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Roger A. Lohmann

West Virginia University, roger.lohmann@mail.wvu.edu

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Public Affairs, Community Service and Personal Care: The Three Faces of Social Work¹

Roger Lohmann
Assistant Professor
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

An ancient myth, which I have recently rediscovered among my papers, has it that Prometheus, the god of philanthropy, has three faces attached to a single head.² Legend has it that Prometheus' life was very tempestuous, since the faces were always looking out on different vistas, and naturally enough observing different things. The riddle which Prometheus poses for those of us with one vista vision is whether his tempestuous life style is the result of an inability to reconcile the three separate vistas into a single, unified vision; a truly multi-dimensional profile of the world or the result of a transcendent vision which such a reconciliation of views allows but which the rest of us are barred from by our own limited vision.

In the following discussion, it is suggested that contemporary social work education and practice suffer from such multiple vision; that they embrace three distinct visions or paradigms that are termed public affairs, community service and personal care; that each of these paradigms points to and links with different external linkages to other disciplines and professions and that the three perspectives are only minimally integrated within current education and practice.

Prometheus' challenge thus was very much like that facing the field of social work today. It almost goes without saying that there are multiple different perspectives concerning the basic paradigm of the field and that these differences coincide with a certain volatility in evidence among the journals, books, conferences and interests on display in the field today. The question is not *why* there is such diversity of opinion. The current diversity of viewpoints in social work today is a historical artifact of the growth of the profession in the past decades and certain concomitant events in the public social welfare sector: The civil rights movement, the war on poverty, community mental health, Medicaid, SSI, Titles IX-A, VI and XX, the Older Americans Act, the Appalachian Regional Commission and the rest of the Great Society legislation, just to name the most obvious examples. Rather, the

¹ Revision of the original (4/23/77) draft. Special thanks to my colleagues at the time, Edward J. Pawlak, Ghassan Ruibeiz, and Jerry Cates for their extensive comments on this paper. It goes without saying that there were diverse reactions to this presentation and that the final result is my responsibility alone. Where appropriate, I have incorporated the reviewers' suggestions into the revised paper. In the original version of the paper, personal care was labeled helping and human services were termed social services.

² In the original version of this paper, Iconoga was said to be the god of altruism. After my colleague, George McCully (2008) reconstructed the Greek myth of Prometheus and identified it as the origin of the term philanthropy, and given Jane Addam's well known preference for the term philanthropy over charity as an overarching comment, I made the current switch.

critical question to be addressed here is the broader implications of these developments for the future of the social work profession.

Stated simply, the question is whether the present crisis in social work is merely evidence of a transition from one paradigm to another (as in a shift from a functional to a behavioral psychology, or to an interactional, more sociological understanding as the base of standard social work understanding of human behavior). If it is such, we must all merely tolerate one another minimally during the transition until those who are on the losing side in the transition will chose whether to realign their views or leave the field.

The view presented here is that the crisis which now afflicts social welfare institutions of various types is much deeper and more subtle. One question that it raises is whether the profession of social work itself can continue to exist in a pluralistic form with a largely “disenchanted” view of the world and of itself. Can professional social workers tolerate being only one of several helping professionals now that the once-precious monopoly on the human services³ market is apparently lost? Will social work continue the search for newer and more effective human services while simultaneously continuing to support services supposedly shown to be ineffective (Derthick, 1975; Fischer, 1976)? On what basis is continuing such ‘ineffective’ action to be justified⁴? Can social work continue to operate in an environment of this sort and still escape the twin evils of cynicism on the one hand and anti-intellectualism on the other?

The key to a reconciliation by the field of social to its place in the world today is to be found in renewed recognition of the significance of a pluralistic self-understanding. This should involve recognition that social work has been throughout most of its history simultaneously a profession concerned with individual helping services but also with the design and implementation of networks of community services and concern for a broad array of public issues including poverty, mental health, education, housing, social justice and a great deal more.

Unfortunately, within this pluralistic enterprise, monism – the doctrine of the one right way – has reigned supreme in several areas of social work education for too many decades. Today, at least part of the justification for the sometimes boorish single-mindedness of the behaviorists, it must be acknowledged, can be attributed to the equally distasteful complacency and snobbishness too often displayed in recent years by the devotees of various approaches to “person-centered” approaches

³ The original version of this paper used to terms “social services” and “social work services”. These have both been replaced in this version with the more current neologism “human services”.

⁴ My first exposure to this issue was the original Westinghouse evaluation of the Head Start program in the late 1960s which found the effects of the program of pre-kindergarten education to be very temporary. Most recently, the issue has arisen for the social work profession from Joel Fischer’s (1976) findings that conventional social casework is “ineffective.”

which simultaneously define their approach as the only legitimate form of social casework and social casework as the only legitimate form of social work practice.

If there is to be a future for social work the field must re-discover the spirit of synthesis, intellectual compromise and pluralism which resulted in the creation of the National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education just a couple of decades ago. Yet this time the openness and conciliation must be directed not simply at others who also carry the label *social worker* but at the other professional and occupational groups who perform substantially the same work and envision substantially the same mission for themselves.

By virtue of its seventy five years of accumulated collective wisdom, social work is in a unique position to temper successions of idealism with the insight of prior experience. Such a critical role for the profession has seldom been suggested and less frequently attempted. To begin to move toward this herculean task, we in the field of social work need to recognize the degree to which internal divisions in social work today correspond with clustering or grouping of those non-social work professions around certain common purposes. (Note: Direct services for the aged and mentally challenged, and the various forms of macro practice as well as the development of interdisciplinary human services programs in colleges and universities all represent prominent examples of these trends.) For purposes of discussion these multiple divisions – within and without – are reduced in the discussion below to three large categories, termed *public affairs*, *community service* and *personal care*.

II.

There are innumerable ways to divide the world of social work found in the contemporary professional literature: social reform or social service; ego-oriented, behavioral or humanistic; casework and groupwork; micro, meso and macro; social insurance, social assistance and social services; income maintenance, education, health, manpower, housing and personal services; casework, groupwork, administration, planning, research, community organization and social policy, just to name a few. One characteristic of these typologies is that they are internally focused. That is, they divide the work initially into social work and other, and then sub-divide social work into arguably meaningful categories.

Yet, there is clear evidence not only of the futility of this approach in general, but also of its rejection by practitioners in the field. Generally, most of the latter appear to prefer nearly infinite variations and permutations on a more simple and straightforward distinction between “What I do” and “Everything else.” Witness the growing popularity of the blandly neutral and largely undefined umbrella term *human services*, which is often used strategically as little more than a synonym for “everything we do.” Or the more fundamental struggles associated with the growing popularity of systems terminology throughout the helping professions. Even more convincing are the interpersonal exchanges which characterize so much of life in social work – at conferences, community meetings, research projects and the daily

life of practice. Breathes there a social worker anywhere who, in the course of regular practice fails to come into contact with several other professionals on a regular basis?

It is the working assumption of this paper that a clear and decisive conception of the field of social work practice today must be pragmatic: based in the realities of the present, rather than logic, "reason" or a yearning for a mythopoetic past or hope-filled utopian future. Other occupations and professions can no more be expected to cede their professional claims and go away than social work can. People in those fields also have career investments in training, distinctive beliefs about the nature of the world and social reality, and their own viewpoints to which they are entitled, and which social work ethics demand require recognition.

Further, the concern in social work with a supposedly exclusive knowledge base must be recognized for what it is: a narrow, parochial vision which completely belies the non-social work origins of most of what is taught currently in schools of social work. The parochialism behind such claims of exclusivity are useful in the short term mostly in support of appeals to professional *esprit de corp*. Professional pride, it can be suggested, should be supported in other, less damaging and restrictive ways.

No tangent of social work knowledge (or that of any other professions under the human services umbrella considered here) is free from outside influences, and by its very nature multi-disciplinary. The basis of the casework method (ala Mary Richmond AND Helen Harris Perlman) for example is simply unthinkable apart from the contributions of pragmatic philosophers, notably John Dewey, sociologists like W.I. Thomas and economists, notably Simon Patten, as well as the experiences of friendly visitors and charity organization society workers too numerous to identify or mention. Dewey, for example, noted the essential importance of experience, Thomas and other sociologists were critical to formulation of the concept of the *social environment*, and Patten brought the essential idea of individual resources into the mix, among many other contributions and insights from social economics. Similar points might be made for numerous other social scientists; and the process is entirely a reciprocal one. Elements of what is good, true and right in casework today are products of social science research, insurance principles, public relations and numerous other theoretical programs, even when such contributions go unrecognized.

Likewise, group work with its diverse origins in the progressive era, the settlement house movement and more recently, small group research is similarly interdisciplinary in origin and development and community organization methods originated with a similar amalgam of social scientists, agriculturists, political organizers, trade unionists, human rights workers and social workers. Basically the same can be said in all other areas one chooses to recognize as contemporary social work specialties. Under the circumstances, any historical claims in the profession to exclusivity in any of its many fields of knowledge is extremely doubtful at best and downright dishonest at worst.

However, one must be careful here to distinguish between exclusivity of knowledge and legitimacy, which seems the more appropriate principal justification for raising the point of exclusivity in the first place. Abandoning the false view that social workers have exclusive knowledge should not, in any way alter the legitimacy of social work aspirations. At the most fundamental level there continue to be too many troubled people in the world. And there are also networks of social work institutions – agencies, programs, methods, services) directed at specific problems and these will not simply disappear regardless of how exclusive or not they are. There is, in fact, a criterion which is far superior to exclusivity for judging the merits of social work claims in a competitive environment. And that is the concept of relative advantage. A principal claim of this paper is that social work has an enormous and largely unrecognized relative advantage over any other aspirant, whether new or established, in the human services arena and that there is at least a reasonably good chance that this relative advantage will maintain social work in a central position in most future pluralistic integrations of the human services. The very core of that advantage is the empirical-pragmatic legacy laid down in their own distinctive ways by Mary Richmond, Jane Addams, and assorted progressives which allowed successful synthesis of theory and reality, knowledge and practice, experience and learning. While elements of this initial pragmatism have been glossed over in the ensuing decades of debate over details of theory and practice, the essential commitments remain intact Human problems can be overcome through collective action; however, the solution is neither totally intellectual and theoretical (i.e., discoverable by armchair philosophers) nor totally practical (i.e., discoverable by unguided, random, uninformed action) Rather, through encountering each individual situation – and each individual person – for their unique and common aspects, it is possible to construct both specific and general solutions to problems in the present.

This statement does not amount to uncritical endorsement of the current status quo in social work. There is much that is simply ritualistic and even magical about the present slavish adherence to method. Endorsement of the pragmatic principles of early social work requires not only ethical commitments (“values”) and knowledge of method but also the wisdom to know when to abandon either or both. In this, social work has too often been in compliance when it should have been indignant.

Social work and human service

In addition, there is a very ostrich-like posture to the often cited assumption of a near perfect correspondence between social work practice and human service. Social work can continue to define itself as *the* human service profession only by a collective act of will that staggers the imagination. Further, the entire history of regulation of professions in the United States argues against the protectionist strategy behind current state licensing efforts. This is not to say that such efforts should not be tried; only that the likelihood of any positive results beyond the narrowest protections of worker self-interest are likely to be disappointing.

Social work has two most likely alternatives open to it at present: To cease to exist in a historically meaningful sense, which in the context of American social history would probably eventually reduce the profession to the position of a cult or a sect – like Shakers – interesting, colorful and completely outside the mainstreams of American culture. The second option is to become a leading force in a pluralistic or integrative movement bringing together the progressive elements of the cluster of occupations and professions with which social work shares common boundaries.

This is a matter of simple logic: If the claims of social work educators and practitioners that the diverse activities of casework, group work, community practice, social planning, evaluation research and all the rest are truly integrated into a meaningful whole are supportable, then the argument for integration would seem to extend beyond social work into other occupational categories as well.

In that event, there are presently also unperceived linkages between some categories of clinical, community and social psychologists and public administrators as well. And that social work, alone among the modern social professions, is equipped with sufficient breadth to actualize this potential.

The other alternative is equally clear; if the claims of social work in all its diversity to being an integrated whole cannot be substantiated, then serious questions arise about the continued existence of the field in its present form. One possible option that is seldom addressed here is the option of historical resignation: Admission, in effect, that the social order of social work is irrational and a meaningless historical accident that brought together largely by accident a congeries of disparate and unrelated activities. If contemporary journal articles and books on human services and social work are any indication of professional sentiment, this will not be the preferred option.

The preference for a pluralistic approach can be defended on several grounds. At a personal level, I like many others in the field have a mix of degrees from various fields, including English, journalism and public administration as well as social welfare and policy planning. I can testify personally to the possibilities, as well as the difficulties which lie in store for those who willingly cross such great divides. At conceptual level also we cannot ignore the associated soul-searching and various identity crises which have characterized not only social work but also related fields. Jane Addams' personal identity crises laid out in the early chapters of *My Twenty Years at Hull House* are very instructive in that regard.

Finally, pluralism can be preferred because it represents a restoration of the pragmatic, open and communal spirit embodied by the pioneers in each of the diverse branches of social work. This view of the good life, and caring is as characteristic of the founders of urban planning and public health as it is of Jane Addams or Sophonisba Breckinridge. Even the hard shell behaviorists are not entirely immune from these common spirits as a dispassionate reading of B.F. Skinner's *Walden II* reveals. Skinner's technocrats may be autocratic and prone to dominate but they are not insensitive, officious sociopaths. .

The key initial question, however, is what are the boundaries that social work shares with other groups that need to be opened up. A second question, taken up briefly in the conclusion of this paper, involves possible initial moves in this opening process. There are three major dimensions along which social work interfaces with other fields. These I have chosen to call public affairs, community service and personal care. If these terms are offensive to anyone, I encourage them to read ahead marking out each in turn and inserting the letters A, B and C, since the terminology here is far less critical than recognition of the underlying commonalities.

Public Affairs (A)

The term public affairs is an ancient one, suggested in the title of the first newspaper ever published in the United States. *Public Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick* began publication in Boston on September 25, 1690. Although the very idea of publicness or publicity has recently been taken over by public administration in connection with renewed emphasis in that field on policy-making as well as implementation. In general, the domain identified as public affairs might be identified with the operation of the public sector in a free society, with elements of legislation, regulation, administration and advocacy with certain private and voluntary activities involving broad public implications including industrial safety, labor relations recreation and leisure and other areas. Specifically, some authorities define the term to refer to the relations of a public (in any of several senses) organization with its stakeholders (<https://www.publicaffairsnetworking.com/what-is-public-affairs.php>).

Among occupations and professions concerned with public affairs, social work shares mutual interests with public administration, urban planning, public health, political science, economics, law and other fields. There is also a major mutual interest of all these fields with sociology and anthropology as both these disciplines frequently support research tending to push certain issues across the border by which C. W. Mills distinguished private troubles from public issues. Private troubles, in this distinction, are generally the domain of what are here called personal care services. Major interdisciplinary interest areas such as gerontology, criminology, mental retardation, mental health and rehabilitation, often have major public affairs dimensions (as well as personal care dimensions) not often recognized by social work in recent years.

Perhaps the most critical criterion (the defining paradigm, as it were) of the public affairs focus in all of these diverse occupations and field is the concept of the public interest or the common good, and the assumption that the unseen hands of the economic market offer an insufficient basis for orderly and lust life in urban industrial society. Conceptions that dichotomize social work into reform and service often fail to distinguish between the pursuit of the public interest implied here and the community service and helping orientations of the following categories. As a result, while supervision of public water supplies and the conduct of autopsies have

been recognized as public service activities of public health professionals. By contrast, social work has in its pursuit of professional legitimacy often dismissed and put down similar activities in comparable regulatory activities in regulatory control efforts in public welfare, including day care inspections, adoptions and foster care. It really should be no mystery to social workers today that such activities also “help people”; yet to suggest this is, often, a controversial suggestion. The bottom line here should be that social work in one of its several faces involves a broad range of public affairs activities.

Community Services (B)

A second category of interface between social work and related disciplines and professions involves what I have chosen to call community services. The principal distinction to be made between this category and the previous one is historical. At heart, it is a distinction between the efforts of the public sector and voluntary action; a distinction basic to American culture at least since Tocqueville.

In contrast to the emphasis in the preceding section on organized efforts on behalf of the public interest, community services tend to place greater emphasis on voluntary action and cooperation among individuals and organizations. In social work, a larger and continually expanding range of social movements, from the charity organization societies and settlement houses, to planned parenthood, the hospice movement, housing reform, senior centers, and many other examples, all began in this domain, regardless of whether or not they later moved into the domain of public affairs.

Indeed, it is the tendency of community services of this kind to arise from social movements which is at the heart of the creativity of voluntary action. The category of community services – with its adherents in community health and welfare advocacy, neighborhood organization, religious and ethnic social programming, settlement houses is the single best evidence of the need for the kind of professional integration called for in this paper. Public social programs offering financing to nonpublic community organizations have, for the time being, almost totally blurred any meaningful distinction between the public sector concerns of public affairs and the community services of voluntary action. Nevertheless, the distinction is an important one in principal and worth noting if only to hold open the possibility that not all organized effort for the public interest or the social good must originate in governmental action.

One of the difficulties of this topic in an age of professionalism is that community services almost by definition involve substantial efforts of nonprofessionals. Thus it may appear at first that social workers, urban, rural and community sociologists, urban planners and perhaps community psychologists are the only recognizable occupational configurations in this area. At second glance, however, many educational and health-related occupations, including recreation leaders, occupational therapists, activities directors and numerous others also have mutual interests here. Further, professionals operating in the community context

typically operate as peers with volunteers of all educational income and social class levels. Indeed, one of the most intriguing qualities of the community services setting, at present involves its leveling qualities.

Personal care (C)

The final category of personal care is the one that has received the greatest attention on the question of the interface of such occupations as social work, psychology (clinical, educational, social, behavioral, humanistic, community, counseling, etc.) psychiatry, nursing and a host of new counseling programs. In general such personal care services can be set apart from either of the above by their focus on a single individuals or small groups of individual persons known personally to the helping professional.

The ultimate distinction between personal care services and public affairs orientations is represented by, and to some degree characterized by, the recent debate in social work over the most appropriate social response to poverty: in particular, the distinction between the casework services and income support approaches. Partisans on both sides have strongly held views on this question. However, the most important insight here is that proponents of the incomes approach are more likely to have a public affairs perspective on poverty, while proponents of the casework services approach are far less likely to do so. Similarly, on this particular issue, adherents of a community services perspective are far more likely to comparative indifference on this question (that is, the choice between an income vs. a service strategy) since the likelihood of a voluntary income strategy is relatively remote.

The principal foray of helping professionals into the public affairs arena in recent years has been on the licensing issue, where the putative objective is typically purification of the ranks of those aspiring to the status of helping professional . Such a pattern of entry into public affairs on the part of helping professionals in social work is similar to the behavior of others operating from a public affairs or community services perspective.

I have tried in the preceding discussion to make two overarching points: 1) When viewed from the vantage point of its areas of commonality with other occupations and professions today, social work can be divided into three distinctive orientations; and 2) Those three orientations each have their own predominant orienting paradigm which have been labeled the public interest, community action and interpersonal aid or helping perspectives. They define particular linkages to other perspectives; so much so that adherents in each of these areas often have at least as much, and sometimes more, in common with those in the same paradigm outside the profession of social work as they do with holders of a different paradigm within the profession.

Conclusion

If one can accept the general accuracy of this analysis and its conclusion, the preeminent question for social work today is what should be done about it. Three options were outlined earlier: 1) To do nothing; 2) To dissolve social work into its constituent entities or 3) To seek new forms of federation and confederation of interests, identified previously as pluralism. To the extent that the present claims of the social work profession to a modicum of integration makes any sense (which I believe they do, despite rhetoric to the contrary), the avenue of pluralism makes the most sense. In that spirit, three sets of actions are called for:

- 1) At the national level, the National Association of Social Workers and Council on Social Work Education should initiate conversations with other national associations in each area on the question of creating a national federation to promote dialogue between these diverse interest on areas of mutual concern. In communities where local affiliates of these same national bodies have chapters similar conversations should be arranged. In some cases, such as the American Society of Public Administration's Human Resources Section or the American Sociological Association Section on Social Welfare, such matters may immediately be delegated.

If no other results of such initiative are forthcoming, the results of such interchanges published should make fascinating study. While initially the tripartite division outlined here could be maintained, careful attention should be paid to integration of these viewpoints, lest option 2 below be inadvertently served.

A number of interesting cross-disciplinary ventures of this type already nominally exist, of course, particularly within the personal care arena. For example, the American Orthopsychiatric Association and the Human Resource Section of the American Society for Public Administration. The central question, however, is whether people in "Ortho" ever talk to people in ASPA and whether they should and whether social work has the pluralistic outlook to facilitate such conversations.

- 2) At the academic level, social work faculty in colleges and universities should increase their interdisciplinary efforts with particular attention to spawning dialogue and not new departments⁵. The existence of social psychology as a joint subfield of sociology and psychology for nearly 30 years should be very instructive here. Interdisciplinary research is a proven commodity and social work would be the poorer for it if such studies as Hollingshead and Redlich, Meyerson & Banfield or Morris, Binstock & Rein (to name just a few) had not been done. However, much solid work in both research and theory remains if some of the obvious potential of cross-disciplinary work is to be realized. (Merely labeling every concept which is undefined but recognized as a "system" will, in the end prove unproductive.)

⁵ Less than three years (and our move to WVU) after this proposal, Professor Jerry Pops of the WVU Dept. of Public Administration and I began discussing a dual degree program for MPA and MSW students. The program was eventually adopted and has been operating since 1980.

3) Finally, at the agency level, executives, board members and senior program staff members should accelerate their efforts to institute joint approaches – whether in interdisciplinary treatment teams, multi-professional programs, inter-professional consultations or other permutations. An explicit focus of such ventures should be honest, forthright recognition and mutuality in negotiating claims of professional status, and legitimacy. One may personally be dubious of the professional claims of a particular “zilch therapist” but since she is a diplomat of the ASZT (American Society of Zilch Therapists) a certain measure of decorum and professional respect is still called for in discussion of any mutual interests.

The principal focus of each of these steps should be communication around a spirit not dissimilar to the religious ecumenism of recent decades. At the federal level, can the peak associations⁶ of social work – NASW, CSWE, the National Social Welfare Assembly and various specific interests like the National Council on Aging, in which social work leaders have been prominent from the start – do more to facilitate greater communication between professions? At the university level, we need to be asking are there new and different organizational arrangements for facilitating joint teaching and research?⁷ At the community level, can some of the traditional ethnocentrism or agency and program lines be transcended, even a little bit? In all of these, social work because of its privileged position in human services is well placed to play a leading role.

The options are rather stark. In this version of the myth of Prometheus the god died of frustration before anyone could learn whether it was from simple split vision or a transcendent view too complex for sharing with all. The question for us is whether social work will suffer the same fate?⁸

⁶ The term peak association was not in use at the time of the original draft of this paper. It is a later import.

⁷ In addition to the previously mentioned dual degree program, the author was also involved in a number of other “new and different organizational arrangements for facilitating joint teaching and research” including the WVU Summer Institute on Aging and the Social Work Continuing Education Program, and the Nonprofit Management Certificate Program, all of which used faculty from multiple departments, and several programs of the Regional Research Institute like the highly innovative undergraduate research mentorships.

⁸ As this paper was being reformatted and prepared for uploading to the WVU Library Research Repository in early 2021, various public affairs interests (A) and community activists (B) within the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) were once again raising many of these same questions around the shared euphemism of “macro practice”.

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