

Absence of Judgment

What social workers believe about the poor will hamper welfare reform.

By James L. Payne

In this season of welfare reform, it's worth taking a close look at the professionals in the middle of it, the trained social workers. Just about everyone outside the welfare system is hoping for an end to dependency-causing giveaways, and for their replacement by programs that expect something of recipients in return for their benefits. But will the social workers who administer and implement the new policies deliver?

They are in a position to undermine welfare reform in a number of ways. For one thing, they can fail to be inspiring mentors to those welfare recipients who need to be motivated and guided. Instead of urging them to take responsibility for their lives and get to work, they can encourage whining and blaming others. Instead of chiding them for bad habits and urging constructive change, they can excuse their dysfunctional lifestyles.

Another way social workers can undermine reform is by overusing exemptions to new requirements. The welfare-reform legislation is laden with "escape clauses" that permit case workers to exempt clients from one or another requirement on the grounds of hardship, family needs, and so on. By applying these exemptions generously, case workers can defeat the aim of the legislation.

Finally, social workers can spearhead political campaigns to overturn welfare requirements.

Journalists generally rely on social workers and program administrators to arrange interviews with clients and to provide information on how the program is working. If social workers oppose reform, they can focus attention on hardship cases, forcing politicians to repeal or amend it to avoid looking "heartless." For all these reasons, the future of welfare reform depends not just on what the legislation says, but on what social workers believe.

There are some 600,000 social workers in this country, filling a wide variety of social-service roles, from eligibility clerk in government programs to career counselors in high schools. At the center of this profession are the schools of social work whose faculty prepare students for work in government social-service agencies. They award 11,000 baccalaureate and 13,000 master's degrees in social work yearly.

This policy-oriented core of the profession includes a number of influential lobbying organizations. The main groups are the American Public Welfare Association (APWA), which affiliates over 800 state and local welfare agencies, including all the state departments of human services, and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), with a membership of 155,000 social workers. As a measure of their political activism, one poll of NASW members found that 64 percent contributed money to political campaigns in 1984, and 33 percent reported lobbying for legislation. Prominent policymakers with a social-work background (an M.S.W. degree) include Senator Barbara Mikulski of Maryland and Congressmen Ron Dellums of California and Edolphus Towns of New York, all Democrats.

Mocking Their Past

It comes as no surprise that members of this occupational sector lean strongly to the left. The NASW regularly backs Democratic candidates; in 1996, its delegate assembly endorsed Clinton-Gore over the GOP ticket by a vote of 168 to 6. Even more significant than their political bias, however, is their professional bias. Today's social workers hold views about poverty—what causes it

and what they should do about it—that refute the spirit of welfare reform.

The social-work profession grew out of the assistance activities of 19th-century charitable organizations. As Marvin Olasky, David Green, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and others have pointed out, private, voluntary groups proliferated during that time, successfully ministering to the needs of the poor. Leading these organizations were dozens of reformers who articulated an empirically based approach to assisting the poor. These “charity theorists” included Mary Richmond, Josephine Shaw Lowell, S. Humphreys Gurteen, Annie Fields, and Edward Devine in the United States, and Octavia Hill, Helen Bosanquet, Thomas Mackay, and Arthur Paterson in Great Britain. From their extensive personal experience with the poor, these early social workers reached a clear consensus on the principles of helping the poor.

The beliefs of modern social workers are practically the opposite of the principles of social assistance developed by the founders of the profession. Instead of building on its past, modern social work mocks it.

To Give or Not To Give

The 19th-century charity theorists advocated a highly personalized approach to working with the needy. They emphasized the capacity of poor individuals to respond to life’s demands, and believed in pushing them to achieve independence and a better life. The social worker was first and foremost a mentor and advisor, one who guided individuals to improve themselves and make better choices.

One point on which they all agreed was that giveaways of material assistance—cash, food, housing, clothing—are generally harmful to the poor. Of course they saw that the poor had need of these things, but they also saw that it was vital that the poor fill these needs for themselves. Well-meaning reformers who stepped in with some form of dole undermined their self-esteem and impaired their capacity to thrive independently. “My friends,” said Octavia Hill in an 1876 speech, “I have lived face to face with the poor for now some years, and I have not learned to think gifts of necessities, such as a man usually provides for his own family, helpful to them. I have abstained from such, and expect those who love the poor and know them individually will do so more and more in the time to come.”

With the rise of massive government welfare programs, social workers abandoned this view. One of the first principles to be jettisoned was the idea that neediness could play a positive, motivating role. For the modern social worker, any kind of suffering or being in need is wrong.

“Human suffering is undesirable and should be prevented, or at least alleviated, whenever possible,” declares Herbert Bisno in *The Philosophy of Social Work* (Public Affairs Press, 1952). This declaration misses the complexity of human motivation. Extreme forms of suffering are indeed incapacitating and therefore harmful. But intermediate levels of deprivation—or the anticipation of such—motivate constructive choices, from getting up in the morning to go to work, to avoiding bad habits like gambling, alcohol abuse, and overeating.

Armed with the idea that neediness is always wrong, social work then derived the notion that



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filling someone else’s needs is always right. Although social work still aims to enable people to cope with the world, uplift has taken second place to the idea of filling material needs. The NASW’s “Definition of Social Work” (approvingly repeated in the introductory text *Social Work*, published by Allyn and Bacon in 1995), asserts that the first “end” of social-work practice is “helping people obtain tangible services”; it puts “counseling and psychotherapy” second.

Another introductory text announces the giveaway mission in its title: *Social Welfare: A Response to Human Need* (Allyn and Bacon, 1994). Like so many of the textbooks, it downplays the idea that the poor should be expected to work for a living. Indeed, "work" is never mentioned as a solution to poverty. The book labels the belief "that each person should be responsible for meeting his or her own needs" as "rugged individualism" and dismisses it: "This situation is neither possible in contemporary society nor desirable in terms of optimal human growth and development."

In contrast to 19th-century writings, modern social-work texts never point to a situation when the social worker should not give material aid to a needy person. In the indexes to these volumes, there are no entries under "dependency" or "incentives" or "motivation." In *The Encyclopedia of Social Work*, published by the NASW, the entry for "Income Maintenance System" considers the idea that "income maintenance assistance robs recipients of their incentive to work" an unfounded "suspicion."

Privately, social workers will mention cases where welfare encourages idleness and other dysfunctional behavior like having babies one cannot support. But in official pronouncements, social-work leaders avoid or dismiss the notion that benefit programs might be drawing vulnerable individuals into dependency and even ruin.

No Judge of Lifestyles

The 19th-century charity workers expressed strong convictions about what behavior would help people rise from poverty. They had clear opinions on the obvious vices—drunkenness, gambling, extramarital sex, idleness, and so forth—as well as on many ordinary choices. For example, Octavia Hill believed it was unhealthy for families to live all in one room—as most of them wished to do in order to save the cost of

This emphasis on values has all but disappeared from modern social work. The orientation today is on not swaying welfare recipients in their choices. One value of social work, says John Brown's *Handbook of Social Work Practice* (Charles C. Thomas, 1992), is a "nonjudgmental attitude," which means that "social workers should not judge clients' behavior by imposing a moral value on it." The introductory text *The Practice of Social Work* (Dorsey Press, 1985) criticizes "the layperson's views that a social worker seeks to 'remold' clients into a pattern chosen by the worker." The professional view is that clients "should be permitted to determine their own lifestyles as far as possible."

"Social work assumes the inherent worth and importance of the individual," says the *Introduction to Social Work* (Prentice Hall, 1991). From this seemingly unobjectionable premise, the authors reach a startlingly indulgent conclusion: "The person's worth is validated equally by his or her decision to achieve potential or to permit it to lie unused, by a decision to achieve or merely vegetate."

The notion that social workers must be neutral paralyzes them as advisors or mentors. Of course, in any advising situation a dogmatic style is generally counterproductive, and no one piece of advice fits everyone. The 19th-century workers, with their personal, individualized approach, knew this well. They stressed the importance of tact and patience in projecting healthy values. But they were in no doubt about the need to project these values. Today's social workers have genuinely internalized a value-free approach. This leads them to be complacent about programs that validate and reinforce destructive lifestyles, such as income support for unwed mothers or for alcoholics and drug addicts.

Never Their Fault

The 19th-century charity theorists knew that there were many environmental causes of poverty. They were fully aware of the unhealthy living conditions of the poor, and the dreadful lack of opportunities they faced. To remedy such environmental problems, they advocated public policies that addressed them, such as sanitary improvements and the development of parks and gardens. But they also knew that many poor people were held back by their own shortcomings: by vices, by family breakup, by unhealthy habits and shortsighted choices. In their policies of individual social assistance, therefore, they endeavored to improve character.

In 1875, after a decade of serving as a befriending manager of low-income housing units, Octavia Hill pointed to the importance of personal behavior. "The people's homes are bad,

Says one textbook: "The person's worth is validated equally by his or her decision to achieve potential or to permit it to lie unused, by a decision to achieve or merely vegetate."

renting a second room. As a volunteer housing manager, she used her powers of gentle persuasion to get tenants to pay extra and take two rooms. (After the move was made, she reported, tenants themselves would typically admit it was a wise use of their money.)

partly because they are badly built and arranged; they are tenfold worse because the tenants' habits and lives are what they are. Transplant them tomorrow to healthy and commodious homes, and they would pollute and destroy them. There needs, and will need for some time, a reformatory work which will demand that loving zeal of individuals which cannot be had for money, and cannot be legislated for by Parliament."

Most modern social workers have abandoned this balanced, logical view. The textbooks smugly criticize 19th-century charity workers for their "judgmental attitudes toward the poor." They find it lamentable that social workers in those benighted days "held to the notion that individual failure was the reason for poverty." The modern view is that the needy cannot be held responsible for their problems. Indeed, anyone who suggests otherwise is engaging in the cardinal no-no of "blaming the victim."

An environmental explanation of poverty underlies social workers' policy recommendations. Whatever the problem, it's not up to the needy person to reform or strive; "society" has to give more. In a 1990 editorial on homelessness in *Social Work*, the magazine of the NASW, editor-in-chief Ann Hartman criticized programs that aimed to treat drug addiction and alcoholism because "they define homelessness in terms of private troubles"—an unacceptable approach. "Homelessness is a result of the steady disappearance and unavailability of low-cost housing," she declared. "We must be clear that homelessness cannot be reduced appreciably by treating individual troubles."

In expounding such positions, social-work professionals often exhibit a weak grasp of economics. In *Social Welfare: A Response to Human Need*, we find this tautological explanation: "The distribution of income, the way that income is distributed, is what causes poverty." Social-work professor Mark Robert Rank of Washington University likens the economy to a game of musical chairs with a fixed number of opportunities: "This musical chairs analogy can be applied to what has been taking place in this country economically and socially. Some people will lose in the game, given that there is unemployment and a lack of jobs." This static, zero-sum conception of economic life ignores the fact that people continually create new jobs for themselves and for others—if we don't undermine their motivation to do so.

The determinism of modern social work is also devastating to the poor. If you want someone to improve, to make an effort to overcome a problem, he has to feel that he is capable of influencing his fate. In the game of life, just as in sports, it is not useful to dwell on the past and to

blame others. What would we think of a coach who told his team that the reason they lost was the rainy weather and the bad calls of the referee? Even if this were mainly the truth, it would be unhealthy to dwell upon it. A coach who followed this approach would find that his team loses even when the weather is fine and the referees are fair.

Welfare Reform: Bigger Is Better

Social workers today may occasionally pay lip service to welfare reform, but only if it leads to greater spending. In its 1994 policy recommendations, the NASW declared that block grants to the states must never mean cutting benefits: "States should be allowed to diverge from the national base only if they scale benefits upward from it." It fought experiments that demand something from recipients, such as a compulsory work requirement for the recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

Social workers of the 19th century emphasized the capacity of poor individuals to respond to life's demands and achieve an independent life.

In its 1990 recommendations for "Improving the Food Stamp Program," the APWA urged 15 substantive program changes, every one of which had the effect of increasing benefits or the number of beneficiaries. In the latest round of proposed welfare reforms, it has fought virtually all efforts to restrict welfare. It opposes family caps and lifetime limits on benefits; it opposes any effort to end benefits to single individuals, noncitizens, unwed teen mothers, and drug and alcohol abusers. It even opposes denying benefits when these benefits are already duplicated by other welfare programs.

In a potentially promising shift, the APWA has accepted the idea that some kind of work obligation is appropriate for certain welfare recipients. But in practice, this principle is undermined by the profession's more deeply held conviction that welfare recipients are fragile and incapable, and must be shielded from any possible suffering. Even if a client refuses to participate in an employment plan without good cause, the APWA recommends cutting benefits by only 25 percent.

Furthermore, when the APWA agrees that welfare recipients should be expected to work, it does not mean that they should go to work tomorrow. The APWA approves of a work requirement only if government programs first supply a vast array of additional services to help

recipients find and hold a job. For the APWA, welfare reform means a larger, not smaller, government welfare industry. "We know," said a 1987 APWA report urging "real reform," "the investments we propose will cost more money—more money than the federal and state governments currently invest in low-income families with children."

A spokeswoman for Delaware's "First Step" program gives an idea of the support that welfare administrators feel is necessary to implement the welfare-to-work concept. In this program—which enrolls less than 5 percent of Delaware's AFDC recipients—the agency offers a broad smorgasbord of additional benefits to cajole recipients into taking care of themselves: "basic academic and life skills development," "career counseling," "child care," "transportation," "remedial medical such as eyeglasses or eye exams, physical exams, dental work," even "clothing." "If we don't have these supportive services," says the Delaware official, "then the participant cannot succeed." "Cannot" is a strong word when you consider that tens of millions of working poor get and hold jobs without any of these services.

A Psychology of Coddling

The welfare industry's premise that recipients must be coddled makes observers skeptical about the latest round of welfare-to-work programs. Remember, these programs were first introduced in 1962, and renewed in legislation passed in 1967, 1971, 1981, and 1988. After 35 years, they're still not successful. A 1994 GAO study of the JOBS program—the current incarnation of welfare-to-work proposals—found that only 11 percent of AFDC recipients were even signed up for the program, and the overwhelming majority of these were not in actual on-the-job training, but cycling through support programs such as counseling, job-search preparation, higher education, eye exams, and so on.

Some officials in the welfare industry dispute this critical view. One who argues that social workers have now adopted "a surprisingly different approach" is Sid Johnson, the executive director of the American Public Welfare Association. "The dramatic change in 1988" with the Family Assistance Act, he says, "was that a system that for 50 years had been, by public policy, aimed at providing income maintenance made a major shift toward the promotion of self-sufficiency."

But can 50 years of training and ideology be overcome so readily? In most parts of the country, social workers are still wedded to a philosophy of nonjudgmental giveaways. In Michigan, social workers have largely undermined the state's policy of requiring unwed teen mothers to live with responsible adults simply by exempting

the teens in question. In Ingham County, 74 of the 85 indigent mothers under age 18 were allowed to keep their welfare checks and their independent lifestyle because social workers decided that adult supervision would jeopardize their "emotional and physical well-being."

In those few places where welfare reform has succeeded, social workers are noticeably absent. In California, all 58 counties are supposed to be pushing welfare recipients into work under the GAIN program begun in 1988, but only one, Riverside, has a well-documented record of success. I asked John Rodgers, assistant to the program's director, what proportion of Riverside's caseworkers are trained social workers. "That's basically a nonexistent classification, in GAIN," he replied. "There are some counties in California that . . . took social workers in their existing organization and moved them over into GAIN. We did not do that at all. We had an open recruitment, and in fact strongly encouraged people from the community who had never worked in a social-services agency to apply for the jobs. We were looking for people that had a variety of skills, but specifically people that had experience in the employment sector, of helping people go to work."

Another sign that social workers aren't behind meaningful welfare reform is the lobbying of the NASW. The organization strenuously opposes the welfare reform passed by Congress and

Social-work textbooks teach "nonjudgmental attitudes." They say "social workers should not judge clients' behavior."

signed by President Clinton last August. The NASW has vowed to undertake a "state-by-state monitoring of the welfare reform bill's impact on poor women and children." This is another way of saying that social workers are preparing to provide the media a diet of hardship cases attributable to the reform.

Modern social workers may mean well, but they have absorbed a deficient approach to social assistance policy. They will need a big push from citizens and policymakers to recapture the 19th-century focus on personal improvement and self-sufficiency.

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The Freshmen's *First Principles*

By George Radanovich

Writers have so confounded society with government as to leave little or no distinction between them."

So wrote Thomas Paine in "Common Sense" in 1776. He could be writing today about those who look to government to solve all of America's problems.

The House GOP freshmen reject this view. We know that government is only a part of society. Society is not a part of government. Government serves as only a portion of the entire society, and is not the entire society.

Think of society as a chair. The legs of the chair represent four different and separate institutions. Government is just one leg; the others are families and the institutions that support them, religious and civic institutions, and business.

A stable chair frees you to sit, relax, eat, whatever you want to do, without worrying about falling on the floor. Similarly, the four institutions of society contribute equally to its stability. A child born into a society where all four institutions are healthy has the greatest opportunity for success in life. Consider the child's relationship to these four institutions: When family institutions are healthy, a child is more likely to learn respect for his parents. When government institutions are healthy, a child is more likely to obey the law. In healthy businesses, a child is more likely to learn the work ethic. In healthy religious institutions, a child is more likely to maintain a clear conscience before his or her God. With healthy and equal institutions, we can provide to every individual the freedom and security to pursue the promised opportunity for life, liberty, and happiness.

During the past 100 years, America's government has become disproportionately large in relation to the country's other institutions. The re-

Congressional conservatives remind America what their election was all about.

sult has been a burdensome governmental structure involved in virtually every aspect of our lives. The fundamental principles of the New Deal and Great Society programs—the solving of social ills with governmental programs—has resulted in a chair so unstable that a single finger can tip it over. Of all the money spent by government, 70 percent is controlled at the federal level, while 30 percent is controlled at the state and local levels. The 537 elected officials in Washington have substituted their "wisdom" for the wisdom of the thousands of local elected officials in our communities. The growth of the governmental leg has drawn too much away from the other core institutions, reducing their effectiveness and creating instability in America.

Blueprint To Renew Society

In order to provide greater freedom and security, the 74 members of the Republican Freshman Class stand for structural reform in America.

We believe that government is too big in relation to other institutions in America. We believe that reducing government should not, and cannot, occur without renewal of family, religious/ civic, and business institutions in American society.

A balanced budget that privatizes, localizes, and eliminates federal government activities is the blueprint to renew society. To renew society, however, the conscience of the American people must be raised, increasing personal responsibility and hence the effectiveness of all of our institutions.

Our vision is one in which family, religious/civic, business, and government institutions contribute equally to the foundation of a New America.