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THE CONCEPT OF EMPLOYMENT IN SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS: THE NEED FOR CHANGE IN CONCEPT AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Social welfare and social work practice are based upon and limited by concepts concerning the role of work in society. These include coverage, vestedness, administration, and the wage-stop. As human labor becomes quantitatively less important in the technological society, and as attitudes toward work change, the role of social work should become proactive -- leading toward necessary and desirable changes, including new meanings of the concept work and new methods of distributing income, rather than continuing to attempt to shore up an increasingly outmoded systems of values and structures.

In examining the content of the major social work textbooks published in the United States during the 1970s, Ephross and Reisch (1982) identify the basic ideological positions of the authors, distinguishing between those that view social welfare and social work as concerned primarily with the socioeconomic system; those that deal mostly with individual differences; and those that attempt to do both. In none of these books, however,

including that of this author (Macarov, 1978), is the immanence of the concept of employment throughout welfare programs posited as a major determinant of the welfare systems and social work. It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to point out the ubiquitousness of the work/welfare link throughout social welfare programs, and to trace the deleterious results of that link in terms of the individual and social problems caused.

The work/welfare link

The connection between work and welfare expresses itself in a number of ways. When social insurance programs are adopted, the first such program undertaken is almost invariably workmen's compensation, which assures workers and potential workers that they can enter the labor force without fear of uncompensated injuries. Unemployment insurance, on the other hand, is usually the last such program to be adopted, since it is generally seen as helping or inducing people not to work. Workmen's compensation generally pays more than unemployment insurance, is easier to obtain, and is not limited as to duration. Surveys indicate that unemployment compensation has much less public support than has workmen's compensation and, indeed, than has any other social insurance program (Macarov, 1980).

The link between work and welfare can also be seen in terms of coverage, vestedness, administration, and the wage stop. From 72% to 100% of all social insurance programs in every country in the world limit coverage to workers, employees,

laborers, or some other designation of employed persons. People who do not work are simply not entitled to partake of these programs that are designed to protect people against the exigencies of life. Even Family or children's allowances are generally paid only to the families or children or workers (Social Security Programs . . ., 1977).

Being covered, however does not assure one of benefits. Almost all programs require a certain amount of prior work (termed "vestedness") to entitle the covered employee to benefits. The length of time worked and the salary received usually determine the number of payments made, and their amounts. Large numbers of workers are denied payments because they have not yet worked long enough to be eligible, despite the fact that they have paid in the necessary 'premiums' while they did work.

Then there are the administrative regulations designed to strengthen presumed incentives to work. These include a waiting period before drawing benefits (Griffiths, 1974); proof of continuing job search; personal appearances at the labor exchange; and taking almost any job offered, at any salary under any conditions. None of these requirements are attached to other types of programs, including maternity grants, invalidity, etc.

Finally, and perhaps most important, there is the factor known as the wage-stop. This is a direct outgrowth of the Elizabethan concept of less eligibility. The wage-stop, which is almost universal through all welfare programs, makes it virtually impossible to acquire from welfare as much as the person could acquire

from working, or as much as other people acquire from working. This limitation also operates upon those people who cannot or should not work -- the aged, children, the disabled, single parents, etc. In thus linking welfare payments to salary levels rather than need, the work/welfare link dooms from 10% to 15% of the populations of every Western industrialized nation to poverty (Macarov, 1980).

But social insurance programs are not the only aspect of social welfare to be based upon the needs of the world of work. Social workers in their daily jobs spend enormous amounts of time inducing people to go to work and solving problems arising from work, viz., the burgeoning field of occupation social workers. Social workers seek child-care arrangements so that mothers can enter the labor market. Indeed, the recent enormous growth of child-care facilities did not spring from data or an ideology that such care was better for children than that of their parents, but rather from the phenomenon of women entering the labor force. Home-care service for the aged and the ill are arranged by social workers to allow family members who would otherwise have to stay home to go to work. In addition work is seen as both the goal and the method of treatment in rehabilitation efforts; sheltered workshops; in probation and parole; and in a myriad of other ways.

Attitudes toward work

At the heart of these efforts is the belief, shared by social workers, that full employment is not only possible, but a necessary and desirable goal for society; while work is viewed as good for individuals from points of view of their physical and mental health, their economic

situation, and self-actualization as happy, normal people. It is no surprise that social workers hold these views, as they are shared by the overwhelming majority of the population. Indeed, socialization for and into the world of work begins almost at infancy. Children learn on the see-saw that Jack shall have a new master, and that he shall get but a penny a day because he can't work any faster. Students are told to "work hard" at their "homework." Schools are criticized for not preparing graduates properly for their jobs. Religious teachings emphasize the Godliness, or at least the Biblical admonitions, concerning work, e.g., "Look to the ant, thou sluggard; consider his ways and be wise." Poems, songs, and fables, such as the grasshopper and the ant, or the hen who would not share her cake with any animal that had not helped bake it, re-emphasize work as the only acceptable basis for human existence. In fact, working -- and being considered a good worker -- has become a surrogate for being moral, religious, patriotic, and neighborly.

The internal contradiction in the situations described above is clear. On the one hand, work is posited as a normative, if not completely positive, activity, which people both need and enjoy; nevertheless, the fear that people will not work requires the most stringent positive and negative reinforcements. In short, while professing to believe in Theory Y, society acts according the Theory X (McGregor, 1960). The present structure of society, and the economic system in particular, makes this gap between values and behaviors both necessary and understandable.

Still, despite constant reinforcement

by all elements of society concerning the joy and usefulness of work, there is ample evidence -- ranging from the folk wisdom that nobody would work if they weren't pain for it to sophisticated studies of complex motivations -- to suggest that the great majority of people get little pleasure from their work. Generally speaking, the further one goes down the scale of occupations, the less the satisfaction found. It is indeed ironic that policy regarding work and welfare is made by those people with well-paid jobs that contain power and are ego-satisfying -- and these policy-makers cannot conceive, and do not believe, that other people do not get the same satisfaction from work that they do. For example, 93% of urban university professors would choose the same work again, while only 16% of unskilled autoworkers would; 43% of white-collar workers would choose the same work again, but only 24% of the blue-collar workers (Work in America, 1973).

In over three thousand studies of work patterns and attitudes conducted over the last fifty years, the phrases best used to describe attitudes to work are "fatalistic contentment" (Lasson, 1971) and "resigned acceptance" (Macarov, 1982), both of which are said to be arrived at by a "surrender process" (Robinson, 1969) whereby previous expectations for job satisfaction are lowered or given up. The job satisfactions found in several surveys seem to merely indicate fulfillment of drastically reduced expectations.

When survey research is supplemented by in-depth interviews, observation, and indirect queries, negative attitudes toward work become even more prominent. An illustrative case is the young man asked by Strauss (Work in America, 1973) whether he

had a good job. On responding in the affirmative, he was asked what made it a good job. He replied, "Don't get me wrong. I said I had a good job. I didn't say I had a _good_ job." Rubin (1976) also found that respondents reporting themselves as satisfied at and with work confessed, on continuing the interview, that they were really not satisfied. But even taking survey research at face value, there are large and continuing decreases in work satisfaction among practically all occupation (Walfish, 1979), and even among that group who were once the most satisfied, the middle managers (_World of Work Report_, 1981).

The evidence for lack of work satisfaction is not confined to what people say -- their actions speak even louder. Perhaps most significant is the continual reduction in hours of work, which has diminished the average work week in the United States from fifty-three hours in 1900 to thirty-five hours in 1980 -- and this reduction takes into consideration part-time and second jobs. Such reductions in work time have not come about without the consent, or over the objections, of workers. On the contrary, most union negotiations are more concerned with hours, vacations, and holidays than they are with safety measures or even salary increases. Further, with the exception of some workaholics, no one works longer hours or more days than he or she is paid for, due to sheer enjoyment of the work. Finally, people are retiring early at an ever-increasing rate, and this not due to ill health, forced retirement, or financial inducements. Given the opportunity to retire at age sixty-two with 80 % of the pensions they would acquire if they continued working until age sixty-five, over half the retirees on American Social

Security are opting for early retirement, foregoing both the three years of salary and 20% higher pensions. This number has risen from 21% of all retirees in 1965 to 52% in 1980. And, despite the mythology, retirees who are not in financial need are generally glad they retired, enjoying their retirement and wish they had retired earlier (Stagner; 19788; Schmidt, et al, 1979).

All of this evidence -- survey and experiential -- does not add up to a picture of people happy in their jobs, finding creativity, companionship, a sense of accomplishment, and self-actualization in their work. In fact, if one divides the components of work satisfaction into feelings about having to work at all, instead of engaging in some other activity, such as child-rearing, the arts, sports, etc.; feelings about the job, which includes pay, permanence, perquisites, status/stigma, and chances for advancement; feelings about the workplace, including physical conditions, hours, co-workers, supervision, and amenities; and feelings about the work itself, including interest, creativity, responsibility, societal necessity or desirability, and side effects such as pollution -- then it is indeed a rare working person who is satisfied in or with each of these areas, or even with a majority of them. When one reports satisfaction at work, it is usually "on balance," as it were, or with one area overshadowing the areas of lack of satisfaction.

In addition to the widespread lack of satisfaction with work which seems to exist, at least on the lower rungs of the occupational ladder, there are also the effects of the work itself, and the effects of feelings about work, on the physical and

mental well-being of the workers to consider. Many studies have been done as to how work can be used as a therapeutic measure for persons with physical and emotional problems. Little thought has been given to the problems caused by having to work, at the workplace, or by the work itself. Even the growing number of occupational social workers deal more with problems that concern employers, such as absenteeism, tardiness, and negligence caused by alcohol or drug abuse, than they do with problems that concern workers but do not affect their productivity. Indeed, if Herzberg's (1959; 1966) distinction between satisfiers and dissatisfiers is examined, most occupational social workers deal with removing dissatisfiers -- i.e., changing condition -- rather than increasing satisfaction, which requires restructuring jobs, and is not within their jurisdiction and power (Bar-Gal, 1982).

Recently, work stress has become a concern of occupational health personnel, spurred on by court rulings that work stress is a compensable work-disability (Shostak, 1980). In general, however, and certainly among social workers, it is lack of work which is thought to have many individual and societal implications for health and well-being. And, indeed, both socialization to work, and jobs as the only acceptable way of acquiring income, make lack of work a widespread cause of distress and social ills. As a consequence, social workers not only encourage, aid, and coerce people into going to work; they also partake of the ideology, and sometimes the activities which put full employment at the head of a hierarchy of social goals.

Full employment -- the impossible dream

The desire to provide people with jobs,

rather than simply giving them food or money, dates back to the earliest days, when people first left their family farms to become laborers. In fact, the building of the later pyramids has been described as a make-work project (Mendelssohn, 1977). Herod found it necessary to build a road around Old Jerusalem to employ the former Temple builders. Vespasian forbade the use of water power to move building supplies in order to preserve jobs for workers. In the days of the Industrial Revolution Luddites attempted to destroy machines which they saw as replacing human labor (read: jobs). In fact, Lord Byrons first speech in Parliament was against the death penalty for such people.

Since that time governments have expanded enormous effort to achieve full employment, including measures like work relief, public service jobs, public works, subsidies to employers, job creation, job training and re-training, public employment offices and even -- in some cases -- the government as employer of last resort. Despite these monumental efforts, continued for centuries now, no Western industrialized country has ever been able to achieve full employment -- i.e., more jobs than workers -- except during periods of war.

Further, due to statistical and definitional artifacts, the official figure concerning unemployment is usually 50% to 300% understated. In many countries the figure is based upon those people drawing unemployment compensation, thus ignoring those who have not applied, have exhausted their benefits, or who were not eligible for various reasons, such as not having acquired vestedness. In countries where the figure is derived from surveys, like the United States, the figure ignores those

who have become discouraged and stopped actively seeking work, as well as those who have part-time jobs despite their desire to work full time. In addition, in some places the jobless are paid to participate in various training and educational schemes, thus enabling the authorities to list them as students, rather than as unemployed; Sweden, for example, has more people in subsidized training courses than unemployed, which partially accounts for a low unemployment figure.

It has proved impossible to arrive at full employment even when this is defined as "more vacant jobs than people seeking work." When the definition becomes more exacting, e.g., "interesting work at decent pay under good conditions producing socially-desirable objects or services without deleterious side-effects," full employment becomes manifestly impossible. The truth of the matter seems to be that modern society does not need all of the human labor available; nor, even more important, the labor of everyone seeking or needing a job; nor all the labor of everyone holding a job.

The unemployment rate in Western industrialized countries, which has been rising sporadically but inexorably over the last fifty years (with the exception of war periods), is masked in large part by the continual reduction in work hours, which spreads existing work; plus maintenance of unnecessary jobs; and the growing amount of unproductive work time, more generally referred to as loafing on the job (Schrank, 1979; Cherrington, 1980; Walbank, 1980). Indeed, it has been estimated that present productivity could be maintained with one-half the existing work force (Kreps, 1971).

Even the desire for full employment, or

that people work harder than they do at their present jobs, is based upon a serious misconception concerning productivity. Changes in productivity are mainly the result of changes in machines, methods, materials, and energy -- not manpower. Human labor accounts for no more than 25% of changes in productivity, and perhaps for only 10% (Rosow, 1977).

Full employment -- the dangerous delusion

Not only has full employment proved impossible of attainment, as outlined above, but the search for full employment contains dangers for society, and for individuals. One of the societal dangers is implied in the figures quoted above concerning the human factor in productivity. Emphasizing that factor is an ineffective way to attain high productivity. The key to productivity is technology, and attempting to use humans instead of machines produces a drag on productivity efforts. Thus, the effort to provide everyone with a job deters the very result of high productivity from being attained.

Further, the need to provide jobs leads to a search for labor-intensive industries, instead of capital-intensive or technology-intensive. This puts the economy into direct competition with developing countries which have excess manpower and low standards of living. The only way that labor-intensive industries can survive in the developed countries is to match the labor costs of their competitors, which means fewer fringe benefits, longer hours, and lower salaries -- a process illustrated by the recent contract between the United Auto Workers of America and General Motors, in which the workers gave up salary and holidays to meet competition from Japanese

automobiles.

Finally, the need to provide jobs, regardless of the superfluousness of the work, leads to make-work and boondoggling. Despite the impressive accomplishments of the WPA during the Great Depression -- evidence of which is still with us in terms of bridges, murals, plays, and successful artists -- two and a half million people eligible for WPA were never assigned, due to lack of useful work for them (Charnow, 1943), while everyone who lived through that experience remembers mostly the great bulk of WPA workers who were going through a slow charade in order not to use up the work available. Make-work projects today are no longer as harmless as WPA leaf-raking, but tend toward the manufacture of armaments (viz., the B-1 bomber in America) and other large-scale items of dubious value, like nuclear plants, which are defended as much in terms of their job-creating potential as concerning their intrinsic usefulness.

Insofar as individuals are concerned, the methods utilized to attain and maintain high employment lead to corruption, cynicism, negative self-images, and mental problems of various degrees of seriousness. Many of the jobs currently being performed by humans could be done as well, if not better, by machines. These machines work three shifts a day, never take vacations, demand no raises, and perform more and better work than many humans -- and, in some cases, perform jobs that people cannot do. The extension of technology into ever-widening areas of work is deterred only by the need to provide people with jobs. We are just at the beginning of the microprocessor and robot revolution, and a determined effort to use machines wherever and whenever possible -- one of the bases

for Japan's outstanding success -- would replace millions of people in the jobs that keep them unsatisfied, as noted above.

It is just this knowledge -- that they could easily be replaced by a machine, and are kept on only by the employer's or society's charity -- that affects many workers. As Liebow put it in a New York Times (1970) article: "no man (sic) can live with the terrible knowledge that he is not needed." A case in point: In 1974 the New York Times changed its printing method. To meet union objections, lifetime contracts containing excellent terms were given 830 workers, although only 350 were needed to produce the newspaper. Two hundred were induced to retire by excellent terms, while 280 people drew pay for useless work (Zimbalist, 1979). Such situations are hardly calculated to increase the self-esteem or the mental health of the worker. Millions of other workers know that they can be replaced by machines, or live in fear that they will be. The anxiety thus caused has never been specifically isolated or dealt with, let alone measured, but it undoubtedly affects great masses of workers.

And then there is the fact that most jobs do not require all of the work that one is capable of performing, but that the worker must nevertheless pretend to be busy. This often results in a conspiracy between workers, and sometimes between workers and their superordinates, to maintain the fiction of being busy all the time. Workers who sign in and then go out to take care of personal matters; those who have others insert their cards in the time-clock in their own absence; those who deliberately or consciously stretch their work to fill the assigned time (a la Parkinson); those who dawdle, gossip, and

simply idle; those who hold other jobs during their own ostensible working hours; those who do not come in, or come in late on Mondays -- all of these are reactions to non-serious work, not its causes.

It has been estimated that the average worker uses 44% of his or her potential (Walbank, 1980). In one survey, 54% of the workers said they could work harder than they do (Berg, Freedman and Freeman, 1978). In another study, workers who indicated that they could work harder were asked why they did not do so. In almost every case, the answer was that the job doesn't require it (Macarov, 1982). In order to pass the time away, workers use a variety of devices, such as setting small challenges for themselves. For example, the girl engaged in gutting tuna-fish who tried to see how high she could pile the catfood component before it tumbled over (Garson, 1975). Others engaged in horseplay, or in elaborate rituals, or fantasize, or even blank out work time entirely. It should be obvious that there is nothing in such a situation that speaks of or reinforces mental health. On the contrary, such self- and other - deception must exact a toll, and the attitudes and practices engaged in at work may be carried over into non-work situations, adding corruption, deception, and unhealthy personal relationships to society at large.

On the other hand, there remains the deep popular conception that there is much work that needs doing, and that somehow such work can be made interesting, self-actualizing, and worthwhile. The human services, in particular, are thought to be short-handed, and the answer to growing unemployment. However, closer examination reveals that the problem is not lack of personnel, but lack of conditions which

induce people to take or hold such jobs. In both the United States and Isreal, for example, there is said to be a shortage of nurses, but in both countries about a third of the registered nurses are not working, and another third work only part-time (Flick, 1983); Handless, et al, 1982). Were conditions offered that would induce all the nurses to work full-time, there is question whether the shortage would remain.

If there is a shortage of manpower in the human services, it is not in the professional or highly-skilled jobs, but among those who are expected to empty the bedpans, change the linens, push the wheelchairs, do the laundry, and wash the dishes -- in short, that which Gans (1974) called the dirty, dead-end jobs of society. Mildred Rein points out that about a third of the AFDC caseload have employment potential -- but only if the jobs offered pay more than the minimum wage, have stability, and offer good fringe benefits -- conditions which such jobs never meet. If there is work that needs doing, it does not offer variety, control, growth, and good remuneration. Indeed, technology usually moves into the hard-to-fill jobs through sheer lack of alternative in terms of humans willing to do the work. Hence, the work which "really needs doing," and which doesn't attract people, will be done by machines, or by system changes, ending the mythical open-ended job shortage in the services.

Implications for social work, social welfare, and society

Why do social workers, who are on the leading edge of concern for the physical and mental health of individuals and societies, allow themselves to be used to strengthen the redundancy of human labor,

the pretense that people enjoy their work and that it is good for them, and the stress, anxiety, and mental illness that is inherent in the present socioeconomic structure? The answer is clear: Even were social workers do agree concerning some, many, or all of the negative effects of work as outlined above, they would see no way in which their clients could support themselves other than through job-holding, regardless of clients' deeper wishes, and regardless of what working might do to the individual and the family.

What is needed is a different method of distributing the fruits of technologically-derived production so that human labor is minimized and the highest level of technology eagerly sought and embraced as freeing people to engage in more pleasurable activities. This requires both structural and value changes. Suggestions concerning the spread of cooperatives of worker-owned businesses; and a genuine collective using the example of the Isreali kibbutz (Macarov, 1980). Simultaneously, this would require changes in the value base of society, which currently enshrines work as the central value in the pantheon.

Arriving at such different values would not be easy, and it might be simpler to enlarge the definition of work to include them. That is, if work is seen as that which people do to acquire the material necessities and luxuries of life, including services, then they could be paid for doing those things which are now considered non-work, or leisure. Thus, if society were willing to reward people with livable incomes for studying anything that strikes their fancy; for exploring new physical and non-physical phenomena or territories; for participating in community projects; for learning and playing musical instruments;

for engaging in sports activities; and other things currently dismissed as leisure-time activities, then full employment and enjoying one's "work" might become a reality.

These possibilities are not as wild as they sound. Not only did the ancient Greeks live without work, the great thinkers -- Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato -- decried work as making people bad citizens, bad neighbors, and bad parents. The results of a society in which citizens did not have to work were bequeathed to us as the foundations of art, philosophy, theatre, and mathamatics, amoung others. In European Jewry, the student of Talmud was held in the highest esteem and supported by the community. In our own day and place, we reward (and perhaps overreward) a few people for engaging in just the activities mentioned above -- musicians, sports stars, actors -- and spread support more widely for those who study, in terms of scholarships, stipends, and government loans. Extending this practice to include more and more people might be the simplest way of distributing technologically-acquired resources while avoiding severe societal unrest and upheaval.

In any case, it seems quite clear that the newly emerging technological society will create social disturbances and individual difficulties unless it is met planfully, creatively, and energetically by all those concerned with human happiness, among whom social workers and social welfare planners should stand in the vanguard.

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