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A Critique of Family Case Workers 1900–1930: Women Working With Women

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Case records from a charity organization/family case work agency in the early century provide means for evaluating the interaction of nascent social workers with female heads of poor households receiving relief 1900–1930. Class differences and social control appear in retrospect as defining certain elements of this activity; although social workers provided needed material resources, positive impact on poor women's lives was limited by workers' lack of knowledge and unquestioning commitment to traditional values. Casework, however, is shown as a complex process with concerned leaders in social work trying to shape professional behavior and recipient families engaged in their own problem solving processes.

Early twentieth century urban America appears in photographs as newly built factory smokestacks and crowded tenements—"home" for the families of poorly paid workers. Behind this was an ironic pattern of social relations wherein certain industrial capitalists created misery for the working class in the name of progress—and profit—while asserting civic responsibility by sitting on the boards of charities constituted to remedy the blight of poverty. Some historians have concluded, therefore, that social control was the driving intent of social welfare organizations. Rather than primarily acting out of humanitarian concern or compassion, those with economic authority are judged to have used relief to dilute expression of class conflict and to pressure adoption of middle class manners1 (Gettleman, 1963, pp. 325–327, 417–421; Jones, 1979, pp. 75, 76; Kogut, 1970,

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While this interpretation rightly draws attention to the interests of elite male power in interlocking board rooms, the scholarship too often stops short of examining how ideology translated into actual organizational activity and the degree to which it was successful. To accomplish this includes asking: Who were the persons engaged with the poor on a daily basis and what did they do? How receptive was the lower class to either help or “control” at the hands of others? Answering these questions reveals charity work in poor neighborhoods as an uneven and complex interaction primarily among women. It was activity characterized by both haphazard and controlling approaches to problem solving which reflected class difference and ignorance, but also activity whereby recipients set some limits.

At charity organization societies (COS) and most other social service agencies in the early century, front-line employees were females who were expected to carry out the mission of the sanctioning boards while identifying themselves with the developing social work profession (Becker, 1963, pp. 255–261; Chambers, 1986, pp. 1, 6–8, 21; Rauch, 1975, pp. 241–259). The needy families they met frequently lived in households that today would be defined as part of the “feminization of poverty”. Women with children and old women alone came within agencies’ purview, but two parent households were represented as well in which a man’s presence carried no economic guarantee. Here a wife was more than an equal partner in the scramble for economic survival and it was she who was left to negotiate with sources of formal relief. Thus, contact on front porches and at kitchen tables between middle class nascent professionals and lower class, often desperate, women characterized much of urban charity activity (Berg, 1978, pp. 156, 170, 199, 222, 267; Rauch, 1975, p. 256). Eventually this would come to be defined as the meeting of a social worker and a client in the process of family case work.

Understanding the process of this interaction and the constraints on activity of both female parties is essential to a thorough evaluation of the COS as an urban institution, of the roots
of the social casework profession, and of the recipient experience of the urban poor.

Research is based on the Minneapolis COS established in 1884 as Associated Charities, whose records are located today in the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota. This collection includes over 30,000 individual family case records written or dictated by social workers in repeated encounters with the poor over half a century\(^4\). A sample of 300 cases opened between 1900–1930 was selected for use here, each included a face sheet for demographic information and pages of text—usually with great detail describing an applicant’s material situation, family history, and experience in the city and with the agency. Bits of dialogue were included within quotation marks. Clients and kin sent notes which became attached to their records along with medical and school reports and pertinent news clippings\(^5\). While case records reveal the interaction between paid workers and the poor, administrative reports and early professional literature enable comparison between what did occur and the “experts” assumptions at the time about what should take place.

Associated Charities (AC) was chartered with the vision of centralizing relief applications city wide and coordinating—with great discretion— all responses to them\(^6\) (Associated Charities, 1909, pp. 16, 17; Atwater, 1893, pp. 240–244; Hudson, 1908; Shutter, 1923, p. 110). By the early 1900s however, AC like other COS in the century, veered from this mission and emphasized organization in other directions (Katz, 1986, pp. 80–84; Lewis, 1977, pp. 98–100; Warner, et al., 1930; Watson, 1922). A busy employment bureau had been established where worthy individuals were matched to the city’s demand for menial labor. A legal aid department and a corps of volunteer nurses offered services to the indigent, and paid employees investigated and intervened in myriad family problems. By 1922 the state had established a public employment bureau, and legal aid and nursing both had become independent programs; the total emphasis on “family work” was therefore formally acknowledged with a name change to Family Welfare Association (FWA) revised later to Minneapolis Family and Children’s Service, an agency still in full operation today\(^6\).
The shift to family work was reflected in the title of the national organ that linked similar local agencies across the country. The American Association of Societies for Organizing Charity became the American Association for Organizing Family Social Work and finally the Family Welfare Association of America. The nature of family case work interactions at AC/FWA in Minneapolis resembled that in similar private social welfare agencies elsewhere during the early decades of the century.

The Challenge Of Developing Professional Intervention

Female benevolent societies flourishing in antebellum America took on the task of visiting the poor at home (Ambramovitz, 1988, p. 151; Gratton, 1985, p. 5; Rosenberg, 1971, pp. 189–193, 207). Later city COS organized “friendly visiting” as a fundamental strategy to determine if the needy should be found eligible for aid and as means to inspire and uplift them. Agencies often provided guidelines for this contact between classes and in 1899 Mary Richmond, later the author of case work publications for the Russell Sage Foundation, compiled Friendly Visiting Among the Poor as a handbook. The act of visiting by middle and upper class ladies was to include the “intimate and continuous knowledge and sympathy with a poor family’s joys, sorrows, opinions, feelings, and entire outlook upon life” (Richmond, 1899, p. 180). Theoretically the family that had such regard from an outsider would develop the ability to rise above the negatives in its own situation. Over time, however, neither the corps of volunteers, the relationships, nor the change in character had been achieved in many places.

By the early twentieth century ladies in the Friendly Visiting Conference at the Minneapolis AC had reorganized as the Relief and Service Committee concentrating their efforts on studying civic issues, discussing the problems of particular case families, and raising funds. This money, in addition to funds from the agency’s general budget, was allocated to households for emergency relief or periodic pensions. The paid staff—originally called “agents” and later “social workers”—handled the distribution (Becker, 1964, pp. 57–72; Lloyd, 1971, pp. 80, 81, 138; Lubove, 1965, pp. 10–19). They hoped that short term financial assistance would not simply relieve immediate
want, but would help a family find its way to permanent self-sufficiency. Giving out money, however, was not to be the heart of an agent’s work.

When Associated Charities celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1909 past accomplishments were highlighted but the intent of festivities was to look to the future. As keynote speaker, Julia Lathrop from Chicago’s Hull House emphasized the important development of “professionalism” with the use of paid—not volunteer—staff relying on a body of knowledge that took human difference into account (Associated Charities, 1909, pp. 36-40; Survey, 1910, pp. 762-764). Lathrop was advocating changes already taking place in many agencies, but as Associated Charities moved into its second twenty-five years, developing a professional approach to work became an agency priority. With paid staff this COS and others had to define an intervention in people’s lives that was distinguishable from the untutored help of friends or neighbors and from efforts of other professionals—for example, those in medicine or law. For years the visiting nurse corps at AC had been providing basic health care to the poor in their homes and giving advice about nutrition and hygiene, but agents were to have greater goals than good health. Their broad intervention in family life was judged successful if it resulted in economic self-sufficiency. Efforts to this end also had to have a definable technique and objective enough impact to justify training agents and paying them wages (Associated Charities, 1911, pp. 14, 15; 1913, pp. 13, 24, 28, 31, 43; Leighninger, 1987, pp. 27-32; McKnight, 1917, p. 38).

When Frank J. Bruno came in 1914 to direct the Minneapolis COS after years of charity work in New York City, he took charge of this accelerating movement toward professionalism. Soon after arriving he sent a series of letters to his old friend Mary Richmond asking advice and expressing his concern that staff develop as a group both “autonomous” and “accountable.” To better advance these goals, Bruno spurred the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota to develop a training program for social workers where he himself taught for a time. Until he left in 1925 to head a new social work program, which became the George Warren Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, his director’s reports to the Board cautioned
that agents were underpaid and overworked, a condition that led to high turnover, not good case work\textsuperscript{10} (Associated Charities, 1910, p. 12; Becker, 1963, p. 256).

The fact of low pay and large caseloads is not a surprising revelation; less known is the concern among social work leaders at that time about the quality of case work and their search for means to improve it. When Mary Richmond’s text, *Social Diagnosis*, was published in 1917, Bruno among others saw it as a turning point (Bruno, 1928, p. 203; Bruno, 1957, p. 186; Chambers, 1963, pp. 97, 98; Salsberry, 1927, pp. 153–157; Vandiver, 1980, p. 29). It provided an explicit framework for investigation of families within a broad social context that included attention to a family’s economic resources, ethnicity and culture, kin, neighbors, employers, physicians, and any others who might be aware of their situation and act as resources. This conceptual understanding placed individuals within an environmental context and at the Minneapolis Associated Charities a dog-eared copy of the book was passed among staff. Supervisors made marginal comments on case records, “What does Mary Richmond say?” and “check Soc. Diag.

In looking at this book today, it is clear that Richmond emphasized data collection and assessment almost to the exclusion of planned intervention. A comparison of the Minneapolis case records opened between 1900–1910 with those of 1920–1930 shows that families in the latter period were somewhat less likely to receive needed material relief and practical services while the agency was more likely to interview secondary sources to gain understanding of a family’s plight\textsuperscript{11}. Although professional literature in the 1920s was already moving beyond the environmental focus to psychological insight as the key to understanding human behavior, that was not yet an approach implemented by agents responsible for case work in poor neighborhoods (Field, 1980; Leighninger, 1987, pp. 16, 17). Thus, social work students in internships from the University learned part of their “craft” by going to City Hall to “verify” the births, deaths, marriages and mortgages of case families. The result was an amassing of objective information and interviews in the records whose practical use was unclear (Strode and Strode, 1940, pp. 25–28, 30–39).
In 1920 the Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies with leadership from Bruno enlisted AC social workers and those from other organizations—Red Cross, Big Brothers, Children's Protective Society, County and University Hospitals—to undertake a self-study of family case work in the city. One purpose was to uncover duplication of effort among agencies, but Bruno also hoped to evaluate his staff's understanding of family intervention. When the surveys were analyzed, he was disturbed. His agency had steadfastly attempted to provide educated supervisors, to require ongoing training, and encourage agents to read from the growing body of literature. (By 1922, family case work had developed its own journal titled The Family, forerunner to Social Casework.) Yet it appeared to him that staff lacked an understanding of the difference between providing service and creating a plan for action\(^1\). This struggle to improve case work continued with his successor, Joanna C. Colcord, who also came to Minneapolis after experience at the New York City COS. She took up the same challenge of establishing professionalism and wrote optimistically in 1926 that the quality of work at AC/FWA contained "more thought and less motion" than in the past (FWA, 1926, pp. 18-20).

Sophonisba Breckinridge, shaping the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration during these years, wrote that social work education could not develop far without textbooks that included actual case records showing family dynamics and agent intervention. But this goal was difficult to achieve, she said, because records had to be disguised for confidentiality in a way that did not reduce content. More serious, however, was the fact that "good" case work was very hard to find in the agency records she had seen (Breckinridge, 1924, pp. vii-x, 42). Others teaching and writing in the field also critcized social work case records as "hodge-podge" collections of facts and impressions, a stream of consciousness on the part of both workers and family members with moral judgments scattered throughout (Bruno, 1957, pp. 184–189; Mowrer, 1927, pp. 60–62, 177–187, 241; Rich 1931, pp. 98, 105; Richmond, 1922, p. 28). One critic within social work at the time described workers and all the information they gathered into records as "overladen ships" on "uncharted seas" (Wallerstein, 1920, pp. 17, 18).
By the 1920s educated women and men across the nation were attempting to give direction for establishing a purposeful social welfare work force. Clarity was growing about the range of variables in dealing with people, but some experts in the field also realized that much of the family work was being done haphazardly. The profession was developing an approach to work, but at different tempos at different levels within the proliferating private agencies (Chambers, 1963, pp. 87–106; Leighninger, 1987, pp. 8–21).

What Actions Followed the Knock on The Door?

Serious family work began with an initial home visit and the first page of almost every case record included a vivid description of this meeting. Not every family lived in impoverished circumstances but when agents first knocked on a door and then looked in or were let in, they often perceived want without the need for extended conversation. In responding to the malnutrition, ill health, inadequate housing and clothing that often were apparent, a worker from AC/FWA could make available small amounts of cash relief, coal or grocery orders. Case records show that arranging in-kind aid was a primary role of staff at the agency and usually this material relief was accompanied by what social workers today would call "Information and Referral." Such services are illustrated here in a particular case included in the 1920 self-study that Bruno directed.

For each family record selected as part of this evaluation, the designated social worker had to answer a set of questions explaining her actions. The first of these read, "What were the problems you discovered in investigation?" Existing drafts of the study questionnaires show that workers wrote in, crossed out, and reorganized what they wanted to say about their efforts. The list below was the end result of editing on a description of initial problems in an immigrant household:

1. Mr. L. in City Hospital with pleurisy and possibly TB.
2. Anna, 17, only support of the family.
3. Mr. L. drank.
4."Joe," a boarder, and a cripple, was supported.
5. Mr. L's relatives thought themselves "above" the L's and did nothing to help them.
6. Anna and her father did not get along. Anna had previously left home because he drank and beat her, stayed out late at nights.
7. Mrs. L. had rheumatism.
8. Stephan dull mentally.
9. Mrs. L. still nursing year old baby.
10. Mrs. L. spoke little English.
11. Mr. L. spoke little English.
12. Anna out late at night, lived away from home at times. (This entire phrase had a line through it; marks on the work sheet suggest #6 was the preferred statement of the problem.)
13. Bad Housing.
14. Children exposed to TB.

In answer to this situation AC/FWA eventually gave the family a total of $157.10 in direct cash relief, but much of the social worker's activity was directed at consulting and involving 38 other persons and organizations in the case. The County Poor Relief sent "Joe", the boarder (who also appeared to be a relative), to the County Poor Farm. The clothing project run by the public school system furnished garments for the children; the infant Welfare Society "taught" Mrs. L. (the mother of 7 other children) how to wean the baby. The City Health Department registered Mr. L. at the metropolitan tuberculosis sanitarium; Big Sisters placed Anna in a private home; teachers at another school pledged to show "special interest" in one of the younger children, and a neighborhood grocer agreed to take a second mortgage on a lot and shed the couple owned. The worker decided on and accomplished certain referrals, but she carried the case further.

After some time the agent came to believe that the "wisest thing to do would be to sell the lot and lumber" and use the proceeds as income to cover family expenditures. Mr. L. had left the sanitarium with the onset of other physical and mental problems and refused to return; he was too ill to work but would not agree to selling the property. His drinking was reported as being over; however, no impetus for this abstention was mentioned nor was it recorded that his brutality ended as
well. The family had found its own solution to the problem of income; Mr. L. stayed home providing child care while Mrs. L. went out to work. Anna received “general supervision,” including encouragement for employment and for reading “good books” as opposed to “dime novels.” And the relationship with her father was judged to be “somewhat more friendly.” At the time the case record was studied, the worker still hoped Mr. L. would get well enough to hold a job so that Mrs. L. could stay home. Poor health and the absence of English continued as obstacles.

The list of family problems that the social worker initially cited mixed value judgments and objective observations. There was little sense that some concerns held priority for intervention or that issues were interrelated. What were the causes and consequences of the poor health? What was the role of ethnicity in kin relations, in child rearing? Was Mrs. L. vulnerable to the same brutality that Anna suffered? And who in the family and strengths on which to build? Some difficulties were largely beyond the direct intervention of a single worker worker—for example Mr. L.’s deteriorating health. Other problems were almost ignored—his drinking and violence. No simple solutions existed and the L. family could challenge case workers at a contemporary county social service. As the case stands here it suggests what Bruno feared as workers providing service without a plan for action and what Colcord called “motion.” The activity is notable, however for it shows how a family case worker made numerous contacts and moved assertively to find resources in a city wide network.

A social worker from AC/FWA was accustomed to taking the street car and traveling through poor areas—not just to visit cases but to locate landlords to forestall evictions or postpone a demand for rent. Agents hunted for what they believed would be better family housing and they talked with employers about providing jobs or advancing a paycheck for a particularly “worthy” household. They solicited relief funds from wealthy women and men on the agency Board and sought donations from others around the city (Chambers, 1986, pp. 10, 21). At times of crisis a worker could be the person to “rescue” a family,
arriving at the door with groceries the day the cupboard went bare or bringing a coal order when the temperature dipped.

Such arrangements by staff had another impact as well. As these social workers developed individual proficiencies in seeking and successfully negotiating resources from throughout the city, many accompanied assistance and referral with license to recommend and criticize family behavior. In this way they sought "control." Questions put to the neighborhood grocer might reveal a family's ill-advised use of credit or lack of frugality in purchasing habits and armed with such information a social worker could demand reform. Neighbors would be asked about liquor bottles in the garbage can or union suits on the clothesline. With the strength of the agency's reputation behind them and growing confidence in their own professional status, unmarried middle class social workers appear to have had few qualms about telling wives and mothers what constituted proper homemaking, child rearing, and family relations. When the giving of such advice led to debate (dutifully recorded in the records), social workers would on occasion threaten court procedures—although this was rarely executed. Mary Richmond recognized this phenomenon and cautioned the profession not to confuse an agent's "acts of seeming selflessness" in working for a family with "an autocratic role in center stage" of family life (Richmond, 1922, p. 171; Lubove, 1965, p. 23).

Constraints on What Social Workers Knew To Do

Records show the high number of cases assigned to each agency worker; figures through 1913 vary from a low ration of one worker for 81 families to a high of 1:225 families. As a result of this responsibility, time given each case was uneven. Whether any one particular family felt agency attention to be a helpful needed resource or unwanted control, an agent did not even have the personal resources to impose either benevolence or judgement on all the households she knew (Associated Charities, 1910, p. 31; 1911, p. 16). Thus, the records show that social workers dealing with multi-problem households often did what was most easily accomplished. Getting clothes for a child in rags was a much simpler task than getting the mother to
agree to follow through on a doctor's appointment at a hospital. Clothing, food, and fuel answered needs on which the two women could agree. They would easily disagree, however, as to whether a relative was lazy and should be asked to move out or whether the family should uproot and leave a neighborhood with a "bad" reputation.

In a 1910 case a new widow's own plans for self-sufficiency included renting household rooms to male boarders. The agent heard from neighbors that these men had been seen sitting in the kitchen drinking, with the widow joining them at times. When questioned she denied the allegation and refused to turn them out. The agent's response some months later was to give no more coal as long as these men would receive part of the heat, but clothes would still be sent to the children. Disagreement might be raised forcefully by a worker for a time, but most often the records indicate the controversial issue dropped from sight in the case record without further action. Poor women could refuse to follow a worker's suggestion and "win" over time.

Colcord wrote that when staff were overworked with high caseloads, she could see by the ledger that cash relief rather than case work became workers' preferred strategy. And the female director who followed her made a similar assessment suspecting that many cases were being closed quickly after opening simply because workers were too busy to undertake much action (FWA, 1926, pp. 18-20; Salsberry, 1920, p. 4). Therefore regardless of intent, time constrained a worker's functioning with a family. Agents, however, acted under constraints which were less apparent than those of time and large caseloads; knowledge base and values limited the quality of help they were prepared to give families in need.

In retrospect it is clear that these women—as other professionals then and even now in certain settings—lacked scientifically based information about human behavior. For example, they knew little about physical or mental disability although they used many labels such as "mentally queer," "half wit," "imbecile." In this study a limited number of adults and children were placed in state institutions by court intervention, but placement was usually presented as a fact in the records with very little reference to the behavior observed and judged.
Culture and ethnicity were given slight attention and a third of the time workers neglected to indicate nationality on the face sheet. Agents might urge that an immigrant enroll in settlement house English classes but records do not simultaneously reveal an attempt to understand how ethnic culture shaped behavior. The one short-lived exception to this neglect was the agency’s employment of a "Slavik worker" in 1913. Such immigrants were a small minority compared with Scandinavians and Germans who make up at least a quarter of the case load, but the annual report explained that these Eastern Europeans did not understand America, nor did America understand them. Within a few years, however, the person was dropped from the staff roster without comment (Associated Charities, 1910, p. 32; 1913, p. 11).

Across lines of ethnicity, more than a fifth of all families in this study coped with the drunkenness of male members, but with this problem also agents appeared to understand little. Women complained vigorously that husbands drank too much and neighbors corroborated reports that men staggered home from taverns to abuse their wives and hungry children (See also Gordon, 1988, p. 143). For some time of these men arrest and a sentence in the workhouse followed public fighting or disturbing the peace. This was a problem police dealt with, however; few female social workers had actual contact with these men and initially were falsely relieved when Prohibition seemed to promise solution to the problems of drink. After 1918 the police made fewer arrests for drunkenness and the state closed an inebriate hospital but some wives said that drinking moonshine made their husbands act worse than legal liquor ever had (Rosheim, 1978, p. 123). When the records do show agents intervening, it was to recommend a "good strong lecture" as remedy. Social workers would seek out a brother, employer, priest, or policeman to persuade—or scare—a habitual drinker into sobriety. For this serious family problem, social workers offered little else.

Other vital issues related to family well-being occurred with scant acknowledgement. Social workers often wrote sympathetically about a cluster of pitiful looking children huddled around a mother’s skirt, and over time they would add birth dates to
the record’s face sheet, but contraception was discussed only if the woman in the house expressed her own desperate concern. Some mothers were apologetic for pregnancy, vowing that they had been “careful.” Others would say simply that they wanted no more children. such comments were written into the record but usually without report of what had been the worker’s response. Occasionally a dialogue was repeated wherein a woman directly asked how to prevent pregnancy, and the best a worker could do—according to the records—was to advise her to see a public health nurse or doctor. One particular case was unusual in that the worker became more involved.

In 1927, Mrs. M., the pregnant mother of four, began a series of conversations about birth control with her agent. She was resigned to the forthcoming birth—although she had experienced miscarriages and the doctor had told her she was working “too hard.” Babies “had been coming every year,” and “she knew she would never want to have more children although she was only 31 she thought she had enough to take to care of.” After the birth of the fifth child, the agent sent her—to no avail—to a public health nurse to ask about sterilization. The nurse, in turn, referred her to doctors and the woman reported, “Has asked doctors but they refused to tell her any preventive measures and would not sterilize her.” The record went on:

She said if she had another child she wanted to die as she knew she would go crazy. She was almost crazy from those she had as has had such a terrible time with each one. Mr. M. always resented each child as it was born altho he liked his children afterward. He was cruel to her when he could not have intercourse & she would not permit it while she was pregnant. He hounded her to death. She could not do anything with him when he got this way.... She used contraceptive measures such as some kind of suppository when she could afford to buy them and a douche. She thought the 2 together would be more preventive, but had found out when she became preg with last child, that they were not.

The agent “promised to do what she could” and within a month told the mother that a “vocat test” might be sched-
uled. “On the basis of the results of this test something might be arranged whereby she would never have to have any more children, she said she certainly would do this . . . She would be willing to go any time . . . .” It appeared that the worker thought low scores could justify sterilization on the basis of “feeblemindedness” or perhaps insanity. Discussion in the record about this matter ends here—for whatever reason; seemingly no test—and clearly no sterilization—took place. Through the next years new agents took up the case and this mother had two more live births in addition to miscarriages and abortions. It is unclear whether that scheme to control contraception was one female agent’s independent and inventive response to another woman, or if it was unwritten policy that certain social workers implemented to skirt legal prohibitions and social criticism. It was obviously controversial for on the front page of the record the following unusual note was written in bold letters, “NO ONE TO READ THIS RECORD WITHOUT THE PERMISSION OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY.” Not until 1931 did the chairwoman of the Relief and Service Committee suggest to the larger Board that it was time to take a stand on the matter of “b.c.” in spite of the fact that some Board members had concerns about association with the concept of “Voluntary Parenthood” ¹⁵ (Gordon, 1976, p. 256). For years the role social workers’ played was to encourage prenatal care and hunt for layettes. They, as many of the women visited, were resigned to the inevitability of conception and birth.

The middle class backgrounds of individual agents as well as attitudes within the social work profession itself contributed to ignorance of and a sense of propriety about domestic sexual relations. Social workers felt free to record a poor woman’s lament over “unreasonable” sexual demand and to include confirmations from her female relatives that the husband was a “brute.” In these records, however, social workers rarely defined what constituted “unreasonable” sexual expectation, what had been their own line of inquiry, and more importantly, their own response to women in such situations. Although social workers’ own professional lives included an assertive independence that ran counter to normative expectations for female behavior at this time, they worked within an institution that held to a
traditional ideal for family life. A nuclear family was to be self supporting through the honest work effort of the man, and it was to be harmonious and healthy through efforts of the mother at home caring for both husband and children (Abramovitz, 1988, pp. 36–40; FWA, 1926, p. 26; Richmond, 1930, p. 178). The reality that agents encountered, however, frequently departed from these norms. Too much drinking made some men a physical threat to their families and the absence of effective contraception kept families expanding regardless of women's wishes and financial resources. Even in households where domestic relations were not at odds, unemployment and ill health interrupted expectations for economic support. Men abandoned their families, and women and children walked the streets hoping to find work.

At professional meetings throughout the country social workers and reformers debated the proper response to desertion and the problems of child labor; there was little said, however, about the issue of women's physical abuse (Gordon, 1988, pp. 253–267; Pleck, 1983). A sixth of the women in this study, particularly those who complained about a husband's drinking, talked also of being afraid. This fear would often be expressed in the records as part of a discussion as to how a husband had "changed." There were many variations of the following report: "She says he is cruel to her now." Some men, described usually with the adjective "crazy," kept a gun under the bed or in the shed and had terrorized wives, children, and sometimes neighbors. Social workers reported these stories, but as with comments about sex, they rarely acknowledged in writing what—if any—had been their reaction to such violence. This reluctance stands in great contrast to quickness in recording comments or dialogues with women over proper housekeeping standards and appropriate menus. In a sixth of the households a husband's failure to provide financial support was an ongoing issue written into the record, with the court room always held out as a possible course for corrective action. Workers more than wives were frequently in favor of pressing non-support charges, but a man's cruelty did not elicit similar quick insistence on action. Social workers reported no arguments with wives as to whether such men should be turned over to the law. They did not check
back diligently to find out if the husband was still brutal as they did to monitor what became of this weekly pay check.

In partial explanation for this silence it is important to note that some of these perpetrators were discussed in the past tense; they had abandoned their homes (although desertion rarely was permanent) and women were simply remembering the misery of what had been with mixed feelings about the value of such men's return. Even the husbands living at home were rarely around for confrontation when agents visited. These female social workers did not register regret about the lack of opportunity to face men and they might well have been wary of opposing males who had bad reputations and might not take kindly to lectures. On the few occasions that records reported what now would be termed "marriage counseling" with both spouses present, social workers recommended patience and mutual pledges of kindness (Gordon, 1988, pp. 280-285). The female agents—who were quick to hold males accountable in traditional roles as economic supporters—accepted the tradition of patriarchy wherein women were subject to physical and sexual abuse. These same women often were exploited in the work place and here too, social workers indirectly participated.

Simply because men should work, or a man was in the household, did not mean that a wife and mother could escape the need for wage work to bring home income. Agents sometimes encouraged wives not to find jobs because their husbands might grow indolent and neglected children would suffer. Women alone, however, were assisted in taking up provider roles if no other options for self-sufficiency existed. In 39 of the 300 households agents gave direction in finding work or forcefully encouraged women to move into wage labor. In a home visit that was not atypical, the worker lectured and cajoled a young, newly deserted and despairing mother "to get up & dress & go to PH [Pillsbury Settlement House with both an employment bureau and day nursery] so she might "get work for tomorrow." 16

Job opportunities for either sex in the lower class were characterized by hard work, irregularity, and scant pay. Three fourths of the 300 in these cases were recorded as working intermittently and social researchers at the time observed, "if there
are few good servants, there is always an army of charwomen available.” A sixth spoke of cleaning business buildings at night; a larger group cleaned in private homes and taxed their backs leaning over laundry tubs. In 1918 local ladies’ clubs worked with the Minnesota State Department of Labor to survey the wage work of over 50,000 women in Minneapolis. Findings showed one half were mothers and one third were earning less than the $10 a week considered “below minimum subsistence”; the next one third were earning at “minimum subsistence.” The menial labor providing these wages, however, was the same activity that agents perceived as “opportunities” to be found for clients.

Social workers informed ladies on agency committees about honest and hard working charwomen whose labor was available at the going meager rate. Occasionally agents themselves hired a female client to do their laundry. In 1917 a worker recorded a conversation with a young widow who was receiving her monthly rent money from the Relief Service Committed. She was doing laundry for two of its members known to be “so much interested in her” situation. The widow, however, felt she was being underpaid and expressed the belief “she is worth $2.00 now with everything as high as it is,” (rather than the $1.60 a day she had been receiving). A note a few days later reported her price for laundry had risen as warned. But such cases were rare, most women were desperate to find a regular place of employment and often squandered their own health working for lowest wages17 (Brady, 1948, pp. 171-175; Cadberry, et al., 1907, p. 110; Monthly Labor Review, 1920, pp. 543-547).

Over decades this COS/family case work agency in Minneapolis could measure rate and incidence of local unemployment by the volume of requests for help. During its first years much of the office activity centered around the employment bureau, and calls for jobs tied up the phone lines. When the region experienced its periodic recessions, the executive director participated with other community leaders in committees focused on unemployment, allocations of city funded jobs such as shoveling snow and raking leaves, and the possibility of job creation. Yet case records in the agency demonstrate that social workers talked to individual family members as if an earnest search for
work would doubtlessly prove fruitful, and that once a job had been procured, it would deliver means for self-sufficiency and thereby end the need for agency assistance.

Agents were willing to criticize others' life styles and values and made quick judgments about what would be best for the families they met; they were unreflective, however, of the values guiding their own judgments. Social workers accepted the exigencies brought on by industrial capitalism and supported traditional definitions of family relations in spite of painful contradictions they knew through experiences in the field. They were able, however, to provide short term material relief and establish interagency links as shown in the example from the 1920 self-study. Social workers could and did arrange for children to spend a week at summer camp or pay for false teeth needed by a woman ashamed to leave her home. They helped immigrants take out citizenship papers and found lumber and volunteers to repair dangerously sagging back steps. Short term tangible material needs were responded to, and for many families this was all they sought from the strangers at the private agency.

Families’ Interaction With Social Workers

Family case work involved two parties—each of whom had questions about the other and an agenda of concern. In a particular record one woman’s logical question “why do you come?” continues as “why do you come to bother me again? How many more are there at the FWA office that can call...?” This was repeated twice as a wife confronted a social worker coming up the walk. Her anger arose from her belief that the agency had bungled efforts to locate her deserted husband. As she perceived the current state of affairs, “no good”—only “grief”—had come from agency involvement. The worker’s inquiries in the neighborhood had led to “all” of the woman’s friends hearing rumors of her troubles and she refused any more discussions with anyone from AC/FWA. Just as agency directors could be both hopeful and disappointed with the quality of case work, women like this one had expectations which went amiss.

The majority of families, however, that became known at AC/FWA had initially expected nothing. Among the 300 house-
holds in this study, two-thirds first came to agency attention through referral. It was a neighbor, relative, visiting nurse or teacher who assumed that the agency could and would do something to help. They called AC/FWA or sent notes and the need in such instances was routinely written up as “investigation and aid.” When a woman—or more seldomly a man—first came in on their own, the request was not for broadly based intervention but most usually for something specific: a job (even after the employment bureau was officially closed), a loan to rent a dray for moving, underwear for school children or a layette for another one expected. As this request was followed up by the home visit and further questions, the agent assumed a more general mission—“the knowledge and sympathy of family life” that Mary Richmond had first spoken about combined with concern about proper living and economic self-sufficiency. These goals almost always meant that a family got more than it asked for—both positively and negatively.

As agents attempted to be thorough in the investigative approach of Social Diagnosis, they encouraged women to expand on the details of what had happened in the past. This also meant that for homemakers who were ill, lonely or frustrated, a social worker could play a role of a welcome therapeutic listener. In acts of reciprocity women gave agents flowers from gardens and jars of preserves. Occasionally cordial notes added to case records showed social workers and recipients exchanging warm greetings about children and past experiences years after a case had officially closed. The following letter was sent by one deserted mother who with her children left the city temporarily to visit kin in the country:

Dear Miss Hamilton,

Awfully sorry that we haven’t written sooner but we have been so busy you know how it is when you haven’t seen anyone for a long time. There is so much to say to one another.

We found everyone well here . . .

I will be back the first part of July and put in for a divorce as its no use to go on any longer . . . My
brothers have no time for Mr. C. [her husband] as he always told so much that wasn't true....

Well Miss H. I am all out of news and hope you will answer this letter when you have time.

I am your friend,
(signed—Alice Carrick) 19

At times contact with an agent was appreciated as a supportive relationship between women. Most poor women, however, used social workers functionally as resources. Once a family became a "case"—however that might first take place—its members quickly came to experience how agents had access to a range of material relief, services and opportunities. Many of these were needed and mothers sent children to AC/FWA with notes asking politely one more time for groceries, a load of coal in the winter, or ice in the summer. Whether the requests were recurring or for one time, they did not mean that a woman wanted or would listen to another's advice or suggestions about budgeting her money, spending time with a male friend, or sending a child to school. And while AC/FWA might perceive a family as its "case," the family did not likewise accept such a proprietary relationship. Regardless of agency intent to give help or devise plans, few families "stood still" to listen to all of what was being proposed. For the sake of survival they were engaged in their own processes of decision making and problem solving, and to do so at times meant ignoring or circumventing what others laid out (Stadum, 1988).

Families moved geographically and changed structurally to cope with deprivation. A bad housing situation would be changed for another to save a few dollars or escape eviction—and sometimes to accommodate changes in family size. The fact of the move would become clear to an agent after it had occurred; the social worker would knock on the door only to find that her "case" had disappeared. More usually it was the husband alone who left—whether by death, divorce, desertion or a job search elsewhere—and mothers became single parents. In turn many women moved in with sisters or sent children to board with
kin in the country where the cost of feeding one more mouth was less.

More than half of the families in this set of 300 cases had relatives in the city and state and one third of the women vigorously resisted giving out their names and addresses in answer to agents’ regular requests for their identity. Women also denied or hid involvement by persons who later proved to be helping out. In the following example the social worker did not know assistance was coming from the woman’s father-in-law. “While [agent] was there an elderly man came in & without much explanation laid a beef roast and two large loaves of bread before Mrs. T.” Though usually poor themselves, there was much evidence that kin shared the resources they had and particularly sisters, mothers and daughters came to the aid of one another with nursing and child care. When an elderly bedridden woman reported that her daughter was coming every day to bathe her and change the bed, the social worker suggested that AC/FWA could pay a bit to hire a woman to help out. “Mrs. R. did not think [this] necessary as her daughter would do anything for her that was needed. Mrs. R. seemed to think there was nothing [agent] could do for her...” Successful arrangements for mutual assistance were almost always designed by clients themselves while social workers sought in vain to standardize assistance from a relative as shared living or a monthly stipend. In dealing with friends and relatives, women consistently sought autonomy from the actions of the agency.

As she eked out survival a woman could earn the label of being “cooperative” and “grateful” or “uncooperative” and “ungrateful.” And both kinds of adjectives could be applied to a particular person in the context of a single record. While social workers would continue to offer assistance even the in the midst of disagreement and impatience with the family and suspicion that the truth was not fully known, agents seemed not to realize that women chose to be selective about parts of their lives open for inspection and intervention21 (Gratton, 1985, p. 5; Katz, 1985, p. 24). There was a rational pattern to both the cooperation and its absence that characterized recipient women’s behavior.

Driven by responsibility for children, many women in the records appeared dogged in piecing together bits of income
by keeping a boarder, doing laundry in a private home, and scrubbing office floors. They knew how short a distance wages reached and not unlike social workers they developed proficiency in tapping community resources. Necessity required knowledge as to which churches, societies, agencies and institutions had what kind of assistance available, and while agents could make important contacts for clients, women pursued these on their own as well. Although the lives of these poor women are available to historians because need brought them within the purview of AC/FWA, "dependent" would be an inaccurate adjective to use. Need forced an assertive set of behaviors that were often on the edge of despair but that included an independence that social workers could not control and often could not clearly perceive.

Conclusion

Outsiders' intervention in the details of poor families' lives evolved out of home visits made by middle class do-gooders. During the early twentieth century people with connections to urban power established formal private COS and young women who identified with the developing social work profession became the principle employees responsible for family work. Leaders in the field at the time read the case records generated by these women and criticized the haphazard approach to the ultimate goal of family self-sufficiency that agency and profession shared. A contemporary reading of the same records shows an array of worker activity and inactivity that adds detail to the concept of control as implemented by social services historically.

Many factors helped define the parameters of COS case work. Individual agent's time and energy had limits and their training did not prepare them to understand the precarious living in poor neighborhoods. The profession seeking to supervise them was also amateur in its understanding of human behavior and the social and economic environment.

More importantly, social workers in this study were representatives of a prominent agency and were captive to the assumption that their own views and that of the dominant society were automatically superior. Relations between females char-
acterized family case work but this did not mean that female identification defied the class lines existing between giver and recipient. Social workers had their job to do and contemporary professional concepts of “contract” and “self-determination” acknowledging limits to workers’ rights to decide and impose were yet to be developed. In examining the case records, however, it is also clear that workers were only marginally effective in regulating households for the women in these homes selectively and actively resisted intervention as they saw fit. In family case work at private social welfare agencies such as Associated Charities and Family Welfare Association, regardless of the intent—consistent or regular control over the daily lives of clients was rarely possible.

Nascent social workers and the women they met in need both knew how to act assertively but within different sets of constraints; each had separate expectations for what role AC/FWA would play. What agents did best was to create linkages and find short term resources and such practical assistance was usually what people wanted. But many social workers in family case work agencies lacked vision and more critically, they lacked outrage at the pain systematically inflicted by nativism, sexism, and capitalism. The records suggest, however, that the poor never expected that social workers would render social justice. It remains to be seen if the profession holds that expectation for itself.

References


Rosheim, D. L. (1978). The other Minneapolis, or the rise and fall of the gateway, the old Minneapolis skid row. Maquoketa, IA: Andromeda Press.


Endnotes

I owe appreciation to Clarke A. Chambers for the support and suggestions he gave me as I wrote and revised this article over time.

1. In an alternate interpretation Leiby finds those in the COS movement motivated principally by religious ideology and conviction.

2. To examine female dependence and independence in relationships to men and marriage, cases in this study were selected initially to fill set quotas related to categories of marital status: married with man at home, married with man gone due to desertion, institutionalization or other reason, man gone due to divorce or death. Upon reading the records, however, it became clear how volatile marital status was among this needy population. Not only does the concept of female headed household need to be re-examined to take into account roles played by women when men were temporarily absent, unemployed or ill, but the number of such households historically needs to be reconsidered. Among the 300 cases in this study, only 122 maintained the same marital status from beginning to end of the case recording period (40% of all cases were closed within 6 months; 80% were closed within 5 years.)

3. Berg claims the new female middle class in the nineteenth century came to understand feminism by involvement in charities benefitting poor and abused women. Material here, however, supports Rauch's questioning of the degree to which friendly visitors were committed to the "aspirations" of the poor women they met in charity work.

4. When Associated Charities/Family Welfare Association became the Minneapolis Family and Children's Service in 1947, approximately 35,000 existing case records from 1895–1945 were microfilmed. These along with 21 linear feet of administrative records from 1889-1961 comprise the Minneapolis Family and Children's Service Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

5. Quotations from case records used here appear as originally written in the records; to honor confidentiality names and initials have been altered with attention given to maintaining ethnicity.

6. See also Folder-Historical, Box 1, FCS Collection.
7. Minutes, Special Board Meeting, August 30, 1922, Folder 1–23–18 to 12–16–24, Box 5, FCS Collection.

8. In this text "agents," "social worker" and "worker," are used interchangeably. Annual Reports from Associated Charities included membership lists of the Friendly Visiting Committee and amount of funds they raised. Discussions about recipient families and advice to agents appears in Minutes, Friendly Visitors Conference ("Visiting" and "Visitors," "Conference" and "Committee" were used interchangeably). Box 7, FCS Collection.

9. See Folder-Historical, Box 1 FCS Collection.

10. Letters, Frank J. Bruno to Mary Richmond, August 25, 1914, September, 1914, and February 16, 1915, Folder-FWA Historical, Box 2; Frank J. Bruno to A. E. Zonne, June 22, 1920, and Report, April 21, 1920 in General Secretary Reports, Box 7, FCS Collection.

11. The 300 cases were divided evenly between those opened during the periods 1900–10 and 1920–30. As examples of change, 105 of the 150 families from the early period received basic material relief and 32 got help dealing with a landlord; in the latter period 82 and 17 did respectively.

12. Letter, Frank J. Bruno to Francis McLean (staff for American Association for Organizing Family Social Work), December 21, 1920, Folders — 12, 13, Self Survey, Box 8, FCS Collection. Administrative reports and sample surveys about the study are also included.

13. This case is written up on survey forms in Folders — 12, 13, Self Survey, Box 8, FCS Collection.


16. Case 1,165 on Reel 114, FCS Collection.

17. Case 707 on Reel 111, FCS Collection.

18. Case 14,901 on Reel 205, FCS Collection.

19. Case 2,385 on Reel 120, FCS Collection.

20. Cases 3,293 and 3,331 on Reel 125, FCS Collection.

21. Katz paraphrases an analysis from G. S. Jones, (1971), Outcast London, pp. 251, 252. London: Oxford Press, that charitable gifts to the needy imposed obligation and the recipient had to express gratitude and humility to continue receiving them. In this study an agent's impatience or distrust often was recorded but did not inevitable lead to case closure or denial of service.