

**Social Work's Identity Problem:
The Past, The (Old) Paradigm, The Practice,
The Profession, The Philosophy and The (New) Paradigm**

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For

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Note: The hard copy of this paper scanned and digitalized. Hopefully, all related errors have been corrected. Minor editing was carried out.

A Personal Introduction

What primarily drew me to social work as a vocation was what I interpreted to be its offer of meaningful, purposeful, ethical and challenging employment. As a social worker I would be paid to “help people.” However, when family and friends asked me what a social worker did, although they pretended to be pacified by my response, “they help people,” I could tell they were not satisfied by this answer at all. In turn, I too became dissatisfied with such a ubiquitous answer. After all, most jobs in society “help people” indirectly, if not directly. I had to stop and ask myself if I knew what I was about to become. I felt an embarrassing lack of identity whenever I told someone I was studying to be a social worker.

After much reading, two practica and a summer job as a social worker, I now have a fuller sense of identity as a social worker. I can now describe a little more to my satisfaction what a social worker does and I detect less pretence of pacification on the part of others when I explain what a social worker does. Nevertheless, this sense of social worker identity is not yet as fully developed as I want it to become.

I also feel far less self-conscious about the lack of social worker identity now that I know the entire discipline of social work has had an ongoing identity problem of its own. I appreciate now that it wasn't just me not being clear on what a social worker did as it was the whole discipline of social work not having a reasonable consensus on just what should pass for the identifying conceptual framework for the discipline of social work. Consequently, I sense that my own fuller identity as a social worker can be best nurtured, in part, by contributing to the current efforts of the social work discipline to identify itself through a common conceptual framework. This paper begins my contribution.

A More Academic Introduction

Current attempts to design a common conceptual framework, universally adoptable by social workers, independent of their particular practice methods, knowledge, and skills are mostly traceable to a general systems, ecological systems or, most recently, natural systems perspective (Ramsay, 1986). Despite social work's century of practice, it continues to wrestle with an identity problem and systems approaches are, at this very moment, single-handedly trying to pin the shoulders of the social work identity to the mat. Such an identity pin would allow much of the historically misdirected energies of the social work profession to be redirected to its global mission of facilitating individual human and humankind's peaceful co-existence with their changing selves and their changing environments.

The long-term purpose of this paper is to set the stage for a second paper in which I will present a comparison study of general systems, ecological systems and natural systems theory from a social work perspective and conclude by recommending a common conceptual framework largely based upon Ramsay's common conceptual framework. The immediate purpose of this paper is to offer an historical explanation of why social work has had a century-long wrestling match with its own experienced, elusive and wily *hydra-like social work identity.

[* In Greek Mythology: The Lernaean Hydra was a huge serpent with several heads killed by Heracles as his second labor. As soon as one head was cut off, two more grew, until Heracles commanded his friend Iolaos to cauterize the wound with a hot iron.]

The Past

The past, spotlighted here, originates in the late 19th century and early 20th century in the U.S.A. The two key performers on the American social work stage were Jane Addams and Mary Richmond. Their respective roles and influences were pivotal in splitting the social work movement into two disparate casts (Franklin, 1986). Franklin outlines how the scenario of Addams' and Richmond's personal backgrounds, the prevailing intellectual and religious ideologies, along with ready-to-adopt models from England of Settlement Houses and the Charity Organization Societies (COS), provided a setting wherein Addams and Richmond were apt to see different roles for social workers and different means to perform those roles.

Richmond took the COS role which espoused the "rehabilitation" of needy humans. Rehabilitation was necessary as the appropriate moral character was lacking and could best be instilled through proper education available through the COS. This "moral certainty" approach survived despite empirical evidence indicating lack of moral character was not likely the source, or at least not the sole source, of poverty. The evidence (Franklin, p. 509) was an English study by Charles Booth in 1885 and an American economic depression in 1893, which demonstrated that anyone, given the circumstances, is vulnerable to societal forces. The Settlement House Movement had a more holistic approach in that it looked to the fabric of the surrounding society, "the experiences, thinking, and actions of local populations that could affect broad social and economic reforms" (Franklin, p. 508).

Addams' impact was cut short as a result of her donning too high a political profile (Franklin, p. 513). With Addams' fall from grace, Richmond's links to the medical model, to the moral certainty model, and to the rising popularity of psychoanalysis, led to the social work stage being reset for a preoccupation with the person (social casework), at the expense of the person-in-environment (PIE) model (Franklin, p. 519). This preoccupation prevailed into the 1960's.

The Paradigm (Old)

Franklin reminds us of Thomas Kuhn's concept of "paradigm shift" which results when the existing rules of a discipline or group are no longer sufficient to resolve their problems, necessitating a new model of protocol for problem resolution to result. The paradigm shift in social work as stated by Franklin was from one of moral certainty to rational inquiry (also Austin, 1983, p.365) and didn't start its full shift until the 1960's.

Clearly the paradigm shift to rational inquiry, which is now Paradigm (Old), was long overdue given the experiences of the Great Depression (Popple, 1985) and the 1960's civil rights and peace movements (Meyer, 1983) when social workers were not organized to meet these societal level challenges. The casework practice model of Mary Richmond's was not designed to intervene on a societal level. New practice methods were in demand.

The Practice

Although casework practice methods dominated until the 1960's, this is not to say that the reform movement with its roots in the settlement house movement had not continued, albeit in a subordinate position. The reform movement was not particularly concerned with development of a systematic practice method (Meyer, 1983, pp. 6-7). Group work, which sprouted from the settlement house movement did become methodologically sensitive as it embraced a rational inquiry involving

problem identification, stating a hypothesis, testing the hypothesis, and verification. Group work, in part, developed a kinship in its concern for method with casework (with its roots in the COS movement) because group work and casework occurred in similar settings. Family treatment methods gradually developed out of casework and thus inherited a methodological sensitivity.

Ironically, social work, having been almost religiously committed to casework for some four decades prior to the 1960's, has seen an explosion of differential practice methodologies and concentrated practice specializations in just a mere three decades. Interestingly, although social work's rapid and diverse growth may have it prepared for present and future societal concerns, it has fanned the flames of a generalist-specialist debate (Leighninger, 1980) in social work education, further splitting the discipline and magnifying the need for "cauterizing" social worker's identity wounds, not with a "hot iron" but with a common conceptual framework. A framework was need that would accommodate growth and diversity in a profession that requires growth and diversity.

It is even more ironic to see a discipline whose stock and trade is change and understanding the change process, historically having an uncomfortably difficult time of either changing or, having changed, not knowing how to adequately accommodate the change in a manner that sustains a coherent discipline. Knowledge of our own discipline's coping abilities with change should serve to inspire us to be that much more patient with client's who appear to be slow to change. Indeed, as "change agents," our identity and survival, as a profession, may eventually come down to how well we cope with our own change as much as any function we may or may not have, or cause we do or don't pursue.

The Profession

Besides confronting us with a past having two different "heads" (Addams' and Richmond's) and their respective "facts" the hydra-like social work identity brings us "face to face" with our paradigm shifts and multiplication of practice specializations; the generalist-specialist debate; and to rub salt in the as yet cauterized wound, this two-headed identity struggle pesters us with whether or not a professional status is warranted for social work.

The professional status debate ignited at a National Conference of Charities and Correction (NCCC) conference in 1915 when the prestigious Abraham Flexner presented a paper entitled, "Is Social Work a Profession?" (Austin 1983; Popple 1985). Flexner mixed praise with poison and concluded social work was not a profession. Thereafter, social workers, generally, and Mary Richmond, specifically, attempted to have social work meet Flexner's criteria for a profession. Popple argues that the drive for professional status proved to be dysfunctional for social work. Austin concedes, however, that the Flexner myth,

...in many way...has been a useful stimulus to the development of social work. The attention to the institutional structure of the profession, the drive for recognition within universities the continuing examination of the intellectual foundations of social work practice, and the effort to bridge the gap between research and practice. (p. 373)

But on the negative side Austin admits to the Myth's influence upon,

...a frequently obsessive concern with intellectual unity and a preoccupation with defining a 'unique' method....(and) a defensive and apologetic posture, reflecting constant concern with the question as to whether other groups in society recognize the professional status of social

work (373).

Popple paradoxically argues that social work was a profession long before an organized occupation was developed to claim the pre-existing professional status of its social worker members. The implication here is that social work's efforts to qualify it as a profession on Flexner's terms was unnecessary. Popple explains this paradox:

In a pre-industrial society, dependency is not a great problem because its handled by the family, church and community. As societies develop and industrialize, these institutions begin to breakdown, and dependency becomes a serious problem. Atherton argues that 'when the industrial society recognized dependency as a threatening state of affairs, it evolved a social mechanism -- a technology or profession -- to deal with it.' This is, of course, social work (pp. 572-573).

But, is this common social assignment sufficient to define the social work identity? Is each social worker's awareness of his/her role, in effectively managing dependency, enough to unify the social work occupational specialties into a "federated profession?" It may be necessary, but not sufficient.

For example, imagine a new social assignment suddenly surfacing which is too complex to be dealt with bureaucratically, call it "SA". Next, imagine asking if they are "professional" and they reply, "Yes, because we have a social assignment "SA". We further ask about the skills, knowledge, methods, values, philosophy or conceptual framework that grounds their profession. Now, if their reply is that, "no organized occupation containing these elements exists," we might wonder about their claim of professional status, if all they have is a social assignment unembroidered with skills, knowledge, methods, values, philosophy, conceptual framework or organization. We might ask how long can such a claim last without such embroidery? Indeed, can it do without these elements entirely? If it cannot, then social assignment to the management of some new form of human dependency is not sufficient as the criterion of what constitutes a profession. An unlikely scenario you say, sure it is. But the unlikelihood doesn't diminish its logic.

The Philosophy

Weick (1987) claims that social work's philosophical base has developed an unequal balance. The philosophy, she adds, was derived from a blend of humanistic values and a commitment to the quantitative methods of the natural sciences. The imbalance is said to be in favor of quantification at the expense of values. In social work's well-intentioned efforts to be a coherent profession it channeled much of its energy into a social science arena, dominated by a 19th century physical science model. In short, qualitative aspects of practice have been neglected for the quantitative aspects.

Although we have traditional values (e.g., client self-determination, inherent human rights, and non-judgmental responses, to name a few), Weick argues that these are "derivative of and dependent on a larger philosophical perspective" (p. 219). Our desire to be respected as a profession, we felt, necessitated shaping "the profession in the image of the prevailing empirical paradigm" (Weick p. 222). Weick then suggests that a new paradigm shift may be gaining momentum that could both provide this larger philosophical perspective and redress the decades of imbalance in social work's philosophical foundation caused by our unprofessional preoccupation to be professional.

The (New) Paradigm

According to Weick, the new paradigm shift is already occurring in other fields. Hints of these developments are found in holistic health, quantum physics, adult development, and human liberation movements. There is a growing “emphasis on the potential of people to grow toward fullness recognizing their tremendous strength in maintaining integrity of both body and mind and in growing through crises and difficulties” (p. 225). The following lengthy quotation from Weick comes closest to captioning what hints at a (new) paradigm, which blends the (old) paradigm and a firm metaphysical/spiritual element:

Holistic approaches recognize that people do or can know what is best for them. This wisdom is a reflection of the inherent life force that provides the interior stimulus for continued growth and well-being. When seen in this, the social work value of self-determination takes on new meaning. The basis for this self-knowing is not a cognitive process so much as a deep inner sense of one’s own particular needs for growth. As such, it does not respond to what tends to be the overly rational bias in human behavior theories but suggests that there are ways of knowing that have correlates in the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of each person.

A key factor in helping people know what they know (i.e., discover their inner wisdom) is in understanding the ways that the social environment (e.g., culture, institutions, and groups) impedes this discovery. It is here that the social work recognition of the social context of human development is critical (p. 225). On several different levels, the insights from other fields can contribute to a more complex understanding of these interactional dynamics.

One important concept for understanding the nature of these dynamics comes from work on holography. A hologram is a form of lens-less photography in which it can be demonstrated that any part of the whole contains the whole. According to Capra, ‘If any part of a hologram is illuminated, the entire image will be reconstructed.’ This phenomenon has become an important metaphor in work by physicist David Bohm and neuroscientist Karl Pribram as a way of theorizing about the interdependence among all levels of matter. In Bohm’s notion of an implicate order, he theorizes that all matter is enfolded in each of its parts. Pribram has applied the concept of hologram to brain functioning as a way of suggesting ‘the whole is encoded in each part.’ Whether those theories are supported in their particular applications is less important than is the growing notion that there is an inextricable interrelation among all matter whether organic or inorganic (p. 225-226).

The core area of development is the philosophical - conceptual one. It is here that the principles underlying a social work perspective or worldview need to be articulated. As indicated above, the principles could be usefully amplified by new developments in the fields of physics, psychology, philosophy, biology, health and anthropology. The key would be to draw on the writing found on the edges of these fields that seems to be moving toward a new paradigm. The philosophical principles would describe a view of human development and change that draws on past social work wisdom but that also brings that wisdom to a new level of articulation, sophistication, and vision (p. 228).

In the end, Weick’s paper is appropriately anchored largely in an intuition of hers and not in what she would now call the (old) paradigm of empiricism.

Weick suggests that social work is strategically positioned to be on the cutting edge of the new paradigm movement if it hasn't become dependent upon, instead of interdependent upon, the (old) paradigm of empiricism. Essentially, Weick views social work as a holistic profession needing a holistic paradigm and a holistic philosophical perspective.

One crucial task of social work today is to counterbalance the long-time imbalance favoring empiricism over practice wisdom. Weick recommends giving more breathing space to practice wisdom and to the "new age" thinking in several other disciplines which have been smothering under the weight of empiricism.

So much of what Weick is saying in her paper overlaps with or echoes a general systems theory orientation. Surprisingly, although she makes passing reference to the "ecological perspective" in social work and often uses the words "holistic" and "holism," she the doesn't once use the words "system", "eco-system," "systems theory," or "systems approach."

The paradigm (new) I find compelling, but when I consider just how established the paradigm (old) is, it is difficult to see how the strengths of empiricism and the corresponding vested interests, within the social sciences and natural sciences, in empiricism, are going to be persuaded to give up some of "their" territory.

Concluding Remarks

I have an uneasy feeling that the hydra-like social work identity is laughing at us at this very moment. Here we are, concluding a paper by suggesting a move to a paradigm (new) that will apparently just add a few more "heads" to the social work identity. But what the hydra-like social work identity doesn't yet appreciate, wallowing in self-satisfied giggles, is that some holistic or systems approach, while perhaps initially adding more "heads," may have the potential to cauterize the social work identity wound with a common conceptual framework that can accommodate, under a single disciplinary identity, all of the multiplying "heads" of the current social work identity.

The immediate purpose of this paper was to offer an historical explanation of the social work identity problem. The long-term purpose was to set the stage for a second paper in which I will explain why we presently find a tag-team of systems approaches in the (conceptual) wrestling ring pitting their (conceptual) frames against the hydra-like social work identity. The major part of this explanation will compare and contrast the general systems, ecological systems, and natural systems theories. I will also present a slight variation of Ramsay's common conceptual framework blending (old) paradigm and (new) paradigm to begin the cauterizing of a century-old wound.

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