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*Social Work, Social Welfare,
and American Society*

F O U R T H ■ E D I T I O N



Social Work, Social Welfare, and American Society

Fourth Edition

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to Linda
to rachel elaine morris, 1971–1994

Preface

Political events in the 1980s played a major part in the inspiration of the first edition of this book. Before Ronald Reagan's two terms in office, most social workers assumed that many of the basic elements of a liberal welfare state were firmly entrenched in U.S. society. True, the country had not yet achieved a nationalized health system, and programs like Aid to Families of Dependent Children did not seem to adequately address the problems of poor families. True, the 1970s had brought reductions in social welfare spending. Despite such setbacks, most social workers anticipated continued progress toward the liberal goals of ensuring a minimum standard of living as well as adequate job opportunities, health care, and housing for all citizens. Government, especially the federal government, was to play a major role in the achievement of these goals.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, liberal ideas of progress toward a more complete social welfare system were severely shaken. Economic difficulties and growing federal budget deficits helped pave the way for a major reconsideration of the goals and shape of social welfare programs in our society. A revived conservative agenda emerged, forcefully articulated by Ronald Reagan. Many of his ideas and programs were continued under the presidency of George Bush.

Most social workers, including the writers of social work textbooks, were slow to respond to the new social welfare era ushered in by the Reagan presidency. They failed at first to grasp that Reagan was acting not as a social renegade, but as a politician mirroring a wide growth of conservatism in the United States. This conservatism included resentment about the rise of "big government" and the expansion of the welfare state. Despite the political shift, many social work faculty continued to teach Introduction to Social Welfare courses with the liberal perspective and faith in continued progress as unexamined assumptions. Social welfare text writers failed to openly acknowledge and examine their liberal approach. Equally important, they neglected to describe and analyze the conservative critique and its alternative proposals.

Social work teachers, the authors included, gradually became aware that some students did not share the liberal assumptions and were unconvinced by the standard liberal arguments. We found discussions of liberal and conservative approaches to problems creeping into our classes with increasing frequency. This led to another realization. While students had self-images of being liberal or conservative (or even radical), few had any real idea about what these labels meant. Not only were many students unprepared to clearly articulate their points of view, but most were unable to either respond effectively to or appreciate the arguments of alternative political perspectives. Since we ourselves identify most clearly with a liberal approach, we were particularly concerned about our students' inability to evaluate and respond to the increasingly popular conservative critique of social welfare.

Thus we felt the need to help students grasp the meaning of different political perspectives and understand social welfare developments in light of those perspectives. Accordingly, we revised our outlines to begin the course with an analysis of the political context of social welfare. When we tried to find course material for this endeavor, we discovered that little was available. We realized that in order to achieve our goals, we would have to write the material ourselves. That realization was the beginning of this book.

When the second edition of this text was published, the election of President Clinton seemed to promise a political shift back toward liberal policies. Health care reform was on the horizon, and interest in various social issues, such as gay rights and a woman's right to an abortion, was renewed. Yet within a brief two-year period, the United States took another political about-face, electing a Republican majority in the Senate and the first Republican-dominated House of Representatives in forty years. Clinton's national health care reform proposal was declared "dead," and fears of "domination by big government," which were so common during the Reagan years, returned in full strength. With Clinton preempting many Republican issues in his successful campaign for a second term, the stage was set for sweeping changes in public welfare, the increased privatization of health care, intense scrutiny of the Social Security system, and reductions in Medicaid and Medicare. As we head into the next century, it is clear that social policies and social welfare issues will continue to be central to political debate in the United States. In this fourth edition, therefore, the original purpose of this text—increasing an understanding of political perspectives on social welfare—has become even more relevant for people preparing to become social workers.

This is not a book about politics per se. It is a book about social welfare, but social welfare within a political context. It does not assume that the liberal perspective is the only relevant perspective in discussions of how we have chosen, continue to choose, and ought to choose the structure of our welfare programs and goals. We have written this book out of a conviction that social work students and practitioners need to deal intelligently with all approaches to social welfare in order to be effective advocates for their clients.

Plan of the Book

The book begins with a chapter outlining the concepts of *conservative*, *liberal*, and *radical*. We examine each concept in terms of the following dimensions: attitude toward change, view of human nature, explanation of individual behavior, view of the social system, view of government and the economic system, and general value systems. In each of the remaining chapters, this material is integrated in analyses of the major concepts and areas of social welfare in terms of political perspectives.

Chapter 2 examines the concept of social welfare. It focuses on the important question: What is the function of social welfare in modern society? We argue that social welfare exists to manage issues of dependency and interdependency among and between individuals, communities, and social institutions. Our definition of dependency includes both a lack of concrete resources and a lack of skills, knowledge, and power necessary to cope with a particular set of circumstances. We recognize that no one is truly independent in our society and that promotion of healthy interdependence can be a goal of social welfare programs. The chapter concludes with an examination of conservative, liberal, and radical approaches to the management of dependency and interdependency.

Chapter 3 discusses the social work profession. It looks at the concept of professionalism and what the pursuit of professional status has meant for social work. The history of the profession is examined in light of that pursuit. The chapter also describes the effects of different political perspectives on the development of social work as well as the important topic of values, ethics, and ethical dilemmas in social work practice. This is followed by an overview of social work methods, a presentation of a model of

social work practice, a description of the broad range of practice settings, and an identification and analysis of current professional issues. The chapter concludes by relating the three political perspectives outlined in Chapter 1 to contemporary social work.

Chapter 4 develops an understanding of issues of diversity and discrimination within the social welfare system. It discusses the development of the United States as a country of many different racial and ethnic groups, and it describes the ways in which social welfare programs and policies have responded to these groups. The chapter analyzes the phenomena of discrimination and prejudice as they relate to women, minorities of color, homosexual and lesbian individuals, and other frequently oppressed groups. As in the chapter on religion, this chapter encourages students to look at their own attitudes and biases in working with people.

Chapter 5 covers new ground for a social welfare text in its presentation of a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between religion, social work, and social welfare. Political changes in the 1980s brought renewed attention to the relationship between religion and public life. Increasing numbers of students now seem to be drawn to social work out of religious impulses. This has been a topic of lively discussion among social work educators. The main source of concern has not been religion as a motive for social work per se because, as the historical discussion in the chapter explains, religious impulses have inspired social welfare efforts from their very beginnings. The current concern has been with the type of religious orientation of some students—a fundamentalist, often socially and politically conservative, and sometimes evangelical approach. Questions about the appropriateness of this particular religious orientation in social work practice have led to broader discussions of the general relationship between religion and social work. In Chapter 5 we look at the issue in both its specific and its broader forms. In doing so, we have been careful not to preach and not to advocate our own motives and brand of religion. We try to affirm the appropriateness of social work as a career choice for people wishing to operationalize their faith. However, we attempt to sensitize students to the importance of a nonjudgmental attitude, the inappropriateness of evangelizing among clients, and the need to examine the various issues that a social worker with a strong religious orientation is likely to face.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 deal with the topic of poverty. We devote three chapters to this subject, compared with one chapter for each of the other problems discussed, because we believe that poverty is *the* central social welfare problem. Virtually every other social problem has poverty as one of its causative factors. Chapter 6 examines the complex topic of measuring and defining poverty. Chapter 7 describes the poverty population in the United States and examines the major theories of the causes of poverty. Chapter 8 focuses on a historical presentation of the development of antipoverty programs in this country. All three chapters detail conservative, liberal, and radical perspectives on the definition and causes of poverty, and the most effective ways of dealing with it.

The remainder of the book is devoted to a comprehensive discussion of major areas in social welfare. These include child welfare, crime and delinquency, health care, mental health and developmental disability, and aging. The book also explores two crucial aspects of social welfare that have received far too little attention in courses aimed at preparing knowledgeable and effective social work practitioners. Chapter 13 analyzes work as a central factor in the welfare of individuals and thus as an important topic for all social workers, not just those who specialize in occupational assistance. Chapter 14 not only discusses the causes and effects of homelessness but places this discussion in the larger context of the relationships among housing, community life,

and individual well-being. Each of these special topic chapters relates varying political perspectives to theory and practice in that particular area. In addition, each chapter details the role of social workers in that specific field. The book concludes with a chapter urging students to develop and articulate their own perspectives on social welfare and social work practice.

This updated edition includes new or expanded material on welfare reform; immigration; managed care in health and mental health; the continuing rise in the prison population; proposals for changes in Social Security; revitalization of community life; and new developments in child welfare, including court orders for massive system reform. The “Closer Look” features give more concentrated emphasis to case histories and examples. The “Focus on Diversity” selections help students recognize the important effects of cultural diversity, discrimination, and oppression in our society. The book also has two new features: lists of relevant web sites at the end of each chapter and “Social Work Destinations” boxes that suggest the kinds of places students can visit to learn more about social welfare issues and the development of institutions to deal with them. We believe that this fourth edition will do an even better job of preparing students to understand social welfare issues in the real world.

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Finally, we honor the memory of Rachel Morris. The article “The world is a box of crayons” on pages 133–136 is one of her many legacies.

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