however difficult it may be to define, is not just diffuse. As the sociologists would say, it involves carrying out a role of a specific kind towards others who have their complementary roles.

Am I right in detecting a certain self-consciousness in the literature where attempts are made to define both this role of the social worker and the particular specialized knowledge it involves? Thus, in *Notes on the Ethics of Social Work*, published by the Association of Social Workers in 1953,[2] a definition emerged that 'A social worker is one who, by education, vocation and training, has fitted himself for professional employment in agencies working for the happiness and stability of the individual in the community'; and the chairman, Principal Nicholson, stated that 'The social workers' claim to professional status

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[1] Robert K. Merton, *Some Thoughts on the Professions in American Society*, Brown University Papers XXXVII, Brown University, U.S.A., 1960, p. 9.
[2] Association of Social Workers, *Notes on Social Work*, London, 1953.

centres upon being a specialist in human relationships, an individual trained and disciplined in human adjustments.' At the other end of the scale, Lady Wootton simplifies the requirements of the social worker to 'good manners, ability and willingness to listen, and efficient methods of record keeping', *plus* also accurate knowledge of the workings of the social services.[1]

The difficulty seems to be to find a statement of the function of social workers which is not too diffuse, not to say grandiose, on the one hand, or too pedestrian on the other, to do justice to the real demands made upon them. To call oneself an expert in human relationships and adjustments *tout court* falls into the former pitfall. For no one (not even the psychologists) can claim just to be an expert in human relationships. There must be some particular kind of relationship in which a person can claim some special understanding: in marriage guidance or child guidance, for instance; or as a probation officer in the problems of young offenders, or as an almoner in for example the problems of the adjustments of a convalescent to family life. Undoubtedly a wise and experienced social worker can also give help in a host of personal difficulties over and above those of his or her special concern—as indeed might any wise friend who wins the confidence of someone in trouble. The problem of combining a limited and specific role with a wider kind of friendship and concern comes up in any job which involves human relationships, though it may be more difficult to evade it in social work. It is sometimes suggested that casework can be a profession in itself; but I cannot help thinking that the wealth of human experience which may be acquired in casework is best geared to some particular social service, so that the help people may be given in working out their personal and emotional troubles can grow out of some specific service or information which the caseworker is able to supply. In many instances the particular service or information is all that is required. We need not assume that there is always 'something deeper behind' a simple inquiry, for instance, about how to get a pension. But there always *may* be; and to be able to sense this, and give a person the opportunity to talk, is one of the most delicate arts in social work. Yet this is very different from setting up as an expert in human relationships in general. Some people may well seem in effect to be this, but they probably operate from a base as a family doctor or parish priest, or even keeping the little shop round the corner. If a welfare agency does not succeed in being a functional base which can be recognized as such by both parties, then a social worker

[1] Barbara Wootton, *Social Science and Social Pathology*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1959, p. 291.

may lay herself open to the comment of the housewife who remarked: 'I wish that you ladies what have nothing to do had something better to do than come and take up the time of us ladies what have.'

Social workers, then, need to have an expert function, carried out with a sympathy which enables them to receive confidences when required. The purpose of social work must not be defined in so vague and grandiloquent a way as to cut out its specific functions, nor in so coldly matter of fact a way as to leave no room for this personal relationship. Here I come back to one of Professor Merton's requirements for a profession: 'Putting conjoint knowledge and skill to work in the service of others: helping.' To help people professionally is acceptable nowadays, in a way in which 'to do good to them' apparently is not. 'Professional help' means help within the specific field in which the person is competent. In the case of an old established profession such as medicine, this field and the end to be served—the prevention and cure of disease—is generally recognized and accepted. And there is a long tradition, going back to Hippocrates, in which thinking has gone on about the role of the doctor. This could indeed be taken as the paradigm case of a considered attempt to formulate and inculcate a professional code; for instance, the distinction between professional services and profit making: the doctor may expect his fees but must not advertise or sell his services to the highest bidder. He must respect the confidences of his patients, and must cultivate what Talcott Parsons calls 'affective neutrality'. That is to say, he may not be able to help liking some of his patients better than others, but he must not allow this to affect his treatment of them, and he must guard against any emotional involvement with a patient. These are some of the elements in the ethics of the role of the doctor; the role of the patient also has its obligations, though these are not so clearly understood and cannot be made matters of formal discipline. For instance, a patient should not do what the Americans call 'shopping around'—consulting other doctors behind the back of his own doctor without telling him that he wants a second opinion.

Some of the elements in medical professional ethics, for instance 'affective neutrality' and the respecting of confidential information,[1] would no doubt be ingredients in any code of professional behaviour, including that of social workers. But there is a special difficulty in the case of social work. In a profession such as medicine, the professional code is designed so that the doctor can properly carry out a generally

[1] This does not mean that there are *no* circumstances in which it would be right to divulge this.

accepted and recognized purpose. His professional ethics are therefore primarily concerned with means. But in the case of some professions, notably social work and education, the end itself is controversial and difficult to state, and any way of stating it is likely to have some ethical notion built into it, either overtly or in a concealed way. It is concealed when the end is described in terms which sound scientifically neutral, but are in fact question-begging. (When we come to think about it, do we really approve of 'harmony' and 'adjustment' in every possible kind of society? If people are being helped to 'realize their potentialities' are all potentialities desirable? If the end is 'social health', is this not really a metaphor for some state of affairs which includes morality?) Of a selection of definitions of a social worker listed in *A Report on Registration and the Social Worker*, I prefer No. 6: 'A social worker is a person who, through professional education, has acquired (1) special knowledge of the nature and needs of individuals and groups and of society; and (2) special skill in methods of helping individuals, families, groups and communities to meet their needs and to make the best use of the social services available.'[1] I should, however, want to make the qualification that (1) suggests more sociological knowledge than social workers can always claim. The question-begging term in this definition is of course 'needs'. In some branches of social work undoubtedly considerable attention is given to learning to diagnose what these are. But some of these needs may include the need to cope better morally with one's problems. The statement of the purpose of social work in the Younghusband Report is put in commendably simple language: 'The purpose of social work is to help individuals or families with various problems, and to overcome or lessen these so that they may achieve a better personal, family or social adjustment.'[2] This avoids being grandiose, but contains the question-begging term 'adjustment'. How much does 'adjustment' sometimes mean? A recent cartoon in *The New Yorker* has a lady consulting a psychiatrist who remarks: 'In a nutshell, Mrs Turner, either your son is making a remarkably fine adjustment to his lack of ability, or else he just doesn't care a damn.'

Because of the difficulty of defining an end which is partly at least a moral one, definitions of the purpose of social work tend, then, either to be put in very vague and rather grandiose language; or else the end is made to sound like a routine job of supplying practical help and

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[1] Association of Social Workers, *A Report on Registration and the Social Worker*, London, 1955.
[2] *Report of the Working Party on Social Workers in the Local Authority Health and Welfare Services*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1957, p. 7.

information. These are in effect the alternatives as Lady Wootton sees them; her own predilection is for the latter, and she is accordingly dubious whether an avocation so considered qualifies for professional status.[1] Moreover, she thinks that it is possible to separate the practical from the moral aspects of advice which may be given to people; to be efficient and sympathetic in giving the former, and permissive and tolerant in refraining from the latter.

But are these the alternatives? Is it not also possible to acknowledge in a rather more tough-minded way that there is a moral element in these activities? To begin with, can one really believe that all people's ideas about ways of life are equally good, including those that involve neglecting children and not paying the rent? When a probation officer is reported as having said at the Oxford Conference on 'Morals and the Social Worker' in 1959[2] that 'the purpose of casework is to free the client from his emotional troubles so that his own moral values can assert themselves', how many probation officers can put their hands on their hearts and say that this is really all that they are trying to do? (I note that other participants in that discussion had their doubts about how far one can take this 'permissive' attitude.) Many of those in the compulsory charge of a probation officer (in this case at any rate it seems a bit odd to call them 'clients') are not clear or stable enough in their own moral values for us to hope that these will 'assert themselves'. Some of them may not have anything coherent enough to be called a 'moral attitude'; others may need help in reshaping their attitude into one more satisfactory to themselves and less of a menace to other people than the attitude they hold now.

I am, of course, considering only the kinds of social work which are concerned with people's conduct. There may well be some services (for example supplying braille books to the blind, and a great many services which just call for practical information and help) where this problem need not arise. Where it does arise, is part of the trouble that the alternative possibilities tend to be stated incompletely? They are given as (a) 'permissiveness' (keeping one's own moral values out of it, and letting people make their own decisions), or (b) as an authoritarian judgemental attitude, or (c) as 'manipulation' (i.e. not telling a person what is what, but trying to get him where we want him by means of which he is not aware). Manipulation is very properly repudiated; but it is difficult to avoid it, if we do not realize clearly ourselves how much our moral values enter into the methods and ends we are pursuing.

[1] Barbara Wootton, op. cit., p. 291.
[2] Association of Social Workers, Morals and the Social Worker, London, 1960.

But are these the only alternatives, any more than 'tolerating non-conformity' and 'pressures to conformity' are exhaustive alternatives? To take the latter disjunction first; there are surely deviants and deviants. Professor Roger Wilson for example distinguishes:

(1) Unconformity which offends neither the law, nor the conscience, nor the convenience of others, e.g. oddities of dress or eating habits.
(2) Unconformity by persons with an articulate conscience, e.g. rocket-site passive resisters.
(3) Unconformity by persons who are assumed to know the price in punishment or social isolation and are willing to risk having to pay it, e.g. the motoring offender, the big criminal, the petty delinquent who persists in committing crimes for rational gain, those with an 'unsettled way of life'.
(4) Unconformity which offends the law, the conscience or the convenience of others, and for which there is no satisfying rational explanation.[1]

It is doubtful whether these last nonconformists have very clear moral standards to assert. They may indeed have an inchoate cluster of moral sentiments, and in some of these—generosity for instance—they may leave many of us standing. But they need help in seeing what moral judgements mean. And is the skeleton in our cupboard that, unlike our Victorian forbears, we are not so sure what they mean ourselves? Part of our trouble is the prevalence of the idea that moral standards are personal, subjective and emotional, and so are not matters into which intelligence enters, and for which reasons, maybe good reasons, can be given and communicated to other people. Alternative views are controversial, among moral philosophers no less than others. I should myself approach the question of moral judgement in a way which I can here only indicate sketchily. First, it is clear that no society can function without generally accepted *mores*, if for no other reason than that there must be some generally fulfilled expectations of how people will behave if anyone is to be able to carry out any purpose effectively. Next, any moral system will probably contain a number of obligations which, as time goes on, may seem odd, and sooner or later the question can be asked about any one of them, '*Why* ought I to do this?' Then legitima-tizing reasons may be produced, some of which may also seem odd; they may include all sorts of authorities, traditions, discussions of desirable and undesirable consequences to oneself and others, and

[1] Roger C. Wilson, 'Unconformity in the Affluent Society', *Sociological Review*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, 1960.

appeals to more basic principles. If people are prepared to reveal these reasons and look at them, they can be discussed; some may be abandoned, some modified, and some reinforced. Their acceptance or rejection can then be a responsible matter, guided by some general notion of what morals are for—for instance, satisfactory ways of living with other people (this too is controversial; we need not claim to have the one correct moral philosophy, but only a reasonably grounded one). Whatever maxims we hold about how we think other people should behave, a reasonable defence of them implies that we should be prepared to see that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, and apply them to ourselves.

Thus, this is one respect in which a moral point can be put to a person as a matter of reason. One may be dealing with people who in effect expect exceptions in their own favour, and yet want to take advantage of the fact that other members of the community do not behave as they intend to behave themselves. This is an exercise demanding a certain amount of intellectual effort, though it need not be carried on in the technicalities of moral philosophy, and I suspect that more people than is always realized can engage in it, and in fact enjoy it. It would do no harm for social workers themselves to do more of it during their own training. Even if the result is to drive us back on to some moral principles or values for which we can give no further reasons, there will be a difference between holding them in this way *after* a process of critical heart-searching and just asserting them dogmatically. At any rate we can learn both to see moral questions as problematic and open ended, which means that they can be thought about and discussed, and also see there are reasonable ways of going about this.

To reach this point will mean helping social nonconformists of type 4 (the muddled and feckless) to turn into type 2, those who have their own moral will and convictions, however bizarre. There may well be many people who will never get to this point; and they probably will in fact need moral guidance and moral support. I met somewhere in the literature of social work the remark that 'the client is treated to less than a human relation if we don't discuss his problem as a moral problem with him'. I think that is profoundly true, except that all problems need not be moral ones. But it means that social workers must have done their own thinking about what a moral problem is like; and they must hold strongly enough that morality is part and parcel of any normal human life to believe that others will need to see some of their problems as moral problems too. This does *not* mean that one

forces one's solution on them; but it does mean being prepared to throw one's intellectual moral resources as well as one's sympathetic ones into the situation. It may also mean that the relationship becomes a more adult one.

One rule should surely be that pressure must not be brought to bear on a client to do anything which he actually believes to be wrong (though the consequences of not doing it may be explained to him). This is well put in the 'Draft for a Code for Social Workers':[1] 'Respect for freedom of choice does not imply acquiescence in what is not right. But if a change is desirable, it should not be forced upon the client; the first effort should be directed towards enabling him to make the change himself' [but what do you do if he won't?*] 'It does imply respect for a client's moral standards' [but what if he needs to be shown how to acquire some?*]. 'The aim of a social worker should be to support, not to undermine a client's own standards, and solutions at variance with these should not be recommended.' When the client has made his own decision, the social worker may be able to help him even where he personally does not approve; but in instances where the decision is to do something which the social worker definitely believes is *wrong*, then he must surely be able to tell the client that he personally cannot help him implement it. This seems to me well put by Biestek.[2] Father Biestek writes from the background of a firm Thomist position; but those with a different moral philosophy can well learn from his clear thinking, and particularly from his analysis of the notion of 'acceptance': taking another person as he is, however unpleasant or uncongenial (cf. 'affective neutrality'), establishing a relation with him as he is, and refraining from passing judgement on his innocence or guilt, which does not mean necessarily approving of his behaviour and not wishing to help him change it. The general principle is that people should be helped to build up their own moral wills and their own integrity. And there may well be stages where they are so far from acting morally and responsibly (some children, for instance, delinquents, mentally sick people, and all of us at times, when for instance we need to be made to do something properly) that pressures of an educative kind are justified, so long as their purpose is to help us to become more capable of making responsible decisions in the end. There is a razor-edge balance needed here, for sometimes pressures may break down a person's own integrity; sometimes they may be the means

* Queries mine.
[1] *The Almoner*, 'Draft for a Code for Social Workers', Vol. III, No. 7, London, 1950.
[2] F. P. Biestek, *The Casework Relationship*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1961.