The Elusive Boundaries of Social Work

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Repeated attempts to conceptualize social work have assumed that social work should and can have a precisely defined domain. One suggestion is to equate social work with personal social services. This article suggests that the uniqueness of social work lies in the very absence of defined boundaries. Implications for social work practice are identified, in particular social work's heavy dependence on resource controllers, and the consequent need of social work education to shift its traditional focus from client-centered interventions to managing non-client interactions.

The purpose of this article is to narrow the range of definitions of what social work is about. It examines social work's role in the division of labor and the resources its practitioners control, and demonstrates that the function of social work is clearly different from that of the personal social services. This, in turn, enables us to extrapolate the specific roles social workers are required to perform, and to examine what implications they have for social work education. The major conclusion of the analysis is that social work is a residual institution with boundariless areas of concern, which, paradoxically, requires that social work agencies command no material resources other than labor. Consequently, social workers must meet most of their charge indirectly, mainly by brokerage and advocacy. This also suggests that social work education must lessen its focus on client-centered interventions in favor of teaching practitioners how to work with other, non-client, resource controllers.

Introduction

During the last thirty years, the distinction between social work and personal social services has slowly eroded, leaving many to wonder whether social work can sustain an independent identity, and, if so, what this identity should be. One answer to this question is to subsume personal social services

under social work. In the United Kingdom, this has partially
happened already. Scotland's Social Work Departments embrace
such diverse services as home help, occupational therapy and
probation, and though Social Services Departments in England
and Wales are less comprehensive, they "have been widely as-
sumed to be social work writ large" (Webb & Wistow, 1987,
p. 195). In the United States, similar professional expansion is
still a desideratum: "As educators are to schools, lawyers to
courts, and doctors to hospitals", argue Kahn and Kamerman
(1980), "so social workers are to the personal social services.
Social work must . . . recognize that unless (it) seizes the oppor-
tunity . . . (it) will be . . . the only human service claimant for
professional status unable or unwilling to assume responsibil-
ity for a social institution to devise and be accountable for a
delivery system."

For an aspiring profession, such steps may be politically as-
tute. The acquisition of its own turf would provide social work
an independent organizational base on which, in time, it could
consolidate its status. Yet before social work thus broadens its
domain, it is necessary to enquire whether it can adopt this
strategy in the light of its societal purpose and objectives.

Social Work's Social Mandate and Concerns

Defining social work's purpose and objectives is no sim-
ple task. Generations of scholars have tried to clarify what this
profession does and to what ends it aspires, but regardless of
the theoretical, ideological or practical perspectives employed,
social work defies a generally accepted definition, or even an ac-
cepted description. The first conceptualization of social work's
social assignment was presented by Abraham Flexner (1915) in
his address to the National Conference of Charities and Correc-
tion on the topic "Is Social Work a Profession?". More recent
attempts were undertaken by Wootton (1959), Lubove (1965),
Atherton (1969), North (1972), the National Institute for So-
cial Work (The Barclay Report) (1982), Rosenfeld (1983), Popple
(1985), Wakefield (1988), and Specht (1990). Other discussions
of this topic were published in two special issues of *Social Work*

(22(4), 1977; 26(1), 1981), but more deal with how social work should be carried out than with its ends. In fact, it lacks even an elementary consensus about its concerns. As Meyer (1981, pp. 71-74) eloquently phrased this phenomenon: "Architects design buildings, doctors deal with sickness and health, lawyers practice law, and educators teach. (But) social workers are concerned . . . With what? . . . It would be reassuring to have this author, or some other professor, dean, president, or guru announce the purpose of social work." Consequently, social work invites its practitioners to apply its teachings each in a personal way. This is clearly reflected in the diversity of duties social workers perform, in their varied employments, and in the virtual absence of an internationally accepted core curriculum for social work training (Brauns & Kramer, 1986).

The following discussion is predicated on the assumption that the purpose and objectives of social work derive from its self-proclaimed domain and from the profession's institutional function: that is, social work is given a mandate to perform certain roles and to refrain from performing others. It is also assumed that the resources an occupation requires are dictated by its purpose and domain rather than that such purpose and domain are determined by available resources.

1 Social Work as Society's Safety-Net

Human societies have developed intermeshing networks of informal, private (commercial and voluntary), and public institutions, which, together with personal effort, are expected to meet all social needs. Yet even in the most advanced and organized society it is inevitable that these institutions fall short of meeting all expectations. Indeed, this could not be otherwise, unless needs were narrowly defined, resources were abundant and cost-free, and the uniqueness of the individual was denied. As a result, all societies require a back-up or safety-net mechanism to carry "the burden of failures in social policies" (Barclay Report, 1982, p. 45; see, too, Gustafsson, 1986; Pinker, 1990) to provide for those needs which they are otherwise unable to meet. Today this role is mainly assumed by what is generally known as 'social work'.

Use of the safety-net analogy to describe social work's role is relatively common. For example, Kahn (1967) describes this role as furnishing the essential support to human welfare which is not provided by other social services. A less restrictive use of this analogy, in the sense that it frees social work from its traditional association with social services, is provided by Rosenfeld (1983). In a revealing attempt to tackle social work's concerns, he defines the profession as that societal arrangement which covers *all* spheres of well-being that are not provided by others. This is also the approach taken by Shlakman (1972, p. 195), who observes that social work is available "when all else fails". Yet what all these writers fail to appreciate (or are politically unwilling to accept) are the implications of this analogy for social work's concerns and for the ensuing modes of practice social workers are required to adopt or must refrain from adopting. This is mainly because it has been accepted at face-value rather than being interpreted in its metaphorical sense. In order to illuminate the differences between these two approaches and their consequences for social work, the following discussion examines the structural properties of a safety-net, and how they relate to social work.

The most obvious property of a safety-net is that its concerns are *residual*. The safety-net covers only those areas which are unattended or inadequately attended to by other institutions.

Second, the safety-net's concerns are *fluid*. Because peoples' needs and need-meeting arrangements are dynamic, the boundaries of the safety-net are constantly "moved, enlarged or expanded, shaped and reshaped" (Shlakman, 1972, p. 207). Hence, a residual institution invariably lacks attachment to any given field of activity.

Third, the safety-net's concerns are *structurally determined*. They are externally prescribed to the safety-net by the system it serves, and are therefore beyond its control.

These three properties of a safety-net fully apply to social work. As the previously quoted descriptions of social work's role suggest, its concerns can only be defined in the negative, by deducing them from the particular context which social work serves. This implies that we can only learn of social work's concerns from the range of needs that the present (primary)

need-meeting institutions are expected to satisfy, and from the extent to which these needs are not being met. The more effective these primary institutions, the smaller the task left to social work, and vice versa. Hence, as Rosenfeld (1983) observes, since the primary need-meeting networks and the circumstances which govern them are inherently dynamic, it is futile *a priori* to assign to social work finite spheres of operation. As the primary need-meeting arrangements expand or contract, improve or worsen, so social work's concerns shift and alter.

Rosenfeld goes on to argue, however, that because of this dynamism, "the particular (spheres of operation) that are or ought to be within social work's focus of attention 'here and now' is an issue to be thrashed out anew within each societal context and at each point of time" (1983, p. 187). In other words, he suggests that social work's concerns are negotiable, and, therefore, that they are at least partially controlled by the profession. This conclusion is also reached by Hanlan (1978, p. 56), although somewhat less sweepingly. Analysing social work from the perspective of social administration, he suggests that "while (this approach) does not deny that social work may initiate from within its own profession a definition of its boundaries . . . (it) does assume that the perimeters of the profession are constantly bounded and determined by events in the larger system."

Yet while Hanlan's and Rosenfeld's position can be understood in the sense that every profession seeks to determine its own field of practice, they confuse political desire with reality. For what both writers overlook is that since social work's realm is residual, it cannot *a priori* determine its concerns, nor can it do so in the 'here and now'. Clearly, social work can initiate *how* it contends with its charge; but as a residual institution, entrusted to meet all 'leftover' needs, what it is supposed to contend *with* is dictated by the society it serves.

Another misconception engendered by the common analogy of social work to a safety-net concerns the fluidity of this mechanism. This feature is frequently interpreted as bestowing social work with a role which will no longer be required once the primary need-meeting institutions fully mature and acquire their 'natural' capabilities. For example, one of the earliest

descriptions of social work depicts it as an endeavor which is meant to supplement other professions pending their complete development, whereupon it presumably will have outlived its usefulness (Flexner, 1915). Likewise, Kahn (1972) argues that to regard social work as a residual provision is to accept that it will soon disappear. Indeed, this notion has been so entrenched in social work, that being a finite commodity has even been idealized as its ultimate goal. For example, Tillich (1962, p. 14), categorically states that the aim of all social work is "to make itself superfluous", and Rosenfeld (1983, p. 187) concludes that once social workers have reduced the incongruities between particular needs and the resources that meet these needs they "have worked themselves out of a job".

The popularity of regarding social work as a finite commodity can doubtlessly be traced to a misreading of Wilensky and Lebeaux's influential distinction between 'institutional' and 'residual' approaches to social welfare (1965, pp. 138-140). The first regards social services as a permanent social fixture, whereas in the residual approach, social services attach "to emergency functions and (are) expected to withdraw when the regular social structure is again working properly". It should be noted, however, that at no point do these authors suggest that residual provisions are terminable. They are only expected to *withdraw* once institutional arrangements can take over, which implies that they have an ongoing, though perhaps sporadic, function. A residual provision can therefore not be dismantled. Like a standby football player, it must be ever present and ready to go into action when the need arises. If the game goes well, the player's services may not be required, but he must always be available. Hence it is incorrect to conclude that "moving from one incongruity to the next characterizes what social work does" (Rosenfeld, 1983, p. 187). It must cover all incongruities at all times, though at different points in time it may more intensively intervene in particular arenas and cover other arenas only latently. Using Wilensky and Lebeaux's terminology, this function could be labelled 'institutional residualness', which means that the boundaries of a safety-net must continuously encompass the entire system it serves. When translated to social work—which plays the understudy role to all society's primary need-meeting

arrangements—this quite literally means the profession is concerned with all unmet social needs.

2 *Social Work's Holistic Domain*

Social work's concern with all unmet social needs also derives from its self-proclaimed domain, as determined, for example, by its generic outlook on needs.

In social work, the generic outlook on needs is interpreted in two basic ways. One suggests that practitioners should take a panoramic view of individuals, in which they address 'the full gamut' of their clients' needs (Cooper, 1980). This means that social workers should be responsible for assessing all the needs of their clients, and since, as a social service director commented recently, "if you identify any need, you have to provide a service for it" (*Community Care*, No. 957, 11.3.93, p. 1)—they must also attend to these needs. Thus, according to the British Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (1975), "(a social worker must) acknowledge a responsibility to help clients obtain all those services and right to which they are entitled, both from the agency in which he works and from any other appropriate source".

Hoshino (1973) identifies the role which attaches to this panoramic view of needs as being 'functionally general', which he contrasts with the more 'functionally specific' role of other professions. For example, a person may request his lawyer to help him to meet some personal financial need, but the lawyer is not obliged to assist him; she is only required to serve her clients' legal interests. In contrast, social workers, *are* responsible for meeting all of their clients' needs. This is clearly expressed in their agencies' open-door policy, which, in effect, is an offer to help *any* person with *any* type of need (Weissman, 1976). Moreover, according to this interpretation of genericism, social workers also bear responsibility for 'concealed needs', which means that they are not only potentially concerned with all social needs, but actively seek them out.

The second interpretation of genericism suggests that social workers should holographically focus only one or two needs. Social phenomena, according to this approach, are intertwined with their entire environment, so that none can be dealt with

in isolation. Social workers must therefore "take into consideration any and all aspects of life that concern the individual with whom (they) work" (Dean, 1977, pp. 370–71), which once again requires them to attend to all of life's elements, even when dealing with only one particular need.

To summarize, the foregoing discussion demonstrates that social work's long-standing attempt to stake out specific boundaries of practice has been inappropriate. The profession's social role, and its self-proclaimed ideology on how needs should be met, both indicate that social work's concerns are the totality of unmet social needs. This also explains why the definition and description of social work are so baffling. Attending to 'everything' lends itself neither to description nor to definition, the very purposes of which are to differentiate between phenomena. "Social work", as Howe (1986, p. 160) remarked, simply "has no essential nature"; its uniqueness lies in its lack of defined contours.

Social Workers' Command of Societal Resources

If social work, which is "a very practical activity" (Jordan, 1984, p. 1), is concerned with all unmet social needs, its objective must be to meet these needs to the best of its ability. This it can accomplish in one of three ways: by meeting needs directly (for example, by providing people with accommodation), by meeting needs indirectly (for example, by teaching people how to acquire accommodation), or by some combination thereof.

In order to meet needs directly, social workers must have the effective authority to dispense the resources their clients require. They must either personally control these resources, or be able "to commit resources without the prior consent of those who will be called on ultimately to supply (them)" (Gamson, 1968, p. 43). In the absence of either of these preconditions, direct need-meeting is impossible practitioners must resort to indirect need meeting, the essence of which is to prevail upon others to help their clients, or help their clients to help themselves. Hence how social workers go about achieving their ends depends on the need-meeting resources they control, or whose allocation they are able to influence.

In general, social work agencies control few resources other than labor. Organizations become the recipients of resources on the basis of prescribed spheres of action and normatively approved modes of intervention (Benson, 1975). Social work agencies, with their residual function, lack such independent bases on which to sustain resource demand. Also, given that the effectiveness of a need-meeting provision is usually positively correlated with the level of resources with which it is provided (Sutherland, 1977), other institutions' resource demands will take precedence over the demands of social work. They will justifiably argue that it was society's failure to provide them with sufficient resources from the outset that precluded their ability to meet their charge. Hence, by their very function, social work agencies can command but a residue of societal resources, and must therefore resort mainly to indirect modes of intervention.

For field-grade social workers, the effect of their agencies' lack of command of resources is even more pronounced. Carrying a functionally general role, social workers master technologies with which they can directly meet only few of the needs they encounter. In this, they differ from other professionals whose more limited purviews enable them to use more specific technologies, and to execute most of their tasks within the confines of their own occupations. For example, physicians can perform substantial parts of their job on their own, and they mainly rely on other medical personnel to complement their work. In contrast, social work's current technology mainly consists of various therapeutic skills. When these fall short of helping them to attain their objectives, they must rely on others. "Having localized his problem", as Flexner (1915, p. 585) wrote long ago, " . . . is (the social worker) not usually driven to invoke the specialized agency(?) . . . There is illness to be dealt with - the doctor is needed; ignorance requires the school; poverty calls for the legislator, organized charity, and so on. The very variety of the situations he encounters compels him to be not (an independent) agent so much as the mediator invoking this or that professional agency".

Another reason why field-grade social workers are largely unable to assist their clients directly is that even when their

agencies control resources, they are rarely given the effective authority to use them. In order to provide their clients with even the most minute of these resources, field-level workers must generally receive prior authorization, and are often even curtailed in appealing to other agencies by having to get their letters counter-signed by a superior (Hill, 1979; Simpkin, 1983). It is therefore inevitable that the primary strategy they adopt is meeting needs indirectly.

That social workers must mainly intervene indirectly is also indicated by their social role. As we have seen, a safety-net's role is residual, it is neither a primary need-meeting institution nor a substitute for these institutions' endeavors. Indeed, should it become such a substitute, it would itself fulfil a primary need-meeting function, whereupon another safety-net would have to be established to deal with whatever needs the previous occupier of the role has left unmet. A typical example was recently provided by the murder of an Israeli social worker by a psychotic client. In the ensuing discussions, it was suggested that in order to avoid similar incidents, social services departments should no longer assist such people. Yet should this occur, another agency would inevitably have to be established to assist all who would now be barred from social services departments. As this is clearly a contradiction, social work is *a priori* precluded from meeting needs directly. This was fully recognized by the Barclay Report (1982, pp. 105), which asserted that social workers' "primary task (is) to motivate others to care, and to enable them to take part in the caring process, rather than to take on themselves the responsibility for action and intervention".

It was mainly to emphasize this structurally determined indirect mode of social work intervention—which clearly distinguishes it from personal social services, whose function is to provide *direct* practical aid—that social work's safety-net role is being examined in this article metaphorically. This is because the face-value analogy of social work as a safety-net leads to a quite different mode of practice.

The face-value conceptualization of a social safety-net regards society's need-meeting institutions as hierarchically superimposed in an inverse pyramid, with each layer attending to needs which remain unsatisfactorily met by the institutions

immediately above it. The broadest and uppermost layer consists of all individuals and their informal care networks. This is followed by market economy. Together, these institutions are assumed to be people's 'natural' need-meeting channels. Third in line is the public sector. These agencies, and especially "those which provide direct services to meet immediate consumption needs of individuals and families" (Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1965, p. 139), cover the structural failures of the preceding institutions. Finally, at the bottom of the inverted pyramid, are mutual-aid and charity organizations which are expected to provide for the residue of needs which have remained unmet by the other, more institutional, organs above them.

In this configuration, social work is lodged somewhere between the last two layers. Its exact position depends on whether it is primarily regarded as a public service, or as a voluntary enterprise. This positioning also determines whether social work plays an 'end of the line' role to all of society's need-meeting schemes, or merely to some. But by the very nature of this analogy, social work is misleadingly held to perform a direct need-meeting role, rather than the indirect need-meeting role which its social function dictates.

Need-Meeting and the Field-Grade Social Worker

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, social workers can help their clients by using only one of the following strategies, or combinations thereof. They can either:

- Restore, enhance, or promote people's independent need-meeting capacities;
- Restore, enhance, or promote the need-meeting capacities of the primary institutions; or
- Expedite required resources from their controllers, and negotiate that they be utilized by their clients directly.

The first strategy assumes that removing personal constraints in the need-meeting process is sufficient to satisfy all unmet needs. This is the market economy solution to need-meeting, where competent, fully-informed citizens are expected to navigate their own way through life after receiving adequate advice or rehabilitative therapy (Ringeling, 1981). In other

words, individual consumers are assumed to be their own need-meeting guarantors. Likewise, the second strategy assumes that needs can be met simply by removing obstructions in service delivery, only here one opts for an administrative need-meeting model which relies on organizational, rather than personal, accountability as the need-meeting guarantor.

Each of these two assumptions and their respective courses of action may, under certain conditions, yield positive results. Yet it is improbable that either can suffice to meet all, or even most, unmet needs due to the fact that both individuals and society's primary need-meeting arrangements are inherently fallible. Hence, if social workers are to attempt to ensure that all of their clients' unmet needs are satisfied, they must primarily rely on the third strategy, namely prevail on others to attend to their clients' needs. In operational terms, this means they must primarily be brokers and advocates who intercede with society's direct need-meeting institutions on their clients' behalf.

Implications

The fact that social workers mainly have to rely on indirect modes of practice implies that their primary targets of intervention are not their clients but other resource providers. This does not mean that social workers cannot try to help their clients directly, or that such help would not satisfy particular types of unmet needs. For example, they might assess that all that is required in a particular case is psychological support or practical advice on how to approach a third party who is both able and willing to meet the client's needs. Rather, what indirect practice means is that social workers are likely to be far more frequently involved with persons who are not their clients than with persons who are. Indeed, mounting evidence which demonstrates that working with clients face-to-face occupies but a third of most social workers' time or less, amply attests that this has always been the case (Goldberg & Warburton, 1979; Austin & Caragonne, 1980; Jones, 1983; Bar-On, 1990).

A second implication of indirect practice is that social workers are heavily dependent on other resource controllers (Bar-On, 1990). If the resources were easily accessible, this would hardly pose a problem. However, since perfect resource accessibility

rarely exists, social workers are critically handicapped by the uncertainty of whether or not the resources they and their clients require will be made available. Consequently, one of the most essential tasks of social workers face is how to manage this dependency, that is, how to prevail on other to dispense their resources in such a way that they will meet the needs of the social workers' clients.

Conclusions

The foregoing analysis of social work's social role leads to at least two fundamental conclusions. First, social workers are not akin to the personal social services as teachers are to schools, or lawyers to courts. The personal social services are charged with providing direct assistance in identifiable fields, and therefore need to control as many societal resources as the economy allows. In contrast, social work has no *a priori* definable boundaries, and since its practitioners are structurally destined to rely mainly on indirect strategies of intervention, social work agencies require few resources other than labor and supporting administrative services. Politically, this still leaves open the question of locating social work's organizational base, but clearly the answer does not lie with the personal social services.

Second, social workers have to accept that their essential job is advocacy and brokerage, where they represent their clients' unmet needs before other non-client resource controllers. Social work education must therefore moderate its traditional focus on client-centered interventions, and strengthen the teaching of applied sociology and political science, which can better equip social workers with techniques of intra- and inter-organizational resource mobilization. As Wootton (1959, p. 296) observed, the "middleman function is itself now so expert a service as to qualify for professional status in its own right. The range of need for which public and voluntary services now provide, and the complexity of relevant rules and regulations have become so great, that . . . the service rendered by those who are masters of all of this and much more beside, and who can mobilize these facilities intelligently and efficiently to suit the requirements of particular individuals, is both skilled and honourable."

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