Social Welfare Texts: A Study in the Sociology of Knowledge

Leslie Leighninger
State University of New York, College at Oswego

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Nearly thirty years ago, C. Wright Mills asserted that "present institutions train several types of persons — such as judges and social workers — to think in terms of 'situations.'" "Their activities and mental outlook," he added, "are set within the existent norms of society; in their professional work they tend to have an occupationally trained incapacity to rise above series of 'cases'.... [This] emphasis upon fragmentary, practical problems," Mills continues, "tends to atomize social objectives" and to mitigate against any attempts at social change.1 Mills made these statements in a study aimed at seeking out typical perspectives and major concepts of social pathologists, as exhibited in key text books in the field.2 He assumed that such textual presentations in college courses both reflected current thinking and influenced the conceptualizations and subsequent actions of their readers.

If we were to employ a similar method in examining the perspectives and value commitments of the social work profession, and were to look at present educational approaches to the training of new members, would we find any support for Mills' assumptions? Could such a study suggest ties between the nature of text book presentations and the conceptualizations of their readers? In particular, do major social work texts organize their contents in such a way as to promote or to hinder students' abilities to think analytically about social institutions?

The question about analytical thinking is posed because it seems that some theoretical approach to the study of institutions is paramount to any confrontation with basic social work issues. One might argue that meaningful social work education should aim at developing the ability to think sensitively about one's professional role and the settings and society in which it is carried out. Once in practice, social workers require an analytical framework within which to grapple with such professional problems as: 1) Should social workers concentrate on interacting with individuals and small groups or on changing social conditions; 2) How can the worker reconcile institutional goals and requirements with client needs, and 3) Can a social worker perform as a social change agent, or is he inevitably a force for social control?3


2. By "social pathology" Mills means the sociological field of "social disorganization."

Such questions, particularly the last, have increasingly occupied professional thinking. Social work has been rediscovering its traditional stress on social and institutional change, and this has led to a discrepancy between stated professional goals and aspects of professional training. The social worker as change-agent, "social broker," and "humanizer" of institutions has begun to appear more and more in the literature.\(^4\) Perhaps the most succinct statement of this thrust, viewed in terms of social work education, lies in the following passage from the Council on Social Work Education's 1967 guide for undergraduate programs in social welfare:

> The suggested curriculum...is designed to...foster an understanding and a critical evaluation of the philosophical values which underlie social welfare.... In tracing the origins and development of our current social welfare institutions, emphasis should be placed on previously acquired knowledge regarding the nature of social institutions, the process of institutional innovation and change, the sources of social control. New content should be introduced analyzing the social worker as an agent of social change....\(^5\)

Any such critical evaluation of social welfare values and of the nature of social institutions will largely depend on the student's ability to think analytically about institutional patterns, professional roles, and the relationship of institutions to the larger social structure, and to fit this analysis into a theoretical framework. It follows that a major requirement of social work education should then be a focus on analyzing and comparing agency practice settings, studying the effects of the institution upon individuals within, and relating agencies and institutions to the overall political and economic system. The student would then possess a sociological framework within which to apply his own values to social work goals and practice.

Although I myself would tend to hope for the growth of social action measures as a result of such analytical thinking, this paper does not argue that active social reform or institutional change is in itself always "liberal," humane, or desirable. What does seem important is that any professional education should allow for options of action based on an analysis of the roles of the profession within its institutional settings. Such actions could include supporting the institution when it upholds a desired principle, changing an institution when it violates certain values, or replacing institutions with new structures.

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embodifying specific ideals. The key factor is that decisions are based on a recognition of the issues involved, stemming from a knowledge of the relationships between institutions, individuals, and principles.

Do existing social work texts contribute to a student's recognition of professional values and issues and of the implicit ideological bases of these? The following study contends that they do not, and that their failures are quite similar to those found by Mills in his examination of social pathology texts.

Mills criticized the social pathologists for their "informational" or descriptive approach, and their "failure to consider total social structures." Such an approach, he argued, allows readers to avoid taking stands, and encourages them to ignore any thoughts about total structures of social norms and the relationship of these to distributions of power. Similarly, certain basic social work texts, particularly those used in introductory social welfare courses, present the student with a descriptive, non-analytical picture of an array of social welfare agencies. Those texts which appear to be the most widely used in the area show an almost complete failure to draw conclusions about general institutional or bureaucratic patterns and their relationship to the total social system. This lack of analysis seems related to a particular form of organization within the text books, in which most of the books are divided into separate discussions of different agency settings. Such a division in itself seems to mitigate against comparative and critical approaches to the study of social welfare.

The books examined here are all designed to be used in basic undergraduate and graduate courses on the structure and function of social welfare institutions. The survey includes both widely adopted books and recent texts in the field. The books chosen for this study appear,

7. Both undergraduate and graduate texts were used because each presents basic and introductory material for the student in either level; in fact, several of the texts were used interchangeably in graduate and undergraduate courses.

in fact, to represent the universe of introductory social welfare texts currently in print. It is recognized that text books do not represent a total picture of course material, but it seems obvious that they play a role in shaping course content. This is particularly important in a discussion of introductory courses, which may constitute a student's first close look at social work and social welfare, and where texts may be relied upon more heavily than in advanced courses.

The picture of the field of social welfare presented by most of these texts is that of an unrelated collection of specific agencies and institutions, and of a profession fragmented into a number of practice settings. The fragmentation is illustrated in the following table, which outlines the content organization used in the books surveyed. (see Figure 1).

As this diagram demonstrates, four out of the seven texts devote most of their time to chapter by chapter discussions of specific agency settings. Having once divided the field into seemingly separate practice areas, do these four authors at any point convey a sense of the interrelatedness of the various agencies? Although several of the writers profess to do so, in actuality they rarely make any attempt at the kind of comparative analysis which would be an obvious first step in creating a theoretical perspective. It is as if the very act of separation has precluded thought of comparison. Crampton and Keiser, for example, purport to offer an "integrated approach to social-welfare institutions." Yet in their book, as in the others, each chapter stands as a separate entity, with little comparison made between the institutional settings, and no summary chapter existing to draw common themes together.

Within each chapter, the several authors offer perfunctory and non-critical descriptions of the various social welfare agencies. The practice settings are generally accepted as "givens," immune to processes of social change. That these settings might share certain bureaucratic structures and problems is rarely recognized. Friedlander, in his section on "Public Assistance and Social Insurance," offers a descriptive summary of existing programs. While he discusses certain punitive aspects of welfare legislation, no comments are made regarding internal difficulties in the welfare system or possible alternative programs. The chapter leaves out any reference to the problems of bureaucracies and their implications for the welfare structure. In speaking of "The Impact of Industrialism on the Occupational Ladder," Crampton and Keiser similarly describe various employment and industrial programs in an informative, but never analytic manner. Any reference to the bureaucratic

Social Welfare: Charity to Justice (N.Y.: Random House, 1971);
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Social Welfare: Charity to Justice (N.Y.: Random House, 1971);
Russell E. Smith and Dorothy Zietz, American Social Welfare


Figure 1

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structure seems limited to the level of references to the excess of paper work demanded by the welfare department. In Ferguson as well, the theoretical look at institutional functioning rarely occurs; her only real critique of a setting relates to aspects of public welfare — a relatively safe institution to attack since it is viewed by Ferguson as created largely by "legislators," rather than social workers.12

Do any of the authors offer insights into the role of the social worker within his particular practice setting and the influence of the setting upon him? Once again, stated intentions are not carried out. Crampton and Keiser speak of examining the role of social workers in various institutions, yet their book makes little mention of social workers in reference to any of the institutions or programs discussed.13 Friedlander confines his comments to non-analytical descriptions of social work jobs in particular agency settings, and Ferguson and Fink rarely note the effects of agency frameworks upon individual workers.

The four texts thus ignore any thought of the general phenomenon of institutional influence upon the actions of workers, and do not recognize the possibility of a dilemma arising between meeting clients' needs and fulfilling institutional requirements. For example, in his short discussion of school social work, Friedlander's emphasis lies mainly on the function of social workers in changing attitudes of parents, teachers, and children. Such attitudes need to be altered, he states, when they are "detrimental to the adjustment of the child and to the requirements of the school."14 In a corresponding chapter on school services, Crampton and Keiser describe the major goal of pupil personnel as supporting "the broad objectives of the total educational program."15 Neither book recognizes the possibility of a worker seeking to alter institutional demands to fit the child's needs. Such comments in text books are dangerous; they present a particular stance toward institutions and workers without calling attention to the issues and values involved, and without recognizing that a position has been taken.

Although it is difficult to judge which came first, form or content, the "fields of practice" division in the four texts is also accompanied by a lack of attention to any of the ways in which institutions relate to the larger social structure. All of the texts discuss schools, for example, as separate organizational entities with no relation to a larger social framework. Similarly, Friedlander's description of the welfare system never analyzes the connections between public welfare programs


13. Crampton and Keiser, op. cit., p. 3. The omission seems most glaring in a section on social services to immigrants over the years; here neither social workers or settlement houses are mentioned. pp. 77-79.


15. Crampton and Keiser, op. cit., p. 90.
and the larger political and economic system. None of the four authors make any attempt to pose questions as to why certain institutions exist in the first place, and what functions they might serve within the larger system.

It is not the immediate concern of this paper to ascertain why some social work text writers avoid a theoretical approach to their subject. We might note in passing, however, that these failures to discuss institutional patterns, professional roles, and relationships of agencies to larger structures are accompanied by a general tone of optimism and naively regarding social institutions and social change. Friedlander, for example, makes the assumption that social reforms are brought about for purely humanitarian reasons. Such optimism is linked to a more pernicious tendency to view existing institutions as "given," in which change is seen only in terms of the improvement of the social work role within the particular setting. Again, one danger seems to be that positions have been taken without explicit analysis or confrontation of the issues.

The absence of an analytical sociological framework in these texts seems particularly puzzling when we consider the present needs and dimensions of social work practice. It is paradoxical that while many current texts present a "field of practice" division which obviates an analytical framework, the social work profession itself has been gradually evolving toward a unified state where analytic thinking is much more possible. As the following brief look at the history of social work indicates, the general trend in the profession has been a move away from emphasis on adherence to agency goals alone, and towards a stress on common professional values. As a result, today's practitioners seem better able to handle basic social work issues.

Historically, social work has been a divided field. Its early development can be traced to the growth of two main streams of theory and practice: the charity organization and the settlement house approach. Each area boasted its own theoreticians, and workers in each field clung to a separation and even an occasional suspicion of each other. The transformation of charity work into the case work method may at first have only widened the rift, even though early case work's leading spokesmen, Mary Richmond, counseled that social reform and social case work must of necessity progress together. The wisdom of Richmond's insight into the interrelated aspects of the various methods and fields of social work gradually became apparent to other practitioners, who increasingly stressed the commonality of techniques and goals.

In this movement toward a single profession, the social reform emphasis of the settlement workers became more broadly accepted by others in the field. Recalling our discussion of the non-analytical implications of a fragmented, particularist text book approach, it is interesting to note that the reform urge of the settlement workers may have originated with them because they were the more generalist of the first two social work groups. Perhaps their focus on evaluating institutions related to their relative freedom from ties to agencies supporting the status quo, and their tendency to be individuals with sociological training who viewed settlement houses as social laboratories.

Further evidence of the move towards unification of the field of social work can be seen in the history of national social work organizations. At first, social workers belonged to the national group representing their particular work setting, such as the American Association of Hospital Social Workers (formed in 1918) and the American Association of Psychiatric Social Workers (1926). But by 1955, responding to the concepts that one's identification as a social worker appeared to be more significant than the setting in which one operated, and that fields distinctions tended to promote artificial division in social work practice, the then seven separate social work professional groups united into a single membership organization, the National Association of Social Workers.

Professional thinking, then, has developed from a particularist approach to a tendency to view social workers as applying certain basic techniques within specialized, but interrelated settings. Furthermore, practice in the last few years has become increasingly directed to work in quite generalized settings, such as community mental health, where the worker must relate both to other professionals on the team and to other institutions in the community.

A more cohesive profession, with broader practice settings, seems better equipped to cope with various social work problems, such as the social control-social change issue, than does a fragmented body of workers. If social workers can move from setting to setting, and if

17. See, for example, his description of causes of the American Revolution, Ibid., p. 17.
18. Also, while no direct connection need exist between the failure to think analytically about institutional structures and the adherence to a particular political ideology, it is interesting that Crompton and Keiser's treatment of labor unions and the AMA reflect not only a conservative ideology, but one more characteristic of the 19th century than of the present. Crompton and Keiser, op. cit., pp. 72, 119-22.
21. The movement toward a unified view of social work practice received additional emphasis in the 1930's debate regarding "generic" vs. "specific" practice. Roy Lubove, op. cit., p. 120.
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practitioners in different fields can employ a common language, it
would seem that comparisons between settings can be more easily made,
and commonalities of institutional structure more readily seen. Further-
more, the existence of a body of professional ideals, however loosely
organized, provides one standard for evaluating institutional goals and
performance. The chances for analytical thinking may increase when
workers are not as dependent on agency values for their conceptualiza-
tions, but can draw upon an external and more general fund of goals
and principles.

Can a broader and more unified view of practice in social welfare
texts be equally conducive to the building of an analytical framework
within which to view professional problems? The assumption that a
difference in textual organization can contribute to critical thinking
is at least partially borne out by two recent books in the field. Carol
Meyer's Social Work Practice: A Response to the Urban Crisis and John
Romanyshyn's Social Welfare both offer a form of organization quite
different from the "fields of practice" framework, and each suggests
methods of analysis and evaluation of existing institutions. 24 Meyer
has chosen to organize her book around a single large theme, the "urban
condition" in America, while Romanyshyn divides his discussion into ex-
plorations of broad issues and areas within the field of social welfare.
These generalist forms of organization, outlined in the preceding
table, are accompanied by at least partially successful attempts to
build a critical perspective from which to view social institutions and
social work practice.

By focusing on the present urban crisis, for example, Meyer is able
to explore the functions and efficacy of traditional social institutions,
such as the family and private charity, and to relate these to current
human needs in the urban environment. She can thus compare and contrast
existing agencies along at least one standard of analysis, that of their
effectiveness in coping with existing urban problems. Utilizing a trans-
actional analysis of social institutions, the text looks occasionally at
the organizational structure of social agencies, and views social work
itself as a social institution. Meyer's focus is displayed in the follow-
"The Rise and Fall of Social Institutions," and "The Process of In-
dividualization." 25

Romanyshyn, who disclaims any attempt "to present the reader with a
detailed overview of social welfare programs," focuses his discussion on
three social welfare areas. He talks about "social services" (these
services supporting, supplementing, or replacing the family, and con-
stituting part of society's means for socialization and social control),
"social provisions" (services supplementing and replacing market allo-
cation of goods), and "social action" (efforts aimed at system inter-
vention). The text explores alternative institutional and agency struc-

24. Meyer's comments on the restrictiveness of the differentiated
settings approach in current practice helped suggest the present

25. Ibid., pp. 36-38, 93-96.
tures for dealing with human needs in each area. This analysis of alternative structures includes a look at the bureaucratic organization of social welfare programs, the problems of professionalism, and the dilemma faced by all social agencies of a conflict between the social control function and the innovative changing of institutions function. Unlike Friedlander, Romanyshyn has organized his book into categories relating to areas of human life, rather than to the particular agencies developed to deal with these areas.26

Both authors suggest methods of analysis to the student, tentative tools which offer some hope of objective evaluation. Meyer's proposal is the fairly simple question: do present institutions, and social work practice, respond adequately to present problems? Romanyshyn's more sophisticated schema allows for evaluation of existing institutions in terms of their relationship to various ideals regarding what kinds of human beings are valued and what sort of society is desirable. Analytical thinking based on some set of ideal goals can then lead to a critique of existing institutional arrangements.27 In each case, the author openly displays his own value systems, but the methods of evaluation offered the student are basically objective ones.

Using broader frameworks of analysis, and avoiding the narrow "fields of practice" approach, Romanyshyn and Meyer take steps to help the student see relationships between institutions, individuals, and values. This strengthens our assumption that particular kinds of organization in text books can encourage or obstruct analytical thinking, which in turn affects evaluation and action. The fragmented approach seems to lead away from the building of a generalized sociological perspective. Texts organized along broader lines can more effectively present analyses of institutions, professional practice, and values. These then, are the books most likely to equip students for effective confrontation with the important professional issues.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


