December 2002

From Social Work to Human Services

David Stoesz
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw

Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol29/iss4/3
From Social Work to Human Services

DAVID STOESZ
Virginia Commonwealth University
School of Social Work

Social work has forfeited its professional mandate and should be replaced by “human services.” In three traditional areas of responsibility—child welfare, public welfare, and mental health—social work has failed to meet its societal obligation. Meanwhile the profession has used postmodern thought to justify a focus on internal constituency groups. A template for professional education in human services is proposed.

Social work is failing to prepare professionals for the expanding service sector of the post-industrial economy and should be replaced with a more competitive education in “human services.” For a variety of reasons, social work has been unable to complete its institutional assignments during the industrial era. The profession is, of course, a product of American culture. Social work’s mission, aiding the disadvantaged, often conflicts with a market economy that generates poverty and inequality. The American polity fairly consistently opposes policies that protect people from insecurity, to say nothing of cultural impediments, such as discrimination against minorities, women, and the disabled. Yet, such adversity does not fully account for the profession’s desultory performance. Other disciplines have flourished in the same environment, and they are increasingly usurping social work’s turf, in the process raising fundamental questions about the profession’s long-term viability.

Harry Specht and Mark Courtney’s (1994) Unfaithful Angels reflects the superficiality of the conventional critique of American social work. Focusing on the split between the increasing number of students who enter professional programs to become clinicians and the dwindling numbers concerned about larger
questions of social justice and its consequents, social policy and social programs, the authors observe a paradox: “Social work has suffered from being poorly financed and unloved, and public support has been at a low ebb. But even so, the public remained willing to provide resources to prevent economic dependency” (p. 101). Note that the authors concede general sympathy for one of social work’s missions, abating poverty, yet admit the public’s ambivalence about the profession. If only those narcissistic clinicians could see the larger picture and change their ways!

Yet, anyone remotely familiar with the travesties of public service would do exactly what legions of younger social workers have done: jump ship. In the mid-1980s, a veteran practitioner observed that “To work in a public agency today is to work in a bureaucratic hell” (Chaiklin, 1985: 7). A decade later, a former welfare client spoke of public welfare in Orwellian terms, As long as poor people are prohibited from having a choice—a say in deciding which services they need and which providers are most capable of satisfying them—the competitive element, if there is one, is entirely in the hands of Big Brother. Most of the people in every form of this business know this: there is no accountability in the social service field. None demanded, none supplied (Funicello, 1993: 252)(original emphasis).

The tragedy is that altruistic young people are vilified for electing private practice, sacrificed on the cross of industrial era social programs and professional education when what is called for is an alternative more consonant with a post-industrial environment. Paralleling its tendency to absolve the individual of responsibility in a hostile environment, social work has attributed its impotence to adverse circumstances, therewith consigning itself to the status of professional victim.

Thesis

Fundamentally, social work is a creature of the industrial era, a complement to the welfare state (Reisch, 2000). Because of this, structural problems plague the profession. Reflecting a bureaucratic milieu that has suffused social work practice, social work education is similarly regimented, characterized by generic components—human behavior and social environment, research,
social policy, and practice—that have been standardized in programs across the nation. Mimicking an industrial model of professional preparation, social work education is over-organized, under-whelming in its expectations, and inferior in product. The educational template forged by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) assures that the production of social workers is virtually identical across schools of social work. In this manner the educational bureaucracy assures the credentialing of professional widgets, a mode of professional preparation that is a vestige of industrial production. With rare exception, distinctive schools have failed to emerge; indeed, even though CSWE offered schools freedom from the industrial mode by introducing a new standard on innovation, as of 2001 no schools had exploited this opportunity. For these reasons, social work is conceding traditional areas of the human services to more competitive disciplines, including new fields of human resources, personnel management, even human ecology [formerly home economics] to say nothing of established disciplines, such as business, psychology, public administration, and nursing.

Social work’s association with public programs results in internal dualism: more ambitious practitioners strive for clinical work in the private sector, while less capable practitioners drift to the public sector. “Public social services are being abandoned by MSW social workers,” noted the then-executive director of the California Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, “It seems to be employment of last resort” (Dunbar, 1987: 3). Over the decades this has resulted in scandalously inferior service in the public sector, particularly child welfare, public welfare, and mental health.

The inferior quality of the public social services is facilitated by the practices of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) which has indiscriminately accredited programs with little concern about the quality of social work graduates. In a critical assessment of social workers’ performance, Noble and Stretch (2000) document that the self-esteem of BSWs is well above their actual competence. Graduate social work education is compromised by the chronically low Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores that typify incoming students. Between 1996 and 1999, the mean GRE scores for social work fell significantly behind all other
major disciplinary categories—life sciences, physical sciences, engineering, social sciences, humanities and arts, education, and business—in all three test components: verbal, quantitative, and analytical (Graduate Record Examinations, 2001). Post graduation, social work is distinguished by the highest rate of first-time passing of state licensing exams (93 percent for social workers) compared to other professions (82.3 percent for nurses, 75 percent for law and medicine, and 72.6 percent for psychology), indicative of an absence of rigor (Noble & Stretch, 2000).

Further diminishing the likelihood that it will realize its objectives, social work has retreated to postmodernist relativism, a philosophical nether-world that contains sufficient academic respectability to pass muster in the marginalized humanities, but fails to provide the theoretical and methodological substance necessary for success in an increasingly competitive human service environment. As a result, the theory and practice of European social workers has eclipsed that of Americans (Reisch, 2000). Conveniently, postmodernism serves to absolve the profession of any responsibility for its failures in social service.

The status quo is perverse in several respects. During a period of significant expansion of the service sector, social work struggles for relevance. During the New Deal, prominent social workers, such as Frances Perkins and Harry Hopkins, moved the seminal work of Jane Addams in new directions and achieved national recognition; by the War on Poverty the list narrowed to Wilbur Cohen and Whitney Young, Jr.; today it is difficult to identify any social worker of comparable stature. The expectation, of course, is that, with the unfolding of the welfare state, the number of nationally recognized social workers would have increased, not diminished. A comparable omission is evident with respect to the organization of social services. With the elaboration of the service sector, human services is increasingly defined by innovations in the private sector, including nonprofit as well as commercial organizations. Yet, social work innovators have become a rarity in the nonprofit world; in the corporate world they are virtually unknown. A structural feature of post-industrialism is the experimentation with service delivery forms that are alternatives to industrial era bureaucracies. Industry has experimented with Employee Stock Ownership Plans for the same reason that charter
and magnet schools have emerged in public education; yet, the social work literature is largely devoid of similar discussions about structural alternatives to private corporations or public bureaucracy. Apparently disillusioned by the deinstitutionalization debacle that accompanied the community mental health movement, social work has failed to disseminate those few true innovations, such as the Savannah Youth Futures Authority, which remain a regional phenomenon.

The ultimate perversion, however, is a result of the profession’s dependence on industrial-mode production: by failing to promote innovative methods of education and practice, social work effectively reaffirms its allegiance to bureaucratic organizations that have been shown to be indifferent to the demands of consumers, staff, taxpayers, and decision-makers. Over time, the maintenance of archaic programs and practices has not only proven counterproductive, it has become convoluted: social work is associated with the maintenance of child welfare agencies that harm children, public welfare departments that populate the underclass, and mental health facilities that exacerbate mental disorders. Social work, much to its detriment, has become associated with providing second-class services to second-class citizens.

The Legacy

Like its sister occupations—nursing and education—social work blossomed as a semi-profession during the Progressive era. In the century following, social work would assume responsibility for three areas of social welfare: child welfare, public welfare, and mental health.

Child welfare—Arguably its original social assignment, social workers advocated for labor laws that protected children, lobbied for “pensions” for the mothers of children who were destitute, and contended that social services could protect children from maltreatment. These were ensconced in Title IV of the 1935 Social Security Act. Subsequently, the welfare of children was to be enhanced by the 1974 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (emphasizing child abuse detection), the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (focusing on permanency planning), and the 1993 Family Support and Preservation Program
and 1997 Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act (introducing family preservation). Despite these policies, child welfare is profoundly inadequate, the degree of child maltreatment a jarring contradiction with the nation’s prosperity. The UN Human Development Index (1996, 1997, 1998) has ranked the U.S. among the most developed nations of the world: second in 1995 and 1996, and fourth in 1997. Yet, the response to child maltreatment is decidedly retrograde. Reviewing data from the 1970s and 1980s, British researcher Colin Pritchard (1993) reported that the U.S. child homicide rate was twice that of the second most lethal nation for children: Australia. Using data from the early 1990s, American researcher Jane Waldfogel (1998) calculated that the reported as well as founded cases of child maltreatment in the U.S. are double the rates of Canada or the United Kingdom.

Of the 2,000 children who die of abuse or neglect annually, almost half are known to child protection agencies (Costin, Karger & Stoesz, 1996). The calamity of child welfare has been portrayed by William Epstein:

The field does not know the rudiments of its operations or its outcomes and it lacks the self-discipline or largeness of character to find out. It spends its scarce resources to create a series of factional studies to its own ideological and political advantage, furthering both the fiction that it knows what to do and that its preferences are in the interests of maltreated children. In the most fundamental way, the field has not bothered to find out what maltreated children need and how those needs can be met (1999:122).

More recently, Alvin Schorr (2000) reflected on child welfare, lamenting that “the debasement of services, the decline of staff, and the absence of sustained citizen engagement are so advanced that it is difficult to see how these may be reversed” (p. 131).

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that scandals involving the deaths of children under the protection of child welfare have appeared prominently in the media in San Diego, New York, and Washington, D.C. A recent series in the Washington Post is especially alarming since it is the seat of federal decision-making about child welfare: between 1993 and 2001, journalists reported that 229 children had died “after their families had come to the attention of the District’s child protection system” (Horwitz,
Higham and Cohen, 2001: A1). The fact that the District agency was staffed completely by MSWs raises profound questions about the integrity of graduate social work education.

Social work typically attributes the decline of child welfare to family poverty, institutional racism, public indifference, societal violence, and the under-funding of programs. These constraints, so the argument goes, make the construction of theory problematic and the accumulation of empirical evidence impossible; but, this position is no longer tenable. While the standard of research—randomized controlled trials—is a rarity in child welfare, field experiments have been used successfully to assess welfare waivers for two decades (Stoesz, 2000), and the research method is being introduced in housing policy as well (Goldstein, 2000). Among the nation’s schools of social work, few are fully established research institutions. The Chapin Hall Center for Children of the University of Chicago is an exemplar because it mounted a rigorous experiment in family preservation; yet, one program cannot compensate for the otherwise inferior performance of American social work education. As a result of social work’s abnegation of child welfare, other disciplines have moved into the field, notably psychology, child development, and family studies.

Public welfare—A signal achievement of the heroines of the Progressive era was the establishment of “mothers pensions,” cash grants to help destitute mothers raise their children. At a time when women did not have the vote, “maternalists” leveraged public opinion so that family welfare was realized in state legislation and later incorporated in the Social Security Act of 1935 (Gordon, 1994). Yet, state-governed family welfare was often meager, mean-spirited, and capricious, so class-action litigation undertaken by the Legal Services Corporation beginning in the mid-1960s opened eligibility, particularly to minority mothers. Coupled with new “War on Poverty” programs, such as Medicaid and Food Stamps, the expanding welfare caseload meant skyrocketing expenditures for public assistance.

Yet, social work soon turned its back on poor, disproportionately minority mothers (Lowe & Reid, 1999). The clearest evidence of this dereliction is chronicled in Social Work Research and Abstracts which began abstracting and cross-referencing articles about social welfare in 1965. In 1965, the inaugural year of the
War on Poverty, twelve articles were published on poverty; the following year the number leapt to 22. In 1973, “the poor” was added as an entry, and 11 articles appeared under both entries. For the next two decades, social work’s interest in poverty flat-lined. Between 1974 and 1988 (the year of the Family Support Act, the first conservative stab at welfare reform), the number of articles appearing in the social work literature averaged fewer than four per year.

Social work’s disinterest in public assistance is remarkable in two respects. Fiscally, welfare was an expanding industry. Between 1970 and 1985, federal expenditures for public assistance jumped from $16 billion to $98 billion in current dollars, a doubling of expenditures in constant dollars. In an astonishing rejection of the progress wrought by its maternalist forebears, social work inexplicably ignored one of the most important expansions of benefits in the history of the American welfare state. Politically, the correct approach to poverty studies became the “feminization of poverty,” through which social work speculated about destitution among the welfare poor, but conducted little or no original research on the matter. Indeed, it was not until the early-1990s, when the ideological shocks of the Reagan presidency registered that social work would demonstrate renewed interest in family poverty. Even then, it was not until 1993 that the number of articles about poverty, 25, eclipsed the previous high of 1965.

For decades much of the poverty research conducted by social workers was undertaken by the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin. After passage of the 1988 Family Support Act, other schools of social work—the University of California at Los Angeles, Rutgers University, the University of Georgia, the University of Michigan, and Columbia University—demonstrated an interest in research on welfare, but this proved ineffective vis-a-vis right-wing policy institutes that had already created the momentum for conservative welfare reform. Social work’s renewed interest in poverty research would prove too little, too late. Having probed problems associated with the poor for two decades, conservative think tanks comprehended the vulnerable aspects of cash assistance to poor families and cobbled together regressive welfare reform legislation. Eventually, the welfare entitlement for poor families would fall to the knife of the
1996 welfare reform act, a casualty of social work's negligence as much a contrivance of right-wing policy institutes (Stoesz, 2000).

The real implications of social work's retreat from poverty reside not in public displays of legislative influence, however, but in the more prosaic applications of evaluation research. Since the states were encouraged to mount alternatives to family welfare in 1981, the Department of Health and Human Services granted dozens of waivers, in exchange for which states were obliged to conduct state-of-the-art research, usually random assignment of welfare recipients to "program" versus "control" groups. Such evaluations are notoriously expensive to conduct so the Feds in collaboration with state welfare departments budgeted tens of millions of dollars for evaluations of welfare reform demonstrations. Where did the money go? Having made family poverty an issue for decades, the nation's schools of social work could have received welfare research funds, had they been competitive with respect to program evaluation. But, until recently, they were not, and, with the exception of the Institute for Research on Poverty, virtually all of the funding went instead to private research firms: the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, Mathematica, and Abt Associates (Noble, 2000).

Mental health—Social work activity in mental health was fashioned largely by American response to Freudian analytic theory. In an attempt to replicate the financial success and the status of psychoanalysts, social workers became therapists in such numbers that they soon dominated the profession. State licensing of clinical social work and reimbursement through private and public insurance further enhanced private practice during the 1970s, even if managed care began to subvert its viability during the 1990s. Clinical social work has been largely defined by psychiatry; indeed, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association is so central to social workers in private practice that it is often taught in graduate social work programs, despite persistent challenges to its diagnostic validity (Kutchins & Kirk, 1997). Inexplicably, an alternative system predicated on psycho-social interaction, the "person-in-environment system," has not achieved wide usage by social workers in mental health practice, despite its having
been promoted by the National Association of Social Workers (Karls & Wandrei, 1994).

Social workers concerned about more troubled clients tended to practice in public institutions until deinstitutionalization which, abetted by the advent of psychoactive medication and the community mental health movement of the mid-1960s, emptied state hospitals. Following deinstitutionalization, social work with the seriously mentally disturbed has diversified, with services provided in community clinics as well as shelters for the homeless. The failure to identify effective interventions with the seriously mentally disturbed has meant that practice has verged on social control through use of psychotropic medications, which can induce tardive dyskinesia when not carefully monitored, or quasi-coercive treatment, such as preventive commitment.

Despite more than a half-century of mental health work, then, social work has been unable to demonstrate its efficacy. In a withering critique of research on social work interventions, Epstein concludes a “near-uniform failure of the field’s intellectual life to credibly identify the benefits of services or to acknowledge their weakness. After decades of insubstantial research, the failure of advocates to defend the value of their programs endorses the skeptic’s prudent surmise that social work is ineffective” (1997: 205). An oblique comment of social work’s failure in this respect is offered by Laura Myers and Bruce Thyer (1997), who, in contending that empirically-validated treatment is an ethical obligation of social work practitioners, proceed to illustrate a series of effective clinical interventions, all of which are products of, not social work, but clinical psychology.

Social work’s contribution to knowledge about mental health was so lackluster that during the late-1980s, the Director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Lewis Judd, called on the profession to contribute more substantively to research on mental disorders (Austin, 1992; 1998). Subsequently, social work programs were encouraged to become Social Work Research Development Centers (SWRDCs). Those so designated would be eligible for funding of up to $500,000 per year for a maximum of five years which could be renewed for another five years. By 2000, eight programs had been so anointed by NIMH, of which one was defunct; only one had been reauthorized for a second
cycle. The SWRDC experience is telling with respect to social work education. Funding for the initiative is open-ended, meaning that any number of social work programs could be funded so long as they were competitive with other disciplines competing for research designation status from NIMH. Yet, almost a decade into the project fewer than ten schools of social work would qualify as SWRDCs; in the most recent round, of five schools applying, only one received funding and that was a program seeking renewal for a second cycle (Juliano, 2000). Considering that there are 62 doctoral programs and 137 masters programs in social work in the U.S. (Lennon, 2000; Randolph, 2000), that only a handful of them would be competitive in mental health research does not reflect well on the profession, particularly given its infatuation with clinical practice.

Professional Involution

As disciplines as diverse as economics, psychology, public health, and nursing have demonstrated, the route to influence in the modern world is the construction and application of theory that is apropos of a given milieu and is empirically testable, optimally through experimental methods. Empirically testable theory is a rigorous and expensive process; nonetheless, it is the sine qua non of the modern professions. Yet, social work has disregarded this prescription. Not only has social work tended to borrow its theory from other disciplines, it rarely mounts its own experimental studies. Worse, much of the profession has embarked on a postmodernist "futulism," a venture that is nothing less than the defenestration of the Enlightenment. It is worth remembering that social work originated contemporaneously with other social sciences—indeed, it was integral with sociology and survey research during the Progressive era—but the profession's theory and methods are, by comparison, anemic today.

While social work skirted the rigors of the empirical project, it became immersed in cultural politics, in the process pushing-aside traditional areas of inquiry. During the 1970s and with increasing urgency in the 1980s, social work focused on the grievances of "special populations": minorities of color, women, and people of alternative sexual orientation, in roughly that chronol-
ogy. Special sections of professional associations were designated to assure their representation in organizational activities. Curricula in professional schools were required to include content on the attributes and needs of these groups. Special journals were established to publish works focusing on their circumstances. Positions within the welfare bureaucracy and academic institutions were effectively reserved for representatives of these groups so as to provide role models to students and assure that programming reflected their social reality. Two decades of such preferential selection would prove consequential; social work celebrated its diversity, but in the process crowded out traditional concerns. Social work courses were required to address the needs of African Americans, Latinos, gays, lesbians, and women, but the status of classic issues such as poverty had become optional. By the late 1990s, social work suffered from "professional involution"—preoccupied with the requirements of special populations, social work neglected traditional concerns, such as child welfare, public welfare, and chronic mental disorders, in a self-perpetuating process of social fusion (Stoesz, 2000).

The apotheosis of professional involution took the form of postmodernism, a critical analysis which denigrated the social sciences as manifestations of a patriarchal and exploitive worldview. The Western canon, alleged postmodernists, maintained educated elites in institutions of power all at the expense of indigenous populations. The hegemony of academicians was justified by an empirical understanding of "truth," evident not only in the esoteric journals that chronicled their work, but the very offices, classrooms, and laboratories through which they conducted their work. The postmodern critique held that Enlightenment philosophy and its sequel, the social sciences, generated theory and methods that were oppressive of the populations that were the subject of academic study. "To postmodernists there is no objectivity and to believe in science means you support an oppressive existing social order that seeks to deny equality to oppressed citizens," observed Chaiklin (2000: 6). Accordingly, the way to liberation was the abandonment of the entire repertoire of the social sciences: knowledge became multi-faceted; theory was deconstructed; methods were devalued; ethics became relative; standards were degraded.
The postmodernist high-jacking of American social work reached its apogee with Stanley Witkin's editorship of the profession's lead journal, *Social Work*. Dichotomizing between literary versus scientific depictions of reality, Witkin stated a preference for the former. The consequences may well be an American version of the "cultural revolution." Invoking "alternative forms of writing or nonpositivist forms of knowledge," Witkin employed postmodernism to challenge "Western enlightenment thinking. Previously unassailable notions such as progress, objectivity, and rationality have all been subject to critique—'unpacked' and reassembled as historical expressions" (Witkin, 2000: 390).

An alternative view, informed by developments in literary theory and cultural studies, is that what is taken as the true meaning of a text depends on whose interpretation is privileged. For example, in universities, instructors' interpretations are privileged; in practice settings privileged interpretations are associated with various experts—for example, social workers, supervisors, judges, psychiatrists. True meaning becomes synonymous with authoritative interpretations, and authoritative interpretations are based on conferred power within particularly contexts. Uniformity, associated with efficiency and the reproduction of relations of authority, rather than multiplicity becomes rewarded. Thus, teaching social work students "correct" interpretations is a way to socialize them into the social work community while retaining the relationship between teacher and student. They learn to read in a manner that accepts certain literary conventions and beliefs—for example, the relationship between authority and citations or the privileging of experts' opinions about others over others opinions of themselves (Witkin, 2001: 6).

Having established social workers in higher education as well as direct practice as "privileged," Witkin advocated literary theory for political ends: "dislodging" authority (Witkin, 2001: 6).

The practical implications of postmodernism were explored by Ann Weick who championed a female, "first voice" as authentic for a social work that had largely succumbed to a dominant culture typified by a rational, male "second voice." Late in her career, Weick discovered that "I perfected, as most women do, my second voice—the voice of dominant culture—framed in logic, rationality, and rules, where right and might are more important
than care and comfort and where winning eclipses warmth and worry" (2000: 398). Weick located her experience within the larger social work project, embracing a pre-scientific *practice wisdom* as superior to scientific sources of knowledge that the profession had since embraced.

In the ensuing years the profession has moved more vigorously to authenticate its approach to practice by aligning with the dominant voice epitomized by the scientific enterprise. In contrast to the ordinary concerns of human relationships, social improvement and community well-being, the methodology of scientific research requires parsing and dissecting discrete elements. Emotions are replaced with studied disinterest; complexity is resolved by narrowing the point of study; mystery evaporates in the face of calibrated instruments and precise numbers. No where to be found are the living tissues of human drama and human triumph. In choosing this dominant voice as the official voice of the profession, social work has let slip through its fingers the language that fills its veins with the fullest expression of human experience and that most essentially give social work its distinctive character as a profession (Weick, 2000: 400).

In rejecting science, the postmodern agenda in social work is not only irrational, it furthers the profession's irrelevance. Weick's "first voice," for example, "will require us to move away from our naive enchantment with theories that emanate from the more distant voice of the scientific and social scientific disciplines" (Weick, 2001: 401). In a society that is increasingly data-driven, such a position is decidedly retrograde. Not only are the diligent analyses of social workers, such as LaDonna Pavetti and Jan Hagen, subverted; but research on populations of traditional concern to social work are increasingly undertaken by non-social workers. The most poignant research on welfare families has been conducted by Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, neither of whom are social workers. While social work muses about its "voices," researchers at the Institute for Women's Policy Research are generating data on issues of compelling concern for social work, ranging from welfare reform, to older women and Social Security, and the glass ceiling.

Postmodernism is a dead-end for social work because it generates no identifiable public benefit. While professional involution
may entertain university faculties, the half-life of such indulgence is likely to be short for a profession as dependent on public support as has been social work. As valid as diverse representation is for social work internally, it is inherently circumscribed unless the profession can demonstrate a corresponding external value to the public. The substitution of conventional terminology (class, income, etc.) with postmodern vernacular (the center, the other, etc.) invites ambiguity. A sympathetic observer opined that the disconnect between social welfare and postmodernism will hamstring the movement until its concepts “appear as operational and utilizable” (Carter, 1998: 104). Quite beyond that the postmodern flaunting of authority, evident in eschewing of established investigatory methods and rules for decision-making, invites organizational chaos. A philosophy of social welfare that equates mutually-affirming commonsense with professional knowledge may prove popular in the short-run; but, in the long-run, any school of thought that encourages clients to challenge staff, case-workers to defy administrators, and students to lecture professors invites disaster.

Human Services

That social work had slipped its epistemological moorings has not gone unnoticed. The NIMH SWRDC project, while of enormous prospective benefit, has not been fully exploited by schools of social work; for that matter it has no corollary with respect to child welfare and public welfare. After more than a century of institutionalized activity, social work education fails to present a confident public image when only a dozen or so of its schools of social work are fully competitive with other disciplines in the social sciences or health and human services. The degradation of social work education provoked Alvin Schorr (2000) to indict schools of social work for “having] been studiously blind to endemic violations of good practice” (p. 133). Under these circumstances, the merit of recent efforts to establish a national center for social work research is open to question: it is doubtful that Congress will long tolerate, at public expense, a research agenda that furthers professional involution, let alone a postmodernist agenda.
A post-industrial society requires high-quality professional education for its expanding service sector, but social work has not responded. In search of a postmodernist future, American social work has diverged from a trajectory that would have enhanced its relevance and authority. Instead of exploiting the instruments that are central to the continued expansion of a dynamic service sector, the profession has turned inward, preferring to placate its internal constituent groups. In an accelerating information age, it is ironic that those institutions best situated to assert a corrective course, the nation’s university-based schools of social work, have failed to provide leadership to a profession that is struggling for purchase.

In the interest of promoting the well-being of residents of the United States, social work should collaborate with other disciplines—gerontology, human resources, child development, family studies—and establish a new discipline: human services. The focus as well as the content of this new discipline must be consonant with the requirements of the post-industrial environment of which it is a part. Toward that end the following generic changes are warranted:

1. The Council of Social Work Education should be replaced by an Academy of Human Services, incorporating the disciplines of child development, family studies, human resources, personnel management, human ecology, rehabilitation, and gerontology. The Academy would be governed by a board representing leading theorists, researchers, administrators, and practitioners from these fields.

2. Until the Academy is fully operational, a moratorium should be placed on the accreditation of new social work programs.

3. The degrees authorized by accredited programs should be the Bachelor of Human Services (BHS) at the undergraduate level, and the Master of Human Services (MHS) at the graduate level.

4. Undergraduate programs should consist of 30 credits in human behavior, research, policy, practice, ethics, and incorporate an internship; the balance of 30 credits should be electives. In order to respond directly to an increasingly diverse consumer
population, proficiency in a language other than the dominant language (usually English) should be required.

(5) Graduate programs should consist of 30 credits in human behavior, research, policy, practice, ethics, and incorporate an internship; the balance of 30 credits should be electives. Students should be required to complete a research thesis for graduation.

Beyond these generic changes, specific alterations in educational policy are indicated:

(6) Educational programs receiving child welfare training funds should be required to generate state-of-the-art research on services to maltreated children in exchange for such monies.

(7) Programs offering a specialization in nonprofit management and social administration should require basic courses in budgeting and finance as well as information systems.

Finally, strategic innovation should be encouraged for purposes of integrating human services at the local, state, and international levels.

(8) Students should be encouraged to intern with governmental institutions at the state, national, and international levels.

(9) Internships with community-based, advocacy organizations serving marginal populations should be developed.

(10) Reciprocity agreements among educational institutions should be required as a condition of accreditation, and an aggressive effort should be made to link institutions internationally in response to globalization.

* * * * *

Social work has largely squandered the legacy that it inherited from the heroines and heroes of the Progressive era, the New Deal, and the War on Poverty. Social work education no longer serves the public interest if that means generating state-of-the-art knowledge that enhances the general welfare. Instead, social work has deteriorated not only with respect to the generation of its own theory, but also the development of methods that meet contemporary standards of scientific research. As a result of this degradation of its societal assignment, the profession has forfeited much of its traditional, institutional responsibilities, substantially so with respect to child welfare, public welfare, and mental health. Rather than shore up these deficiencies, social work has chosen
instead to focus on its own constituent groups, a narcissistic indulgence that has been encouraged by postmodernist thought. That this should continue at public expense is untenable. Rather than continue to drift, social work should merge with other disciplines and establish a new discipline: human services.

References


