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THE NONPROFESSIONAL AND THE PROFESSIONAL
CULTURE: A DILEMMA FOR SOCIAL WORK*

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A critical shortage of trained social workers, a restructuring of the social services, and a national policy of employing the poor in human service organizations have all led to the introduction of large numbers of minority-group and low-income non-professionals into social service employment during the last decade. The social work profession has affirmed the necessity and desirability of this trend, not only as a means of solving the manpower problem but also because these new entrants to the field of social work are indigenous to the client groups which social work seeks to serve and they have attributes and skills which enable them to work effectively with these groups. There is some evidence that the process of professionalization which social work has undergone since its nineteenth century origins has tended to alienate it from these groups.

In order to provide opportunities for lifelong careers rather than mere dead-end jobs for the new nonprofessionals, career ladders have been established which will permit advancement to full professional status through formal education. These developments present a dilemma for social work educators, since there is much evidence which suggests that professional education not only provides the skills and knowledge deemed necessary for professional practice but it also

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serves the purpose of socializing new entrants to the professional culture. This being so, how are these particular entrants going to be socialized to the professional culture without seriously impairing the special attributes and skills which they are said to bring to the social services?

This paper will examine the sources, nature and implications of this question in the hope that such an examination will yield insights which will suggest ways in which this dilemma might be resolved. Some social work leaders have suggested that the new entrants be helped to gain full command of social work knowledge and skills without undergoing the formal professionalization process. This development, should it occur, would add a unique chapter to the growing literature on the sociology of the professions.

In order to understand the problem and why it has arisen at this particular time, it is necessary to review its historical antecedents.

The profession of social work has a dual and philosophically conflicting heritage. One of its roots lies in the nineteenth century charity organization societies which were concerned about the moral and spiritual welfare of the poor, directing their efforts toward helping the individual to organize his life better in order that he might not remain dependent on the bounty of public or private charity. The other root of the profession is to be found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century social reform movement which was concerned with societal conditions which produced poverty and distress. The social reformers sought to have some impact upon the causes of social problems rather than focusing on the weaknesses of individual social casualties.

Of course, none of the sources of a person's distress--whether individual, societal, or a combination of these--can be ignored and social workers have always acknowledged the need to be cognizant of all factors. However, it is clear that, while one may acknowledge the importance of all elements in a situation, one need not necessarily give them equal weight.

The history of social work reflects an unresolved conflict between the two views of man and society which underlie its major concerns.¹ Certainly, there are other segments and special interest groups within the profession but emphasis upon individuals or upon social systems as the locus of change represents the most marked cleavage among social workers.

The charity organization tradition finds its present-day counterpart in the clinical or therapeutically-oriented segment of the profession while the social reform tradition is exemplified by the community-organization or social-action element. The dominance of the former group can be closely related to the process of professionalization which social work has undergone during this century. As Harold Wilensky and Charles Lebeaux have observed:

. . . Casework, of course, is only one of the specialties of social work, but it is so dominant that it is doubtful that there would be any such identifiable entity as professional social work without it. Emphasis on casework evolution can index the evolution of the whole profession.²

Wilensky and Lebeaux cite a publication of the Council on Social Work Education which reports that, in 1956, 86 percent of all social work students were being trained in casework method while the remaining 14 percent were divided among group work, community organization, administration, and research.³

Like all the newer professions, social work has been preoccupied with its status in the professional hierarchy.⁴ Since Abraham Flexner asked, "Is Social Work a Profession?", at the 1915 National Conference of Charities and Corrections, social workers have striven hard to demonstrate that they have all the necessary attributes of a profession. While acknowledging the important role which social work could play in society, Flexner found himself forced to

conclude that it was not a profession since it lacked a unique knowledge base and methods of inquiry which could be systematically transmitted. He saw social work as an intermediary between the established professions and those classes of people who needed help in making use of their services.⁵

Flexner's evaluation of social work's epistemology did not discourage social work leaders from exhorting their colleagues toward greater professionalization. In fact, it seems to have stimulated more vigorous efforts in that direction, if it had any effect at all. At the same 1915 Conference, Felix Frankfurter, a lawyer, suggested that social work follow the example of the older, established professions by upgrading the educational requirements for entry.⁶

By 1923, some 26 schools of social work were in operation in the United States and Canada.⁷ The major concern of educators at that time was the need to expand the educational endeavor beyond the narrow one of preparing people for the "fairly well-defined agencies of relief, aid, and administration or oversight."⁸ The reform component had all but disappeared and efforts were being made to develop the theoretical base of the casework method. Porter Lee, Director of the New York School of Philanthropy, was able to report, with some satisfaction, to the 1929 National Conference of Social Work that social work had changed from being a "cause" to being a "function."⁹ By this he meant that social workers offering organized social services in a skillful and systematic manner. The emergence of psychiatry, especially the psychoanalytic branch, provided an additional thrust toward a focus on the individual, his strengths and weaknesses, and his intrapsychic conflicts.

If we accept the point of view of Ernest Greenwood and others¹⁰ that there is a continuum along which occupations are dispersed according to the degree of professionalization which they have achieved, rather than alternative points of view,¹¹

we might conclude that a fair degree of professionalization has occurred in social work. Social workers claim to have developed a theoretical base of knowledge and a repertoire of practice skills which derive from this knowledge. They have achieved control over access to this knowledge through accreditation of professional schools. The professional association controls, to some degree, social work practice through certification of qualified practitioners. However, in spite of all of its efforts, social work has remained a relatively low-status profession. Its knowledge base, in common with most of the social and behavioral science professions, is at once too broad and too vague. As Harold Wilensky has observed:

. . . All occupations in the human relations field have only tenuous claim to exclusive competence. This results not only from their newness, uncertain standards, and the embryonic state of the social and psychological sciences on which they draw, but also from the fact that the types of problems dealt with are part of everyday life. The lay public cannot recognize the need for special competence in an area where everyone is 'expert'."12

Speaking specifically about social work's plight, Charles Dollard observed that it "has had to fight a constant rearguard action against the pervasive notion that any man with love in his heart can do the job."13

More severe critics of social work deny its claim to any unique body of knowledge. Proponents of this point of view would relegate it to the status of a semi-profession within Etzioni's typology which differentiates the life-and-death and knowledge-producing professions, like law and medicine, from the service-giving or knowledge-using professions, such as nursing and teaching.¹⁴ As Flexner observed, social workers very often function in an auxiliary role in relation to other higher-status

professionals and this fact has tended to negate any claim to professional authority. Public identification of the social worker with a low-status clientele has added to social work's status problems since a profession with a predominantly low-status clientele is unlikely to be accorded high status by the dominant groups in society. Finally, the threat to the status quo implicit in social work's social reform heritage--regardless of the relatively small part which it has played in recent social work practice--has tended to differentiate it from the higher prestige professions which, according to Lipset and Schwartz, are "among the more conservative elements in society" in that they manifest "satisfaction with the status quo and opposition to change."¹⁵

The relative ineffectiveness of social work's attempts to achieve high status as a profession notwithstanding, its efforts in that direction have had some unfortunate consequences. Its efforts to gain status by emulating the higher-status professions, most notably the medical specialty of psychiatry, and its concentration on the refinement of practical skills of the therapeutic variety have resulted in alienation from its major client groups--the poor and minority groups--with whom these skills are not particularly helpful. Reflecting on this trend, Bertha Reynolds has observed that, while most social agencies do not deliberately establish policies which lead to an avoidance of serious social problems, it is nevertheless "easy to refine one's techniques to the point where only relatively refined people can make use of them."¹⁶

During the 1960's a number of manpower studies were carried out which focused attention on the existing and projected critical shortage of professional social workers. Department of Labor statistics indicated that "roughly four out of five persons employed as social workers lack the two years of graduate social work training . . . established as the prerequisite for professional status."¹⁷ Most of these studies concluded that the best hope for coming anywhere near a solution to the manpower shortage lay in more efficient use of nonprofessionals.¹⁸

Most of the 'nonprofessionals' who were carrying out social work functions were holders of bachelors' degrees in various disciplines. Faced with the possibility that manpower policy for the welfare services might be formulated without its participation,¹⁹ since its members formed such a small minority within the social welfare complex, the social work profession quickly moved to establish undergraduate programs in social work, making the bachelor's degree a professional practice degree. Accreditation of undergraduate programs by the Council on Social Work Education has now begun. This development reflects an awareness of William McGlothlin's admonition that, "The place of the professions is seriously threatened by shortages which require society to turn to nonprofessionals for the services it requires."²⁰ It also indicates an awareness that "the exclusion of those with lesser credentials frees them from control by the standard-setting organization."²¹

Concurrently with the development of bachelor's level professional education, large numbers of the poor and minority group members have been introduced into social service organizations in service-giving roles.²² This movement received its main impetus during the mid-1960's when federally-sponsored anti-poverty programs required local social service organizations to recruit substantial numbers of poor community residents in order to be eligible for federal funding. The experience of the professionals with the indigenous nonprofessionals in these programs convinced many of them that the poor, the disadvantaged, and members of minority groups had a special contribution to make to social service provision.²³ Countless articles appeared in the professional journals during the mid- and late-1960's, urging greater use of such personnel in the social services.²⁴ The special contribution which the indigenous nonprofessional was purported to make was his ability to form helping relationships with low-income and minority-group clients, to understand their life situations and life

styles, and to help them utilize the services which were available to them.²⁵ In short, the helping professions, social work among them, were forced to "concede that noncertified, less trained personnel can meet manpower needs, bridge gaps with clients, and provide service organizations with skills congenial to client populations."²⁶ The nonprofessionals were able to do this, Grosser, Henry and Kelly have suggested, because they have not been subjected to the professional socialization process which "may carry specific disabilities to perform the very service for which one is presumably certified."²⁷ Grosser, Henry and Kelly note that, while professionalization does not specifically exclude the talent to work with groups like the black lower class, nevertheless, "the long, hard socially mobile route to such certification may well incapacitate many for just such encounters."²⁸

While the original federal anti-poverty programs were concerned primarily with the creation of immediate employment for the poor and their involvement in the provision of health and welfare services within their communities, it soon became clear that this new cadre of personnel would not, and should not, be satisfied to remain indefinitely in entry-level jobs. Opportunities for advancement to higher levels of responsibility had to be created if the anti-poverty program was to be more than a token gesture. It was not sufficient simply to create jobs; it was necessary to develop life-long careers for the poor.²⁹ On-the-job training could help upgrade job skills but genuine career advancement would depend on the credentialization which could be provided only by recognized institutions of higher education.

The rapid development of the community colleges during the 1960's coincided with the emergence of the "new careers for the poor" movement and many of these colleges initiated associate-degree programs for non-professionals in a variety of human service occupations, including social work. Linkages were established between these community college programs

and the developing baccalaureate programs in social work, thereby creating a career ladder which would enable persons entering at any level to advance to full professional status. In 1968, the Council on Social Work Education issued its first publication in relation to community college programs in social work,³⁰ and in 1970 it issued guidelines for the design and implementation of these programs.³¹ Although it is not quite ready to assume responsibility for the accreditation of community college programs, the social work profession is certainly taking steps to bring them under its professional wing and its publications reflect an implicit assumption of responsibility for all levels of social work education.³²

These developments contain a built-in dilemma for social work. It has refined its techniques to the point where it has ceased to be able to work effectively with its primary client groups. It has introduced representatives of these client groups into service-giving positions and affirmed their key role of providing a bridge between the profession and its clients. It has established career ladders which will permit these nonprofessionals to advance to full professional status. But, is there not a risk that, as the indigenous nonprofessional is assimilated into the professional culture, the special attributes and skills which he brings with him will be impaired?

The literature on professional socialization throws some light on this question. Socialization, according to Robert Merton and others, refers to the learning of social roles.³³ Describing this process as they observed it occurring in medical students, Merton and his associates state that:

. . . socialization refers to the process through which he (the student) develops his professional self, with its characteristic values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills, fusing them into a more or less consistent set of dispositions which govern his behavior in a wide variety of professional (and extraprofessional) situations.³⁴

Sanford Dornbusch talks about the two-fold process of socialization as it occurs in a military academy--the transmittal of technical knowledge and the instilling of an outlook considered appropriate for members of the profession.³⁵ Although there are various routes to the practice of law, Dan Lortie asserts that socialization of the neophyte lawyer is a central concern of all educational and post-educational experiences.³⁶

The importance of 'reference groups' to the socialization process is implicit in all of these writings and it is made explicit by David Gottlieb in his description of the socialization processes which are at work in American graduate schools:

. . . socialization is seen as any development which entails the modification of the self through the acquisition of personality characteristics through contact with significant others.³⁷

In none of these studies were clients included among the neophyte professional's "significant others"; almost invariably, the profession--symbolically, institutionally, or personified in specific individuals--was the referent of the neophyte. Melvin Seeman and John Evans found, in their study of attitude changes during internship, that medical interns showed a marked change toward in-group members, in this case senior physicians, along with greater social distance between the interns and other groups, including patients.³⁸

Ernest Greenwood gives what is perhaps the most emphatic summary of the professional socialization process:

To succeed in his chosen profession, the neophyte must make an effective adjustment to the professional culture. Mastery of the underlying body of theory and acquisition of the technical skills are in themselves insufficient guarantees of professional success. The recruit must also become familiar with and learn to weave his way through the labyrinth of the professional

culture. Therefore, the transformation of the neophyte into a professional is essentially an acculturation process wherein he internalizes the social values, the behavior norms, and the symbols of the occupational group . . .³⁹

When we consider the implications of these statements we would have to conclude that those nonprofessionals who are capable and motivated enough to climb the career ladder are likely to find themselves caught between intolerable role demands. Unless the expectations of the profession should change, the indigenous nonprofessional can only resolve this conflict by rejecting one or other of the referents--the client group or the profession. In either case, his bridging function is negated.

Since a profession requires control over its members, according to William Goode, "precisely because its judgments do not coincide generally with those of clients,"⁴⁰ it is hard to see how the negative results of professionalization of the nonprofessional can be avoided unless the social work profession reverses or, at least, modifies its attitude toward the achievement of a high level of professionalization. Greenwood has observed that "all social workers are not uniformly enthusiastic about the professionalization of social work."⁴¹ Bisno, Reynolds, and Wilensky have all warned, in one way or another, that professional status could only be bought at the expense of abandoning social work's social reform heritage. Apparently, some social workers are not prepared to pay that price. Bertram Beck has explicitly called upon social work to "desert the traditional pattern of growth of a profession."⁴² Affirming social work's traditional identification with the underprivileged and its historical commitment to social reform, he places responsibility on social work for helping those who come into the field without formal education to gain maximum command of social work knowledge and skills without necessarily undergoing the typical socialization process.

If . . . we can welcome new recruits into the social work fellowship and help them to gain maximum competence through a variety of life experiences, then we may not only ease our manpower problem but also make an enormously valuable contribution to an open and free society.⁴³

If such an occurrence were to take place, it would indeed be an extraordinary development. Social work would be the first occupational group to undergo a process of de-professionalization. However, at a time when reputable sociologists are proposing strategies for de-bureaucratizing large complex organizations in order that they might become more responsive to human need,⁴⁴ the idea of some form of deprofessionalization, with the same intent, may not be entirely fanciful.

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