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Requiem for Social Work?

by

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Abstract

The November 1998 special centennial issue of the NASW journal Social Work published papers and letters intending “..to explore who we have been, who we are, and whom we might become.” Included was a letter from Richard Cloward who had publicly declined the honour of being placed in a social work hall of fame and suggested that instead of a centennial celebration there should be a “wake”. Relating to the journal’s material, this article examines some of the author’s fifty years experience of social work internationally; the long-term struggle to define the development role; the seemingly current rise of “function” determined by others, along with the decline of social work’s sense of “cause”; what is needed to integrate practice and education as an active professional partnership and suggesting an effective institutionalisation of social work research. Entitled “Requiem?” to Cloward’s wake, this paper seeks debate to contribute to the profession’s resurrection.

Key Words

Role Definition Internationally, Social Development, Practice, Education, Research

Requiem for Social Work?

Richard Cloward's public letter declining the honour of being placed in a social work hall of fame suggested that instead of a centennial celebration there should be a "wake".¹

PERSPECTIVE

There is of course value in periodic review of the past, present and future direction of a profession. In addition the nature of the use of self in social work requires a constant process of self-examination. (Indeed, this present article has turned into a recollection of, and re-visit to, my own half century in the field.) At the same time there seems to be an unhelpful deep-seated element of navel-gazing among social workers and one is led to ponder at the tone and content of much of the heart-searching expressed on this centennial occasion.

There has been at least a hundred years of practical experience behind us and to be drawn upon; a century of borrowing, integrating and adapting of theory from a range of sources wherever its utility could be found; and the establishment of professional schools and training that has spread world-wide. Without complacency then, how is it that we seem to betray so little confidence in defining what we do, how we do it and why? Our graduates leave schools, I trust, properly knowing that they face a lifetime of continuing to discover and learn about the human condition and what ails it. They should also know that they are joining a profession likely always to be a minority in terms of their particular idealism and social concerns, and will receive not too much public recognition or financial rewards. Perhaps also they may too often carry the sense of falling short of their highest hopes and aspirations in a job that will by its nature present them everyday with so much of society's sorrows. How come then that there is apparently so little sense of belonging to a fellowship of professionals that provide an on-going solid foundation of support and assurance? Should we not have a sense of pride and security in understanding and contributing to a maturing recognisable professional agenda, albeit diverse and consisting of many strands?

SOCIETY, SOCIAL WORK AND THE POOR

In the November NASW special centennial issue of the Social Work journal much is made of social work being very much concerned with the social injustice of conditions of poverty and the Poor². I

¹Knowing of my recent related correspondence on the Internet and my concerns, an American colleague has sent me photocopies of the editorial and letters in the November 1998 Special Centennial Issue of the NASW journal of Social Work. Certainly the editorial mention of the contribution - "The Rise in Social Work in PUBLIC Mental Health through Aftercare of People with Serious Mental Illnesses" has led me to much speculation, which makes it doubly unfortunate that the articles in this edition were not included.

write from the perspective of a professional education and practice in Britain and the USA; then teaching very senior people from the developing countries. Subsequently I spent many years in the so-called (Undeveloped)) Third World (Asia and Africa) and was commissioned back in 1971 to conduct a six-country study (Exploration ...)³ of social work in Asia. Most recently I have been involved in setting up social work and its education in Lithuania in the Baltic and have just returned from a two-month lecture tour around the USA (that I had not visited in nine years) on “The Search for the ‘Social’ in Development”. I have been surprised how few professionals I have met anywhere that are actually practising where the Poor are to be found.

In the second paragraph of the editorial, referring to the morose comment that our profession does what others do but more cheaply, I was struck by the phrase;

“In a society that assesses quality in monetary terms,” and continues “... such a distinguishing characteristic simply devalues our services and clients.” It certainly is the case that (as is stated later) “...social work is supported and shaped by the very system it seeks to change”.

The system and its monetary evaluations, from my observation in the current social climate, are indeed, with a vengeance, “the forces that push (social work) for professional acceptance and status....”. Can it be that we ourselves have self-depreciatingly adopted the same values we seem to deplore? These values are certainly spreading like wildfire.⁴ It is this that has everywhere influenced social work and its desire for professionalism.

SOCIAL WORK, an INTERNATIONAL PROFESSION?

This is not exclusive to the USA, for the same process is accelerating worldwide. As Ming-sum Tsiu and Fernando Cheung from Hong Kong in their letter to the Social Work journal describe:

“..globalization is coming at us with little warning.”, and “Many developing countries are going through industrialization in a pressure cooker environment.”.

It is my experience too, that everywhere governments are vandalising the hard-won public social services in a Gadarene rush to embrace the free market global economy. In the process they are producing

² “.. with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of the people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” “ ... also emphasises social work’s determination to promote social justice and social change ...” NASW Code of Ethics.

³ Drucker D. An Exploration of the curricula of social work in some countries in Asia with special reference to the relevance of social work education to social development goals.

ECAFE/UNICEF. 1972. See also, Summary of Exploration....1972. and

Social Welfare: An evolutionary and development perspective.

Shankar Pathak, Macmillan, India, Ltd., 1981.

⁴ One of the letter contributors uses the terminology about social work’s “market appeal”.

vast new populations of unemployed and the opportunity for international business to exploit labour in poor countries unhampered by civilised protection. All such matters should clearly be of concern to social workers at this end of the century.

Tsiu and Cheng say that social work has become an “international asset” which is fine if this reflects the oft-declared international aspirations of social work. However, we might be able the better to claim internationalism if we took up their challenge and incorporated “.. how social work is critically adopted and reinvented by social workers in developing countries according to their own cultural and socio-political contexts”. It has been acknowledged that:

“Asian knowledge, Asian objectives and Asian social work cannot depend merely on the patronising idea that Western knowledge has to be indigenised.⁵ What emerges from Asia should be recognised and valued as fundamental knowledge in its own right which can make a considerable, necessary and vitalising contribution to building a truly international knowledge base and an international profession. The West might indigenise some of the Asian experience to spur the embryonic efforts in the West itself directed to the issue of their poor and their unjust social conditions. Western poor, significant and growing in numbers, are still very much un-okay”⁶.

Our Hong Kong colleagues “remind” us that social work’s:

“.. values, knowledge, intervention strategies, professional cultures, and future challenges are no longer fully represented in discussions that are only relevant to Western Societies”

To my mind, it is not a matter of “no longer”, it has always been the case. We had formal notice over thirty years ago.

WARNINGS of MYOPIA

In 1968 Asian social work educators, administrators and planners meeting in Bangkok reported:

“ ..that professional social work and social work education were still (sic) not sufficiently attuned to developmental needs and problems as currently defined in the plans of the countries in the ECAFE region, and that greater efforts should be made to improve that situation”. (United Nations)⁷

⁵ See, quoted later, Kathleen A. Kendall’s “Social Work Education in the 1980s: Accent on Change” *International Social Work*, 29(1), p.15-28 (1986),

⁶ Drucker, D. “Look Homeward Asia: The Social Work Profession in Asia 1968-1993”, p.517
The Indian Journal of Social Work. Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 1993
& IASSW Conference Amsterdam 1994

⁷ United Nations Report of the Seminar on the Relationship of Social Work Education to Developmental Needs and Problems in the ECAFE Region.1968

Later that same year, at the International Conference of Ministers Responsible for Social Welfare held at the United Nations in New York, 89 countries endorsed the recommendation that priority be assigned:

" ..particularly in developing countries, to the developmental tasks of social welfare and therefore, to orienting social welfare training toward preparation for such tasks."(United Nations)⁸

In 1970 the Asian Ministers meeting in Manila extended this concept more specifically:

"Curricula on social work training should be geared to social development goals and constantly examined, reviewed and evaluated in the light of the countries' changing needs". (United Nations),⁹

At the fellow conferences of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) - the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW); and the International Congress of Social Workers (ICSW) in Manila at the same time (1970) the in-thing was to exult at the prospect of social work operating effectively "in the corridors of power"¹⁰ as the challenge of the seventies. By 1970, then, leaving aside the hubris, at least social work had authoritatively had its attention drawn not only to the nature of the Asian situation, but to the necessary widening of social work priorities and direction.

GOALS and a CAUSE

A distinguished international group spelled out the national social development goals for the seventies. They cited the national role in development as influencing national priorities; utilising the political process; interpreting social development goals; dealing with areas of tension; working with related groups and professions and helping those in need of service. "Strategies for the Seventies" were spelled out as social development planning; legal measures; management of the economy; rural reform; income redistribution; universal social services; education and manpower development; population policy; family planning; community development; new towns; preventive programmes; rehabilitation; mutual self-help; citizen or client participation; advocacy and confrontation strategies; consumer protection and rights; the open communication strategy; modern management and sense of community.¹¹

⁸ United Nations Proceedings of the International Conference of Ministers Responsible for Social Welfare. New York. 1968

⁹ United Nations Recommendations of the First Asian Conference of Ministers Responsible for Social Welfare. Manila. 1970

¹⁰ Corridors of Power was the title of a celebrated novel by C. P. Snow, 1964

¹¹ The report of the Pre-Conference Working Party to the XVth International Conference on Social Welfare of the International Council on Social Welfare held in the Philippines in Aug/Sept 1970.

A wide-ranging and ambitious agenda. Presumably the profession had made a choice and it was now to turn attention vigorously to society, its aberrations and reform.

To my mind a profession that had international aspirations might have listened to what a major part of the world was saying back then and profoundly begun to think of its implications nearer at home and for the future of the profession itself. ¹²

For starters, social work had seemed to declare itself once more as having a CAUSE (the cause of contributing to a just social order) which would require involving itself in areas of practice well beyond activities which had been superseded and diminished in “professionalism” in a country like the USA. The American experience had been of a whole continent of untapped natural resources and a relatively small and determined population of mainly immigrants and refugees vigorously committed to achieving material well-being. Where self-reliance was a necessity, the vision embodied in “go-west young man” opened up infinite possibilities. Eventually the emergence of a strong culture of individualism above all else was to welcome individualistic psychological theory and medical models as social work’s major ‘treatment’ of choice for those who were in trouble and needed to “adjust”.

However, the developing world did not have this kind of history, nor do they have a cultural tradition of highly prized individualism. Absent too are the “New World” advantages in resources and technology. Unlike the first industrialising nations the emerging nations today find that they have to compete with firmly entrenched financial and technologically advanced economies.¹³

In the 1970s the foundation of social work was proclaimed as “Social Development” I interpreted this as Social Development not being just the cherry on the top of economic development. It must become a major goal of economic development and is probably the prerequisite for the creation of

¹² The social work conferences were the largest ever held in Manila and the overwhelming majority of national registrations to the conferences was from the USA. Their expenses, such as round-the-world airline tickets, conference fees and accommodation, apparently could be claimed as professional expenses for income tax purposes. Subsequently the IRS became suspicious that claimants actually attended, and required a register to be kept of presence at each session, much to the irritation of other nationals. The suggestion that the fortunates with tax relief might voluntarily donate their refunds to a fund for providing for social workers from the poorest countries to attend such conferences was not well received. The location for the 1970 Philippine conferences was at the General McArthur former headquarters, the then dilapidated Manila Hotel owned by President Ferdinand Marcos and his wife ‘Iron Butterfly’ Imelda. The staff of the hotel went on strike complaining, I understood, that the service charges and health benefits had not been paid to them as contracted. President Marcos and the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare arrived with armed outriders through the picket lines and gave splendid accounts of their concern for people and just labour laws! The social work conference committee apparently decided that as we were all guests of the Philippines we had no business to express in any way our concern at the employees’ situation.

¹³ Britain, from where the Charity Organisation had come to the USA at the end of the nineteenth century had also at that time a vast empire of resources and the poor on which to fuel its industrial revolution and economic dominance. That dominance was, like the private Charity Organisation, to pass to the USA after the First World War and today reigns economically supreme.

resources and wealth and certainly for ensuring social justice in distribution. At the same time it became only too apparent that social work teachers and practitioners had nowhere much direct experience in working in situations with a recognised social policy macro perspective. Quite what did the development perspective demand?

SOCIAL WORK and DEVELOPMENT

The six plus country study, Exploration¹⁴ in 1972 (which incidentally included an investigation of the situation in Hong Kong) sought guidance by taking the repeatedly pronounced key phrases to see what they actually represented to the social work educators and professionals in terms of the roles to be taught and undertaken. These were distilled as:

- (1) Social policies and planning in development
- (2) Ensuring social justice (with particular reference to more equitable distribution of national wealth)
- (3) The essential need for participation by the people in policy formulation, planning and implementation
- (4) Improving the social and cultural infrastructure by institution building

Where to place traditional social work methods in this developmental framework was approached as follows:

(5) Social work helping methods

The situations dealt with by social workers very often illustrate the malfunctioning of our societies and the gaps and inconsistencies in our policies and programmes. The social worker's role is to be alert and sensitive to this and to systematically report these matters, thus contributing decisively to policy and planning in the normal course of their "helping" activities.¹⁵

In the course of the "Exploration" study, the Asian educators and professionals emphatically endorsed the importance and the outlining definitions of these roles as fundamental to developmental social work.

¹⁴ Drucker, D. Exploration.... Ibid.

¹⁵ Very much in line, I have since discovered with C. Wright Mills, in his book The Sociological Imagination.

"Know that many personal troubles... must be understood in terms of public issues ...and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles - and to the problems of the individual life."

Nevertheless, on scrutiny it was not found possible at that time to identify coherently what was actually taught and what might be the nature of an overall curriculum to impart these roles.

It was concluded that:

"The fact of the matter seems to be that the current machinery linking schools, supervisors, agencies, professional associations, policy makers, planners, etc. is not adequate to the task of producing personnel for the important developmental roles which are currently being canvassed. This lack of coherent (sic institutional) machinery constitutes the major problem confronting the schools and the profession"¹⁶.

In Exploration the state of social work was reported:

"If social work is to firmly grasp the fact that some of its traditional declarations of concern with the poor are now becoming the central focus of attention of many disciplines concerned with the human condition and that the political element is not just local or national but global, it will be seen why the profession has to organise its present and potential contribution swiftly and effectively. Without a concentrated frontal attack on mass conditions of poverty little else can have lasting significance. It should no longer be possible for leading social workers to come together as they did in the Region in 1966, and to find;¹⁷

'Poverty as an observed cultural phenomenon in most Asian countries is striking because of its pervasive presence in the life of countless people who exist on the brink of starvation. Yet the handling of poverty in professional social work as an observed and cultural phenomenon in Asian case records is more striking in its absence. The question might be raised in what way do professional social workers in Asia come in contact with such poverty, how does this poverty actually affect the role of the client, as well as the role of the profession itself, not only in its objectives but also in its methods?'¹⁸

"Social work's silence on such matters is astonishing, social workers should have known better or been less professionally timid. However, social workers are of their society and alternate diagnostic formulations (regarding poverty) were for a long time muted in the shrouds of political subversion"¹⁹

Shankar Pathak was later to point out that this role, so defined from the current practices of social work, was in fact a version of the first- listed an essential development role in policy and planning.

¹⁶ Drucker, D. Exploration Ibid p.170

¹⁷ Ibid. Epilogue p.2

¹⁸ Asian Records for Teaching Social Work. Part Two. (Report of the Regional Centre for Social Work Education and Field Work Supervision) UN ECAFE 1966. p.ix

¹⁹ Drucker, D. Ibid Epilogue p.3

If social work education were to move firmly into the field of development and take up the challenge of poverty, based on its much heralded claim to be serving the poor, the dispossessed and the underprivileged, the teachers would need to discover and invent a growing fund of skills from first-hand experience in order to know what and how to be able to teach.

However, despite the high sounding definitions, enthusiasm, even euphoria, how was this to be done?

THE SEE-SAW APPROACH²⁰

It was seen that if social workers were really going to operate in the development arena, they would need to locate themselves in new and unfamiliar settings. I thought it would be desirable and necessary for social work careers to move back and forth from teaching to the field. Suggested and outlined was the “See-Saw “ approach. Social Work careers would be structured to move from practice to supervision to teaching and back again to practice in new fields.

It was proposed that staff members of the schools themselves be assigned to try out possibilities of the envisioned developmental social work activities. This would entail an exploration of the dimensions of the tasks and identification of realistic assignments which might be set up for students eventually. The staff member would explore and practice the social work role and from first-hand experience draw up as detailed a job description as possible, based on an analysis of the tasks involved. Objectives and goals of the service or agency and the learning objectives and goals that students might be expected to achieve would be spelled out. In the course of the practice the staff member would keep a detailed record of happenings, to be developed into case material.

In identifying the theory, knowledge and skills required to function in this position, the staff member would check whether and where such matter appeared in the school curriculum and would prepare to supplement the teaching, together with teaching materials, either to highlight and reinforce what was already being taught or to introduce new content. After perhaps a year the staff member would have paved the way for the introduction of students into the practice role, having prepared the setting and the agency staff to receive them.

The second phase of the school staff member's activity, having fulfilled the role himself, would consist of supervising the students' practice and learning. The staff member being familiar with the

²⁰ This idea first surfaced in Thailand. To my surprise it evoked much embarrassed laughter. Not at the content, I discovered, but because the term see-saw in the Thai language meant something sexually very rude!

service requirements and the knowledge and teaching base could then concentrate on the educational diagnosis of the student and the student's needs.²¹

The staff member would at the next stage by means of apprentice-type training introduce a worker designated to take over the supervisory role in subsequent years. As the fieldwork and supervisory role diminished, the staff member would prepare to move back into the teaching role in the school.

Ideally it might be arranged for two members of staff to address the same areas of work. One would be moving through from practice on to supervision and back to classroom teaching, while the other was moving in the opposite direction - thus the idea of a see-saw.

This of course would require building of new institutional arrangements, (which did not fit comfortably within universities²² and agencies as they currently functioned) in which periods of six years of work or so would constitute the see-saw. Associations of social workers would need to become professional institutions for gathering together the experience and opinions of their membership to feed and support social workers on policy and decision-making bodies²³. Associations would also need to play a major role in the matter of research. Research from this point of view would be action-oriented; anything beyond which would best become a professional speciality of its own. This is an area that obviously very much concerns Richard Cloward.

RESEARCH: KNOWLEDGE OR INITIATION RITUALS?

²¹ This was attempted on a modest scale by UN ESCAP's Mobile Training Scheme in Nepal. In the short run it displayed very great promise.

²² "In my opinion, social work has been too eager, too soon, to take on itself the trappings of academic respectability by seeking academic certification on the terms of old-style academia. This has been part of the politics or power ploy of social work. In the process the leadership largely abandoned their potentially unique place of observing, recording and formulating the condition of and the need to find ways to deal with, the situation where "the poor are the vast and significant majority". In the main, entrance to universities took place at a time when world-wide those elitist and conservative institutions derived their prestige from the laboratory-based myopic ("pure") static science of the nineteenth century or from the more romantically-inclined abstractions of the humanities formulated in the comfort of learned literary discourse in ivory towers far from the misery and chaos of everyday life. Social work, if it had been less concerned with its status and acceptability and more with the workings of society and social injustice, might even have contributed dynamic concepts well before the fixed state of the physical sciences gave way to the flux, uncertainties and living with the unknown, of atomic and biogenetic research." Drucker, D. "The Social Work Profession in Asia: Look Homeward 1968-1993"

The Indian Journal of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Vol. LIV No.4, Oct 1993.

²³ At that time only one Asian association had a full time professional social worker as organiser. Establishment-connected social workers who sat on committees drew on their own respected but limited perspectives unprepared by the profession as a whole. The suggestion that a student as a research thesis might observe and describe the social workers' role and contribution to such bodies to make a start on identifying the activity for teaching purposes was met with disbelief.

For me, it is, and always has been, difficult to conceive of social work as a profession whose preparatory and formulating education derived fundamentally from other than a practice-based foundation. Its "Hundred Years" in the States began, I understand, when the Charity Organisation Society and similar workers thought that a university might offer theoretical structure to enhance the skills of its volunteers and staff and to provide an improved understanding for future recruits. It was probably thought, and correctly, that there was much to learn from a range of other disciplines engaged in the study of, and active in, human affairs, that could be utilised by social workers. Social work was only unique (if that is not too presumptuous a word) distinguished? recognisable? by its multifaceted nature of combining and adapting borrowed and contributed knowledge from experience, in order to inform its activities and develop skills in identifying, prioritising and attending to what ails people and the societies in which they live. Ominously for practice, early on both in the USA and in Britain fieldwork disappeared for some years from the curriculum in some of the University programmes.

My view is that the matter of RESEARCH for social workers should be seen in such a context. Primarily social workers should be eager consumers of research in order to examine, discover and extrapolate what it can tell us regarding what we should do, do better, or avoid doing. We should not be in the business of universal truths. We do have responsibility, however, to identify from our practice and convey to appropriate resources what needs to be researched.²⁴ Such an approach was spelt out long ago in Exploration, it will be remembered, and I repeat:

"The situations dealt with by social workers very often illustrate the malfunctioning of our societies and the gaps and inconsistencies in our policies and programmes. The social worker's role is to be alert and sensitive to this and to systematically report these matters, thus contributing decisively to policy and planning in the normal course of their "helping" activities."

At its simplest, as a profession which in practice recognises it needs to act frequently with very limited information, research which is anything better than guess work and can be acted upon is to be welcomed. Social workers themselves need not be researchers in the formal academic sense. They do need to be constant consumers of research and to interpret the findings, from whatever source, for well-considered social work application.

The implications of all this is that the professional practitioners would have a very strong commitment to initiating research and the schools a responsibility in constructing a curriculum which will constantly relate to and involve the students in the cutting edge concerns of the profession.

²⁴ I was told recently quite bluntly at one distinguished American School of Social Work that what gets researched is determined by the funding source.

Everywhere students at that time were expected, in the main required, to choose their own "research topics" and this was considered a virtue and good educational practice.²⁵ Very often completion was postponed (sometimes for years after the time set for graduation) or the material was never produced at all. Students were so bored with research and traumatised by the amount of time they had to devote to it and the futility of its outcome that even the most enthusiastic came to shun research of any kind for the rest of their professional lives. Such attitudes would stand in the way of their identifying in their practice vital matters that required careful study which could be submitted through the professional channels to the Schools and universities and be added to the list of research topics. Research and theses writing was:

"..a long drawn-out and painfully debilitating affair which both teachers (privately) and students (clamorously) assess as largely an academic certification ritual".

The student 'theses' rarely had any meaningful analysis leading to suggested application and more often than not went unsummarised and uncatalogued to gather dust on obscure shelves. Amongst this fossilised material there existed very little descriptive information of the social work taking place in Asian countries in terms of activities, problems, methods and processes. It was noted:

"Only with a rich base of indigenous description can we contribute to theory rather than be straight-jacketed in our perception by theory derived from elsewhere Of course we have much to learn from our colleagues, but we must reinterpret their experience from our own social work perspectives...We must begin to identify the questions we need answered, which spring from our own professional practice, and develop theory which can be derived from it. Social work research must be directed to social considerations...and must not be second-hand in method or subject matter".²⁶

In summary, Exploration argued that:

"..the primary responsibility for identifying research topics belongs to the profession in general and practitioners in particular. It is the practitioners in their daily work who are faced with questions that require answers... which are better than guess work".

"These answers are required not as fundamental truths but for practical application. This is not to denigrate 'pure research' but to argue that students neither have the time nor can be expected to have the resources, experience, or capacity for posing and effectively tackling such matters".

²⁵ A typical example of unreality was that of a student accepted at the Indian National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHNS) for a month to research "The causes of teen-age mental illness in India" with a proposal to interview 100 such patients. Recently I see on the Internet a student wanting to write on whether Mary Richmond did private practice! Herman Hesse in his philosophical novel Magister Ludi (The Glass Bead Game) foresaw the state of academia at this end of the century deeply engaged in such subjects as "The Lapdogs of the Great Courtesans".

"...the Association of Schools and individual schools should be responsible for collecting from the professional practitioners lists of...subjects for research, clearly stating the problem and indicating the practical implications which are likely to flow from an investigation.... It would be the responsibility of a research group to examine these subjects and sketch in the broad lines of method best fitted to the matter under consideration and judge whether it is appropriate for a student to undertake".

"...The range of topics thus identified is likely to give a student a much broader and practical view of social work and its priority professional concerns than can be expected from those with limited experience in the field as is the case with most students.

" There are important implications here for the profession and for organising practitioners in such a way that appropriate dialogue takes place with...the schools, in order to produce this professional agenda for research. The need for relatedness of the research to the profession's progress, and the relatedness to the teaching to professional practice cannot be over-emphasised".²⁷

A detailed research sequence was recommended to the schools:

Students should be seen as needing to become primarily professional "consumers" of research. (Few will want to go on to become full-time researchers.) Consumers would need to be familiar with a range and limitations of social research methods.

Within the limited time available to students they would not be expected to initiate and complete their "own" research, but would be expected to be taken through all the stages of research, adding a step to work in progress. They would start from examining the need and purposes of a practitioner's identification of research, through to action and implementation of findings and recommendations. Each stage would be taught as a course in its own right.

These courses would be:

Appreciation of the objectives of the proposed research on the list compiled by the professionals;

²⁶ Drucker, D. "The Role of Psychiatric Social Work in Developing Countries", National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Surgery (NIMHANS), Bangalore, India 1977

²⁷ Drucker, D. "The Scapegoating of Students and Professional/Academic Failure", Bangalore (NIMHANS) India 1977.

Identifying the appropriate research method for a selected topic and devising work plans and schedules; (these selected topics would become the task of students (or where appropriate a group of students) the following year;

The collecting of data on a research topic for which the method and work plan had been devised by a previous intake of students (devising the method and schedules takes up much time and most student theses seemed to rush through the collecting stage because there was so little time left to them as their courses proceeded);

Analysis of data collected by earlier students;

A Social Policy and Programming Planning Seminar (this analysis would determine what had been learned from the research and its implication for social work.)

Implementation seminars to devise strategies and specific work plans to follow upon what emerged from the research (as in the normal course of events the research topic had been proposed by a practitioner, the relevant agency (agencies) would of course have a role in working through this phase with the students)

If appropriate for a student worker, the activity would become the subject of a subsequent year's fieldwork assignment;

Finally, learning the skills in evaluating such projects from topic proposal to completed action.

In this way it was anticipated that the professional practitioners and the Schools would be drawn together in identifying need, pursuing research, creating and contributing knowledge, enhancing professional skills, and translating it into action. From the students' perspective, they will have experienced how questions from the field are taken through all the stages to action and final evaluation. The students themselves will have had a role to play, having been taken through each stage with its specific focus. Although they would not have had to take responsibility for any one topic from start to finish, they would have begun to appreciate the practical pay-off of research, savor the excitement of having contributed to knowledge and change and precipitated organised action. They would understand the importance of providing research topics from the field when they become practitioners and where they belong in contributing to an overall professional identity.

Such an ambitious vision seems relevant still if we are now to acknowledge the (Cloward) cry that the teachers are increasingly out of touch with the field and rarely, if at all, act as a united group of interactive professionals. Perhaps this proposal from a generation ago might be examined and experimented with now in the light of the present discontent with the path that social work and research has apparently taken.

Of course it was realised that there were dozens of problems inherent in these wide-ranging sets of proposals career-wise and within university and agency structures. Clearly, here again the profession would need to do a lot of “institution building.” However, if we were to take seriously the roles of institution-building, social justice, participation, social policy and planning, (which had been identified as fundamental elements of the development and social work role), like the adage “charity begins at home”, we would need to build effective institutions for professional social work. Before we could speak with some authority about what society should be doing to bring about change we would need to demonstrate our ability to manage change ourselves, particularly within and between our own professional organisations and those academic and social service institutions and structures of which the profession has some measure of control and already, to some degree, participates in decision-making

Exploration and its proposals provided the basis for a United Nations Regional meeting in Bangkok in 1972.

TIME PASSES and the POOR ENDURE

However, eight year later, in 1980 there took place in Hong Kong²⁸ the bi-annual meetings of the International Congress of Social Workers (ICSW), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). The Hilton Hotel was the major venue. Plastered all over the city was the ICSW conference theme: "Social Welfare in Times of Economic Uncertainty". This was at the Reagan, time when many American social workers were anxious about funding for their jobs and well before the rise of the so-called Asian economic tigers. My Asia was one where, for the Asians I worked with, economic uncertainty was as constant as the earth turning each day on its axis, and I was uncomfortable in discussing such matters as social work's concern for the poor in a venue in some of the most expensive real estate in the world.

Returning to Asia, in 1984, my old colleague and friend Tom Brigham wrote:

²⁸ Ten years after the unsuccessful suggestion in Manila for funding social workers from poorer countries to future conferences (through voluntarily contributing tax rebates) the (1980) conference attenders had been asked to bring souvenirs from their country to be raffled off for such a fund. At a \$50 dinner at the Hong Kong Hilton (built on some of the most expensive real estate in the world) great pleasure was expressed at raising something over \$4000).

"...social work arose in the West to help a few marginal people to adjust to society; whereas, in most of the developing countries the poor are the vast and significant majority!"²⁹

He compared five developing countries which were predominantly rural and continued to find the anomaly that they " .. had adopted American urban models of education." which Midgley³⁰ had described as "professional imperialism"?

In 1993 Brigham's findings were quoted in prompting The Tata Institute of Social Sciences to bring out a special issue of The Indian Journal of Social Work on the "Social Work Profession in Asia". I noted in my contribution that, although the thrust of the Journal's issue was the apparently eternal theme that Western concepts have irrelevantly dominated Asian social work, none of the references provided by the editor included an Asian name.

What has emerged from all our workshops and conferences? Katherine Kendall, retired secretary-general of IASSW, also quoted by Tata in 1993 from "Accent on Change"³¹, (lack of change?), in what I suppose was diplomatic understatement, put it mildly:

"..particularly in Asia, the effort towards indigenisation of the curriculum to increase their relevance to the local situation seem to move rather slowly. Equally important is the slow process of indigenisation of the body of knowledge".

The Tata special issue proposal for the theme went on to say:

"Indigenous social work knowledge is a must for indigenous social work education and professional practice...Whatever literature has been developed in the Asian countries it has not been successfully disseminated even among the Asian countries. As a result, the exchange of knowledge has not taken place (except at seminars and conferences,)...."³²

Indeed! What an indictment of all those expensively-mounted seminars and conferences of which the United Nations, the International Association of Schools of Social Work and others have been major sponsors. Can it be that the subject matter proved to be untranslatable at the national and operational level or that a generation of respected conference-goers proved as expensively marginal to the needs of their profession as the profession seems to have remained marginal to the needs of their

²⁹ Brigham, T. "Social Work Education in Five Developing Countries in Education for Social Work Practice: Selected International Models", International Association of Schools of Social Work. Vienna, 1984

³⁰ Midgley, J. "Professional Imperialism: Social Work in the Third World" Heinemann London 1991

³¹ Kendall, K. A. *ibid.*

³² Desai, M. editor, The Indian Journal of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. 1993

societies? Rather than pursuing the on-going work of the profession, have they just been talking shops held in fancy locations well away from the Poor?³³

Brigham's quote stimulated the comment:

1) "Adjust". The implication here is that in the West society was by and large OK and the social work task is to assist in seeing that the few marginal people fit in without too much trouble. Perhaps out of goodness of heart, social workers dearly wanted those unfortunate marginals to share in the benefits of an OK and, presumably, just and ever-progressing society. A very comforting perception!

2) My own experience in Asia and certainly in Africa, especially with some of my recent struggles fresh in mind, is that almost all the people I have had much to do with live in extraordinarily un-OK societies which are not merely unjust but often positively murderous. The unfortunates do a phenomenal amount of adjusting just to survive in such societies, although by any standards they cannot be considered well adjusted. It is clear to me that people in dire trouble are being generated at a faster rate than can be helped by any amount of social work "adjustment".³⁴

Our old social work ancestor Flexner (1915) and his cohorts spent much time trying to work out this dilemma of perspective and role in terms of "Social Work: Cause or Function?" By and large, from my recent travels in America and elsewhere, function seems to have won out. There was even a whole school of FUNCTIONAL casework in dispute with DIAGNOSTIC casework when I was in the States in the mid 1950s, although the diagnostic was not examining social forces but given over to psychoanalytically defined disturbances and therapeutics. These-in-the-mind perspectives certainly fascinated me, opened up new fields of work opportunity, and kept me seductively self-focused and enthusiastically involved in such practice for some years.

SOCIAL WORK in a MONETARY/VALUE SOCIETY

A big issue for social workers by 1961, at the time I departed from the States, centred on the pros and cons of private practice, which was where the wealthy marginals were seeking adjustment. On my return in the mid 1980s, when I was writing a "docudrama" of Bertha Capen Reynolds,³⁵ I was astonished to find that the suggestion for a conference topic "Social Work in the Work Place", which had sounded very much a matter that Reynolds had been much concerned, turned out to be to examine the latest money-making opportunities for social workers with corporation executives who suffered because of drug and alcohol related problems.

³³ A graduated student of mine has recently been at a conference in Cairo housed in a five-star hotel her room cost per night perhaps two-months of her miserable salary at home. Conference topic was concern for the Poor.

³⁴ Drucker, D. "Look Homeward Asia: Ibid p.514

³⁵ Drucker D. Somewhere a Door Blew Shut: Letters from Exile

Staged at Smith College, Mass. USA in 1985 and again in 1988

This 1998 time round, although I may have been seeing and hearing a very select group of social workers and academics during my recent circumnavigation of the USA, I have been impressed by the seemingly overwhelming majority of those in the clinical or “managed care” field, who are despairing and struggling with the imposition of bureaucratic paperwork and controls. These apparently determine professional matters such as how many times one meets with a client and require in advance specific goals for each meeting that would match the criteria for insurance company’s payment. In the main it would seem that function, money-determined from outside the profession, is much more in evidence than cause. I have also the impression that as one commentator has put it; “The War on Poverty has become a War on the Poor”

Great for social worker’s fees, well-heeled executives, the insured, or those otherwise financially “covered”. However, it is very clear that the monetary value of the Poor themselves everywhere adds up to little or nothing in current economic terms and calculations. Their purchasing power is relatively negligible and can attract little “free market” attention. Their participation and decision-making possibilities can therefore either be ignored or, if necessary, (when the Poor become restive, too vocal or organised and challenge the tenets of classical economics and the seats of power) suppressed by force. Not too serious an outcome in many places it would seem, as the arms trade (politely Defence Industries) do very good business in amply keeping both sides of violent conflict provided with murderous weaponry and maintain vital employment in “civilised” countries. Civilians and the Poor have become far and away the major battle casualties, compared to the military and the weapon wielders themselves, in so-called “Security Forces/Rebel Terrorist” operations. It is quite usual for such Poor, in surplus supply anyway and generating so little effective economic or political demand, to be brutally expended - examples of which I have personally witnessed in my professional social work experience. It has also been my experience that in the main professionally trained social workers have been conspicuous by their absence in such areas and arenas.³⁶

SOCIAL WORK - RESURRECTION

Social workers of course have a choice to define themselves more narrowly than some others do and I have done. They have no doubt a right to take up an honourable and much needed localised stretcher-bearer role (as Richard Titmuss used to categorise those who dealt with the halt, lame and excluded). Florence Hollis, a renowned casework teacher and practitioner, took an honest position.

³⁶During my time, of the 80 international organisations working out of comfortable Bangkok in the 28 refugee camps on the Thai borders, the number of professional social workers could be counted on one hand. In Zaire there were none at all.

"I don't know" I heard her say, "what I can do about the problems of society, but I do know something about how we can help some people in emotional and domestic problems to live more comfortably and even creatively".

However, whatever choice individual social workers make, and whatever necessary training is developed to fulfil these marginal functions (marginal is Brigham's not my word, please note) the profession has constantly declared that it has much wider objectives and responsibility in giving direction to its on-coming practitioners. Social workers have emphatically adopted a wide mandate with high sounding phrases, and genuinely believe that social work has a philosophy and mission for the excluded of the world.

Yet, as we see, social work continues to agonise over whether it can really stand with the other grown-ups who tinker in big issues and has staunchly sought professional status. It seems to accept that a profession must profess beyond the narrow confines of its current practice and continuously accumulate a body of knowledge of its own as well as to seek to provide new perspectives for others. Nevertheless they find themselves at best identified with, valued, and funded as inadequately as the Poor, and they become marginal, professional and political outcasts and expendable too.³⁷ More serious still, it is common to find that social workers rarely find a supporting public constituency derived from those they seek to serve. Devalued, and relatively to others, poorly rewarded and recognised in a "society assessing value in monetary terms" social workers may be, but the Poor characteristically identify social work as an active employee, instrument, and maintainer of such a society.

All in all I am led to wonder whether we might expound from more solid ground if NASW and professional social work organisations around the world asked for hands up (or more respectably conduct RESEARCH) to discover what proportion of the professional time of their membership, and organisations are actually directly involved at some level or other with the Poor. And which Poor, where, are we talking about? ³⁸ The 1970 Asian question needs to be answered again, - "In what way do professional social workers come in contact with such poverty, how does this poverty actually affect the role of the client, as well as the role of the profession itself, not only in its objectives but also in its methods?"

³⁷ See the recent discussion on the Internet stimulated by Harriet Meek's deep concern at how eager young social workers are constantly thrown into violent situations with a minimum of sound Agency support.

³⁸ The poor, even, perhaps particularly, in affluent countries are a significant and excluded culture. They have been described by an unusual group who have taken the plight of the poorest seriously, as "The Fourth World" (as distinct from the Third).

See Rosenfeld. J. M. Emergence from Extreme Poverty Science and Service Publications Fourth World Publications 1989. and From Impasse to Action: The Forging of Reciprocity. Rosenfeld & Tardieu B. International Movement ATD Fourth World and the Brookdale Institute, Israel.
(Available in French, Artisans de Democratie, Editions Quart Monde, Paris 1998).

A breakdown of the activities of members in academia, the well-established and traditional agencies, and those outside the affluent "civilised" areas and countries might be most revealing in defining our claim. I have some suspicions!

THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE

As for international perspectives and concerns, IASSW in 1996 and the fellow conferences were again locating their international conference in Hong Kong.³⁹ I offered my apologies at not wishing to be once more in a city which, in the international league table of such things, Hong Kong was then the third most expensive in the world. Nevertheless, I would have dearly liked to hear what our Asian members had to say about the conference's only too familiar theme, "The Social Work Profession in Social Development". I noted too, in my letter to the IASSW President Ralph Gerber that in 1996 the political climate of globalisation was certainly not as socially benign as that being expressed by government Ministers back in the seventies. Just that very week the BBC news reported that the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Ministers meeting in Jakarta had warned that "rights, labour and environmental matters would not be allowed to be placed on the agenda of the ASEAN business conference in Singapore next December." Social issues clearly must not be allowed to interfere with serious economics.⁴⁰ This, I supposed, was a case of business as usual and perhaps well illustrated by ASEAN as a preliminary to full membership according observer status to Burma (where I had worked for some years), with its savage and murderous military suppression of the democratic processes and public participation in affairs.

Even so, I regretted deeply not to be in Hong Kong and to discover what organised social work, its educators, philosophers and practitioners, were planning to do these many years on in relation to "Development". And I wonder very much if Tsui and Cheung's 1998 challenge to the Journal of Social Work to devote a special issue to " .. how social work is critically adopted and reinvented by social workers in developing countries according to their own cultural and socio-political contexts" was a vital matter made very manifest at the conferences held in Hong Kong in 1996. Certainly I believe that if such activity was seriously addressed and incorporated in the professional psyche and agenda we really might be able to claim internationalism. It may well be also that as our Hong Kong colleagues hope it might "shed light on the current identity crises of our profession in the West"

³⁹ This was to be the last year of British rule before it was returned to Red China. It was ironic to observe that during Britain's hundred (99) colonial years there had not been established any recognisable democratic structure but much very late agonising was expressed for Hong Kong's democratic fate and future under the Communists.

⁴⁰ So soon afterwards came the collapse of the Economic Asian "Tigers" who's success the West had been encouraged just previously by leading economists, to learn from. Alas for the Poor with loss of their miserably paid work and public services and projects, which the World Bank advises countries to cut back in order for governments to get enormous loans which will add to the debts that will need to be repaid.

Finally, early this year at my speaking engagement with the international committee of NASW in New York City, in their business meeting they seemed eager to continue meeting in the United Nations building ("despite the cost"). This was important it was said "....in order to show the UN what social work is.....". I pointed out that in the fifties and sixties there was a strong social work presence in the Social Development Division at the heart of the UN in New York. It eventually was virtually banished off-stage to Vienna (as was the International Association of Schools of Social Work) where they (both) declined into relative obscurity. We lost, as far as I can determine, the potentially effective presence of a cadre of professional social workers in relative shouting distance to the hub of mainstream organisations of international affairs. Can it truly be that our Western-dominated social work had little in the way of universality to contribute when it had a foothold opportunity on the world stage?

Clearly there has been a massive failure of the profession to profess and build organisation on the local, national and international levels, to keep practice at the centre of our concern and to relate it meaningfully and productively to the social ills and disasters of our times. However, most critically and essentially, co-jointly both in the schools and in the field, what is to be done now in this, the profession's centenary as we stumble confusedly into the next?

I would like to hear whether this missive strikes a rallying and rededicating note with the readership of the Journal; whether the erstwhile ambitious vision for social work is still (or ever was) really relevant; whether some of the above approaches to research and careers are practical and possible today; and whether they can play a part in the resurrection of the profession (after the Cloward "wake" and cry that the teachers are increasingly out of touch with the field and rarely, if at all, act as a united group of interactive professionals). Optimism, and just a bit more and better of the same (as some of the correspondents seem to suggest)⁴¹ is nowhere enough.⁴² This cry of my own is offered here as a contribution to the debate that surely Cloward's letter and our honourable profession deserves.

⁴¹ As one letter contributor to the journal writes, "the importance of crafting our messages to touch people's hearts as well as minds."

⁴² "*.. both academics and practitioners seem comfortable with suggesting, if only by omission, that staying with a variant of the current course will lead eventually to some sort of comprehensive progress. This tendency is prevalent particularly in academia, where the development enterprise is tinged with the patina of hopefulness unjustified by experience.*" V.S. Naipaul's* warning about how it is wrong to "corrupt (one's) views by injecting optimism or hope into what (one) is seeing" obviously is given short shrift by development specialists, possibly because we personally do not pay the price for disregarding reality. The real cost is borne by other people, on whose behalf the development community works, and who remain consigned indefinitely to misery and want".

Porus Olpadwala "The Rhetoric and Reality of Development" Draft 7/9/98 Cornell Univ. Ithaca, NY.

Draft 7/9/98

*V.S. Naipaul Interview in IndiaToday 31/7/ 89 p48