

## 1: Introduction to Social Work by O. William Farley

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Bibliography expanded and updated to reflect recent research. Updated on 3 September The previous version of this content can be found here. Under the terms of the applicable license agreement governing use of the Encyclopedia of Social Work accessed online, an authorized individual user may print out a PDF of a single article for personal use, only for details see Privacy Policy and Legal Notice. History and Evolution 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. 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 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. As Garvin and Cox 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 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, 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. 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 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, 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. 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. This included the creation of professional organizations, a code of ethics, professional agencies, and the creation of professional schools and a knowledge base. In 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, ; Eherenreich, 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 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. 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, Although, it is not completely clear whether the profession as a whole endorsed Freud or just its leadership see Alexander, 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 " came to an agreement on the importance of casework to the profession Eherenreich, 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. They advocated more progressive politics and a movement away from casework Eherenreich, 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 s, 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 s. 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 s. 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. 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. Involvement in social planning was facilitated by the Model Cities Program and the regional planning agencies such as the Appalachian Regional Commission. 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 s 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 s 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. Turner and Payne describe a vast variety of clinical approaches that move beyond the single theory approach of the profession prior to the 1970s 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 1960s 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 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. 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.

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