**Reflections on Social Work: Past, Present and Future**

**70th Anniversary Colloquium, Social Work at the University of Melbourne**

**Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott**

Distinguished guests, and friends, one and all.

Let us honour and respect the elders, past and present, of the Wurundjeri people, the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered today. In doing so I wish to pay tribute to Aboriginal elders who have passed, such as Auntie Mollie Dyer, who taught me, when I was a young social work graduate working in the field of child welfare, that we had to address the problems associated with Aboriginal children in white foster families. She began with us a long and painful journey of trying to do so.

It is a great privilege to be asked to speak with you on this special occasion for the social work profession, an occasion which brings to mind one of my favourite quotations. Mead and Haymen once said that the task of the family, like the task of humanity, is to remember those who have gone before, to cherish the living and to prepare for those not yet born.

I am reminded of this because social worktoo is comprised of intergenerational links in a chain, each link forged by its own time and place. Its core elements can create continuities of certain values, knowledge and skills, while changing contexts also create discontinuities, sometimes slowly, sometimes abruptly.

Looking at earlier links in the chain of social work may help us to see our own times and place in perspective. It may even help us to think about how we prepare for the links to come - looking back to see ahead.

History, however, is a risky endeavor. Whether it is a history of our family, our nation, ourprofession or an organisation with which we are closely connected, it is always contested territory as there are competing narratives,depending on who you are and where you stand. There are the risks of ancestor worship, of ignorance of key people and events, and of unfairly passing judgement on those who have gone before because we fail to understand them in the context of their time and place. There is also the risk of telling a narrative which may make some people feel that they don’t belong in social work. For example, the role of men in the history of social work has often been eclipsed by the predominance of women, and this can act as a self-perpetuating barrier to men coming into social work.

On rare occasions such as this we must allow ourselves the liberty, for it is not a luxury, of looking back. It is time to reflect on thegiants on whoseshoulderswe stand, to coin the Robert Merton phrase, and discernthe continuities and discontinuities of social workover time. This may help us cherish what we have today while not being uncritical of what we do, andalso help us to prepare for those not yet born..

As we all know, social work in English speaking countries owes it origins to both the Charity Organisation Society movement (the COS), which foundedthe social casework tradition, and to the settlement house movement whichfoundedthe group work and community developmenttradition and often drew on this experience as a foundation for advocacy.

This twin heritage is often exemplified by contrasting the two North American mothers of social work – Mary Richmond and her pioneering conceptualization of social casework at the end of the nineteenth century arising from her COS work, and Jane Addams, social activist and founder of the famous Hull House in Chicago and pioneer of community work.Our local COS wasthe Melbourne Charity Organisation Society, founded in the 1880s, later called the Citizens Welfare Service and now known as Drummond Street Services.

An example of a local organization which had some resemblance to the settlement house movement, was the Brotherhood of St Laurence, established in the 1930s.

It is easy to create a false dichotomybetweenamelioration of individual needs on one hand and progressive social action on the other.Thehistorical narrative I prefer is far complex and more nuanced than that.

In relation to the history of professional social work in Victoria, which began later than in the UK and North America, there is another, more immediate endowment and that comes from the hospital almonertradition or what we came to call medical social work. Psychiatric social work was also influential in Victorian social work and social work education.

The first trained social worker in Australia was Miss Agnes McIntyre who came from St Thomas’ Hospital London in 1929 to take up the role of hospital almoner at the Melbourne Hospital (later the Royal Melbourne Hospital). Miss McIntyre was also the first Directress of the Victorian Institute of Hospital Almoners, the body which established the hospital almoner training and was the forerunner of social work education in this State.

It was Miss McIntyre who, having returned to England, interviewed Miss Jocelyn Hyslop for the inaugural position of Director of Training of the Board of Social Studies which later became the Melbourne University Department of Social Studies and then the School of Social Work. With thanks to Jane Miller and David Nichols for their recent research on the origins of social work education in Victoria, I have been learning a little about the remarkable Jocelyn Hyslop.

Benefittingin her childhood from the advances in educational opportunities for girls in Scotland in the late nineteenth century, Jocelyn Hyslopheld a Bachelor of Science from London University and qualifications in both social science and mental health from the London School of Economics. She also had practice experience in the child guidance field, what we would now call the field of child and adolescent mental health, and undertook pioneering work in early childhood education.

To quote Jane Miller and David Nichols,

Only 37 years when she arrived in Australia in 1934 to take up the inaugural position of Director of Training of the Board of Social Studies, Miss Hyslop had travelled to her new home via the United States. At the Board’s direction she had compared American and English training...

Her two month visit to New York and Chicago was funded by the Carnegie Foundation, which, it should be noted, also generously supported the establishment of social work at the University of Sydney. Miss Hyslop’sreport on the relative merits of social work education on each side of the Atlantic is illuminating.

The socialwork course Miss Hyslop developed showed a strong American influence, and she changed thename of the qualificationfrom Diploma of Social Science to Diploma of Social Service.Early graduates of the course were mainly employed in voluntary child and family welfare agencies, child disability agencies and in hospitals, also the site of most of the field placements.

The academic subjects for the Diploma included: psychology; political institutions; economics; problems of society; social organization; social history; mental hygiene; child study and nutrition. While curricula have changed enormously, the conceptual focus on both the individual and the social environment is a powerful and profound continuity. Fieldwork was undertaken in both years, and a four week trial of fieldwork was a pre-requisite for entry.

If we take the social work trinity of values, knowledge and skills, can we identify continuities and discontinuities in the links of the intergenerational chain?

**Values**

First, in relation to values, the pioneers of social work were exemplars of the values and virtues of vocation, for social work was a vocation before it was a profession. Many of us might agreethat vocation is now weaker than it once was for all professions but for many,social work is still first and foremost a vocation.

The powerful impact of secularisation, professionalisation and bureaucratisation has weakened the ethos of vocation in society generally. As in nursing and teaching, there are also demographic factors. Most of the early social workers were middle class, single women and a vocation was more possible for them than it is for women, or men for that matter, with childrearing responsibilitiestoday.

Is the notion of vocation an anachronism, then? Well, the word itself is certainly out of vogue but if we take the essence of vocation as ‘where the heart’s desire meets the world’s need’, then it can still be found.

Many of those drawn to social work still bring a deep vocational commitment. The last time I had the great privilegeof teaching social work students was in 2004, just before I left this University. I had developed an elective for final year students, just about to graduate. It explored, both conceptually and experientially, drawing on literature and the arts, the themes of identity, integrity and inspiration in social work. The students were all women, but there was a marked diversity in terms of social class, ethnicity, religion and sexual preference than would have been the case in earlier times.

In a climate of trust,we explored the goodness of fit between our personal and professional identity, the issues of integrity in challenging organizational contexts, and what inspired and sustained us. Each of us told the story of our journey into social work. For one student the story began in Cambodia where she was born in the midst of the genocide, and how she was carried on her mother’s back all the way to a refugee camp in Northern Thailand. She played us the first music she ever heard, a haunting traditional folk song she recalled being sung in the refugee camp. Her journey to social work began in the suffering and the sacrifice of her refugee experience which nurtured within her a deep compassion and commitment to social justice.

I invited social workers such as Julie Edwards and Irene Renzenbrink,who are here with us today, to come and talk about their journeys to social work as a vocation. As they spoke from their heart as well as their head, one could have heard a pin drop. I am not sure if the students had ever heard us speak with them in this way before.

I was moved by the depth of vocation of these young women, and realized with great sadness that this gift had not been cherished and nurtured as it might have been in either the classroom or their field placements. And if their experience on graduation was similar to that of previous students I had taught, then I am afraid that in many of their first places of employment their gift of vocation would not have been cherished and nurturedeither. I believe that this is one of the reasons we lose good people from social work.

However, there are encouraging signs of a resurgence of interest in what would once have been called vocation. For example, the educational reformer Parker Palmerexplores the theme of ‘role and soul’ through group processes based on trust, helping people reconnect ‘who they are with what they do’. For many there is a spiritual dimension to social work which we find difficult to acknowledge and share.

This dimension often does not sit easily within formal organisations. As an organizationallydependent profession, social work is very vulnerable to corrosive organizational conditions, and such conditions are common, in part due to the stigmatized and disempowered client populations we serve, the heavy demands upon services and the ascendancy of managerialism over vocational leadership.

Recent research in child protection settings, one of the most difficult fields in relation to social work recruitment and retention, has demonstrated what social work practitioners have known for a long time – that the quality of the service can be enhanced by improving organisational climate and culture. High quality leadership and high quality professional supervision,are essential to creating and sustaining the organizational conditions essential for retention of committed and skilled social workers.

**Knowledge**

Second, in relation to knowledge, the contrast between past and present is obvious. Reflecting contemporary social values, there is much greater recognition of social diversity in the content of social work education today in relation to culture, Indigenous issues, gender and sexual preference, than when I was a student in the early 1970s.

There is also now a vast reservoir of knowledge and information which was not available to earlier generations of social workers.The research basein the behavioral and social science is enormous, and the revolution in information technology means that the sort of data mining which Professor Irwin Epstein undertakes and teaches us, has created opportunities of which previous generation could not dream.

This comes home to me vividly when I think of the laborious analysis of a sample of child welfare files that my teacher, my mentor and my friend,the late Dr Len Tierney, did for his seminal book *Children Who Need Help*, published in 1963. In contrast, it is now electronically possible to provide an up to date analysis of the characteristics of all the children in State care in Victoria every year.Yet the conceptual depth and originality Len Tierney brought to bear in his analysis, is usually less evident today. I am tempted to ask of my generation the question posed by TS Eliot – where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge, where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

In terms of research impact, I think we also struggle to match that of our predecessors, although we are no less committed to the goal. Len Tierney’s research which I have just mentioned, for example, was absolutely pivotal in the reform of child welfare in this State in the 1960s.It is interesting to note that he did not work in a higher education environment when research impact was measured by publication in so called high impact academic journals which often have no impact in the world of practice or policy at all. Nor was the service system as politicized as it now is in virtually all fields, which means we often see research used not to guide policy but as a rationalization for policies based on pragmatism and politics.

But I do see a strong continuity in the commitment of social workers to doing research which makes a difference, and one can see this in the research undertaken in the School of Social Work here and elsewhere.For this we have superb role models. For example, in 1953 Jean Allen was appointed as social worker in the Clinical Research Unit at the Royal Children’s Hospital. This was a time when the prevalence of tragic accidents such as burns and poisoning in young children was very high. Containers of medicines and poisons were unsafe for children and flammable nightwear, especially for little girls, and kerosene heaters, were an often fatal combination.

After theadmission of every child to the Royal Children’s Hospital as a result of such an accident at home, Jean Allenvisited the family to offer support to the parents and to collect vital information on the injury. She visited more than 500 families, and in the words of Dr Howard Williams who led the clinical research unit, this research was invaluable in initiating preventive action by safety legislation and parent education.

This is not only a wonderful example of practice research with high impact, but also a superb example of theold North American social work exhortationthat we ‘go from case to cause’. I love the twofold notion of ‘cause’ in that expression – cause as in tackling the underlying cause of a problem, and ‘cause’ as in fighting for the cause of reform on a more structural level.

Another continuityover time in social knowledge can be found in the overarching conceptual frameworks which guide social work practice. While it may not have been given the name we now use – a bio-psycho-social perspective, the recognition of the dynamic interaction of factors within both the person and their social environment remains the conceptual hallmark of social work. I notice that Associate Professor Lou Harms teaches what she calls a bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective in the subject once known as human behavior and the social environment.

Of course, the dangers of biological reductionism, psychological reductionism and sociological reductionism are always present. These inherent tensions can also be creative tensions.

Paradoxically, the biological was stronger in social work curricula in the past than it is now, despite the vastly greater knowledge in areas such as the neurosciences, for example, which are so relevant to social work. Some of you will remember the breadth and depth of the subject Social Biology which was taught in the 1960s and 1970s by DelysSargeant, who is with us here today, and Dr Lena Thomas. Among the many things we did was the dissection of human brains in laboratories, visits to supermarkets to do nutritional and financial analysis of the food on the shelves, and learning about human sexuality, the latter being of particular interest to many of us whose knowledge in that area was very limited in those days!

Psychology also had a central part in social work education in that era, with many students majoring in psychology and all of us being required to do at least a sub-major. Within some social work subjects there was also a psychodynamic element, reflecting the enduring American influence on our social work education. This has been the legitimate subject of strong critique, of course, but I must say that I do not recall my social work teachersever privileging the psychological over the situational. To the contrary, I recall Len Tierney once saying to me, “remember Dorothy, there are states of affairs as well as states of the mind”.As a psychiatric social worker I sometimes needed to be reminded of that fact.

In some contexts social workers today, as in the past, are seduced by the psychological and what they may see as the upward occupational mobility promised by the title ‘counselor’ or ‘therapist’. Social work abandons its mission and robs the community of its greatest gift when it does this. But equally,social work is also diminishedand the community not served well when we reject the psychological and respond only at the superficial situational level to phenomena which have a deeper complexity.

The psycho-social gestalt is beautifully captured by British social work academic Gillian Schofield, who, drawing upon the ideas of social worker and psychoanalyst Clare Winnicottdecades earlier, puts it most evocatively:“Inner worlds express themselves through and have an impact on outer worlds.Outer worlds affect inner worlds.Past worlds affect present world.”

To me these are the enduring propositions of social work theory and practice, and this conceptual template is what enables social workers to respond to specific problems for which they have not, and sometimes could not, have been prepared, in their professional education. I think of how my colleagues and I had to respond to the problem of child sexual abuse in the mid 1970s without any preparation for this previously hidden problem. Or howCath James, who is with us here today, and others, forged a social work response to the challenges of HIV AIDS two decades ago. In relation to issues as diverse as these, the core questions are similar regardless of field of practice or whether the unit of attention is the individual, the family or the community.From cradle to grave, social work is profoundly engaged with the complex interactions of outer worlds, inner worlds, past worlds and present worlds.

**Skills**

Finally, in relation to skills, or how we actually respond to situations in the light of the understanding which our knowledge base provides, there are also continuities and discontinuities. One of the advances in the 1970s, pioneered by social work educators such as Stuart Evans, was to use new technologies to teach interpersonal practice skills within the university before students did their field placements.

In regard to direct practice, the core continuities include the use of self and the capacity for self-reflection, for we always have been and as long as the human encounter is at the core of social work, we always will be, the instruments of our practice.

The difference is that we now have empirical evidence to support the time honoured social work belief that the quality of the worker-client relationship is fundamental. The qualities of empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism, as experienced by those whom we seek to serve, have been shown to be very significant in determining the outcome for the client in meta-analyses of research.

**Hope**

Of all these qualities – empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism, perhaps it is the last one, optimism, which now needs the closest attention for we live in an era in which the spirit of the age is one of fear and despair.Often in social work the most precious gift we can offer is hope. This is true not just in terms of individualsbut also in relation to communities andorganisations.

Valerie Braithwaite, from the Australian National University, has written about ‘institutions of hope’ by which she means not just formal organisations but also social movements.

Institutions of hope refer to sets of rules, norms and practice that ensure that we have some room not only to dream of the extraordinary but to do the extraordinary. Institutions of hope move us collectively away from a social script that makes engagement in shaping our futures seem futile toward one in which we are expected to be active and responsible participants contributing to a vibrant civil society.

Under the leadership of Professor Marie Connolly the school of social work at this University is an institution of hope. May we help students drawn to the vocation of social not only to dream of the extraordinary but to do the extraordinary. In this way we can nurture new generational cohorts of social workers tohelp families and communities to cherish the living and prepare for those not yet born.