



**Parallel Process in Final Field Education: A Continuing Education Workshop to Promote Best Practices in Social Work**

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# The Changing Meaning and Purposes of Social Work

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*Shuttlesworth*

As I reflect on my sixty years as a social worker, the changes that have occurred in the profession have, in many ways, altered the original meaning and purpose of social work. Early on, social workers focused on the poor and impoverished who lacked even the most basics in food, clothing, and shelter. Even through the 1950s few entitlement programs save public assistance and a few others, such as country surplus food programs, existed. Poverty was of yet defined by absolute standards, and workers administering the public assistance programs spent as much time in the field as in their offices. Child welfare caseworkers were totally engrossed in dealing with abused and neglected children, developing foster homes for dependent children, screening prospective adoptive parents, and a host of related activities. Group workers were engaged in developing socialization groups with slum area gangs among others, and community organizers were busy identifying gaps in community services and organizing resources to fill those gaps. In a few words, this was the mantle of social work in the '50s: working in the field with needy populations. Not so today. Why? Perhaps because there are some 80 entitlement programs, i.e., food cards, housing subsidies, school lunches, medical assistance, etc. Poverty has also been defined on relative standards, and as such, "the poor you will have with you always." Most assuredly, however, there are individuals, families, and children who survive in absolute poverty. While there are entitlement programs which are available to help them, one might ask where are the social workers to advise them of the available programs and assist them in engaging services from there. According to the latest NASW data, 85% are desk bound doing clinical social work with primarily middle class clients, and while this is necessary and helpful, the needs of the poor, disenfranchised, homeless, and others are not being met.

To be a social worker in the '50s one must have an MSW degree from an accredited school of social work. Workers with only a bachelor's degree (or less) were considered to be paraprofessionals. In the '50s, graduate schools of social work were identified as "diagnostic" (based on the psychology of Freud) or "functional" (based on the psychology of Rank). Students were taught these theoretical frameworks as a basis for taking social histories and as a focus for intervention. Today, there is a plethora of "theories" students must learn to brace their practice focus. Faculties in the 50s were primarily MSWs with extensive practice experience prior to joining faculty ranks.

Due to the proliferation of government-sponsored programs largely driven by the "war on poverty," the shortage of workers available served as leverage for NASW to open its ranks for bachelor's degree social workers who graduated from accredited programs. This, in turn, inspired colleges and universities to develop majors in social work and seek accreditation from CSWE. Hence, BSW social workers were then blessed with membership in NASW as generalist practitioners. During this time frame ('50s and '60s), NASW adopted a program for advanced workers - the Academy of Certified Social Workers. In seeking to further strengthen its "professional image," the NASW urged states to adopt licensure procedures for those who met qualification standards. Although the general public tended to think of social workers as "welfare" workers, few knew who they were or what they did. Little has changed that perspective. As the profession moved away from direct involvement with the poor (other than rhetoric) and focused more on working with dysfunctional families, casework became refined as "clinical social work" and as such became just another counseling profession. Thus, the distinctive difference between social work and other helping professions becomes more blurred.

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While the '50s following WWII and Korea was showing post-war prosperity, morality, and civility (the glue that holds social behavior in check), it was in the early stages of change. In fact, the "cultural revolution" of the '60s served as the conduit for dramatic change. During the '50s marriages were more than less stable; most babies were born to two parent families; production was in full swing, providing goods that were not available during the war years; GI's were going to college on the GI Bill; and social workers were electing to be caseworkers and working in mental health, child welfare, family services, and related agencies. Mental health workers were often identified as "psychiatric social workers" – the acme of social work practice. Private practice was in its embryonic stages, not yet blessed by the profession as a legitimate form of social work practice. That comes much later.

Rural social work and SW with the aged had not yet been given much attention in schools of social work until well past the '80s. Rural areas were underserved by social services in spite of having proportionately higher poverty rates than their urban counterparts. Mechanization displaced many farm laborers (i.e. cotton picking machines, tractors, etc.). Mega farms provided disincentives for individual farmers, many of whom lost intergenerational farms. Public assistance workers were about the only social service agents in most rural counties. Although some progress has been made, rural areas tend to be underserved in spite of the fact that rural residents have many of the same problems as their urban neighbors.

The older population is rapidly expanding as the baby boomers reach 65 and older. In the next decade or so over 60 million will be 65 or over. Life expectancy has been extended, and roughly 50% of the aged will have only Social Security funds to live on. With the cost of living escalating, many face lives of deprivation and need. Nursing homes are becoming overcrowded, many are understaffed with high turnover rates, and social services are limited. Programs such as Meals on Wheels, senior center lunch programs, and home health and rehab services, while helpful, reach only a small proportion of the

needy population. With the burgeoning aged population existing faculties will be swamped. "Grow old along with me, the best of life is yet to be" is true only for the most affluent older population. While politicians wrangle over cutting benefits for this group, old people shudder to think what will happen to them if they do.

Social work is noble profession, and contemporary social workers are a credit to its redefined mission. With innumerable immigrants, overcrowded cities, and limited job opportunities, all with countless problems, my hope is that the profession will once again put at least some of its focus and effort into educating students to address these issues and again get involved in community work. I would suggest that all social workers read Speck and Courtney's "Unfaithful Angels." With the federal government's massive indebtedness, funds for existing (as well as future programs) will likely become more limited. Social work is not a money-generating profession and has long survived on funds from various government agencies, the community chest, benefactors, and others. In a society where wages are stagnant, jobs are limited, etc., the need for community social workers will likely be a field ripe for the harvest, and the distinctive difference between social work and the other helping professions will again be clear.

As an octogenarian who looks back over the past 60 years, many of the problems that existed then – discrimination, poverty, etc. – are still with us, some more intense now than then. The euphoria associated with the "war on poverty" has long since dissipated. Discrimination is and will continue to be a major issue. Stressing diversity without assimilation and civil rights may well lead to a tribal society and inherent conflict. Political correctness is not a solution but only a balm to provide temporary relief from the underlying problems. Many will continue to ponder whether poverty results from characterological or institutional (or both) problems. If we have learned anything from our history, we know that you cannot "casework" the poor out of poverty. We must evaluate the effectiveness of past and current efforts and chart a new course. Only then shall we overcome.