

Re-Thinking

SOCIAL CASE WORK

by

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SOcial WORK TODAY finds real gratification in presenting to the field this new printing of *Re-Thinking Social Case Work*. In a troubled period, when many are despairing of security of any kind, it is with perfect security that we see it go to press again, unchanged. For it arises out of a conviction which can hardly be disturbed by the raucous conflicts of the daily headlines—a conviction concerning the profound relationship between skilled services to individual human beings and the vigor of the democratic way of life.

—FRANK C. BANCROFT
Managing Editor, Social Work Today

RE-THINKING SOCIAL CASE WORK*

By Bertha C. Reynolds

I. INTRODUCTION.

Choice of 1916 as focus of study of early case work.

WHEN each of us first “thought” social case work, we probably took it as we found it, being too busy in discovering what it wanted of us to think very much about how it came to be what it was. It is not easy, even today, to tell what social case work is. This is partly because we still describe it in static terms and expect it to stand still and be photographed. Each person labels what he sees in his own setting *social case work* and wonders why his definition does not correspond with that of someone else. What we need most is to see it in historical perspective, and also with a sense that it is as much a part of the social scene in which it appears as are other phenomena—the homes of a people, their industries, schools and churches, their favorite sports and songs.

Looking to the past for the beginnings of social case work, we find no point at which it erupted suddenly. What we call social case work today seems to have evolved out of a slowly

* See “A Re-evaluation of Social Work,” an editorial introduction, *SOCIAL WORK TODAY*, March, 1937, pp. 5-7; and “Organization and Support of Social Work,” by Harry L. Lurie, *SOCIAL WORK TODAY*, May, 1937, pp. 5-7.

growing awareness of the necessity of treating individuals as unique in their differences from each other, rather than treating alike all instances of trouble of a certain sort. Even today there is much of the tendency to think of illegitimacy, unemployment, delinquency as entities which can be defined as disease pictures and given standard forms of treatment. Virginia P. Robinson* has traced, however, in papers given at the National Conference since 1873, a growing awareness of individuals and increased facilities for understanding them through the developing science of psychology. If, therefore, we take the skeleton definition that social case work is an individualized form of social work, we find it emerging at no definite date, but rather evolving with the years. We can study it in cross section only by selecting some significant point in its development and focussing attention upon that. For several reasons the year 1916 seems to mark such an important period.

That year marked the date of publication of *Social Diagnosis*, the first book attempting to make a scientific study of methods of diagnosing individual instances of trouble, as these occurred in the practice of social work. Mary E. Richmond summed up the best that had been learned in the 30 years preceding and illuminated it with the insight of her rarely gifted and understanding personality. This book continued for more than a decade to influence profoundly the thinking of all who approached the tasks of social case work with real seriousness. In 1915, Dr. Felix Adler had analyzed the claims of social work to be called a profession and had found it wanting a distinctive body of knowledge and field of its own, although it was beginning to be conscious of professional ambitions. In 1917, the name of its national conference was changed from The National Conference of Charities and Corrections to The National Conference of Social Work, thus reflecting a change of attitude toward its clients of which we shall have more to say later. In this same year, the entrance of the United States into the World War changed many things in the nation's life forever.

* *A Changing Psychology of Social Case Work*, pp. 1-32, University of North Carolina press, 1930.

II. SOCIAL CASE WORK AND EXCLUSION OF THE UNSUCCESSFUL FROM SOCIETY.

Case workers unaware of the conflict inherent in their position.

SOCIAL case work was not then clearly differentiated within social work as something which could be recognized apart from particular settings in which it was done. It was sharply divided into "fields"—family social work (then under the names of charity organization societies or associated charities), children's institutions and placing out societies, medical social service, probation work and so on. It was not until 1929, after years of deliberation, that the Milford Conference, composed of representatives of all these fields, published its report* showing that there was such a thing as a social case work generic to all its forms. Even today there is much confusion because generic social case work is always seen associated with some particular setting.

In 1916, social case work was pretty generally regarded as centered in the family. Students were taught that the family was the unit of operation in social case work—otherwise it would not be *social* work. Individuals who stood out in the family group enough to receive attention were to be understood only in their setting of family relationships. Children placed in foster families for foster care were to be fitted to the relationships to be found therein, and thus to acquire in a good home the setting necessary for them to grow up into good citizens. Solitary individuals were somehow out of focus unless a social agency could trace back their history to the family they once had. In this sense the case work of 1916 could be said to be group work with families. Family welfare societies were the norms by which other social agencies measured themselves. Medical social work (which had to individualize the patient) and children's societies (which dealt with youngsters out of their own homes) considered themselves specialized agencies, and often drew their workers from the "general practice" which

* *Social Case Work, Generic and Specific*, American Association of Social Workers, New York, 1929.

family case work was then thought to be. Students of social work were required to have field experience in family case work with the idea that it was basic to all other forms.

Besides being family-centered, the social case work of 1916 was oriented to economic need. It is probable, indeed, that it was because the family was the economic unit that it became the unit of case work, and that individuals were noticed first because they were actual or potential breadwinners. To "get a family on its feet" was to make it self-supporting economically. The relationship of case worker to client was at first that of economic advisor and provider of funds, although the problems of cure of illness and education of children were not neglected. As there became apparent other uses for social case work than that of relief of economic need, there was still a *raison d'être* to be sought in some form of giving—a home for a child, medical necessities and convalescent care, a job to be found or an educational opportunity to be provided.

By 1916 there had grown up in the United States so large an "industry" of giving that the investment in plant and services demanded trained agents. Schools of philanthropy, as they were sometimes called, had become an accepted and desirable means of entrance into a vocation which was losing its motives of "sacrifice for the sake of others" and becoming an interesting occupation for its own sake—even if it was not a lucrative one. A growing body of trained and somewhat-trained workers were therefore making a living in the infant profession of social work. At that time the financial support of the services which became known as case work was drawn predominantly from the gifts of philanthropic people. Community Fund "drives" had not yet become the fashion. The tax-supported distribution of relief through "overseers of the poor," as they were called in some places, was carried out by untrained workers doing as well as neighborly kindness determined, or as poorly as the spoils system in politics made inevitable.

We assumed at the outset that the purpose of trying to "re-think" social case work at this time is to see it in relation to other forces in society. Why did social case work develop in the United States, as nowhere else in the world, in those years before the World War? What need for social case work made society willing to invest many thousands of dollars and employ

a small army of workers to maintain it? In this age of scientific scepticism it is not possible to be satisfied with the assumption that pure benevolence accounts for its existence. Without recapitulating a study (which might be illuminating) of interpretations of social work given to the public through its literature in those years, one can discern a tendency which may be stated as follows: *Society had a need to place outside of itself those who were not economically successful, and employed social case workers to see that it was not troubled by these individuals and their families.*

At first this statement seems a bit preposterous. When we examine further the writings of the period, however, we find abundant evidence that "the poor" were not considered a real part of the society which was aiding them. There was, for instance, the acceptance of the notion of the "stigma" of receiving charity. Social settlements (although they also were giving cultural opportunities to people who were too poor to provide them for themselves) objected to housing in their buildings the offices of a charity organization society, lest the people of the neighborhood feel it a disgrace to come there. In other words, they could not do their work with quite as much of the putting-outside-of-their-group as was understood to be implied in family case work.

For long it was considered a mark of a high standard of case work when an agency devised ways to prevent its being known that a family was receiving aid, and took pains to interpret to those who might be consulted as references that the family had come to it as a last resort. Regard for the privacy of the client did not mean, however, a restraint from gathering all possible information about his past as well as his present life. It did not mean that this information would not be spread before case conferences of board members who would decide how much relief should be given and what plan should be made—even to the point of whether the family should be "broken up." (I hasten to say that in 1916 it was not considered good practice to do this for the reason of poverty alone!) When it became customary to invite residents of the district to join these conferences, it was the most prominent business or professional people who were selected; never the client himself to have something to say on his own behalf. After the vote of the case

conference, there followed the "interview of persuasion" by which the case worker tried to win the family's acceptance of the plan laid down. Students of social work were taught, however, that they were not to make plans for people but with them, and that a plan was not carried out until the family had accepted it! Strange to say, families were sometimes described as uncooperative in those days.

The case work services of the United States were used by many thousands of people prior to 1916. What need of theirs was thereby fulfilled? In that period it was impossible to answer the question for the reason that people had no opportunity to choose whether they would have social case work, apart from some form of material aid. To obtain what was needed in money or opportunity a person had to accept also such services as were offered. There is no literature to express what humble John Smith thought about it, but the literature of social work is eloquent in its concern with methods of overcoming the resistance of the client—resistance to giving the information thought necessary, resistance to accepting advice, resistance to being known as a charity case. Skill in case work was for a time largely the achievement of adequately tactful ways of getting people to fall in with what the case workers thought best for them.

What of the position of the case worker, between clients who silently or openly resisted the services which were offered and a society which expected its investment in social case work to purchase for it immunity from a potentially troublesome group outside itself? That this was a position of conflict is apparent to us today. There is little evidence that it was sensed as a conflict by the case worker in 1916. Why?

The first trained social case workers were of the stage next beyond the volunteer in the development of the profession. They were paid because they had to earn their living, but there was still a strong tradition that one should do good without remuneration. They were employed by and associated with lay people who could afford to give their time. It was natural that they should take over the thinking of the people who supported the work and should accept their definition of the effective community as really excluding the client group. They wanted to be kind, but after all the poor were in a different situation from themselves and few questioned the appropriateness of treating

them differently from the way they would treat their own friends. Their hope was that good case work would eventually abolish poverty and bring in a better society. They were interpreters between rich and poor, but their biggest stake was in learning the language of the rich.

It would be fascinating, if there were time, to trace the growth of the ideology back of the development of social case work, and to see its relationship to all the social and economic forces at work in the United States during the same period. At best we can get only an oversimplified picture of a frontier people constantly moving on in search of greater opportunities and constantly pressed upon by successive waves of immigrants who had crossed the sea with the same aims. There were conflicts between first-comers who seized advantage and those who came later without the means to make a good start. There were the contradictory tendencies of building hopes upon an expanding market in a growing population and tearing down the purchasing power of that same growing population by the exploitation of labor. There was the belief that any man with initiative could succeed if left free from governmental interference, along with the practice by which government itself handed over vast concessions in natural resources—land, forests, mines—to the most swift and ruthless of those who sought special privilege in order to make private profit out of the common wealth. The psychology of the frontier lasted long after the disappearance of the frontier itself. Such a people could tolerate appropriation of their resources only as they believed that these were practically limitless, and anyone could have a gambler's chance to become a millionaire. Such a people could be unbelievably generous, by European standards, for the relief of temporary misfortune—and at the same time harsh toward those who did not recover rapidly. The words "Charities and Correction" in the title of its national conference were symbolic of society's attitude toward its "worthy" and not worthy poor. Indeed, it is even probable that the individualization which developed into social case work began in an attempt to understand why certain persons did not "rehabilitate" as breadwinners more successfully. The religious concern for a man's soul blended with

economic interests to make reform a part of the province of case work.

The early case workers of 1916 were expected, as we have seen, to keep society from being troubled by people whom it excluded and wanted to forget; or to return them to its fold relieved of temporary disability and successful on its own terms. There was a faith which seems to us naive that people of intelligence (i.e. case workers and their lay boards) could know what was best for clients to do to improve their status. One obstacle was recognized—the resistance of the client—but that might be overcome by better methods. The social reform movements of the first decade of the century had broken against a wall of political corruption based upon the growing power of monopolies. Now there was a turning to “adjustments conscientiously effected, individual by individual” as the hope of building a better world.

The more the expense of case work services mounted, the greater became the pressure to show results in rehabilitation or prevention. When it became clear that very poorly endowed people were piling up as the permanent clientele of social agencies, case workers seized eagerly upon the newly developed Binet-Simon tests and upon studies in eugenics which might give some basis for the segregation of the “unfit.” With these out of the way and forgotten, there was some hope that case workers could demonstrate, with a selected group of cases, the value of good case work for prevention of social ills. (The term “worthy” had passed away in favor of scientific selection of cases.) The trouble was that those best able to profit by case work (as the case worker saw it) did everything they could to avoid it. In 1916 it was not inadmissible to pursue them. On the premise that the better clients would not ask for help but might suffer for lack of it, family societies often accepted applications not from the people for themselves but from someone who suspected need. Part of the training of students was in ways to approach people who had not applied. The case workers of 1916 might have been struggling to make bricks without straw, but they were hopeful and naive, as was the middle class from which they came.

III. MOVEMENT TOWARD DEMOCRACY IN RELATION TO THE INDIVIDUAL CLIENT.

The war. Beginnings of the use of dynamic psychiatry.

THEN the homes of America were invaded by the World War to end all wars. Overnight thousands of families saw fathers and sons off to army camps. The Red Cross called upon a public which included almost everyone to give for the support of case work (called Home Service) for these families while they had to adjust themselves to living without their men. For the first time in the history of organized philanthropy, it was *we* giving to *ours*, not one group handling down something to another which was outside its self-defined community. The need might be only temporary, until government red tape was unwound, or it might be “for the duration of the war” and after. It made no difference in the enthusiasm for a great cause. This was not “charity” but the due of those who had given their all. Even the poorest had some part in giving, if only to sew, knit or farm. Democracy was getting into philanthropy, and the latter could never be the same again.

The effect upon the philosophy and methods of social case work was profound. Out of the neuro-psychiatric services in the army came also, more indirectly, a force pushing toward democracy. Case workers had long clung to an association with relief giving because they had nothing else to offer except an unscientific kindness. They had had to rely upon the testimony of unreliable collateral references to establish the “facts” about a family’s situation, and had attempted to give advice based upon their own trial-and-error judgment. In both these processes they had incurred resentment and experienced frustration. Now, out of the necessity of treating cases of “shell shock” in the army, there came to be applied to personal problems a body of more or less scientific data which was soon seen to be equally valid for personal difficulties in civilian life. The dynamic concepts of psychoanalysis illuminated behavior which had been inexplicable under the descriptive terms of Kraepelin’s classification of mental diseases.

In the beginning the new knowledge was used to give more vitality to diagnosis and treatment of the mentally ill and of delinquents and criminals. Then it was gradually extended to

an understanding of the difficulties which people of all sorts experience in adjusting themselves to family relationships, marriage and child rearing, old age and sudden misfortune. Case workers who were fortunate enough to get this special training early, and to be associated with psychiatrists who were pioneers in applying the new insights to all kinds of human problems, grew with the movement into fascinating opportunities for a new kind of usefulness. In a decade psychiatric social work had become something more than a better paid specialty in social work. It was a new approach to human beings, and to every kind of problem which concerns them.

Psychiatry and psychiatric social work "took hold" with extraordinary vigor in the America of the post-war years. Was this because money flowed freely for every kind of philanthropic enterprise as the sentimentality of war time still lingered and war profits, if not war wages, still gave an illusion of prosperity? Was it because of an unacknowledged fear that people who had begun to move and think in masses would not be easily silenced if they began to speak of very real wrongs? The ruthless suppression of strikes and denial of civil liberties suggests this. In a period of general disillusionment, reforms seem futile. Studies of individual behavior may well have seemed safer than a search for the causes of a sickness in society. Perhaps, after all, it was better to assume that those who agitated for reforms could best be explained, and thus silenced, by one of the new terms for describing a psychopathic personality.

If, for any or all of these reasons, psychiatric social case work was welcomed either by those who contributed to its support or by those who practiced it with enthusiasm, it was certainly not understood, in the 1920's, to be pressing on toward the further democratization of social case work of the old form. This came about, however, and was for three reasons inevitable. First, psychiatric work, like the Red Cross Home Service, brought a new clientele from the child guidance clinics into the field of case work. They were business and professional families who could not get the combined service of four professional people such as made up the clinical team (psychiatrist, psychologist, pediatrician and psychiatric social worker) in any other way. They were people who were used to paying for professional service, and sometimes did so when the local medical society

permitted the clinic to charge a fee. They brought with them a self-respecting, voluntary use of professional help. They were people whom the self-defined society of givers could not put outside of itself—in fact they *were* the givers to many good causes. Secondly, the new clients could not help realizing that people who were referred by social agencies to the same clinics had some of the same problems with their children, and were troubled parents like themselves. The problems dealt with by the clinics could not be assumed to be associated with poverty or mental abnormality, for some of "the best people" had them. Thirdly, the *kind* of problems encountered demanded an approach on the basis of respect for the dignity and worth of the client. One might give coal and remain at spiritual distance from the recipient, but one could not even learn the story of bewilderment and mental anguish without coming close to the person. Patronage, coercion simply would not do. At the very least, the humility of a scientific spirit was required.

What was the strong ferment in the new psychiatric knowledge which was destined to change the whole philosophy and practice of social case work? It was, first of all, the concept that human behavior is not made in heaven, nor in hell, but is determined by the pressures of many complex forces upon the biological organism. The corollary of this proposition is that behavior can be studied—with all humility, but with all the ruthless respect for facts which science demands. "Good" behavior is not exempt from study any more than "bad." These terms lose their meaning in a scientific approach. Behavior is the indicator of the kind of adjustment the person is making to a life situation which itself may be a symptom of serious disorder in the body of society. Behavior is, therefore, to be understood in relation to the way in which it is serving the individual in his struggle to live and perpetuate his race.

That the sources of behavior are not accessible to consciousness is a further, and most revolutionary, concept of the new psychiatry. Our conscious understandings of why we do what we do are found to be very inaccurate explanations of behavior when, by the aid of carefully standardized psychoanalytic techniques, the subconscious mind is actually seen in operation. The living psycho-biological organism does not amputate from itself the wishes and impulses to conduct

which meet with social disapproval or other unpleasant consequences. They remain, these wishes and impulses, away from conscious awareness but actively pressing for fulfillment. The final choice of a course of action, expressed as behavior, is a resultant of many forces—out of the person's past, as well as his environment in the present, and out of his world of ideals and his hopes for the future. A case worker who understands that this is true of everyone—not least of himself—knows that he can not be the controlling force in the decision about what to do with some problem in the life of another.

To personify these forces for the sake of vividness, we may say in plain terms that the case worker must compete with the gang, the shopmates, the employer, the mother-in-law and thousands of influences more—not to forget a mother's prayers, the taunts of a playmate or a lover's kiss. The case worker must discard, then, any sense of god-like superiority to these other influences, and must study them with the most accurate observation and the finest sensitiveness to what the unconscious of the client is saying when it speaks through the disguises of behavior. Only by this carefully controlled process may the case worker discover what place he actually has among the forces which determine the client's feeling and action. It is the client, who has all his life been engaged in gathering up into a knot these strands of influence, from within and from without himself, who is the only one in any position to use the case worker (who is just one more influence) in balance with the rest.

If we accept the foregoing as a true (though necessarily inadequate) picture of the illumination which began to trickle into social case work through its contact with dynamic psychiatry, the futility of coercion becomes increasingly evident. It is no longer a question of whether it is *wrong* to try to make our fellow beings think and feel as we want them to. In the long run it is simply silly. The vital needs of their being will in the end determine what they shall feel and how they shall act. It is certain that the world does not believe this. This world has consistently, throughout history, slain its prophets and the scientists who made embarrassing discoveries. Every day, however, when it seems to be demonstrated afresh that people *are* coerced even in their thoughts and feelings—by physical force,

by fear of dire punishment, by power over their very existence through control of the necessities of life—it is actually becoming more evident that the extremes of coercion are but proving their own powerlessness.

It is possible for the student of the social symptom of fascism, for instance, to see that it gains its power only because it conceals the truth and promises something for the satisfaction of deeply real and unmet needs, and that for this reason it meets a response in the unconscious wishes of a people. When fascism produces disillusionment, the struggle against it, and for other choices which *will* satisfy, is an irresistible force. The evidences of underground struggle in the fascist countries and the heroic resistance of the people of Spain and China make certain that the coercion they may at first have seemed to accept was not a stable choice, and that they will defy death and worse to make a valid one.

Psychiatric and other workers divided. Growing awareness of conflict of position.

The new scientific orientation of social case work was pushing relentlessly toward a democracy of approach to human beings which was quite at variance not only with the traditional assumptions of social case work but with the practices of society in general and of the financially supporting society in particular. How could there be any escape from severe conflict for case workers who had managed to maintain themselves fairly happily in the past by sharing the assumptions of the group which supported them? A review of the period from 1920 to 1929 shows that the conflict was growing but was felt at first only as a division among case workers themselves.

Awareness of conflict with society came late to psychiatric social workers for several reasons. First, they were a welcomed group, part of the great new movement for mental hygiene which gave promise of solving the most vexing problems of man and society. It is hard to look a gift horse in the mouth and see a row of teeth behind a community's concentration of attention upon an obvious need for more sanity. It was easy just then to believe that mental hygiene was good for everyone and would unite all classes in its support. Secondly, psychiatric case workers were rather isolated from their colleagues in other

fields. They believed themselves to have come in at the top of a new profession based upon understanding of personality, and that all other social workers would have to look to them for the light. Naturally this did not add to their popularity. Then they were associated in clinical work with psychologists and psychiatrists who tended to spend leisure time in research rather than in active participation in community life. Furthermore, they were out of touch with their giving public. Mental hygiene clinics were directed by psychiatrists who usually represented the staff to the board, and money for their work frequently came from foundations willing to finance experimental ventures in philanthropy. It was easy to live in a world apart.

In the third place, psychiatric social workers did not realize for some time the full implications of the theories they had drawn from dynamic psychiatry. Their practice at first did not make democracy particularly visible. Psychiatric case workers were equipped with new names for the inconvenient characteristics of their clients, but often used them in about the same destructive ways as their predecessors had used moralistic ones. In theory, psychiatric workers had given up the belief that people could, if they would, feel and act as one wished them to. Practically, there lingered a scarcely conscious assumption that when a person had been *told* the meaning of his behavior he would either change it as desired or mark himself as unable to benefit by social-psychiatric treatment. The old term, uncooperative, was back as "unable to use our service." The old penalty of withdrawal of relief became refusal to recommend in favorable terms for a job.

It was just when non-psychiatric case workers were trying to adjust to disturbing questions arising out of the post-war scene in America that they were faced with the challenge of the psychiatric approach to people. At first they saw psychiatry as a more efficient tool for sharpening diagnosis and persuading people to carry out plans. Gradually they sensed (as psychiatric case workers were a bit ahead of them in doing) that there was a dynamic difference in the new concepts, and caught the implication of a new philosophy of case work. They gathered that psychiatric case workers, particularly those in child guidance clinics, were being somewhat critical of them for not

treating people with more individual consideration. They saw these other workers starting afresh, unhampered by association with relief giving, welcomed by clients from the comfortable classes—clients of the type for which case workers had always longed—able to demonstrate their skill to an admiring public. It seemed to them that psychiatric case workers evaded their responsibility, that they had never tested their theories against really difficult situations and that they turned over to other agencies cases in which authority was involved, thus escaping the onus of using it. Even when they were most critical, however, case workers in increasing numbers were taking courses in psychiatric social work. They were being carried irresistibly on the tide of a new orientation.

The challenge of psychiatry to a more democratic approach to people was not the only conflict under the surface of a boom prosperity. There were the ex-service men who found themselves out of jobs, out of the stream of civilian life, out of step because of what war had done to them. There were industrial workers who had been wanted during the peak of war industries but were now unwanted when labor was too plentiful, who were crushed in their attempts to win by strikes some voice in their working conditions, and were betrayed by the bureaucracies in their unions which stood between them and their employers. These groups, and others of the disadvantaged, the society in power had accustomed itself to ignore, as we have seen. It supported case work services so that it need not feel the impact of mounting discontent. But case workers who did feel it could not remain unaware of the contradictions in their position, nor of the fact that periods of unemployment were coming more frequently, even in prosperous years. They tried to believe that since mankind had mastered the techniques of production the end of poverty was almost in sight. They hoped that industrial relations were becoming better. It seemed to them that their obligation was to all classes alike; yet somehow they could not discharge this obligation. Whom were they trying to serve?

The depression. Common body of knowledge drawing case workers together.

Then came the crash of the stock market. The year 1930 found family case workers trying to administer hastily gathered

emergency funds all too inadequate for the overwhelming human need. They were in despair of saving standards of case work built up over many years—of which leisurely interviewing and time to keep records were among the most mourned. Overworked visitors gave long hours to carrying relief to homes, lest contact with a crowd in the office undermine the self-respect of clients. To their surprise, some clients said they preferred public relief, chaotic as was its administration, because they had always paid taxes and they felt they had a right to it. Family case work agencies gave up some of their best workers (and some of their worst) to newly organized public departments. Many did not care to return, and frankly said they liked the more democratic atmosphere of a public agency. Family case work was moving toward change in that its satisfaction with its position was gone. Never had there been so much sense of need to learn what social case work was all about, and what it could really do.

The same year saw the publication of *A Changing Psychology of Social Case Work*.^{*} It crystallized the growing revolt against authoritative methods in this fashion: "The case work relationship is a reciprocal relationship in which the case worker must accept herself and the other equally, in which all of her attitudes towards the client would be such that she would be content to be at the other end of such a relationship herself."

Here was a concept of the fundamental importance of the relationship between case worker and client which was breathtaking, once its implications were understood. It meant that good case work had to be done hand in hand, not handing down. In the midst of the criticism that the book was visionary and impractical, there were many who knew that it said for them something they had been wanting to say for a long time. Those who had experienced such a professional relationship knew its sacredness and power. The book spoke to a certain human quality in those for whom case work was a living art, and brought them together, whether they had had much or little of formal training in dynamic psychiatry.

In other ways the gulf between psychiatric and other case workers was being bridged. As the depression dragged on, many

^{*} *Op. cit.*

mental hygiene clinics were closed for lack of funds, and their case workers found positions in family agencies from which some of the staff had gone to public relief departments. The association was mutually helpful. Psychiatric workers were challenged to see if their theories about acceptance of people as they are could really be applied in all sorts of social situations. They had to overcome a tendency to be dependent upon psychiatrists, doing the best they could with limited clinical facilities. They learned much from their colleagues about the relation of case work to community problems. Family case workers also found stimulation, and help in applying the new concepts. Gradually they were able to get away from their preoccupation with relief enough to see other problems which had been masked by their role as economic adviser. There were many experiments with function in those years. Family agencies were asked to give case work service to families who were receiving public relief but who needed more of a worker's time than the public program would permit. In some places they developed a counseling service on problems of family relationships and drew a clientele from sections of the middle class which child guidance clinics had begun to reach. Here and there they worked in cooperation with pastors, court officers, teachers and physicians who found baffling some of the questions which individuals brought to them.

If there was a tendency, during the depression years, for social case workers of all fields to draw together, it was perhaps because there was a growing area of common understanding of personality in which they could find common ground more easily than when each type of agency was preoccupied with the special situation which it was facing. The Milford Conference, which had published its first report in 1929,^{*} met again in 1932 and 1933 to consider whether the merging of case work agencies which had resulted from shortage of funds might be so interpreted to the public as to make clear that social case work as such had value, no matter in what setting it appeared.

^{*} *Social Case Work, Generic and Specific, Op. cit.*

Its preliminary report was published in *The Family* in February 1933.*

For a time there was a period when social case work seemed hopelessly divided between those who did "therapeutic" case work, and all others more or less occupied with "environmental adjustments." The rise and passing of this trend in case work is worth noting before we leave the developments in private social agencies and consider those in the public field.

The relief of emotional stress by the use of a skilled art of listening, with the support of a relationship to an understanding professional person, presented hopeful possibilities in a period when one could not give jobs nor adequate material aid. Whether or not it was making a virtue of necessity, it became the goal of many case workers who had had some, even a small amount, of psychiatric training, to do "therapeutic" case work. Undoubtedly many of these were ill-prepared to deal with the emotional reactions which they precipitated in their clients, but the fact was that case workers were in touch with people who were suffering great anxiety and for whom no adequate psychiatric help was available. Ill-prepared or not, case workers began listening to stories of distress, found that clients often felt better for talking to them and ended by setting aside part of their working time for regular appointments with clients who wanted help with emotional problems.

Crude as these beginnings have been, they have shown the possibility of developing a professional service which, if it could be protected by expert skills under the supervision of psychiatrists and by a high standard of ethical obligation to the client, could rank with other profession-services for which fees are paid. As time has gone on, a better balanced use of psychiatric concepts has permeated the everyday tasks of case work. No situation is so simple that it may not require the greatest skill in diagnosis of what it means to the person in it. No contact is so brief that it may not demand the finest in a relationship to a professional person in order that the client may gain the confidence and release which he needs for the solution of his problem.

* "Can Social Case Work be Interpreted to a Community as a Basic Approach to Human Problems?"

IV. SOCIAL CASE WORK AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN SOCIETY.

Forces opposing democracy organized. Public relief a battleground.

AS we have traced the growth of social case work in relation to the life of its times, we have seen it drawing away from a real, though not consciously understood allegiance to the supporting group and moving toward a centering of its interest upon the individual client. Progress, either in scientific knowledge or in more acceptable practice, could be made in no other way. Movement in this direction, however, could not go on unhindered.

When the war, and in succession the post-war unrest and the depression, drove home to the people of the United States the truth that the frontier was no more, something happened to the self-defined society of the prosperous who had been the supporters of private philanthropy in the early years of the century. The growth of monopoly capitalism had concentrated greater wealth in fewer hands. The numbers of the disadvantaged had increased with every recurring crisis of unemployment until they could no longer be an easily excluded minority. The unemployed now included so many formerly successful citizens that it was useless to pretend that individual fault was responsible for their plight. The expense of the care of the victims of economic disaster could not be shouldered by the former givers to "charity," as insurance against having to face troublesome questions of economic justice. The load was an impossible one. The base of support of social work was therefore enlarged to include a large portion of the community. Mass giving had begun in the Red Cross drives during the war, and it was easy to carry it into annual Community Fund campaigns. It made no difference, in the face of need for more support, that giving soon ceased to be voluntary for the mass of struggling middle class folk who contributed because they dared not risk loss of their jobs or social disapproval. The slogans used in campaign literature were at first sentimental appeals to relieve suffering. In the later years of the depression they became overt appeals to fear: Give to protect your homes from the public enemies of poverty, disease and crime! The old note of

exclusion of the poor became more menacing: Give, not to protect the poor, but to protect yourselves against them!

Taxation to cover the staggering cost of expanding public relief services fell most heavily upon those least able to pay—and therefore also least able to resist. Few were so poor as not to contribute in one way or another—if not directly then in the cost of purchased goods. Those who had resources to evade taxes by financial manipulation or by influencing legislation had become an oligarchy of wealth. This ruling minority, by now quite conscious of class, was succeeding in making the middle class think with it, to a large extent, against the poorest. Who should agitate for economy in relief expenditures if not the small shopkeeper, the struggling clerk, the hard pressed professional man? Just as corporations opened their stock to small investors and thereby created a public favorable to their interest, so the same class group in its philanthropy and in its tax-paying, (or evasion of it) created in the general public a personal interest in the exclusion of the economically disadvantaged. Furthermore, through its control of press and radio by means of its advertising, the ruling minority was able to drive home day by day the idea that relief clients could, if they would, find other means of subsistence; that many were chisellers and that most were at the very least incompetents.

These ideas have borne bitter fruit in repeated attempts to exclude relief clients from a voice in their own fate, even as voters, by "pauper's oath" bills or by high poll taxes—if not by discrimination because of foreign birth or race. The ruling class in many communities has succeeded in suspending relief and thus in forcing clients to work at any wages offered them. Protests have been met with arrests, beatings, tear gas, even gun fire and murder on the part of those sworn to uphold the law—as if citizens in need were a gang of criminals or an invading foreign foe. The uncertainties of rulings in regard to eligibility and amount of relief have, in practice if not in intent, destroyed all possibility that clients might function as thinking beings with a sense of obligation toward the relief undertaking of their community. They have had to await the word of every official as if it were the voice of God, sending or withholding food.

Such conditions as these are the antithesis of democracy. They contradict the belief in the dignity and worth of every

human being which has come to be the foundation of all progressive social case work. Social case workers could make no further progress without coming to grips with the problem of their relationship to society, and without defining who was to be included in the community which they were serving. The story of case work in governmental agencies belongs to this period of struggle with forces opposing democracy in society. The "mass production industry" of public relief came on the scene in the depression years, and there, immediately, the battle with reaction was joined.

Public relief departments were created, or expanded from the old poor boards, with the idea that the depression would be temporary; and they were long hampered by that notion. Their staffs were assembled from trained case workers loaned by private agencies, from relief clients, from young college graduates and from other professional groups. The public services were starved for funds from the very beginning. There was never enough relief for a minimum standard of health and decency, and never enough staff to administer it properly. The word, *properly*, signifies here not a theoretical standard of case work but rather an irreducible minimum of regard for individual differences of personality and circumstance which must be taken into consideration if the business of distributing relief is to be done efficiently. It is waste not to know the real resources in the people themselves and not to help them to use them. It is waste to misuse human intelligence and energy. The matter of relief in kind instead of in cash has produced, for instance, enormous waste because of its inflexibility and its creation of attitudes of dependence.

In these and many other ways, public relief administration has not been able to adapt its services to needs. It has not been able to use the case method—if by that we mean a high degree of individualization of services—to say nothing of the further refinement of counseling with clients upon problems which they may bring of their own volition. As is true to a less conspicuous degree of social workers in other public services such as schools, courts and hospitals, public relief agencies have been prevented by lack of time and by meagre opportunities for

training for their staffs from giving the counseling service in case work that their clients must be assumed to want and need as much as any other group. Such as they have given has been on a basis more in accordance with the principles of modern case work than was the insistence of private agencies in the early days upon a right to inquire into anything in the client's past, present or future, if his need of relief brought him within range of their attention. Perhaps lack of time has produced the change, but in public relief agencies inquiry is at least limited to the business necessity of determining eligibility for relief, under standards which are in some fashion applied to all. Bad as any form of relief is as compared to the self-respecting status of a person insured under a sound social security law, the client is at least free in some areas of his life from the intrusion of a stranger whose entrance he is not able to forbid.

The growth of standards in the public relief field has been, as clearly as in private social case work, a growth toward democracy. It has often occurred that trained social case workers loaned by private agencies to the newly developing public departments have preferred to remain with them. Why? They have sometimes said that they found more reality in the work, or that public service, as compared with private, was more democratic. What did they mean?

First of all, society, was saying something new, in its acceptance of responsibility—even if a grudging one—for the subsistence needs of the victims of economic disaster. Society was admitting that to give or not to give to charities, as one pleased, was not enough. Exclusion from society of those whom it wanted to forget would not work. They were *in* society. They had a right to share in a collective provision for meeting the breakdown of an economic system. Clients felt the difference when they preferred public relief, even when wretchedly administered, to private aid which carried the subtle taint of exclusion. It was exclusion which they had been resisting when they made case workers of the kindest intentions feel unwanted and ultimately unsuccessful. By implication, clients of public relief agencies had a right as citizens not only to receive but to give—to support and have a voice in planning public services.

Counter movement for democracy among the unemployed, public and private agency employes and labor.

Gradually, among clients who had been herded about at relief stations like animals, there developed enough leadership for organization of protest. They began to assert their rights as men in associations of their own choosing which were in time welded into the nation-wide Workers Alliance of America. Many of the social workers in public departments failed to catch the significance of this movement and saw in it only ill-natured disruption of a public service for which clients ought to be grateful and which was hampered enough at best. Others, who had been more conscious of the tragic meaning of the apathetic resignation which their clients often showed, found it difficult, nevertheless, to have the insight to be glad and the courage to say so when clients were troublesome in demanding their right, as citizens, to have bread to eat and an opportunity to work.

Meanwhile, some social workers who thought and felt deeply about these things got together in discussion groups to consider their own relation to the rapid changes through which they were passing. For what were they being used? And by whom? Was the meagre provision for relief to be seen, in the long perspective of history, as just enough to keep alive without giving life—in reality as a preventive of really fundamental solutions? They found their immediate answer in their belief in democracy—and more of it. Whatever solution for the breakdown of the economic system would ultimately be found, the people themselves must seek it and make it effective by living it out. Theories could only evolve through constant testing in the crucible of experience. The unemployed were doing that testing every day, and so were the relief workers who entered their homes and knew their needs. The "rank and file" movement in social work, embracing workers in both public and private social agencies, had a message to give all the way through the hierarchies of officials and boards and philanthropic endowments to the Ultimate Arbitrator, the inclusive community of the whole American people. They said that no one whose protected position kept him from knowing (as they and their clients knew) the bitter dregs of the cup of poverty would ever stop them from speaking the truth.

The courage and determination of the early members of rank and file organizations in social work were tested as by fire. They were spied upon in the authentic tradition of mass production industries; they were dismissed, often on trumped up charges, when they became active in organizing protests. Some were crude in their methods; perhaps a few were insincere; but most were tremendously in earnest and the movement gathered strength because the strength of democracy and fair play was behind it. The rank and file organizations became affiliated with a revitalized labor movement in which the demand for democracy was stirring as never before.

Organized social workers were accused of self-seeking unworthy of a profession because they demanded decent working conditions for themselves. Often housed in old unsanitary factory buildings, they worked long hours for low pay in an atmosphere of constant insecurity which could not but destroy morale. They protested because they really believed in a democracy which would protect *all* workers from such conditions—and why not themselves among the rest? They saw a community of interest between themselves and every worker, employed or unemployed, no matter what type of work he might be able to contribute to the common weal. For this reason their unions drew no lines between profession or craft and unskilled labor. They were associations of all employes in a given enterprise, because all were human beings in need of protection for the same fundamental needs. There was really no clear line of demarcation between the importance of good service to clients and a worker's health, between adequate staff and time to do case work, between opportunities for training and case work skills. They fought for all of them, and found the voice of organized labor, where it was free to express itself democratically, in complete accord with all these aims.

The case workers in private social agencies have found themselves in considerable conflict during this period of struggle for democracy. In the first place, their tradition, as we have seen, has been to think with the exclusive community of the givers to philanthropic undertakings. As a counter force, the new scientific orientation of case work has made necessary an appreciation of the dignity and worth of the individual client; but the implications of this for democracy in society has been real-

ized only slowly. There still lingers today a hope that the paternal hand of benevolence will support a skilled case work service which does not grow out of the democratically expressed needs of the people who use it. There is a persisting reliance upon better "interpretation" to convince a community, all too narrowly conceived, that it is for its interest to support this form of benevolence. Increasingly, however, as Community Fund drives become harder to "put over," there is a suspicion that the community appealed to for support must be more inclusive, that the mass of people who now contribute must be consulted, that private community services can not remain the plaything of the rich, but must, in fairness to all, be underwritten and administered by bodies truly representative of the whole community.

If the idea that clients of private social agencies should participate in their management has a high shock-potential when it appears, even in private conversation, social case workers have nevertheless begun to wonder out loud whether they themselves should not participate more. After all, they, like workers in public agencies, know conditions which clients experience better than do those in more remote and protected positions. The trained professional workers have begun to wonder why, if they are professional enough to be entrusted with responsibilities which affect the lives of many people, they should not also be held to be capable of some responsibility for their own conditions of work. It has been hard to say this in small agencies where a kindly board and a parental executive have been generous in giving privileges, while chary of admitting rights. It has been impossible to plead for democracy in private agencies where petty tyranny exists underneath the picture of a happy family—impossible, that is, when workers have been scattered and protest has meant individual ruin. Organization of employes in private social agencies came first in a few large city federations where the size of the constituent units and the remoteness of the financing and policy-making bodies most isolated the individual case worker. Experience here paralleled that of the public agencies except that in the latter "mass production" made more obvious the necessity for some organized channel of communication between the workers and the sources of administrative and financial power.

In addition to their confusion because of traditional allegiances to the well-to-do and because of an often happy relationship to the boards and executives of small agencies, social case workers in the private field have been under real anxiety regarding professional standards. The beginnings of a body of knowledge have been only recently laid down, and these case workers have been through considerable hardship to secure a professional education. They have found their standards of practice, and themselves as workers, threatened by a mass of new recruits to social work, for the most part untrained—or rather engaged in getting in unconventional ways a new kind of training for unstandardized work. Private agency workers have reacted to the threat to their security by emphasizing every difference between them and workers in public agencies. They have said that time and trained skill are necessary to do case work (as who can doubt?), and that therefore public agency workers who have neither can not be doing it. Yet the exact essentials of case work have been disturbingly hard to define. A fairly large number of well-trained supervisors in public agencies have found their jobs professionally challenging and have maintained that it is quite possible to practice the kind of personal relationship to clients which has only recently been characteristic of the best private agencies,—respect for the dignity and worth of individuals, consideration for their differences, willingness to adapt, as far as possible, to their needs. Public agency employes have been eager to learn case work, even in scattered courses and in the “tired leavings” of time which they could command. When knowledge is at best only an illumined spot in a vast ignorance, how can one say that a person has or has not the sacred just-enough which makes what he does case work? Where can one draw the line between case work done in leisurely interviewing and the same quality of human understanding which may appear when a client asks a troubled question in a brief contact? How may anyone, whatever his job situation or opportunity for training, obtain more of this quality? These questions have not been satisfactorily answered. The facts are that, in spite of adverse conditions within a public service struggling for a bare existence, the pioneers in the administration of mass relief have hammered out some real standards adapted to the conditions which they faced. The problems encountered have been utterly new—in magnitude if not in

kind. The experience gained in meeting them has produced a body of knowledge not elsewhere available. This is quite comparable to what was known about social case work in private agencies in 1916.

Concern about professional standards will eventually have to come to grips with the problem of making case work available to the clients of public relief agencies—or anyone else who wants and needs it. Case workers in the private field have been a bit like the psychiatric workers of ten years ago who were content to leave coercive methods to those who knew no better provided that they themselves could demonstrate on a few cases what beautiful case work was like. The logic of professional case work points irresistibly to its being a service so valuable as to be necessary for the well being of a modern community (in which case it should be greatly extended) or to its being a “frill”, the hobby of a few supporters who may decide to dispense with it when the next depression occurs. It has been easy to feel more democratic as private agencies have widened their clientele to middle class groups with whom there was no temptation to be patronizing or authoritative. Actually it may be that private social work is only becoming more exclusive, while its own fate hangs upon what communities decide to do about their public service. It is beginning to seem more important to emphasize the problems which are common to workers in both public and private agencies than to dwell upon their differences.

In reality the threat of the forces opposing democracy hangs over the field of private social work—a threat of control if not of financial obliteration. The Community Fund movement has by and large been under the leadership of the oligarchy of wealth. Increasingly, the professional group finds its standards challenged by organized business interests. The following are only a few instances: The objection to giving relief to strikers is a common issue. There is sometimes a demand for dismissal of a case worker who has been too active in investigating cases of industrial disease. Manufacturing plants ask for names of clients who are their employes in order that they may check up on what “welfare work” they are getting done in return for their contribution to the Fund. Sometime there is approval only for those subjects for research studies which do not con-

cern themselves too much with wage rates and working conditions. These are interferences with practice which the ethics of no established profession would tolerate. Social case workers are increasingly being forced to choose between practicing their profession ethically (that is, refusing to use their clients for the interests of any other group) or becoming slavishly obedient to powerful forces which must in the end destroy every vestige of professional integrity.

If private agency workers take the attitude that nothing can be done about these conditions, it is because they have not realized the power of organization which the forces opposing democracy know only too well. To resist alone is professional suicide. To resist in a strong protective organization inclusive of all who are employed in a given social service and allied with thousands of others in organized labor and professional workers' unions, is to have real effectiveness in the fight for democracy in the whole community. It is to belong to the whole community in a new and real sense.

This has been startlingly demonstrated recently when, following the laying off of thousands of workers in the mass production industries, the Workers Alliance and the progressive forces in the labor movement united to force communities to provide better standards of relief and more jobs. Social workers in search of support can see here a public which they have heretofore all too frequently ignored. Does this foreshadow a new employer—the people in any walk of life who value services because they use them—the great American society in an inclusive sense? For even the middle class (perennially confused in its allegiances though it is) finds itself seeing something besides taxes and hearing an undertone of its own real interests beneath the high sounding promises of well-paid demagogues. When unions and organizations of consumers take an active interest in working for better housing, decently administered public services, fairer taxation and reasonable prices, even middle class groups can see the emergence of a new community spirit. The prevailing cynicism about corruption in politics dissolves into purposive action once it is realized how thoroughly graft is connected with economic inequality, and how unnecessary it is to tolerate it once a democratic people stirs itself to deal with the source.

A sick society: Can it be understood?

In all this turmoil it is necessary to realize that we are dealing with a sick society—sick with economic prostration. We have seen how fundamental to progress in social case work has been the application of the beginnings of a science of personality. Is there no such science of society which can give some direction to the struggle for democracy, in which it seems that social case workers are destined to bear some part? Many will say that in this situation—so complex and so different from any known in the world's history before—there is no help from science, but only confusion. Were we to seek some guiding knowledge, we should expect to use the scientific method of gathering and compiling data, to test theory constantly by practice, to analyze phenomena as they actually occur, not as they may be speculated about. Startlingly, the writings of Sigmund Freud are paralleled by those of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in these respects. In another area—that of the economic behavior of societies instead of the biological and psychological phenomena of the lives of individuals—these writings apply in similar fashion an understanding of how opposing forces balance each other, of how something new emerges out of conflict, of how the new grows in the womb of the old, of how nothing dies (be it an emotion or an economic system) unless it has expressed itself and is no longer of any use. There is enough here to challenge to study, and study of first-hand sources, not interpretations by others. Case work has found roots in the scientific study of individual behavior. It needs more roots, wherever it can put them down, in the study of the ways in which societies behave.

The fate of social case work hangs upon the fate of democracy. These are dark days, yet we know that the human race has an immense capacity for survival, and that it learns slowly, but very surely, by experience. In its thinking and feeling it can not be coerced, nor can it, forever, in its actions. In the end human nature will follow its own deepest needs.

What of the future?

Social case workers have learned to respect the nature of man, to learn from it and to follow it. They know that they may supplement—but never replace—the interplay of other

forces within and without the person. They are looking up from their preoccupation with individuals to see what is happening to them, and to all of us, in society. They are beginning to see that we must build a good society on the same principles as those of good case work—mutual respect and cooperation. In such a society will there need to be any social case work? The question is immaterial if we remember that the citizens of that future society will decide. If they want it—a skilled professional service to supplement what friends can do for each other—they will undoubtedly provide for it.

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Jobs: Democracy's Challenge

Edited by

Karl A. Lundberg

Against a background of articles written for SOCIAL WORK TODAY by Rev. Leo A. Geary, David Lasser, Eduard C. Lindeman, Harry L. Lurie, Wayne McMillen, Irving Richter, and U. S. Rep. Jerry Voorhis, Mr. Lundberg has formulated a clear statement of professional and social conviction about the federal program of work for the unemployed.

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