

# Encyclopedia of Social Work

## Social Work Practice: History and Evolution

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Subject: Macro Practice, Policy and Advocacy, Social Work Profession

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Bibliography expanded and updated to reflect recent research.

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### Abstract and Keywords

Social work is a profession that began its life as a call to help the poor, the destitute and the disenfranchised of a rapidly changing social order. It continues today still pursuing that quest, perhaps with some occasional deviations of direction from the original spirit.

Social work practice is the primary means of achieving the profession's ends. It is impossible to overstate the centrality or the importance of social work practice to the profession of social work. Much of what is important about the history of the profession is the history of social work practice.

We must consider both social work practice per se (the knowledge base, practice theories and techniques) and the context for social work practice. The context of practice includes the agency setting, the policy framework and the large social system in which practice takes place.

Social work practice is created within a political, social, cultural and economic matrix that shapes the assumptions of practice, the problems that practice must deal with and the preferred outcomes of practice. Over time, the base forces that create practice and create the context for practice, change. Midgley (1981) correctly notes that practice created in one social order is often inappropriate for work in another social order. Since the social order changes over time, practice created at one point in time may no longer be appropriate in the future.

Keywords: social work history, social work practice, social work profession, social work organizations

# The Profession Develops

Social work, in the United States, is largely a product of the same industrial revolution that created the welfare state and industrial society. As Garvin and Cox (2001) note, industrialization led to the factory system, with its need for large numbers of concentrated workers, and subsequently created mass immigration, urbanization, and a host of consequent problems. Social work was a response to many urban problems such as mass poverty, disease, illiteracy, starvation, and mental health challenges.

Both the Charities Organization Society and the Settlement House Movement were responses to these problems. Both movements were imported from Great Britain and supplemented the efforts of religious groups and other associations, as well local and state governments in dealing with the problems of urbanization and industrialization. The Charities Organization Society and the Settlement Houses were important forces in shaping the development of American social work practice and the professionalization of social work.

The Charities Organization Society (COS) represented the cause of scientific charity, which sought to introduce more rational methods to charity and philanthropy (Trattner, 2004). The direct services component consisted of paid investigators, who worked for the COS, and "Friendly Visitors," who were volunteers that visited the clients. There were also Councils of Social Agencies, which coordinated the efforts of social services agencies. It can be argued that the paid investigators were probably the precursors of caseworkers while the Councils of Social Agencies gave rise to social planning in community practice. The United Way Movement, which credits its founding to the Denver COS, was another product of this group. Richmond's (1917) very important contribution was *Social Diagnosis*, which presented her observations on the nature of social casework. Perhaps the final contribution made to social work practice by the COS was the mark it made on social work education through its role in creation of the New York School of Philanthropy. As Austin (1986) notes, the scholar practitioner model, where faculty come from a social work practice (as opposed to a traditional academic model), is our prevailing mode of preparing social workers today.

The Settlement House Movement aimed at the innercity and created houses as community centers in urban area. This was a completely different approach from that used by the COS. The settlement house workers used social group work to help socialize new immigrants to the city. They offered adult education for their urban neighbors and provided help and advice. They worked on community problems together with the other residents of poor urban neighborhoods. The Settlement House Movement is often most thought of for its social action efforts (Trattner, 2004). Working in conjunction with organized labor and other community activists, the settlement house workers were instrumental in the creation of the juvenile court, mother's pensions, child labor laws, and workplace protections. This is often seen as the touchstone of social work's involvement

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in social action and policy practice. Jane Addams was well known in this regard. Because many of the Settlement house workers were social scientists who worked in conjunction with university-based academic social scientists, they began important research into urban problems.

Between these two movements lies the foundation of much of the practice we see today, accounting for casework, social group work, community development, social planning, and social action. The beginning of research supporting social policy is also here.

The development of fields of practice began to occur with the emergence of psychiatric social work and medical social work (Dolgoff & Feldstein, 1980; Lubove, 1969). These new specialties allowed the creation of practice methodology refined for certain populations and many other practices specialties emerged.

All of this occurred during the process of professionalization described by Lubove (1969). This included the creation of professional organizations, a code of ethics, professional agencies, and the creation of professional schools and a knowledge base.

In 1915 Abraham Flexner questioned whether social work was actually a profession because of what he saw as the lack of a scientific knowledge base. This created an underlying theme in the profession that has occasionally led to unfortunate results (Austin, 1983; Eherenreich, 1985). Social workers, in response to this criticism, worked to find a knowledge base that would satisfy Flexner's critique. This quest continues to this day.

As the profession developed and changed, so did society. As America became more conservative, social action activities decreased. This was especially true during the first three decades of the 20th century. Eherenreich (1985) observes that the rediscovery of poverty and the changing national mood toward social programs created a crisis for the profession. It did not, on balance, lead to much in the way of changes in social work practice.

Freud and psychoanalysis became very influential in social work from the early part of the 20th century until the sixties. This period, often called the Psychoanalytical Deluge, saw social workers eagerly adopting psychoanalysis as a means to solve several of the profession's needs. While social work created its own variants that brought more social factors into the mix (ego psychology and psychosocial treatment), psychodynamic treatment became fashionable. Psychoanalysis was popular with psychiatrists, which facilitated the creation of strong bonds with the medical profession and the emerging mental health movement (see Eherenreich, 1985). Although, it is not completely clear whether the profession as a whole endorsed Freud or just its leadership (see Alexander, 1972). The impact of psychoanalysis cannot be discounted. The individually centered nature of psychodynamic theory also served to push the profession further from social action. Although one can debate whether psychoanalysis was the cause or consequence of

a disengagement from social action and the poor, it is clear that this extraordinarily individualistic practice method closed off many avenues of engagement. Casework was the dominant practice method, a trend that can be seen throughout the history of the profession, and this was, perhaps, its most individualistic form.

The Milford Conference (1923–1929) came to an agreement on the importance of casework to the profession (Eherenreich, 1985). The Lane Report in 1939 argued that community organizers deserved equal status to caseworkers and social groupworkers (Dolgoff & Feldstein, 1980).

There were dissenting voices in direct practice however. A group of social workers formed the Functionalist School, providing a challenge to psychoanalysis. Functionalist theory, based on the work of Otto Rank, advocated an agency-based view of practice, which was different from the psychodynamically based diagnostic school. The Functional-Diagnostic Debate continued, with the more psychodynamically based diagnostic school maintaining the upper hand.

There were also social workers who bucked both the more conservative national mood and the conservative orientation of the social work profession and engaged in social action. Perhaps the best known were Bertha Capen Reynolds and Mary Van Kleek who led a group called the Rank and File Movement during the Depression years. They advocated more progressive politics and a movement away from casework (Eherenreich, 1985). The response of the profession was less than positive and the conservative mood that characterized social work reflected a conservative political mood.

Until the end of the 1950s, social work was a far more unified profession. Disagreements had been worked out and the profession presented a singular face to the world. That was about to change as the nation and the profession encountered the 1960s.

## The Profession Changes in the Sixties

The sixties changed the social policy, and the forces changing the context of practice changed the nature of professional social work practice and ultimately the profession. The politically and culturally conservative fifties gave way to a new national mood and a series of social movements that changed the political agenda for a nation. Poverty was part of the national debate in a way that it had not been since the Depression. This time, the results were different for social work and social work practice.

There were major changes in social work practice during the 1960s. Those changes continued at least for the next four decades and will likely continue into the future. The most momentous change was the erosion of the psychodynamic influence in social casework. There are many possible explanations for this situation, but it is important to

note this as a major change in the profession's view of practices. This does not mean that social workers no longer do psychodynamic practice, nor does it mean that social work schools no longer teach psychodynamic practice theory. The hold that Freudian and neo-Freudian approach had on social casework was, however, broken.

In the macro area, politically oriented community action reemerged. Certainly the War on Poverty and the Ford Foundation's Gray Areas project helped this to occur. Involvement in social planning was facilitated by the Model Cities Program and the regional planning agencies such as the Appalachian Regional Commission. Rothman's (1969) influential approach to community organization theory helped define and organize the field. This was less than 10 years before the Lurie, writing in the Boehm Report, had questioned the lack of integration in the field.

It is fair to say that the 1960s began a pattern of fundamental change in the profession and within social work practice. This change continues even today.

## The Changing Face of Social Work Practice

In the three decades that followed the 1960s there were a great many changes in the way that social work practice was described, conducted, and taught. This reflected an adaptation to changes in the context of practice, as well as the efforts of social workers to move beyond the older agreement.

Micro practice has taken advantage of models and approaches from the social sciences and from other helping groups. While some practitioners still use psychodynamic approaches, social workers also use behavioral and phenomenological approaches. Theories such as task-centered treatment, cognitive behavioral approaches, reality therapy, and so forth provide options for the social work micro practitioner. New approaches that look at social networks and other sets of relationships are also used and will continue to become more important as our knowledge of social networks evolves (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Turner (1996) and Payne (2005) describe a vast variety of clinical approaches that move beyond the single theory approach of the profession prior to 1960.

Macro practice has matured since the 1960s and will continue to develop as time goes forth. Community practice has developed new approaches that encompass a wide variety of strategies and techniques. Political organizing, locality development, and social planning have matured and developed. Administration (frequently referred to as Social Administration) once had an unclear place in social work practice, but is now clearly established as a method of social work practice. This began with a series of reports and projects in the 1970s and evolved into eventual recognition of the approach. Recognition of policy practice as a practice field is also established in most of the profession. This brings in policy analysis and policy change (advocacy, lobbying, and so forth) together in

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a single social work role. These are developments that would have been unthinkable in the past but, in many ways, the profession still lags behind other fields in the training of practitioners for macro practice.

Going beyond the macro-micro divisions, the growth of generalist practice theory is noteworthy. Generalist social work means using an essentially constant set of approaches at multiple levels. Generalist practice has developed a robust set of theories and approaches to inform this perspective.

Ecological systems theory and the Life Model, the Strengths Perspective and Empowerment practice, as well as Feminist Social Work Practice Theory, provide explanations at multiple levels that can encompass several types of techniques. These are, in many ways, recognition of the limitations of earlier approaches.

Evidence-based practice (O'Hare, 2005) is a likely paradigm shift in social work, judging from the impact of evidence-based approaches on medicine, public health, and nursing. The use of research findings to guide practice is an attractive theory and one that promises further improvement in the quality of practice.

Also important are the developments in technology-based practice, including e-therapy, telemedicine, electronic advocacy, and other techniques that use high technology. These have grown in importance as the technology evolves, the online environment become more important and experience and research push the development of practice toward further refinement.

## What Is Next?

The world is now in midst of a new economic and social transition, one that began in the 1970s and continues today. This transition will create an information economy that will be as different from our industrial economy as it was from the agricultural society that preceded it. It is already changing the nature of society in many profound ways and changing the environment of practice. Friedman (2005) identifies major changes in the political economy of the near future, including global competition, outsourcing, more technology, and so forth. This will have major impacts on policies, agencies, and clients. Also important will be the destruction of the physical environment and the rise of globalization as drivers of social policy decision-making. The profession will have to adapt, much in the way that social workers in the 1800s adapted.

## The History of Social Work Practice Considered

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There are a number of lessons that can be gleaned from this discussion of social work practice. It is undeniable that direct services/casework is the primary practice orientation in social work. The orientation of social work practice often conflicts with its concerns for social justice and systems change. When Specht and Courtney (1994) called social workers "Unfaithful Angels," there was significant evidence to back up that charge. Social work has evolved into a conservative profession that has a hard time resolving the conflict between its social justice values and its choice of primary practice methodologies. It often seems that whatever the problem is, casework or psychotherapy is often our primary answer. That does not mean that it is the correct answer.

Social work practice will face a number of challenges in the future. The change in political economy, coupled with other developments in culture, the environment and social organization, will create the need for new practice methods and make others less viable. The development of new knowledge will also create new practice theories and techniques. Social workers must resist the temptation to hold on to the past when the future is at our door.

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