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SOCIAL WORK AND THE NEW *SOCIAL SERVICE PROFESSIONS* IN SOUTH AFRICA

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This paper examines the effects of the adoption of a social development paradigm on human resource planning within the welfare sector, focusing particularly on the consequences for social work and the rise of the *social service professions*. Social work, both in South Africa and in the Western world, evolved out of a political process which gave it legitimate sanction to offer social welfare services. In fact, in South Africa, the development of social work as a profession was intimately tied to the development of government social welfare provision. Thus, for forty years social work enjoyed government support and played a dominant role in the provision of organised welfare services, both government and private. Within the apartheid welfare system, private or voluntary welfare organisations were subsidised by government as recognised partners in welfare provision. In keeping with apartheid policy, their focus was mainly, though not exclusively, on white urban populations. Through the struggle years of the 1980s non-governmental organisations, outside the established welfare sector, gained prominence. Foreign funding to support the struggle against apartheid and to address the needs of the neglected majority, increasingly became channelled through this anti-establishment sector.

With the advent of the first democratic government in South Africa in 1994 the non-government sector was bound to exert a great deal of influence on future policies and practices within the welfare and development arenas. The African National Congress (ANC 1994) formulated its policy in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which laid the foundations for reconstruction and development in South Africa. RDP policy provided a blueprint for social development, which like most social development frameworks, was practically unworkable and pie-in-the-sky (Gray 1998b; Midgley 1997). The RDP soon gave way to Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) as the dominant economic paradigm. However, its principles remained highly influential in the formation of policy within specific sectors, especially within welfare (McKendrick 1998a).

Crucial to this examination of the effects of the social development paradigm on human resource planning within welfare is my view of the process leading up to the formation of the Council for Social Service Professions. It provides a backdrop to the discussion which follows. While realising that others might take a different view, my interpretation of recent events is offered in the spirit of healthy academic debate and, hopefully, it will be seen in that light. There is much that needs open discussion and debate if we are to progress successfully along the path which has been mapped out for us.

Key events leading up to the formation of the Council for Social Service Professions

Several changes embarked upon by the government's Department of Welfare had far-reaching consequences for the social work profession, among them the transformation or democratisation of the social services, the denigration of social work, the emphasis on social development rather than social work, and the advent of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Youth at Risk. The full impact of these events on social work has yet to be realised.

THE TRANSFORMATION OR DEMOCRATISATION OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES

Previously excluded or marginalised groups were waiting in the wings as the transformation or democratisation of the social services progressed. Since the social work profession was tied to the apartheid administration, it was bound to be vulnerable and open to attack as a reflection of all that was wrong with the previous system. It must also not be forgotten that in the Government of National Unity welfare initially remained a Nationalist Party portfolio. Thus some saw the profession as elitist, especially since its professional and regulatory structures were predominantly white. Its services, said to be largely casework oriented, were a luxury, given the vast sea of unmet need (Louw 1998; McKendrick 1990; White Paper for Social Welfare 1997).

THE DENIGRATION OF SOCIAL WORK

As new policy-making processes took hold, so social work came under more and more criticism, being sidelined and maligned at every step of the way. Of course there were those who bought into their denigration and agreed that social work was not relevant, given its Western theories and casework approaches. Maybe they were genuinely concerned about these things or maybe they saw political avenues open before them. They were smart enough to see opportunities in being part of work groups for the transformation of social work and for the inclusion of other service providers. Beginning at the end, where eventually the transformed Council for Social Work became the Council for Social Service Professions, with the majority of its members nominated by the government through its Minister of Welfare, one can, and indeed should, marvel at the political astuteness of those who spotted the gaps as they opened before them.

THE EMPHASIS ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT RATHER THAN SOCIAL WORK

There followed a powerful political force which preached that what South African welfare needed was not social work but social development. So the first Director-General of Welfare, Dr Leila Patel, who was appointed in 1994, hired Dr Jim Midgley, an internationally recognised expert on social development, to guide the process of transformation to a developmental welfare paradigm. Midgley had written numerous books and articles on social development and was ideally placed to assist the government in this transition. However, this was not to be as the D-G resigned over a disagreement with the Minister and other power groups subsequently achieved dominance.

THE ADVENT OF THE INTER-MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE FOR YOUTH AT RISK

Crucial in this process was the advent of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Youth at Risk which was headed by the then Director of the National Association of Child and Youth Care in South Africa, Leslie du Toit. She hired Dr Jim Anglin, from the University of Victoria in Canada, where she had done her masters degree, to advise the IMC on the transformation of child and youth care in South Africa. This then is what the IMC did. It transformed child and youth care, but not child welfare. It overlooked social work's part in the broader field of child welfare. It criticised social workers for not moving children out of institutions, for not doing probation properly, and for caring for children only one hour a day, while child and youth care workers spent 23 hours of the day with them. Elsewhere I have critiqued this process (Gray & Sewpaul 1998) and attempted to better understand it (Gray & Gannon 1998), but the fact remains that this was politics and the child care movement, through the process, won government support at the expense of social work.

The consequences for social work

The adoption of social development as the dominant paradigm in South Africa had far-reaching consequences for social work. It led to the marginalisation of social workers in South Africa, a withdrawal of government support for social work, an undermining of the social work

profession, and a questioning of social work's relevance. To understand the reasons for the marginalisation of social workers in South Africa, the government's response to welfare since the first democratic election in 1994 and the political process affecting the standing of the social work profession in South Africa needs to be examined and understood (Gray 1999).

The withdrawal of much government support for social work led to the elevation of allied occupational groups, such as child and youth care and community development workers, to professional status. In reality, with the exception of child and youth care, none of these groups had any national professional organisation to speak of. If one were to apply Greenwood's (1957) criteria of professionalism, only social work would qualify for professional status. Nevertheless, the result was a Council for Social Service Professions with space for the entry of new professions and a diminished social work influence (only six elected social work members on a committee of 19 members, with 13 nominated by the Minister of Welfare). This was, indeed, a drastic transformation of what was once the Council for Social Work.

To justify this course of events, and indeed to make it politically possible, social work had to be disempowered, its divisions capitalised on, supporters from within its ranks had to be found, and what better way to begin the process but to criticise its relevance and to make social workers feel ill-prepared for social development? Thus criticisms of social work and statements that it was no longer relevant to the changing socio-economic and political context came from all directions: from within the profession and from non-social work sectors, including emerging occupational groups waiting to establish their own legitimacy. Further, the increasing number of non-social workers occupying leadership positions within the welfare Ministry accelerated the challenge to social work. Organisational transformation and policy-making processes within the government welfare sector included broad-based consultations in which social work's knowledge, value and skill were repeatedly overlooked and draft policy documents made ongoing claims about social work's shortcomings. The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997:3) claimed that *while some social workers have received training and practice in community development, the approach to service delivery is largely rehabilitative, it relies on institutional care and is not preventative and developmental. Welfare services are not accessible and responsive to the needs of all people.*

Social work's relevance was questioned because *by its very nature social work practice has been largely reactive, recognising already existing problems and designing specific (reactive) programmes to solve them* (Ntusi 1998:385). Likewise, McKendrick (1998b:i) described social work practice as having often been *overwhelmingly therapeutic, remedial, restorative, and unresponsive to the needs of the very poor*. Rankin (1997:189) related this to the Western nature of social work education and the over-use of American textbooks at South African universities. His views were reiterated by Mupediswa (1997).

In a nutshell, social work was said to be irrelevant because its theory was based on Western models, it was too casework oriented and not geared sufficiently towards development. Thus Louw (1998:139) saw great value in *a fundamental shift from individual casework to developmental social welfare* and to the fact that *social welfare in South Africa may indeed experience its own greatest liberation from oppressive casework domination to achieving balanced intersectoral development* (p. 141).

Such criticisms seem to have been made without any formal research to substantiate their validity. Efforts within the voluntary welfare and non-government sectors to transform organisations and to introduce developmental welfare programmes received scant attention and even less financial support. Likewise changes within some university departments of social work which were teaching development were overlooked. Finally, the growth of South African social work literature was largely ignored.

This then is the background to the focus of this paper on human resource planning within the welfare sector, particularly its consequences for social work and the rise of the *social service professions*. I will begin by examining the difference between occupations and professions and historical analyses of what constitutes legitimate professional status. I will then turn my attention to the future. Given the path on which we are now set, I will look at the positive consequences for social work and the way in which the boundaries of the *social services professions* are being re-defined. I will end with my thoughts on what I believe needs to be done to ensure that the future of social work is secured.

Occupations and professions

There are two ways in which to view social work's (or any other occupation's) professional development in society (Gray 1993; Bernstein & Gray 1996). One is the *criteria approach* first proposed by Flexner (1915) and subsequently developed by Greenwood (1957). In terms of this approach, certain criteria are delineated which define whether or not an occupation may be classified as a profession. The second is related to the first: the *social integration approach* views the way in which an occupation gains legitimacy in society (Hamilton 1976). It takes a constructivist view and examines the way in which social work emerged as a legitimate response to social problems in Western industrial societies, where it was seen as a logical outgrowth of the need for organised systems of care. It needed liberal values and the presence of democratic freedoms to sustain it. Thus social work as a profession grew with increasing levels of organisation in most Western societies. The essential point is that society legitimated social work as a profession capable of addressing social problems. Implicit in this approach is the important truth that the process by which professions gain their standing is a political one (Gray 1996b; Payne 1998; Watson 1985).

Given that social work's development depended on political and economic forces within society, it follows that a withdrawal of such support can lead to the weakening of social work as a profession. In South Africa the dominant political view was that social work was no longer relevant. Midgley (1981) has long pointed to the inappropriateness of casework-dominant programmes for social work in third world contexts and the relevance of social development (Midgley 1995). Thus with the political will to address poverty and to no longer accept a band of welfare services catering only for a particular sector of the population, it stands to reason that social work, which was largely associated with urban issues and problems, would come under fire. In essence, the government's stance was that poverty required a social development rather than a social work response. As stated by Payne (1998:452), when:

> Social work contests with other occupational groups, the arena of a set of skills and ideas ... it may develop away from current concepts of social work or begin to join in creating completely new forms of analysis and professional groupings more relevant to social symbolisations of the new and pressing issues which societies face and which social work is increasingly seen as inadequate to meet.

In South Africa this is happening at a time when the various occupational groups are at very different stages of professional development. While the relatively small profession of social work cannot, by itself, take on the challenge of social development, there is no concrete evidence that any other groups are any better prepared for it. Bar-On (1995:243) portentously predicted this when he said that

> The new generation of social workers are likely to be to-day's human service para-professionals who in many ways are reminiscent of the friendly visitors and early settlement-house workers who originally gave rise to the institutionalisation of social work.

He argued that this likelihood might arise because social workers had, in the main, hitched their wagon to self-improvement (meaning their own professional development) at the expense of focusing on society's unmet needs.

1. The development of social work as a profession

It might be helpful at this point to return to a historical examination of the professional beginnings of social work, when many of those employed by charitable institutions in the USA and England in the early 1900s regarded their work as a profession, comparing it with the traditionally accepted professions of law, medicine and theology. At the time, Flexner (cited in Biklen 1983:75), a noted expert on professional education, claimed that for an occupation to qualify as a profession, it must meet the following criteria:

1. Professionals are people who pursue their chosen occupations full time and possess expert training as evidenced by academic degrees.
2. Professional activities are essentially intellectual in character and knowledge is derived from science and learning.
3. Professionalism requires autonomy and responsibility.
4. Professions are expected to know things others do not know.
5. The professional should balance the intellectual, autonomous, responsible and learned attributes with practicality, in other words, they use their knowledge to achieve a practical and specific goal.
6. A profession possesses a distinct body of facts, hypotheses and theories which are easily communicated through formalised educational and apprenticeship programmes.

Professions are able to organise and monitor their activities.

They are increasingly altruistic in motivation.

Flexner (1915) accepted that social workers were altruistically motivated, but claimed that social work was not characterised by the responsibility or power of a true profession because its aims were too wide and insufficiently specific and, as a result of its broad scope, its practitioners lacked specialised skills. While recognising that educational efforts had been made, he claimed that social work lacked a systematic, scientific body of knowledge and theory which could be taught to aspiring professionals.

The reaction to Flexner's assessment was a *zealous quest* for professional status resulting in a *flurry of activity* in America (Du Bois & Miley 1992: 35). The number of schools of social work expanded dramatically and training was advocated for all social workers. A professional accreditation body was formed, educational curricula were standardised, and a belief in the singular, generic nature of social work skills, applicable in any setting, was propounded at a series of conferences. Similar aspirations were to be seen in the efforts of social workers worldwide to gain professional recognition. In South Africa, for example, an act of parliament (Act 100 of 1978) was passed which provided for the establishment of a Social Work Council to regulate the education and subsequent professional registration and conduct of social workers[1].

2. The advent of the *social service professions*

It is clear from the discussion thus far that the process by which *social service professions* are gaining legitimacy in South Africa is not based on objective criteria of professionalism such as those propounded by Flexner (1915) and Greenwood (1957). No, the process by which social

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[1] Nowadays, social work education in South Africa is carried out in 21 schools and departments of social work, some of which have functioned since the 1930s.

service professions are gaining their standing is a political. For how else can one explain occupations without any professional organisation or accredited educational programmes being elevated to the status of professionalism merely by being labeled *social service professions*? More important, however, is the question of why the government chose to carve-up the *social service professions* rather than recognise that work with children, probation, community development and the like were all aspects of social work (Gray & Gannon 1998; Gray & Sewpaul 1998; Gray & Wint 1998). The government could just as easily have increased the number of social workers to deal with burgeoning social problems, such as street children, drug abuse, AIDS, crime and gangs. One argument for the path they chose could be that development is multifaceted and multi-sectoral, involving people from all institutional sectors, and therefore requires a range of interventions and service providers. However, I believe that by introducing barriers between *social service professions* within a particular sector (welfare), they revealed a misunderstanding of multi-disciplinarity.

The Council of Social Service Professions

With the exception of child and youth care, none of the other so-called *social service professions* has a nationally organised structure, or a professional culture, neither do they have accredited professional education programmes. The first professional graduates of the recently introduced Bachelor of Technology (B Tech) degree in Child and Youth Care will only enter this fledgling profession in 2001. Thus the Council for Social Service Professions is a misnomer and creates the false impression that there are indeed other social service professions (in the true sense of the word) besides social work. Its name is yet further evidence of the power of the political forces at work in the marginalisation of social work. To align themselves with other *social service professions*, some social workers have even been convinced that the professional social work degree should be reduced to three years, even though in most other professions, for example, a four-year degree is minimally needed to achieve professional status.

Eventually the Council for Social Service Professions will serve as an umbrella body for a group of *social service professions* each with their own professional boards. These boards are meant to promote the interests of the professionals they represent and to engage in activities which promote their professions so as to give them recognition and standing in the wider community. To this end, according to the South African Interim Council for Social Work (SAICSW 1998), the major functions of the professional boards would be to:

1. Protect the interests of their members and attend to matters relating to their interests. (It is not clear whether these *interests* might include issues such as salaries and benefits, and lines of promotion.)
2. Maintain and enhance the prestige, status and dignity of the relevant profession and the integrity of its practitioners and students.
3. Advocate for minimum service conditions.
4. Determine minimum standards of education and training of persons registered with the professional board.
5. Promote life-long learning and research in the relevant professions and occupations.
6. Market the relevant professions and occupations as career options.
7. Determine the qualifications for registration of practitioners.
8. Regulate practice and register practitioners and students.
9. Determine standards of professional conduct (by providing codes of ethics to guide practitioners, managers, policy-makers and educators towards ethically and politically sensitive practice?).
10. Regulate the professional conduct of registrants.
11. Promote efficient and responsible practice.

12. Consult and liaise with other professional boards.
13. Assist in the promotion of social welfare.
14. Advise the Minister, where appropriate, in terms of the Social Work Amendment Act.
15. Guide the profession and protect the public.

Given that professional boards are concerned with *professional matters*, it might be helpful to re-examine the true elements of professionalism in relation to these functions. Greenwood (1957:45) defined a profession as:

> An organised group which is constantly interacting with the society that forms its matrix, which performs its social functions through a network of formal and informal relationships, and which creates its own subculture requiring adjustments to it as a prerequisite for career success.

He said that all professions possessed systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes and a professional culture. Thus, being truly professional means, among other things, being guided in practice by ethical codes, keeping up to date with theoretical developments, engaging in research to improve education and practice, and advising regulatory bodies, such as the Council for Social Service Professions, on these theoretical and research developments so that appropriate standards might be set and maintained. A strong professional organisation functions as a watchdog for the profession, that is, for both service providers and recipients. Where injustice is being perpetrated, it is the function of professional organisations to inform the public and policy-makers on these matters. How will *social service professions* at the same time be able to promote their own interests, in the face of the competition between them for the same turf, and the joint interests of welfare in general? How will social work recover in a hostile environment where other *professional* groupings have the support of government and are being actively promoted despite their lack of professional organisation, the absence of accredited professional education programmes, and unclear divisions of roles, functions, norms, standards and competencies for education and practice? These are serious questions which social work educators and practitioners need to address as a matter of urgency. However, before examining future options, let us reflect on the positive consequences of the changes for social work.

The positive consequences for social work

The policy changes over the last four years have spurred many social work writers in South Africa to demonstrate social work's compatibility to the social development model and social work's continued relevance to the current social, political and economic context (Gray 1997a & b 1998a; Gray, Mazibuko & O'Brien 1996; Gray & Simpson 1998; Gray 1998a; Lombard 1997; Neilson & Gray 1997). Social development was not alien to social work. The values and principles of the developmental welfare approach were entirely consistent with those of social work with its quest for social justice, social improvement and the reduction of poverty. Furthermore, the developmental social work model, as it was emerging, did not differ markedly from the ecosystems perspective which had dominated social work theory since the early 1970s. Social work has a history of change and reform which was somehow lost in the preponderance of interest in individualised approaches. What social development necessitated was a change in focus and application rather than in theory or methodology (Gray 1997a; Gray 1998a). Hence social development provided a multidimensional, macro-policy perspective which could enable social workers to transcend their traditional casework roles. It called on them to make a greater impact on the problems of mass poverty, unemployment and social deprivation through greater use of diverse social work methods, such as advocacy, community development, empowerment, consultation, networking, action research and policy analysis (Gray 1996a & c 1998a; White Paper for Social Welfare 1997).

Thus the adoption of the developmental welfare paradigm forced social workers to think seriously about the form and nature social work should take in this new vision. Despite the lack of clarity in its conceptualisation in the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997), social workers have revisited their values relating to social justice and have attempted to redirect their services to the poor by finding effective ways of addressing poverty, including the practice of community development on a broader scale. The participation of many social workers in the retraining programmes offered by the Department of Welfare was a reflection of their seriousness about and their commitment to the developmental welfare process.

Where to from here?

Much wider debate is needed over roles, functions and training needs. Through this debate, the boundaries of the various *social service professions* will be re-defined. A rational process is needed which starts with the issue or problem:

- What range of services is needed in welfare and who will do what?
- What will child care workers do?
- What will social workers do?
- What will community development workers do?
- What will probation workers do?

Having defined these areas of service and the functions involved, the crucial question becomes the training needs of these various groups and finding an answer to this question will not be easy. Apart from everything else, launching new training programmes is about money, big money, and involves politics. Putting this aside, what are the academic issues which require debate?

The question of whether all social workers require a four-year university degree (the current requirement for professional qualification), for developmental welfare practice is an extremely sensitive one, not least because this could perpetuate the existing hierarchy with social workers at the top. The recently introduced B Tech degree offers a qualification in child and youth care work after three years of study. Although, for historical reasons, social work is the most developed of the *social service professions*, the child care movement, which is faced with the intractable problem of training child care workers already employed in the child care sector, is rapidly advancing its professional quest (Gray & Gannon 1998).

On another level, the nature of the work involved should dictate the level of training needed. Thus the role differentiation between, *inter alia*, community developers, child care workers, probation workers and social workers should determine training needs. At present the four-year degree required for professional qualification as a social worker is being questioned and a system of progression from certificate to diploma to degree level is being suggested so as to allow people to move along this continuum. A great deal of work still needs to be done in drawing role distinctions and in devising minimum norms and standards for education and practice for different social service categories. However, in reality, in communities where there are no qualified practitioners, less skilled people are called upon to address problems beyond their skill and capability out of dire necessity. While these grassroots workers do need training, access criteria, based on academic merit, restrict their eligibility to existing higher education programmes. Thus flexible alternatives need to be found for these community-based workers.

Social work can make a contribution by assisting the fledgling professions and many are already doing this. There are leaders in the child and youth care movement who began their professional careers as social workers and who have applied their social work knowledge and skill in this arena. Social workers have played a key role in designing the curriculum for the B Tech degree

in child and youth care and will, no doubt, continue to make a contribution by teaching on this programme. Most probation officers are social workers who will play a role in the development of the probation movement.

Social work can counteract the forces rallied against it by making a positive contribution and taking direct steps to justify its continued relevance. It can provide services at all levels of intervention as part of broader developmental programmes which include community development and other important macro-intervention strategies.

However, most importantly, social work needs to become better organised professionally. There is strong international pressure for the formation of a united professional social work association through which social workers can assume responsibility for their own development and advocate for their rights. At a community level social work has established itself as a recognised profession. It is at the organisational or institutional level that it needs to regain its standing as a legitimate dispenser of welfare services and it is here that there is no other way back in but through political and practical means. This can only be accomplished if social workers become more politically aware, if they understand the processes marginalising them and the consequences, for the profession, of their endorsement of the changes which have been made. Many social workers felt angry when the Minister of Welfare fast-tracked the Council's transformation by calling for final comments at the end of August, when in the original plan the consolidated report to the Minster was needed by 4 October 1998 (SAICSW 1998). Consequently, they were unable to take a united stand.

Social workers need to understand why some from within their ranks supported the process for there is a certain irony in the fact that social workers have themselves driven the marginalisation of social work. First, the changes shifted the political alliances in the profession, allowing openings for new power players to enter the political arena. This has allowed groups and individuals motivated by self-interest to pursue their own political agendas, usually without due regard for the broader consequences for the profession. Secondly, social workers have co-operated in the change process with good intentions believing in the need for transformation, but not fully understanding the political forces at work and, therefore, not anticipating the long-term consequences of their actions for the profession. If they had, they would have been outraged by the double standards at work in the way transformation was being handled and in the side-lining of social work structures. From the very beginning, not least the transformation of the child and youth care system and the formation of the Inter-ministerial Committee (IMC) on Youth at Risk, social work was deliberately excluded from the process. The IMC's failure to consult widely with role-players in the field of welfare generally and in child welfare in particular, and their failure to consult with social workers and social work educationalists, all contributed to the problems experienced with the recommendations of this committee (Gray & Sewpaul 1998), which were nevertheless accepted.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have examined the effects of the adoption of the developmental welfare paradigm on human resource planning within the welfare sector. I have focused on its consequences for social work, not least the rise of the *social service professions*. I have presented my view that one of the effects has been the marginalisation of social workers in South Africa. The withdrawal of government support for social work has given rise to the elevation of allied occupational groups to the extent that we now have a Council for Social Service Professions with diminished social work influence. To justify this course of events, and indeed to make it politically possible, social workers were systematically disempowered, their divisions were

capitalised on, supporters were found from within their ranks so that they bought into the criticism that they were ill-prepared for social development.

I began by examining the difference between occupations and professions and looked at historical analyses of the process by which occupations gained legitimate professional status. Given the path on which we have been set by the formation of the Council for Social Service Professions, I then looked briefly at the positive consequences of the changes for social work before turning my attention to the future, sharing my thoughts on what needed to be done to ensure a bright future for social work. It is my firm belief that social workers need to become better organised and more politically active in advocating for continued recognition of their value to society. I am confident that the tide will turn. People cannot turn their backs indefinitely on social work's long history of experience in dealing with social problems and in educating social workers for this huge social responsibility.

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