SOCIAL WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA: IN SEARCH OF EARLY ROLE MODELS*

PROFESSOR MIKE HOUGH

(*Contributions on this subject will be appreciated.)

PREAMBLE

This is not a normal paper in the sense that it records an interview conducted as part of a research project into the history of social work in South Africa. The aim of this project was to find role models for students and practitioners of social work in South Africa whom they could look up to and revere. There are many unsung heroes in social work who have made a contribution to South African society, some large, some small, and their stories need to be told. Thus what follows is an attempt to allow one such hero to speak with his own voice. Mostly this is a verbatim account, with some editing to create a smooth flow of ideas. The themes were chosen from Professor Hough's responses to questions put to him during the interview. The questionnaire included a quotation from Jim Midgley regarding the contribution of social work to fundamental social issues such as poverty, injustice and oppression. The section '*it is not the social worker's job to change society'* was Professor Hough's response to this question. Points at which the interviewer speaks are indicated in italics.

> *Professor Hough had a long career in social work starting in 1939 as a student of the University of Stellenbosch under Professor Erica Theron. He founded the first school of social work for black people in South Africa in 1945 and remained there until its closure in 1960. Thereafter he went to work for Anglo-American. He was sent to Central Africa where he was instrumental in starting the Oppenheimer School of Social Work in Lusaka and the School of Social Work in Salisbury, Rhodesia. On his return to South Africa, he joined the Department of Social Work at the University of Fort Hare, Nelson Mandela's alma mater, where he remained until his retirement in 1984. He was 80 years old when I interviewed him in 1999 and he died a year later knowing that he could look back with pride at what he described as his "checkered career in social work". He was a modest man who believed that maybe he didn't shout loudly enough. Instead, he said "I did the job under my nose with the tools I had at hand"* (Personal interview, 1999).

I DID THE JOB THAT LAY AT HAND WITH THE TOOLS I HAD AT MY DISPOSAL

I began my long career in social work at the University of Stellenbosch where, in 1939, under the influence of an American missionary Dr Ray Phillips, I switched from theology to social work. Professor Erica Theron was already head of social work at Stellenbosch then. People had widely differing reactions to her: She hated my guts. She had a tremendous dislike of people who opposed her. I then continued my postgraduate study in social work at Boston University, a very different kettle of fish from Stellenbosch, the main difference being the close link of early social work in South Africa to the development of government social welfare legislation.

My earliest recollections of social work are as a Probation Officer in East London. Welfare or Probation Officers in those days did not distinguish people on the basis of their colour. They were not responsible for the government's policy but were caught up in it as part of the emerging institution of social welfare. The Social Welfare Officer was the person who tried to respond to the needs of human beings, to help them gain insight and understanding into their problems and to deal with their predicament.

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My friend and mentor, the American missionary, Dr Ray Phillips came to South Africa during the Second World War starting his mission work with groups of black youth in Johannesburg. In 1940, he started a little school 'in Africa', just a 'little YMCA'. Right after the war, we decided that we would change the course of social work. We started the only college teaching social work to black people, the Minnie Hofmeyr School in Pitcos. (The Minnie Hofmeyr School was for black women and the Jan Hofmeyr School for black men.)

We felt a little bit inferior, we probably were, because we admitted people on the basis of their experience and desire to help others rather than just on academic grounds, otherwise most people would not have passed the admissions test. We couldn't say exactly what was equal to a matric pass but we did a rough estimate. By 1947 we had a three-year training course in social work. Our graduates approached the larger municipalities to start a social work section. Most of our graduates were thus employed but quite a few went to America where they readily gained acceptance. Many of our graduates became socialists. From the beginning they were trained in community work and political organisation was an important part of community work. We trained people from African countries to the north of us. One of our most well known graduates was Rhodesia's Joshua Nkomo. For some time I felt very, very strong, helped partly by my American experience. Later I went to Zambia and established a School of Social Work and a university department there. We set up a four-year programme with two years of social science studies and two years of practical social work.

We worked among the youth in Johannesburg developing various activities in the townships, like boxing, soccer and athletics, and started a social centre near the Jan Hofmeyr School. Some of these activities, especially boxing, were criticised for being too aggressive. For us it was the 'peacemaker approach' because we taught young people to channel their aggression. Most social workers worked for organisations and were paid to carry out programmes, which they themselves had not developed. Often untrained people and administrators designed the programmes.

The Jan Hofmeyr School could have continued for another twenty years but its programmes met with opposition from those who considered our graduates to be communists or socialists. Our graduates learnt a different type of social work from that practised by social workers from other South African universities.

The person that headed the Commission to look at the curriculum of the new schools of social work at the black universities in the 1960s, among them Zululand University, the University of the North, the University of Transkei, and Venda University, clearly hijacked the whole process. Consequently, the model taught in white Afrikaans universities was adopted.

Professor Hough spoke highly of those who balked at this trend, among them Brunhilde Helm at the University of Cape Town. When the Jan Hofmeyr School closed in the 1960s, he joined Anglo-American and went to Central Africa to help them to "localise and Africanise", as he put it. He assisted the school of social work in Salisbury, now Harare, which was started by the Catholic Church with financial help from Anglo. The school became an integral part of the University of Rhodesia. He also started the Oppenheimer College of Social Service in Lusaka. He said he enjoyed having the backing of a large organisation like Anglo.

IT IS NOT THE SOCIAL WORKER'S JOB TO CHANGE SOCIETY

A social worker's job is to deal with juvenile delinquency and victims of poverty. When the social worker is employed in an organisation for this purpose, the social worker ought to be able to help in as effective a way as possible. I don't know who gave social workers the job of changing society, of bringing about progressive change in South Africa. It would be wonderful if we could have social workers in parliament. It would be wonderful if we could have more

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leaders like Winnie Mandela. I have a very, very great soft spot for her because I think she was other than we expected of her. When she was at school, she was a nice, pretty little girl who played along with everybody. She never showed any real leadership among the students. I was amazed at the role she later accepted. Her husband influenced her. She jumped in there and worked with her people for freedom. I'm a Nationalist, a white Nationalist - but I admire greatly the struggle of the black people and the roles that various people played. I don't agree with all the methods they used and probably not all the methods Winnie used. I don't know how many of the stories about her are true. I admired her spirit, to go in there and do something, to assume a leadership role. We need more of those kinds of social workers. I think Ellen Khuzwayo also achieved that. How sad it was that whenever a social worker began to be active in a community, he/she was labeled a communist, a socialist or worse, a troublemaker. Many people told me that we trained troublemakers at Jan Hofmeyr. They were really quite wrong. We were not trying to do this nor were we able to. We should have trained **more** aggressive people who would really try to influence the course of social work.

I am the last person with the arrogance to think that social workers can change the world. I don't think we can. All we can do is, do as much as we can, again as I have said, with the tools we have at our disposal and see whether we can play a role, along with others, to improve situations. I think that would be wonderful but, unfortunately, we are not all aggressive people. I'm not an aggressive person at all.

Besides Winnie Mandela and Ellen Khuzwayo, there are other social workers that have done meaningful work. There was a guy who worked for Child Welfare's Head Office who traveled around the country, visiting organisations and helping them. He did a wonderful job for Child Welfare but maybe he, too, was not aggressive enough and didn't shout loudly enough.

Social work is the collective effort of social workers that are trying to understand human behaviour and human motivation, who are trying to help people to function more effectively in the community **in which they live**. This doesn't mean that they have to stay where they are but that social workers start **where they live**.

At Fort Hare we had groups of students going out in their third year to little villages, where they talked to the people there about problems and tried to advise them. They would come back and write reports. Every week various members of staff had discussions with the groups. I recall a particular third year student who reported on a community's problems with a windmill. When the students were unable to tell me exactly what the problem was, I asked them to go back and explore further. At our next group session, one of the students bravely reported that they had found out what the problem was. "Well", I asked, "tell me", to which the student replied, 'the windmill is fucked". "Excuse me", I said. "Professor", she said, "the windmill is fucked, it's broken". Trying to appear nonplussed, I asked, "do you know whose windmill it is?" Someone then volunteered that it was the chief's while others disagreed and said that it belonged to the government or to the Department of Agriculture. Stymied by this problem, I wondered why the students hadn't suggested a course of action. "Why not suggest to the community", I ventured, "that one or two of them go to the agricultural officer or to the office in King Williams Town and report that the windmill is broken, that the people are suffering tremendously and somebody needs to come and fix it?" The point was that I was trying to teach the students that social work was about helping people to develop awareness and understanding about their problems and encouraging them to do things for themselves. Plant ideas. This does not mean that social workers cannot give direct help. There was nothing to stop the students, in this case, informing the office in King William's Town on behalf of the community but this could not be done until the community saw this as part of the solution. Otherwise, how else would people find better ways of doing things themselves?

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It's the small things we do which are so important like picking up litter and Coke cans and throwing them into a bin. These are things we can do daily to show our sense of social awareness and social responsibility. This is what I believe. Let us work away at things that need to be done, to oil the wheels and so on. This is my approach and this can be done at various levels, at the organisational level too, to help the organisation function more effectively, to see that essential duties in an organisation are carried out. I have always taught that systems only work because people make them work. It is no good having a good system in place and then sitting back and doing nothing. Often the first thing that happens when a community is faced with a problem is that the people call a meeting. They talk about the problem, decide on a solution and then nobody does anything about it. This is where social workers can play an important role, knowing as they do how systems work, understanding people's weaknesses and the pitfalls they often fall into and guiding them accordingly. But it is frustrating. These things take time ... I can remember writing a paper about community development and mulling this over, grappling with the dilemma that we teach students to 'help people to help themselves'. We try to instill good principles but the process takes such a long time ... one wonders if it isn't necessary from time to time to have a dictator with a whip who would say to people that 'you will do this or that'. Still, the most wonderful thing for me was watching students grow from wide-eyed innocents full of good intentions into fully-fledged professionals ready to take on the world.

I have had a very checkered career in social work, at Jan Hofmeyr and before that, as a probation officer in East London. I have been active in numerous organisations and have served on hundreds of committees. At one stage, in Johannesburg, I was on 31 committees. Fortunately, they didn't all happen on the same day. There was Rotary, the Non-Academic Affairs Committee, the Non-European Youth Organisations Committee, the Girls' Organisations Committee, National Youth Work, the Child Welfare committee, committees of community development organisations, and crèches.

HUMAN BEINGS NEED TO BE CONSTANTLY MINDFUL OF THEIR OWN MEDIOCRITY

All in all, human beings have achieved so little. They need to be constantly mindful of their own mediocrity. Sometimes, when I think of all the people with whom I have worked, the people I have helped or trained, or tried to educate, I wonder how permanent my influence has been. As social workers, do we really influence people? When one feels like this, one finds all sorts of reasons for the impermanence of what we have done. We blame the system. This, of course, is too easy. I think a more aggressive person would be more likely to break out of the habit of blaming others or the system, as the case may be. Owning the problem and analysing it to see where the strengths and weaknesses lie, is part of the process that we teach, which is good. There is always a dilemma as to whether we need to be more aggressive and directive or whether we allow people to find their own solutions, as advocated by community work theory.

Social work has had its dictators. The earliest history of social work began at Stellenbosch with Dr H F Verwoerd. Today, there are people who want to downplay his role. This is because they don't know him well enough. They don't know him as a humanitarian. He was an extremely intelligent man. He supported development but believed very firmly that you cannot teach people responsibility. They must learn for themselves and be put into a position where they have to assume responsibility for themselves. Now, for the first time, our black people really have the responsibility of running the country and they have to learn from others' experiences. Fortunately South Africa has been able to provide education to a large number of black people and we have very capable people who, hopefully, will do a better job than some of those further north in Africa.

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THE TERM CASEWORK IS MISLEADING

> *We have moved now in our new White Paper on Welfare towards what we are calling developmental social work. One of the outcomes has been casework bashing. There is the view that we can no longer afford the luxury of casework any more. We must be more community work oriented* (Interviewer).

I have always disliked the term casework because it is misleading. The case isn't the individual. The case is the circumstances that you are dealing with, the situation that the client is in. It is limiting to see casework only in terms of the individual. However, I think it is unfortunate to think that anybody can do casework, a nurse, a clerk and so on. As social workers, we all know how difficult it is to understand the human personality, human behaviour and people's inner motivation. It is not only difficult to understand but sometimes hard to handle too. Thus to be professional you need to have proper education.

However, there are tasks which can be done by less trained people. You don't need a degree to help a client apply for a welfare grant, to help him/her to fill in a form even though this could legitimately be called casework. You need a social worker to work with people who are in difficulty. If, in your community work or in your developmental social work, you come across a person who is sitting at home with half a dozen illegitimate kids who are suffering because she has no income, and she has no idea what to do, then, here is a person who needs a social worker to go in and discover what's going on and what other forces are at work here. For me, this is totally different. The one is casework and the other is social work. Social work can be done in community work. In the many committees that I have dealt with, I have come across people with major problems.

I like the idea of talking about social development instead of social work. One can help communities to develop and this is the focus of developmental work. You mustn't go along like Father Christmas with a bag of money and help a little here and a little there, like the churches do. Now and again, it is useful when the person is really hungry, to send them down to the church or to call the church and ask for help with providing someone with food or clothes, but this is not the social worker's primary task. We help people to find facilities for that sort of thing and for me that will be developmental social work so that we, more and more, become workers that assist people in difficult situations to function more effectively. That is what I call development.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author believes that several of the interviews conducted, as part of this research, should be published in keeping with the ethos of the project stated at the outset. They are largely the words of the interviewee - not the interviewer. Besides the author, Graeham Tyndall at the University of Natal, Centre for Social Work, Durban, South Africa, conducted several interviews. I chose to begin with my interview with Professor Hough who died recently in the belief that he deserves a tribute of this sort for his contribution to social work in South Africa.

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