

CHAPTER 11

The Social Work Profession

Returning to the characteristics listed in the introduction as describing the established professions, to what extent in the early 1960s were these demonstrated by the occupational group which has been the subject of this study?

1. Members of the profession and the rest of the community recognise that it is a distinct occupational group with certain rights and duties.

Most qualified social workers in Australia now considered that they belonged to a distinct occupational group. They possessed a university qualification, similar in broad outline from place to place and over time. The only high-level specialised training which had existed, in medical social work, was now fully integrated with the general social work course. The majority of social workers belonged to a common professional association which had recently absorbed the specialist almoner association. Almoners, the most united group among qualified social workers, were now identifying themselves firmly with the whole group. Apart from organisational changes in their training and their professional association, a sign of their identification with all qualified social workers was their use of the term 'social worker' rather than 'almoner' or even 'medical social worker'.

In the community there were a growing number of people in social welfare, university, and other professional circles, who were aware of social workers as a distinct occupational group with at least some corporate solidarity. This awareness was, however, much stronger

in the larger states. The extent to which social workers' clients realised they were using the services of a distinct and responsible occupation group varied greatly.

Although there was some measure of recognition, among members themselves and in important sections of the community, that this was a distinct occupational group with collective responsibilities, a number of factors were holding back a greater degree of recognition. Members worked in a wide variety of agencies and often not under the title of 'social worker', or with the same-named qualification. Sometimes to gain acceptance in the early stages and to meet some genuine need, they assumed work other than that for which they had been trained. Their relationships, particularly with people from other professions, were frequently determined as much by their personal characteristics, their sex, age, and personality, as by their professional competence. Teamwork between the various professions tended to be haphazard because of changing personnel, the relative newness of some of the professions, and very different ideas about the relative roles of each. A clear demonstration of competence as a profession was likely to be reduced when social workers did not stay in one position for any length of time, when they were inexperienced, and when they carried large case loads.

There was no legal bar to anyone attempting to practise social work. Because of the general shortage of qualified social workers, and the continued reliance by numerous agencies, especially in the smaller states, on unqualified or semi-qualified labour, there were still many outside the group claiming to practise social work. Yet the attitudes, skills, and knowledge of these people were different from those of the qualified social workers. Where there were substantial numbers of qualified social workers, their work tended to be called 'social work', and the work of others was called 'welfare work' or some other name.

By and large, Australian communities were not alive to their social problems or thought they could be bought off, and so did not connect any professional group with them. The qualified social workers did not publicise their work to any great extent; for many of them this smacked of self-advertisement. The limited effectiveness of their professional association also held back community recognition of them as a distinct occupational group with collective responsibilities.

But the group could be widely recognised throughout the community without necessarily having the social standing accorded to the established professions. Many of their predecessors enjoyed a high social status, partly because they worked voluntarily, but perhaps more important because they already belonged to the higher socioeconomic groups. The grounds on which the new occupational group could expect social recognition were that its work was useful, responsible, and difficult, and it required a preparation comparable with that of the established professions. The recently improved salaries were a sign that such arguments were beginning to carry weight with employers and that future status would be linked with such factors.

2. A general common purpose, for example healing the sick, guides the members' work, and this is in reasonable accord with the goals of the wider community.

Through their professional education and organisation, qualified social workers had learned to pursue a common purpose. Briefly stated, it was to help individuals, groups, and communities, to make the most constructive use of themselves and their environment in the solution of their social and personal problems. This was a humanitarian purpose, strongly based on a democratic philosophy.

This aim was not usually in conflict with the goal of economic efficiency advocated by many in this increasingly industrialised society. Repeatedly it was stressed that social work was good business. Social and personal problems were impediments to the nation's economic productivity. Moreover, so much in terms of money, time, and effort, was spent on social services in the modern society that any improvement in their more effective application was likely to be an economic saving. The helping of individuals and groups to help themselves when possible was well in accord with the business community's formal emphasis on individual independence. Generally, in Australian communities the extent to which human values were placed above others varied, but social work's aims were at least in reasonable accord with the goals of a society which increasingly recognised social rights.

3. There are shared intellectual techniques which are acquired only after prolonged training at a tertiary educational level, and these require originality and judgement, not routine application. The development of technique is a recognised responsibility of the group.

From their education at a tertiary level, qualified social workers had learned to apply certain techniques in helping with social and personal problems. They had learned how to practise social casework, social group work, and community organisation. These techniques required thought and judgement. Any rule-of-thumb application of them was likely to have disastrous consequences, and this was generally recognised. For many social workers, lack of professional experience was limiting the quality of their practice.

There was some awareness of a responsibility to maintain and develop the techniques of social casework, but there was not very much systematic study of technique under Australian conditions. Very much less time was spent on developing and maintaining social group work and community organisation as techniques for achieving the purpose of social work.

4. The fundamental knowledge, or theory, at the basis of the group's practice is capable of being set forth systematically, is scientifically based, and is at a level of difficulty requiring tertiary education. The group recognise a responsibility to define, develop and systematise their theory and are free to do so. This is a direct responsibility with regard to their own clinical or practitioner experience. For the part of their theory borrowed and adapted from other groups, it is the indirect responsibility to support the work of those groups.

The theory of social casework was by now systematically set down, but again this did not apply so much to group work and community organisation. There was no doubt that students needed to be at a tertiary level to grasp existing theory. As with the application of the technique, the maintenance and development of social casework was much more evident than with the other two methods, but still there was little examination of casework theory in the light of Australian conditions.

With regard to that part of social work knowledge borrowed and adapted from other disciplines, social workers drew heavily from psychology and the social sciences, and although the subjects themselves may have been systematic, those parts relevant to social work practice in many instances still needed to be systematised. Moreover, the social sciences in Australia, especially sociology, were under-developed;

in some states less than in others. Social workers looked favourably upon any extensions of these disciplines, but usually did not actively press for their extension.

5. The group conform to certain standards of behaviour, because their practice involves them in private affairs, and they are experts advising non-experts.

Persons practising social work knew about details of a private and sometimes intimate nature. Further, they possessed and used information not known by their clients. Through their education and professional association there was some agreement on what was proper professional behaviour. How much their actual behaviour conformed to this is difficult to tell. An ethical code was being made explicit, but questions of its implementation still had to be answered.

6. In their dealings with their clients, service to the clients and the community rather than gain to the practitioner or the group is stressed in the group's ethical code.

Perhaps no group of people stressed more, both in theory and practice, that service to their clients and the community was their intention. The fact that social workers did not rely upon their clients' fees for their livelihood released them from a self-regarding pressure found in other professions.

7. The group accept collective responsibility to use their knowledge for the benefit of the community, over and above services to individual clients.

Individually, many social workers felt a responsibility to use knowledge gained from professional practice to benefit the community; indeed, many would have seen this as an integral part of their professional practice. Collectively, mainly through their professional association, they assumed similar responsibilities. Social action was still part of the Australian social work tradition, even though it had undergone fluctuating fortunes. Singly and together, social workers were consulted by a variety of individuals and community bodies about social problems and ways of combating them. The extent of consultation was limited, however, by such restricting influences as ignorance of the collective existence of qualified social workers, parochialism,

and suspicion of expertise in social welfare circles, the relatively small numbers of qualified social workers, and the disproportionate number of unmarried women, and inexperienced members in their ranks.

On each of these features, then, Australian professional social workers scored at least to some degree. Whether their existing composite score was sufficient to warrant calling them a profession depended on personal choice, attitude, and knowledge of other professions. Whatever the judgement on this, there was still plenty of room for further development of professional social work in Australia.

This text is taken from *Professional Social Work in Australia*,
by R. J. Lawrence, published 2016 by ANU eView,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.