



School of Social Work

Almanac, Volume 36 Number 35, Tuesday, May 15, 1990

University of Pennsylvania

THE PENN APPROACH:

An Evolving Philosophy of Education for Social Work Practice

In connection with its 80th anniversary, the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work has prepared an evolving statement of philosophy. The statement captures the School's pioneering past, its highly relevant present, and its hopeful future. The statement is the product of the School's faculty and Dean Michael J. Austin.

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of its eighty year history, the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work has evolved a social philosophy which shapes the educational program it offers, the research it undertakes, and the leadership it provides to the profession. This philosophy reflects the School's commitment to a vision of social work as:

- a profession of hope, oriented to the prevention, amelioration and containment of social problems;
- an investment in the future by a humane society, providing essential services to meet the needs of those not served by other social institutions; and
- driven by a fundamental commitment to social justice and the elimination of racism, sexism, anti-semitism, ageism, homophobia, and all other forms of social oppression.

This statement of social philosophy is first and foremost an evolving document. It will be continuously revised to reflect the changing requirements of those in greatest need in our society. It also reflects the faculty's commitment to introduce students, particularly MSW students, to a variety of perspectives related to social work practice, social policy, research,

racism and oppression, and the nature of human behavior in the social environment. In addition to the varying perspectives, each faculty member brings his/her own views to interpreting this statement of social philosophy which serves as a foundation for integrating required and elective courses with fieldwork. The Penn approach to the education of future social work professionals includes at least three major perspectives:

- a clear understanding and respect for the past;
- a realistic interpretation of current issues;
- a vision of the future which reflects a commitment to social change and individual empowerment.

A clear understanding and respect for the past is necessary before engaging in any discussions of contemporary issues and moving toward envisioning future challenges. History provides an essential foundation on which to build a strong knowledge base which will be more readily adaptive to a changing society.

A SIGNIFICANT PLACE IN SOCIAL WORK HISTORY

The University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work is one of the oldest schools of social work in the United States. It originated in 1908 when a "Course of Training in Child Helping" was developed under the direction of the Children's Bureau of Philadelphia. J. Prentice Murphy, director of the Children's Bureau and a national leader in social services to children, was the program's director and Carl Kelsey, professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, was consulting director. Four courses were offered in succession over a period of eight months, with an introductory lecture by Mary Richmond, General Secretary of the Philadelphia Organizing Charity issued in 1910 noted the expansion of the Children's Bureau lecture series into "...a definitely organized school with a curriculum providing for both class work and field work and with definite tests for graduation. This has been made possible through the cooperation of a large number of the city's agencies for social work, of which this Society is one."

That year the "Philadelphia Training School for Social Work" was established with William O. Easton, educational director of the Central YMCA, as director. The teaching staff was largely composed of directors of local social services agencies. Included among the faculty was Porter R. Lee, who succeeded Mary Richmond as director of the Philadelphia Society for Organizing Charity and, later, was director of the New York School of Social Work for many years.

In a 1911 letter to the General Secretary of the Federated Charities of Baltimore who had inquired about starting a training school for social workers in that city, Lee noted that the decision had been made to expand the program of the Philadelphia school to include not only lectures but also "the practical field work which ought to go with them." The new school's curriculum included training in "social work in the public schools, the placing out [foster care] of dependent children, protective work with children, the study of neighborhood conditions, problems of public health for charities, the work of the juvenile training schools, the work of the juvenile court and probation, medical social service, institutional care of dependent children, organized charity, and child labor."

Enrollment in the fall of 1910 numbered 63 students. Fifty-four of these made up the school's first graduating class which celebrated its commencement at a festive dinner on June 1, 1911, at the Central YMCA. Alexander Johnson, newly-elected President of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, traveled to Philadelphia, to speak at the occasion.

In the fall of 1916 the school was incorporated under the name of Pennsylvania School



Photo by H. Armstrong Roberts

for Social Service and a full-time director was hired. A program of instruction by agency administrators was introduced. Some of the courses included: "Social Statistics and Research," "Psychology in Social Work," "Housing and Community Sanitation," "Industrial Problems," "Development of Social Institutions," and two sections of "Principles and Techniques of Casework." The Pennsylvania School for Social Service ascribed to a philosophy of social work that emphasized understanding of environmental issues as well as individual and family problems. Because of its close early history, students at the Pennsylvania School received broader, more academic training than did students in schools more closely tied to social service agencies. The New York School of Philanthropy, for example, was founded by and existed as part of the New York Charity Organization Society (COS) during its first half century of existence. Its curriculum and philosophy of service were directly influenced by the practice orientation of its host agency. When the New York COS—later the Community Service Society—came under the influence of Freudian thought in the post World War I era, its training school became a leader in developing the diagnostic approach to social work practice based on Freudian theory.

The Pioneers

By the early 1920's several faculty appointments had been made that were to heavily influence the future direction of the Pennsylvania School. In 1918 Virginia Robinson, later to become instrumental in determining the theoretical orientation of the school, was hired to be director of field instruction. That same year, Karl DeSchweinitz, another influential figure in the school's history, became General Secretary of the Family Service Society of Philadelphia, formerly the Society for Organizing Charity, and began teaching courses at the Pennsylvania School.

Also in 1918 Jesse Taft, one of the future developers, along with Virginia Robinson, of the Functional approach to social work practice, moved to Philadelphia, to accept a position as director of the Department of Child Study of the Siebert Institution. She too began teaching on an adjunct basis at the Pennsylvania school. In that same year Taft, along with Mary Jarrett, director of the newly-founded Smith College School for Social Work, created a furor at the annual meeting of the Conference on Charities and Corrections when they presented papers identifying the psychiatric base for all social work practice and calling incorporation of material on mental hygiene in all professional social work training programs.

Perhaps the greatest influence on the future direction of the Pennsylvania School for Social and Health Work as it was known in the 1920's was the appointment 1922 of Kenneth L. M. Pray as the school's director. Pray, whose academic training was in political science, had been a journalist and community organizer.

After World War I, as Freudian theory

became increasingly influential in the mental hygiene movement, schools of social work began to experiment with adding courses in psychoanalytic theory to their practice curricula, the Pennsylvania School among them. In 1919 an advisory committee composed of 29 eminent psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, including such luminaries as A. A. Brill, William Healy, E. E. Southard, and William A. White, was formed to help the school plan a concentration in psychiatric social work. For three years, beginning in 1919, such a concentration was offered in the school's catalogue.

However, in 1922, the first year under Pray's direction, this concentration disappeared from the catalogue. In its place was a statement of the school's philosophy emphasizing the role of the environment in problem formation and as a focus for change. "Training and practice in specialized fields, such as family case work, group work, health work, research, or community organization in the narrower sense, must be founded upon, not substituted for, an understanding of the underlying community problems out of which arise the special conditions that confront social and health workers in their daily tasks."

Thus, while other schools changed their curricula during the 1920's to incorporate an emphasis on individuals as the locus for change, the Pennsylvania school retained its emphasis on the sociological aspects of human behavior, on the individual as influenced by participation in a variety of groups. In 1926 the school reaffirmed its philosophy of practice in the following statement from the course catalogue: "... the fundamental point of view of the individual as conditioned by his social environment and to be treated through his social relations."

The Pennsylvania School's maintenance of a broader practice perspective under Pray's influence set the stage for the introduction in the 1930's of the model of social work practice with which the school came increasingly to be identified, the Functional model.

The Functional Approach to Social Work Practice

The Functional approach to social work practice was based on the personality theory of Otto Rank, a member of Freud's inner circle in Vienna who began to break away from his mentor in the early 1920's. In his first published work to depart from traditional psychoanalytic theory, *Trauma of Birth*, published in 1924, Rank rejected the deterministic Freudian con-



Photo by Harvey Finkel

cept that one's personality is essentially established by events in early childhood. Rank saw instead that the basic human struggle, and the source of most individual problems, was the inherent tension between the desire to realize one's separate and distinct individuality—to move toward growth and change—and the competing wish to remain psychologically connected and dependent upon others, to be cared for, to retreat from growth and change. Rank also differed from Freud in his recognition of individual difference in the developmental process. His background in the arts and humanities, as opposed to the medical training of Freud and his followers, led Rank to incorporate a broader, more culturally-based perspective on human growth and development into his theoretical framework.

In Rank's view the force for change had to come from within the individual, from an active, self-assertive Will. The Will, a central concept in Rank's theoretical formulation, refers to the organized, integrated personality engaged in positive, creative action. The therapeutic task, according to Rank, is to strengthen and/or mobilize the Will. The medium through which this task is accomplished is the helping relationship.

According to Rank, relationship was central to the helping process. The focus for understanding was on "experiencing" the other as s/he presented her/himself in the relationship, as opposed to "knowing" the other through a cognitive or intellectual process. Consequently, the emphasis in helping was on the here and now, on what was occurring between client and worker, patient and therapist, rather than on events and feelings from the past. As a result of his emphasis on the importance of the process that unfolds in the treatment relationship, Rank identified time as an important therapeutic tool and established time limits as a crucial component of the therapeutic process. Establishing a time limit for the helping relationship forced the worker and client to focus on the begin-

ning, middle, and ending of the relationship as an integral part of the client's growth process.

Jessie Taft first heard Otto Rank speak at an international conference on psychoanalysis in Atlantic City in 1923. She was thoroughly captivated by his ideas and, through her relationship with the Pennsylvania School, arranged for him to give the school's commencement address in June 1924. This was the beginning of an ongoing series of lectures and courses given at the Pennsylvania School by Rank up to his death in 1939. So convinced was Taft of the power of Rank's theories that she entered analysis with him in 1926. Her associate Virginia Robinson completed her analysis with Rank a year later.

Taft and Robinson were so affected by their experiences in treatment with Rank that they began seeking ways to incorporate his theories into a model of social work practice. Taft began studying with a group of Rankian analysts in New York and became the English translator of his most important works in German. In 1929 when Rank formally broke with Freud and was subsequently abandoned by most of the American psychoanalytic community, Jessie Taft became identified as one of his primary American adherents.

Taking Rank's basic principles of individual psychology and human growth and change, Taft and Robinson applied them in a new theoretical model of social work practice. This new practice theory unfolded slowly during the early 1930's, culminating in Taft's seminal statement of functional practice which appeared as the lead article in the first issue of *The Journal of Social Work Process*, published by the Pennsylvania School in 1934.

One of the major themes in the social work practice model that evolved at the Pennsylvania School was an emphasis on the participatory role of the client in her/his own change process. The choice of the problem to be addressed was an attribute of the client role, not an independent decision made by the social worker as it was in the psychoanalytically-influenced Diagnostic model. In fact, it was through the inherent struggle involved in recognizing a problem and working toward its resolution that client growth and change were seen to occur.

Whatever client change that was to take place would evolve within the helping relationship between the client and the worker. It was also through this process that the worker came to know and understand the self presented by the client. There was no separate diagnostic or assessment phase in the intervention process as was the case in the Diagnostic model. Client assessment was viewed as an ongoing and evolving outcome of the total intervention.

A third major differentiating theme in the Functional model was the use of agency function as an organizing concept. Early in their efforts to incorporate Rank's ideas into a model for social work practice, Taft and Robinson struggled to define the difference between

social casework and psychoanalysis. The difference as they saw it was in the agency-based context of social work practice. Society, as represented by the social agency, defined the function and purpose of the social worker's task. Agency function also established for the client the kind of help that could be offered, the terms on which this help was given, and what was required of the client in return for receiving this help. Thus, in the Functional model, the agency, through social agreement as to its purpose and function, became the symbolic representation of external reality as the client struggled toward growth and change.

Public Social Services

The Functional model's notion of individual empowerment within the limitations of agency function was particularly relevant to the emergence of public social services during the Great Depression of the 1930's. As professional social work struggled to respond to the Depression's catastrophic effects, it became increasingly clear that psychoanalytically-based practice models with their intrapsychic explanations of human difficulties and their focus on psychological understanding as a basis for problem resolution held little relevance for those caught in the social and economic crisis of the period. With its traditional emphasis on understanding the environmental context and a practice model applicable to a variety of client groups, the Pennsylvania School was in a unique position to respond to the demands of this new professional responsibility.

Student field units were established in public welfare agencies in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware; public administrators were invited to teach as adjunct professors at the school. As a result, the Functional practice principles, initially developed out of a private sector case work orientation, were honed in a very different context. In 1938 the Pennsylvania School of Social Work published its second volume of *The Journal of Social Work Process*, entitled "Method and Skill in Public Assistance."

In the ensuing years since the Functional model was developed at the Pennsylvania School of Social Work, its basic principles have become an integral part of generalist social work practice throughout the country, often without real awareness of their origins. In almost any contemporary social work practice text a practice approach is described that includes such functional principles as the client's right to self-determination, the under-

standing of individual difference, starting where the client is in the growth process, the evolving nature of client assessment, the importance of relationship in helping, and a recognition of the use of time as an important component of the intervention process. These salient principles continue to shape the present day education and research at the Pennsylvania School.

The Major Principles of Functional Social Work Practice

Building on a rich history of social work practice theory development, this statement of philosophy reflects the ongoing refinement of the concepts and principles of social work practice within the context of a pluralistic and ever changing society. Today the helping process is viewed as a structure through which the social work practitioner provides intensive assistance within a limited time period designed to empower the client to deal with personal and environmental problems related to specific agency mandates. The helping process is incomplete unless the social work practitioner engages in a continuous process of planned change to improve the delivery of services and link social resources to the areas of greatest need according to values of distributive justice.

There are currently nine principles that compose the current philosophy of practice. They are summarized below and then defined in greater detail:



Photo by Harvey Finkel

1. The goal of social work practice is client empowerment, predicated on the belief that all individuals have the capacity for growth and change and can be helped to shape their own destiny.
2. The foundation of social work practice is the establishment of a working relationship of mutual respect between the social work practitioner and the client.
3. The social work practitioner views the client as representative of a population of clients and seeks to address the critical sys-

temic, environmental, and social issues which adversely affect that population.

4. The social work practitioner and the client work through a structured problem-solving process which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

5. The specific purpose and functions of the social service agency provide the context for social work practice.

6. The social work practitioner monitors the dynamics of the social work process and the ongoing processes of change in the client, the worker, and the agency, in order to gather the data necessary to make the case for change at the local, regional, and national levels.

7. The social work practitioner works for planned change within the social service system in a continuous effort to insure that social resources are linked to the areas of greatest need, to improve the delivery of services, and to eliminate oppressive and discriminatory practices within the profession.

8. The social work practitioner has a responsibility to share evidence of unmet needs in the community and to advocate for the necessary realignments of social resources and changes in the public policy.

9. The social work practitioner fosters a climate of inquiry within the profession which directs the continuous search for more effective solutions to the complex problems addressed by social work practice.

THE 1990s AND BEYOND

The nine principles represent the core of our philosophy of practice at this time. Some of these principles will change as we enter the next century and others will be added. In looking beyond the core principles, there are new challenges facing the social work profession and the School in the decade of the 1990s. Defining those challenges represents the third and final component of this evolving statement of philosophy.

Social work practitioners and policy makers have come to realize that neither individual nor environmental change efforts, in isolation, are sufficient to affect the life circumstance of many clients. The Functional approach continues to focus attention both on strengthening environmental supports and assisting clients to increase their competencies in dealing with institutional or environmental blocks to achieving their objectives. The following examples illustrate the challenges ahead.

In child welfare, increasing emphasis is placed on keeping families intact by working with the entire family in crisis situations and helping them to gain access to resources in the community as well as linking isolated families with social support networks. In the health and mental health fields, services to clients include establishing case management services to broker, coordinate, and advocate services for clients, promoting social support groups, and developing programs and resources to serve

unmet needs. There is increased attention being given to discharge planning and the designing of home environments for sub-acute and fragile patients returning to family or community care. In the aging field, accessing and coordinating an array of environmental resources such as home health care, chore services, and delivered meals in order to maintain clients in the community has become a cornerstone of case management. Emerging services to the homeless, AIDS patients, pregnant teenagers, and battered women require attention to both individual needs and environmental supports.

The practice of social work in the coming years will rely increasingly on the following methods and techniques: 1) case management, 2) case and class advocacy, 3) social support networks, 4) social skills training for clients, and 5) implementing community based living arrangements. These methods and techniques require a blend of direct and indirect practice skills. Social workers will engage more directly with organizations, neighborhoods and informal social networks in order to access and mobilize resources for clients, as well as to improve the quality of life that such systems afford clients. Forging new models of practice that incorporate the best of direct and indirect practice methods is part of the mission of the Penn School of Social Work.

In addition to blending direct and indirect practice, future social workers will need to demonstrate skills in service evaluation and accountability. Cost containment, limited resources, and service contracting practices will dictate an ongoing concern with service effectiveness, productivity, and efficiency. This trend will continue to be reflected in such developments as increasingly refined ways of measuring the impact of services, more elaborate information systems, and in a growing utilization of computers for data management. At both agency and direct practice levels, concerted efforts will be made to better integrate data on the outcomes of direct service with program/agency evaluation processes. Improved methods of management control, including more sophisticated accounting and budget monitoring procedures will evolve. Future social workers will need to be comfortable with evaluating practice and program outcomes and using data for decision making.

At the same time as they are evaluating services, social workers at all levels will find themselves increasingly engaged in program and funding activities that were once thought to be the sole province of top management. Diverse and innovative approaches to fund raising, the identification of new service markets, the marketing of program ideas to new consumer groups, the formulation of proposals, and the negotiating of contracts are activities which will become more and more characteristic of future practice. Strategic planning for long-term agency development will become integral to all levels of practice as agencies move to reduce some of the uncertainty with which they are

confronted. Legislative advocacy (lobbying, coalition building, partisan political activity) will likewise take on greater importance as agencies seek to protect public funding sources.

All these developments reflect a continuing change in the nature of direct practice. For example, social workers in the child welfare and health systems will find themselves increasingly engaged in determining which clients are most in need and most at risk in order that agencies can target priority populations. Assessment skills will become even more important in this context.

Short-term crisis intervention will be devoted to acquiring basic resources for clients, protecting vulnerable persons, and resolving interpersonal conflicts. Social workers will be doing more teaching of self-help, self-management, and self-change strategies in order to empower clients. The emphasis will be on helping clients to acquire skills.

Future social workers will also need to be better prepared to work and survive in organizations. They will need superior personal and social skills to avoid demoralizing effects of unrelenting pressure, uncertainty, and scarce resources. Where cost containment measures are pressing agencies to "weed out" unnecessary functions, social workers will need skills in developing and marketing service, engaging in inter-professional collaboration, and becoming participants in coalition building. In those cases where agency policies restrict or interfere with humane and effective treatment of clients, social workers will also need skills in organizational change.

As we recognize our role as members of a global community, it is clear that our teaching and research will need to reflect more international and comparative perspectives. The experience of child welfare staff in England and Nigeria have lessons for our students. The increasing interdependence of the world economy and political developments makes it clear that decisions made halfway around the world can have direct impact on the employed and unemployed in our local communities.

Conclusion

The future challenges confronting the social work profession represent the primary education research issues of the Penn School of Social Work. Students and faculty are involved in mapping the future directions of the profession as they collaboratively explore the boundaries of new knowledge while building upon the rich history of the School. The faculty and students have been pioneers in the past in developing and implementing the nationally recognized Functional approach to social work practice. The boundaries of future social work will again be shaped through the collaborative inquiry and experimentation of students and faculty. This collaboration and search for knowledge are the essence of the School's practice philosophy.