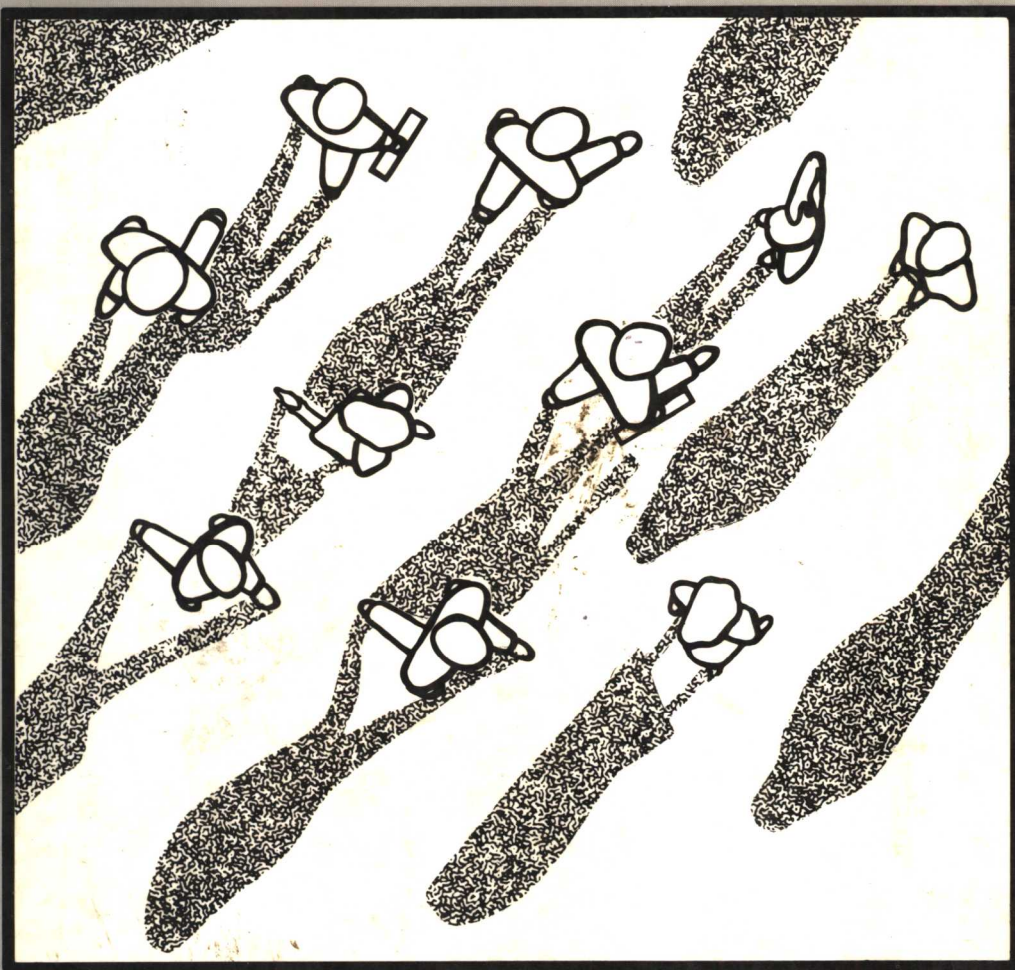


SOCIAL WORK

— A N D —

S·O·C·I·E·T·Y

AN INTRODUCTION



— **DEAN PIERCE** —

SOCIAL WORK

— A N D —

S · O · C · I · E · T · Y

AN INTRODUCTION

DEAN PIERCE

Delaware State College



Longman

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Preface

This book is for those persons seeking to understand social work and to decide if (or how) they want to be part of the profession. Writing about social work is a satisfying and a trying task. Everyone seems to have an opinion about what social work is, but in my experience few understand and appreciate its full scope and complexity. In this book I hope to increase your awareness and understanding of social work by discussing ways in which the profession achieves its purposes within society and ways in which it contributes to society.

When I reply to someone's question, "What do you do?" with the answer, "I teach social work," many naively continue with, "And tell me all about it," as if in a few moments I could do justice to a description of social work. I care so deeply about social work that I want always to present ideas and opinions about it as fully as possible. I also want those with whom I share information to compare and contrast it with their own ideas and to reach their own conclusions.

This book aims to assist you in that inquiry in two ways. First, it offers a range of ideas and beliefs about social work, and second, it provides the opportunities to test your own ideas and values about the profession.

The conclusions offered in this book are mine and sometimes they will differ from those of others. I hope that you will examine carefully the points of view expressed in the book, and that they will stimulate you to formulate your own thoughts about social work.

Three places and the people who occupy them were especially important to me in the development of this book. The first is the Bronx Campus of Mercy College. During the writing of early drafts of the manuscript, the faculty, librarians, and students of that campus helped to create a wonderful work en-

vironment. Their laughter and discussions nurtured this project. Special among them are my colleague Graciela Castex and our “assistants,” Gloria Delgado, Pat Lang, and Willie LaSalle.

The second place is the School of Social Work at Grambling State University in Grambling, Louisiana, where much support was given to me while I made final revisions to the manuscript. Research assistance was provided by Eddie Cook, Dana Franklin, Neoritha Humphrey, Laura Jones, and Michael Smith; and typing was done by Yolanda Carr, Shirley Lewis, and Sandra Willis.

The third place is my parents’ home in Southwestern Idaho. My parents, Cletus Pierce and Charletta Pierce, let me spend several months writing and working on this book there. Their generosity and commentary are greatly appreciated.

Dean Pierce
Caldwell, Idaho

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INTRODUCTION

Definitions and Directions

“In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.”

Lewis Carroll
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This book begins with a journey whose goal is to discover social work. In discussing how to select a path to follow, this chapter explores how certain words and ideas serve to guide our inquiries and influence the nature of our journey. Several ways of finding social work are identified. Finally, the direction offered to you by this book and the plan of each chapter, which gives you an opportunity to reflect on your reaction to the discussion, is outlined.

FINDING A PLACE IN SOCIAL WORK

This book is for those persons who are seeking to understand social work and to decide if or how they want to be a part of the profession. It will help you to explore several approaches used to define and evaluate social work and to develop a model for learning about social work that is sensitive to the range of ideas used to define it. The assumptions leading to the need for such a model are as follows:

- There is no “one” social work that can be learned by rote.
- People argue about what social work is and what it ought to be, and such disagreements are okay and useful in trying to explain social work.
- The ideas of those who are studying social work are important parts of learning about it.
- All the words used to define, evaluate, or criticize social work are key ingredients to understanding and interpreting it.

Any introduction to social work must define it and the terms and ideas related to it. The terms used to portray social work, however, are neither simple in meaning nor universal in usage. We deal with these factors by developing a framework, or model, to guide you in learning about it. We do not begin imme-

diately with a set definition of social work. Instead, we explore some of the reasons for the complexity of the meaning of social work. Then, we use the insight so gained as a basis for a model that we can use in making sense out of the many definitions of social work.

Let's begin by using descriptions of how several social workers "found" social work and their place in it. We can then examine what they say about the profession to come up with some words and ideas that are frequently used to define social work. Their stories also will help you to appreciate how diverse the profession is. You will read more comments from them and other social workers throughout the book (see interviews on pages 4-7).

GRACIELA CASTEX: I never knew there was such a thing as the discipline of social work. All I knew was that certain needs that existed in society should have someone responsible for them. For me, it started out with my thinking about the family. I always felt that society made the family very responsible for both problems as well as their solutions. I always felt that there was a need for some outside intervention. When I went to college, I described social work, without labeling it as such, and they said, "Oh, that's called social work and that's what you want." So it was a matter, I think, of defining for myself what it was I wanted to do, how I wanted to be involved with people, and then going to an admissions counselor in a college and describing what it was I wanted to do. I went to a junior college first. I took an AA in social work and a BSW at another college.

BERNICE GOODMAN: Social work found me. When I finished college I was interested in adult education and went to a faculty member at the Columbia University School of Social Work. I really didn't know what social work was, but after we finished talking it sounded very interesting particularly in relation to group work. I was very naive at that point. I just applied for school. Only after I was accepted and started did I find out how hard it was to get into that school. As I said, social work sort of found me, and I think that is one of the interesting aspects of the profession. Social work involves those things that are most important to all of us in ourselves and in others, a kind of quality of life.

BETTE HARLAN: I am a people-oriented person. As a child, I already knew that I did not want to fill the stereotypical role expectations for a woman from a small- to medium-sized mining town in Southeast Colorado. I knew that I did not want to marry and hence would have to be self-supporting. After looking around at the world I lived in and the so-called "spinster" role models, I decided on college. I went through several majors searching for one that would

fit my capabilities and needs. I tried journalism, education, and psychology. After graduation I worked as a substitute teacher. That lasted for two weeks. I saw an ad for a psych tech in a residential treatment facility on the East Coast and decided that it might be a place where I could use my skills. This facility was for the "rich and famous," and my job amounted to glorified baby sitting. Although I liked the job, I decided to return to Colorado where I eventually took a job in public welfare. There I found my niche. I had a diversified caseload and especially liked working with the rural elderly. My supervisor was a graduate of Smith College for Social Work and urged me to go on for further training. I took her advice and finished my MSW there.

JOE HERNANDEZ: I made a career change about five years ago when I was in my late thirties. At that time I was in the trucking industry, doing repairs. I did a lot of diesel and auto mechanics. Prior to that, I drove for a number of years, but I was beginning to get tired, physically and in the sense that I did not see anything for me in the future. Few drivers went beyond their forty-fifth or fiftieth birthdays. I began to think that I needed a change.

About that time, an opportunity came up to manage a garage, do repairs, handle the payroll, and do dispatching. While I was doing that, I got involved in an informal sort of counseling. Although I was not looking for it, quite frequently the drivers or their wives or relatives called me up to talk about a problematic situation. They would ask for advice, some kind of solution. In most cases, I found that I talked to these people a number of times as I tried to help them.

Again, I reflected on the job I was doing and what it meant to me. I started to think about dropping trucking, forgetting about mechanics, and learning something new. I decided to enroll in college again. It was a difficult decision to make in terms of economics, because of the money I stood to lose and because of no experience with or exposure to social work.

What led them to come to me for advice, I do not know. I didn't really question why they sought me out. I provided what I could. They opened up and shared personal matters as if I were their priest or minister. I discovered that the profession of social work could provide me with more of what I wanted to offer people when they approached me. People saw something in me, and social work could strengthen that part of me.

SUSANNA HUESTON: When I completed my undergraduate degree in North Carolina, I decided to take a masters in social work before working. I had a bachelor degree in sociology and had not taken the couple of social welfare courses the department offered as electives. The chair of the sociology undergraduate department was very helpful in getting graduate scholarships for departmental students. I wanted to go as far away from home as possible, if I could get money. I decided on the University of Illinois, which to me repre-

sented a different orientation—white, middle America. Actually when I started graduate school, I was still trying to discover what social work was and what field of service I wanted to enter.

Illinois' Jane Addams graduate school had a 16-month program. I received tuition and board free and worked as a resident assistant. From September to May, I took only classes; from June to January there was a full time, four-day-a-week placement, with a seminar day on Friday. My placement was in a social agency run by the school under the auspices of a family services agency funded by the United Way. A university instructor supervised all the students who were placed there.

At first I was nervous. Many of the other students were older and brought social work experience with them. I was one of a few who came directly from undergraduate school. I found the field placement to be extremely useful to me in learning more about myself and about social work. I had a chance to work with lawyers and find out about state law. I had a secondary placement in the schools. I ended up working in the field of school social work.

TRACEY JOHNSON: I became interested in social work because my father and mother had social work jobs. I wanted to be a social worker like them. In high school I volunteered at a community center where I did tutoring. This was a place like the one where my father worked. My mother was a youth leader. I figured it was a chance for me to see for myself what they were doing, what kind of work they did. I found that I enjoyed it. After high school, I went to the University of Cincinnati where I completed an associate degree in social work technology and then a BSW. I started with social work as a major and never changed. From my volunteer experience, I knew it was what I wanted.

IRMA SERRANO: When I came to live in New York City after being a teacher in Puerto Rico, I was looking for a job before I went to graduate school to become a school counselor. I wanted to go back to work in a school but not in the classroom. I was referred by the professional placement program of the state employment service to a hospital to interview for a social work assistant job. When I got there, that job had been taken, so I went to another hospital and got the same type of job. I began working in the department of social services without the least notion of what social work was all about. I had heard about social work, but I really had no idea what it was. They wanted someone who could speak Spanish. That is how I got started. I enjoyed helping people. After four years, I was offered an opportunity to do my graduate degree at Columbia, and I now wanted to be a school social worker. I took an MSW and a job in the mental health field.

ADELE WEINER: My choice of social work as a career was quite accidental. Social work as an undergraduate degree was not an option I had explored. BSW programs were just being accredited as I was preparing to graduate from col-

lege. As an undergraduate, I had studied experimental psychology and had enjoyed research. As I was exploring my options for graduate school, I discovered MSW programs. Since I had grown up in a family that had a commitment to social causes, this option seemed particularly suited to me. I applied and was accepted to the program of my choice. I had fully intended to return to psychology for a PhD at a later date. But when I began to explore my options for doctoral study, I discovered that psychology programs would not grant me any credits for my MSW degree work. Essentially they wanted me to begin as if I were a bachelor degree holder going straight to doctoral studies. Since by this time I was a social work educator, I decided to continue my studies in social work and located a PhD program with an emphasis on teaching and research.

These are all social workers. In talking about their profession they use a variety of terms, such as:

- social work
- profession
- needs
- problems
- intervention
- BSW (Bachelor, Social Work)
- MSW (Master, Social Work)
- advice
- counseling
- social welfare
- graduate study
- group work
- public welfare
- field of service
- social agency
- field placement
- volunteer
- community center
- social services
- mental health
- social work assistant
- helping

We must not only define these words but develop a framework, or model, that reflects how their differences and variations in meaning can enrich your understanding of social work.

CHOOSING A DIRECTION: THE ROLE OF ASSUMPTIONS, EXPERIENCES, AND VALUES

Because this book introduces you to a new topic of potential interest to you, you should prepare for it in somewhat the same way you would for a journey to an unknown but sought-out new place to avoid an Alice-in-Wonderland style trip and to reach your goal of understanding social work. Such preparation involves determining which path to follow, which guides to depend on, and what precautions to take on the chosen route.

In our search to learn the meaning of social work, certain ideas and the terms used to present them are the guides that provide direction. Words, however, contain at least two hazards, or potential roadblocks, to reaching our intended destination.

First, words reflect the assumptions, experiences, and values of those who use them. You may not share these values with the users, or you may not grasp their significance. Second, if the words are associated with other ideas, either yours or the user's, they can lead both astray. Third, words are limited in the communication of complex, multidimensional phenomena because of the nature of language itself. For social work this is especially true because the words used to define it are often associated with strong positive and negative values and experiences. Moreover, they may be words with which you may associate other meanings that may lead you astray.

Social work is conceived of in different ways by different people. These various conceptions may be accounted for in part by the assumptions, or expectations, people hold about social work and what it should do. Their expectations are influenced by their social class, culture, political viewpoint, sex, race, and age. In these expectations are basic values about which people in our society should get help and how they should be helped. Some people see social work as a necessary evil to control disliked people; others expect it to create better conditions for those in need. Moreover, further differences arise in defining need.

Other differences in definition derive from the various kinds of contact or experiences people may have had with social workers or social work agencies. How practitioners define social work, what consumers of services think it is, or what lay people believe about it can be at odds. Each group has followed a different path in identifying social work. These practitioners, consumers, or taxpayers are looking at social work from the perspective of different experiences.

The story is told of three sightless persons who encountered an elephant, touched different parts of it, and likened the elephant to three different objects. Similarly, those who discuss social work may have come in contact with or encountered different aspects of it, thereby having quite different images of it. The social worker, depending on where he or she practices; the client, depending on his or her needs and service availability; and the layperson, depending

on his or her contacts with client, worker, and agency—each can report differing impressions.

Such persons, along with many others, may also hold different opinions about the importance of the activities of social work. They place varying emphases on it and its work. When faced with the recent federal budget cuts that threatened to cut social work services, politicians were divided in their response. Some believed that these services were not essential and could be reduced without any real damage. Many other elected officials vigorously supported social work services as vital to the national well-being. Clearly, the latter placed greater value on social work than did those who went along with the budget cuts.

Even scholars are not unified in their approach to defining social work. What they expect of and the value they place on social work also differ. Some, for example, emphasize social work as part of efforts at social control. Others view it as a vehicle of social change or would like to see a greater emphasis on social action, community involvement, or social reform.

Consider the following typical statements:

Social work should not continue to foster dependency among poor people. Social workers should deal with those who will help themselves.

This is a common expectation of lay people. It is an unwritten but powerful demand they make of social work. It reflects the values they hold about social work and a large group of people with whom social workers deal.

In my experience, social work, in collusion with other groups in power, supports a racist society.

Although this statement may be new to you, you will discover that on the basis of their personal interactions some clients (and workers) hold this perspective of social work. The extent to which social work organizations have dealt with racism is not reflected in this statement. By reading policy statements from social work organizations, others might assess social work as being actively opposed to racism.

Social work can be done by almost anyone, and untrained or part-time workers could do whatever is necessary, because most people don't need social work and/or just need some common-sense advice.

This last statement contains the belief that social work does not contribute a great deal to many people, that social work is not basic to or important in society. The words could be altered to reflect the belief that social work makes a significant impact on a few people, who in turn have a positive impact on society.

Although these examples may appear to represent extreme positions, they contain a variety of expectations, perceptions, and values about social work. They reinforce the conclusion drawn from the earlier statements about a variety