



SOCIAL WORK



Seeking
Relevancy
in the
Twenty-First
Century



Roland Meinert
John T. Pardeck
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Larry Kreuger, PhD

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Chapter 1

Beyond Postmodernism: The Challenge of Reconstructing the Social Work Profession

There is no single point in time about which there is agreement as to the definitive beginning of professional social work. Enough signal events took place in the late nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century to reasonably claim that its centennial can be marked with the beginning of the twenty-first century. Over the past 100 years the people who identify themselves as social workers, and the organizations they have established to represent their interests, have spent considerable time and effort in legitimating their claim to be a profession. As the twentieth century began, social workers felt confident that there was sufficient societal acceptance of their efforts as an emergent profession to argue that they were ready to join the ranks of medicine, law, and the ministry. A challenge to this assumption was provided by Abraham Flexner's presentation to a major social welfare conference in 1915, when he concluded that social work did not meet the essential characteristics of a major profession (Flexner, 1915). Following his presentation, and indeed up to the present time, much effort and resources as well as human, financial, and intellectual capital have been devoted to both documenting and demonstrating to other professions and citizens at large that social work does meet the criteria of a mature profession.

Now at the dawn of the twenty-first century, social work, along with several other professions, finds itself at a crossroad of many divergent paths. The signpost at this junction points down epistemological, theoretical, socio/technical, and practice directions that present poten-

tial opportunities for growth and development, as well as obstacles and challenges to continued professional status. Some think the new directions that are unfolding may lead to professional enhancement and new and innovative ways to contribute to human betterment. Others think the challenges to be encountered may be too difficult to overcome and could lead to the changed status of social work from a major to a quasi profession. Some occupations and professions, social work perhaps among them, may not be able to adapt and prosper within the turbulent new technological cyberspace environment of the next century. Irrelevancy is a real possibility for occupations that find themselves on the margins of meeting needs judged as critical by society.

Scholars and social commentators have not yet agreed upon a name to apply to the new era that the social professions are entering. There is agreement that the professions appear to be in the midst of the period called postmodernism, which has had a major impact on both the humanities and social sciences. While awaiting the arrival and societal acceptance of a label to describe the next period, it is prudent, therefore, to identify the forces and influences that are taking shape. In assessing and summing up the status of professional social work at the end of this century and the dawn of the next, there appear to be some areas of satisfaction for the profession of social work but several others of concern.

Examining social work from a historical perspective over the past century reveals that it was an emerging and quasi profession during the first three decades. This was followed by five decades of growth and development during which it approached full professional status and wider societal acceptance. However, beginning in the late 1980s, signs began to appear that the level of achievement in both practice and education was leveling off and was not as stable as had been thought. Predictions began to be made that social work practice as it had been known might be at an end, and social work education was characterized as having deep-seated problems. Indeed, some were so pessimistic about social work education that they thought it was incapable of preparing students to practice effectively for present societal demands and certainly not for emergent future trends (Bisno and Cox, 1997). Innovations and new directions in thinking are necessary to prepare practitioners for the

new millennium. Past professional paradigms are being called into question and replaced without sufficient examination of their relevance to practice conditions.

This chapter examines the central issues concerning the opportunities and challenges facing social work at the beginning of the new century. In the opinion of the authors these are critical and defining issues that must be addressed if social work is to remain a viable profession as the next millennium begins. Indeed, these issues are of such a magnitude that their resolution will determine whether social work will celebrate a second centennial. With but a few exceptions it will be seen upon examination that most of the issues are not fundamentally different than those that faced the founders of the profession at the beginning of the twentieth century. The total array of issues poses a comprehensive set of theoretical, ideological, and technical challenges to be faced and opportunities to be maximized. Each of the issues is briefly stated below in the form of a question and subsequently analytically discussed in more detail:

- Can social work legitimately claim to be a mature profession when measured by both historical and contemporary criteria?
- Is the knowledge base of social work suspect because it spans extensive domains of practice that defy orderly classification?
- Is social work a captive of politicized ideologies that hinder its development and make it difficult to entertain intellectual diversity and the adoption of new and creative directions?
- Are social work values a myth?
- Has the ethnocentricity of American social work prevented it from adopting social development and other approaches found effective in other societies?
- Will uncritically embracing postmodernism, and a family of other “isms,” result in long-range enfeebling consequences for the profession?
- Does social work have a significant impact on developing major social welfare policies?
- Is social work education in serious difficulty because it is epistemologically and conceptually without direction?

The manner in which these questions are addressed and the resources and effort applied to their solutions constitute a set of both

challenges and opportunities for twenty-first century social work. The consequences of not addressing them include the possibility that social work will not survive as a major profession in a society characterized by postindustrial influences and hypertechnological advances. Social work can be reconstructed, but only if it is willing to recognize its weaknesses and use them as an opportunity to advance to the next level of development. The first step in this reconstruction effort should be to reexamine the extent to which it meets contemporary criteria for a major legitimate profession.

FLEXNER REVISITED

The field of social work in the early years of the twentieth century was struggling to establish legitimacy and recognition among the family of professions. There was uncertainty at the time as to what distinguished a professional from an amateur, and whether or not certain attributes could be identified setting professional activities apart from occupational ones. Approximately eighty-five years ago, Abraham Flexner (1915) gave the fledgling occupation of social work a wake-up call when he appeared by invitation before a major social work conference and asserted that it did not meet the criteria of a profession. He praised what social workers did, but was unable to conclude that social work's characteristics were at the same level as those possessed by other mature professions such as medicine and law. He viewed social work not so much as a definite field but "as an aspect of work in many fields." After examining the activities of social workers within multiple fields of functioning, he also did not provide a positive report about the training they received. His opinion was that the activities of social workers were so numerous, diverse, and unspecific that it would not be feasible to design a program of organized education. As the twenty-first century dawns, if social work were to be placed under an analytic microscope it is conceivable that Flexner's conclusions in 1915 would to some degree remain valid.

Recent approaches to the analysis of professions emphasize a model based on systems thinking (Abbott, 1988). In this perspective professions are viewed as existing in a system of occupations

and professions, each of which is vying to establish and then maintain itself within an identifiable niche. As a profession functions within a niche, much of its occupational energy and resources are devoted to consolidating its position and solidifying jurisdiction over a set of functions and tasks. Thus, a profession engages in dynamic interaction and negotiation with other occupations to retain its positional niche. For most of the twentieth century, social work and other occupations were measured by a set of criteria to determine their degree of professionalism. When these criteria were applied to occupations, it was easily seen that some extreme variation existed. Some occupations possessed most of the criteria to a high degree and others hardly at all. Recent literature has tended to ignore the criteria or attribute model of measuring professionalism. It is the opinion of the authors that this model has validity and can illuminate where social work stands in the system of professions at the century's end. Not all attributes possess the same degree of saliency in assessing professionalism. Some attributes are of a first order or central to the conceptualization of professionalism and are intrinsic to the nature of a profession. Others, of a second order, are of lesser importance and are not essential attributes. A major profession would be expected to possess all the first-order attributes to a high degree, and minor or quasi professions would not possess all or would have low saliency among them. Occupations that in the judgment of the general public clearly are not professions possess many of the second-order features but lack one or more first-order ones. Among analysts of occupations there is no consensus on a finite list of professional attributes, but after reviewing the literature the authors feel those listed in Table 1.1 are highly representative of the opinions of most experts. Possession of the attributes to a high degree separates professions from numerous occupations that describe themselves as such but fall short. Table 1.1 lists the central first-order attributes and the second-order peripheral ones along with brief descriptions of their focus. A logical cohesiveness exists among the first-order attributes, which constitute a coherent corpus to which all major professions can lay claim.

Based on the first-order attributes, a profession meets a distinct and expressed need and is given legitimation, jurisdiction, and sup-

TABLE 1.1. Two Levels of Professional Attributes

FIRST ORDER

Niche—There exists a set of specific service activities that are carried out within the larger domain of logically related professions. The practitioners within the domain have exclusive jurisdiction and authority over the functions that are carried out. This authority and jurisdiction are recognized by others within the system of “professions.”

Theory and Praxis—The skilled actions of practitioners rest on a foundation of theory or set of related theories. This permits the application of abstract knowledge to a range of conditions. Even though practitioner actions have practical outcomes, they emanate from a process that is essentially intellectual.

Societal Sanction—There exists societal sanction and support for activities in a specific domain (niche) of human need. This sanction manifests itself by approval for, legitimization of, and the creation of official organizational structures to provide services within the domain of need. The practitioners and the services to be delivered are seen as trustworthy by recipients.

Knowledge Development—The niche occupied by a profession provides the boundaries within which research and the development of relevant new knowledge take place. All professions to some degree “borrow” knowledge from other professions and disciplines. However, major professions provide sanction and resources and institutionalize efforts for this discovery process in support of their core activities.

Articulated Education—To achieve legitimation within a profession, the practitioners must have completed a standardized period of training. The institution or body providing the training must meet a set of quality standards articulated by an external review body. Periodic reviews must take place to ensure that the educational standards continue to be met.

Licensure—Practitioners must document that they have completed formal training in the profession and have passed standardized examinations which are universally accepted within the society that provides the sanction. Licensure examinations must be organized around the central knowledge and skills of the profession. Professionals are not permitted to practice in societally sanctioned organizations until licensure has been achieved.

SECOND ORDER

Professional Association—Professions establish official associations to provide some monitoring of internal functions and to represent the interests of practitioners to the larger society.

Code of Ethics—Professions presumably possess a set of internal values and norms expressive of their core nature and purpose. These values and norms provide the foundation for a code of ethics which is to guide ethical practitioner behavior toward clients, colleagues, and employment settings.

Altruism—It is believed that professions, with their orientation of service provision, have the power to attract persons who have characteristics motivating them toward a career focusing on service to others.

port by society at large. The actions by practitioners are founded on a body of theory and research that is continually updated and transmitted to those preparing for professional careers in organized programs of education. Upon entry into the profession, neophytes are tested in a standardized fashion leading to certification for practice. At the dawn of the new century it is prudent to ask to what extent social work meets the first-order attributes and whether, as claimed, it is seated firmly within the family of major professions.

For decades social work has selected as its main objective the enhancement of individual and social well-being within the contextual niche of the person in the environment. The niche is problematic for two reasons. First, it is so broad and at such a general level of abstraction that it appears to be without boundaries. In this regard the niche turns out to be not a niche at all because of the wide scope of reality that it embraces. Second, all professions to some degree deal with issues within the person-in-the-environment configuration, or the adaptation of the individual to external systems. Education, for example, focuses on the interaction and process of the student with the knowledge-learning environment. Other professions are also involved with person-in-the-environment issues, such as medicine, law, public health, and counseling. Social work's claim to this niche is a weak one. Problems are also present with the attribute of a body of systematic and articulated theory that is applied to practical issues. There is an absence of an organizing theory, or in the perspective of postmodernism, a metanarrative, from which social work practition-

ers can structure and organize their professional activities. Tucker (1996) frames this limitation as the absence of a problematic, or central organizing, question. This problem is best illustrated in the policy on concentrations at the graduate level in social work education. Programs have unlimited freedom to select any concentration they wish that is consistent with the purpose of social work (CSWE, 1994) and if there is a coherent theoretical foundation to support them. Given the lack of boundaries with the person-in-the-environment construct, the theories to be selected can approach infinity. Those who adhere to a postmodern perspective for social work practice argue that theory should be generated situationally and from within the language community of the client. This approach eschews a theory, or set of theories, as a foundation for the entire profession. Indeed, one social work leader argues that the application of imposed theory by practitioners represents a pernicious use of power and is unprofessional (Hartman, 1992).

It is difficult to assess the status of social work with respect to the attribute of societal sanction because there are no agreed-upon measures. Resources are allocated to a vast range of social services, but this only indicates support to meet a variety of human needs and not for the profession of social work per se. The same difficulty pertains to the attribute of knowledge development. Social workers are increasingly involved in research efforts, but there is a paucity of evidence of major discoveries such as those in medicine or the physical sciences. Nor is there evidence that the knowledge produced has made a difference in the world of practice. Perhaps the biggest deficiency in this area pertains to the mechanism and process by which professional journal editorial boards judge what shall be published. Pardeck (1992) and Epstein (1990) have provided compelling evidence that social work editorial boards do not possess the distinction and achievement levels to make informed judgments about whether journal manuscripts should be approved for publication. Since professional journals are the primary mechanism by which new information is transmitted to practitioners, it is absolutely necessary that those who judge the quality of manuscripts possess the required competence.

On the first-order attributes of articulated education and licensure, social work demonstrates some strength. The Council on So-