Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Edna Chamberlain in 1971 at the 12th National AASW Conference in Brisbane

Value dilemmas in old and new methods of social work

This paper was written against a backdrop of disruption and protest, specifically in Queensland, and generally on a world scale. Social change has been accompanied by changing norms. Technological advances have been fostered by a premium on material values and have begotten massive side-effects leading to pollution and the wanton destruction of nature, which threaten the physical conditions necessary for a good life, and to alienation and meaninglessness in the spiritual realm. Fear that time is running out and anger at being cheated have bred a new morality which finds justification in breaking rules sanctioned by custom and law to challenge a system that appears to support the evil. Norma Parker spoke of the need 'for social workers to be responsive to changing community needs so that these may be observed, understood and met without too great a lag between their emergence and their resolution'.[1] We now hear questioned the relevancy of social work to the human condition. Community needs are no longer to be identified merely in terms of gaps in services, and the helping processes that comprised our repertoire a generation ago are at best insufficient to effect a resolution of the vital social issues of today. My sense of urgency is heightened, therefore, not only by the acceleration of social change, but by concern that we may be neither accurately identifying the vital needs of today, nor appropriately oriented to resolve them.

The swift movement of events has created unprecedented challenges for social work. These have been met largely by culling the social sciences for new insights and knowledge and by searching for new practice theory incorporating diverse modes such as 'reaching-out' casework, socio-behavioural techniques, client advocacy and decentralised services. As Rein points out, however, in his consideration of the cross-roads for social work, the problems today are far from merely technical.[2] They are increasingly concerned with direction. The question as to whether we are accurately identifying needs involves a determination as to what should be the purpose of social work and this hinges on its

philosophy. It is a question that is prior to any concerning methods, strategies and techniques for the resolution of problems.

Throughout society today, and especially among the young, there is less tolerance for compromise in terms of the realities of our present system. On closer examination this is often revealed as intolerance of such compromise as leads to conformity and integration, while the thrust engendered by their sense of urgency leads to other kinds of compromises in the interests of system change. The new breed of social workers may refuse to compromise by planning a budget with a widow receiving an inadequate pension but may jeopardise her household by urging her to join a client power group and refuse to pay rent. In the face of this urgency, however, social work is challenged to validate its position. It is not now enough (if it ever was) to be simply more committed to humanistic values than are others. It is enough only to be totally committed. Our problem is to operationalise this commitment.

In terms of the ultimate goal, the guiding principles of the profession postulates no less than social justice for all men, all over the world. For us this implies a stance of greater responsibility for the human condition than we have heretofore adopted. Since 1958 we have echoed Werner Boehm's definition of the goal of social work as 'the enhancement of social functioning wherever the need for such enhancement is either socially or individually perceived'.[3] Is this enough? It is doubtless a matter of interpretation, but the interpretation has too often been in relation to the social functioning of our clients within the confines of that state of life in which they find themselves. To make social justice the goal, rather than social functioning, places emphasis on people's rights rather than the inadequacies of the person in the situation. Unless we join the search for social justice (and there are many beyond our ranks actively seeking it) the profession of social work will have 'an increasingly minor role of remedying human ills'.[4] If we join it, our horizons are instantly broadened. Social justice for all men all over the world means we must be as actively concerned at the ravages of war and hunger in far countries as by the plight of the deserted mother at our agency door. The vital needs of our times stem from the prejudice and power differentials that affect the distribution of resources and the allocation of rights and rewards, and result in various kinds of discrimination, poverty and the suppression of certain minority groups.

To operationalise our concern, interventions will need to be of the macro as well as the micro kind. Our involvement in social planning and policy change must be active, not merely nominal. Moreover, we may be required to protest injustice even in situations where

we do not have the prescription for change. Are we appropriately oriented to confront the social problems stemming from the inequalities still countenanced by society at large?

Analyses, sometimes systematic and sometimes impassioned, have come to focus on three major and interconnected features of traditional social work that inhibit resolution of today's problems:

(1) the accent on social integration (i.e. conformity to the social system) rather than on social change;
(2) the definition of social work, in terms of its methods rather than its goals; and
(3) the dominance of the casework method.

Should we dismiss social integration always in favour of social change? Rein and Morris saw integration and change as requiring the use of distinct (that is distinctly different) organisational arrangements and professional methods.[5] They claim that integration, in the sense of conforming to common values, requires the strategy of 'cooperative rationality'. Rein and Morris argued that the simultaneous pursuit of both integration and change goals by the one organisation leads to intra-organisational conflict. The logical extension of this argument is that the profession itself faces the dilemma of incompatible goals. Option for either goal might well lead to a division of social work into two distinct professions – one pursuing social change and the other social integration. However, the basic premise on which Rein and Morris based their argument is open to question.[6] Change and pattern maintenance are both functional requirements of any system. They are means not ends. Social workers are confronted daily by the recurring dilemma implicit in the need for both stability and change in the lives of individuals and society. The question for the social worker is not whether his mode of operation is to enable people to make choices or to assert his own choices and cast his lot with those who have arrived at the same solution. The question is which of these alternatives is required in this situation. It is necessary to identify the conditions under which change is an individual leading to social integration, on the one hand, and social change, on the other, are appropriate so that decision-making may be based on that knowledge. The dilemma may not always be resolved simply by knowledge and experience. It may involve moral issues. How do the moral implications of fostering stability by helping people accept unjust conditions imposed by the welfare system weigh against the moral implications of challenging, and maybe unseating, administrators who support the system? Social workers have been loath to recognise the political and ethical implications of their traditional role. Readiness to work within the

system implies a political stance just as does readiness to challenge it. Both positions have moral implications. The social worker is accountable whichever stance he takes.

The second of the historical features of the profession that has come into focus as inhibiting constructive approaches to the vital needs of our time is the apparent priority of methods over goals. It is argued that professional specialisation as to method, coupled with a concentration on techniques, has led to displacement of goals, energy being exerted on maintaining or enhancing the method or technique. Method specialisation is seen by some as a response to the 'incompatible alternatives' I have just discussed. In this view the quite distinct processes leading to social change, used with groups and communities, can be separated out from the techniques of individual change. Pursuit of each separately enabled the profession to present a façade of unity. However, an alternative view is that specialisation as to method led to a search for generic themes to evidence the supposed unity, and this led to an assumption of continuity of techniques. Though the processes of working with collectivities should be distinctly different from those used for working with individuals, the dominance of the casework method has led to the inappropriate application of its techniques in efforts to effect change at the community or societal level. Since these have been mainly aimed at integration and based on a consensus model they have been abortive in work with collectivities. Work with communities and groups is essentially a political process in which the concepts of power, conflict and interest groups intrude. The dichotomy we are confronted with by method specialisation is that which divides social work between work with the individual and work with the collectivity. The dichotomy is encouraged by the fact that we have theories of personality and theories of society but few theories that link the two. Rather than method specialisation, or field specialisation its historical precursor, it may be that definition of the profession in terms of problems to be solved would permit a variety of techniques, some pertaining to change and some pertaining to stability or pattern-maintenance being brought to bear, as appropriate on individuals and/or social systems and structures.

The dominance of casework is seen as proof of the charge that the profession has placed emphasis on adjustment and conformity. The defenders of casework point out that modification of the social situation has always been one of the two modes of enhancing the social functioning of individuals – along with modification of the client's personality, behaviour and/or attitudes.

The real issue is not whether casework is, or should be, dead but whether we can find ways of stopping the escalating destruction of human beings by an archaic system of welfare. As

well as refining what we are doing now, another and more urgent task is that of articulating and evaluating strategies for prevention and social change.

Values asserted without objective evidence on which to base a case have little persuasive power. Unfortunately, however, policymakers can be resistant even to hard data, as the Commonwealth Government's slowness to act in response to the Melbourne Poverty Study[7] bears witness. While objective evidence to support one's case must be to hand, there may be more effective modes of engaging public sympathy and government action than the publication of research studies and carefully documented submissions. It is probable that, because of its potential for political embarrassment, John Whiting's articulate and trenchant criticism of the repatriation system, *Be in it, Mate!*[8] has had more success than Ronald Henderson's *People in poverty*.[9]

Neither of these examples, of course, represents the work of social workers, at least not as initiators of action. This serves to remind us

(a) that social workers are not the only ones concerned in social planning and development, and
(b) that the cold fact is that we are handicapped in Australia by numbers, if not by educational bias, timidity and low status, in taking leadership roles in this area.

In their efforts to establish a professional identity social workers have aspired to 'go it alone'. Fearing a loss of professional integrity they have tended to be suspicious of potential allies. Forging coalitions and alliances is, however, an essential strategy in achieving professional goals. If not as leaders, social workers have a potential to act as catalysts.

Where collaboration with other groups has occurred in the past it has tended to be on our own terms. To be effective, open-mindedness and readiness to consider the values and views of others is necessary. Yet efforts at societal change predicate a political process in which, as already indicated, concepts of power, conflict and interest groups intrude. The responsibility of social workers is to ensure that they are among the interest groups arguing competing goals and methods in respect of inequalities of income, services and participation. Engaging in debate about objectives, and therefore about means, would clear away vague assumptions and misplaced confidence in our expertise. Clearly collaboration with social scientists, especially economists, and the legal profession, could pay dividends in increasing our power position in relation to policy-makers. Alliances with our clients can be argued also on political grounds, but to enhance their power position rather than ours. In

several States social workers are now participating in pensioner and client power groups. The time has come either to tailor plans to meet the needs of client groups as they see them or to give convincing reasons why not.

Efforts to educate the government in respect of humane legislation for people, our agencies in respect of just administration and our clients as to their rights, are all based on the assumption that consensus is possible and that public attitudes are amenable to change if only the facts are known. It also assumes there is time for the slow-moving processes of social survey, fostering dialogue and improving communication between interested groups. Sometimes we have to face the choice of arguing as effectively as possible with the realisation that the issue has not been fully researched or missing the boat while we accumulate more facts. The Queensland Branch's recent submission in relation to legislation for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders represents a choice of the first alternative, since the government's announcement in May that it intended to amend the existing Act when Parliament resumed in August suggested the need for instant action.

Contest implies an adversary stance. The assumption of an adversary stance has not been easy for social workers, however. As already indicated, professional education and practice have tended to legitimate the consensus orientation and, in consequence, social workers frequently lack the necessary technical skill and confidence to 'take on' administrators, agencies or the government. Generalised criticism of discriminatory, unjust or inadequate legislation has relieved guilt while specific malpractices of agencies are tolerated. The tendency is to 'explain' legislation and/or agency policy and practice rather than challenge it, inside as well as outside the agency. The situation has been complicated, of course, by the employee status of almost of all social workers.

Dilemmas abound in the performance of the adversary role. What tactics are available to social workers? Once it would have been unquestionable to set the boundaries around those that are legally sanctioned. Even these limits are being pushed by more radical members of the profession who see the law as bolstering a system which creates many of the social ills of the day. Their justification for stepping outside the law and accepting the risks involved rests on their striving for the collapse of an archaic system of welfare to permit social policies which will ensure social justice. At this point of time the majority of social workers hesitate to accept the extremity of their viewpoint. Even within the law, however, such feasible tactics as marches, demonstrations, and strikes are unfamiliar in the short history of social work in Australia. In the campaign for increased pensions and

review of the social welfare system of this country, for example, such tactics have not been contemplated.

The dilemmas associated with the use of disruptive tactics were present and real for social workers in Queensland as I prepared this paper. In twenty-five years of membership I sat for the first time last month with fellow members while we seriously considered the possibility of strike action, with the twin goals of protesting racial discrimination (in South Africa and Australia) and the right to dissent. Neither of these issues related to social planning in the welfare field nor to service delivery to specific client groups. The issues were at the same time more comprehensive than the traditional definitions of social work responsibility and more elementary. They were seen by many to be among the vital issues of the 'seventies, however, and of relevance to social work if social work were to be relevant to the human condition.

Though debated, the propriety of our concern for discrimination in far places and civil rights at home was not the main issue. Tactics were. Never before has the Queensland Branch, or any other branch of the Association to my knowledge, contemplated strike action, albeit legitimate, to signify protest against injustice – or indeed for any other purpose. A rational approach to the issue raised such questions as: Who benefits and who loses? How do the benefits and losses to one group (e.g. the coloured people of South Africa) measure against the benefits and losses to other groups (e.g. pensioner groups at home from whom energy would be diverted)? How would a strike affect our clients, in the short run, in the long run? How would it affect our relationship with policy-makers and administrators with whom we were currently in dialogue and apparently making some progress? Social work values require that none of our professional behaviour be in our own interests.

I have underplayed throughout this paper the truly radical criticism of social work which views its function as 'cooling-out' socially deprived group in society in the service of powerful elitist groups. In their failure to perceive social problems in political terms, social workers have permitted themselves to be used as agents of socio-political control to support the existing social order.

In the meantime, in a society as complex as ours, attuned to a state of affluence but beset with social problems, there is a need for a diversity of approaches among social reformers, in meeting need through social service delivery and in counselling the psychologically troubled. The unity of the profession depends on acceptance of diversity with the proviso that all social work activity must be measured against a standard of what it does to and for people in pursuit of social justice. The profession's responsibility is to remain committed to

its ethical stance while it fosters professional education and understanding based on theories and methodology sensitively applied and carefully evaluated in relation to that stance. An ideology without method or techniques is at best insipid, at worst fanatic, and techniques that are not rooted in democratic values can be stultifying at one extreme and dangerous at the other. Individual social workers will continue to be too timid and miss opportunities, or too impatient and destroy them. All will make choices. How much compromise is inevitable in the various options we have: selecting causes or cases, seeking change or conformity, using conflict modes or consensus? Each choice is a dilemma because each option involves costs as well as benefits. Knowledge and experiences can help in the assessment of costs and benefits but the contribution of cost-benefit analysis is strengthened when the value assumptions on which it is based are made explicit. The different assumptions underlying different models for action need to be known to clarify what the choices are. Ultimately, as individuals and as a profession, we have to confront these dilemmas in terms of our commitment to the rights and worth of the human person.

Note

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Chamberlain, E. (1975). Value dilemmas in old and new methods of social work. Australian Social Work, 28(1), 5-13.

Endnotes

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9. Henderson, Ronald, et al., op.cit.