

Function versus Cause: Moving Beyond Debate

by Carol Jarvis

Abstract

Two narratives – that of function, associated with Charity Organization Societies, and cause, associated with the settlement house movement – have strongly influenced the social work profession since its inception. For much of the profession’s history, there has been an emphasis on the function tradition, with cause remaining at the periphery. This essay traces the factors that led to the development of these two divergent philosophical approaches and the various forms in which the tension between the two approaches has been expressed. Today’s social worker has a myriad of practice approaches from which to choose. These approaches, having their foundations in both function and cause traditions, suggest the social work profession may be ready to dispense with debate in order to face the challenges of the 21st century.

Introduction

The function versus cause debate, which has consumed the social work profession since its inception in the late 19th century, has taken various forms. Going back to the beginning of the debate, a commitment to “cause,” or a focus on social reform, is associated with the social reform efforts of Jane Addams and the settlement house movement, while a commitment to “function,” or a focus on changing individual behavior, has its roots in the Charity Organization Societies and the casework techniques developed by Mary Richmond. Over time, this dualism within the profession has been expressed in numerous ways, including the debate between the functional and diagnostic schools and, more recently, social work clinicians divided between a problem-solving approach to practice on one hand and a strengths-based or empowerment approach on the other. Dualisms like these create ongoing internal conflict for social workers and divert attention from external pressures that need to be dealt with by the profession. From severely reduced funding for social service programs to demands for evidence-based practice, social workers are challenged to “do more with less.” Our clients, too, face enormous challenges brought on by globalization and free trade, resulting in reduced opportunities for a living wage, the lack of affordable health care, and an absence of

government protections in many arenas of society. It is imperative for social workers to find a way to move from debate to dialogue on the fundamental question for the profession, framed here in terms of the original debate between function and cause. Acceptance of practice approaches that draws from the function *as well as* the cause traditions in the profession could provide a means for moving past these divisive debates and position the profession to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Origins of the Debate

Beginning in the Progressive Era, a debate began to take form concerning where social workers should focus their efforts to assist those in need. The Charity Organization Societies (COS), emphasizing the individual as the focus for initiating change, or an emphasis on “function”, came first, preceding the Settlement House Movement (SHM) in the United States, with its emphasis on social reform, or “cause,” by almost a decade (Leiby, 1978). The COS movement emerged as a response to perceived abuses of the poor laws in England and a fear of pauperization (Leiby, 1978). These concerns led philanthropists to devise ways of distributing aid in a more orderly and systematic way. Hence, from its beginnings the COS movement, grounded in the fear that the poor would become dependent on almsgiving, established a means for “rational charity” with a focus on eventual change within the individual (Leiby, 1978, p. 114). Proponents of the COS movement believed it necessary to move beyond what they saw as indiscriminate aid provision to an examination of the causes of poverty, which were believed by the COS to lie within the individual (Suppes & Wells, 2003).

The methods used by the COS were chosen to express and implement the organization’s emphasis on the individual as the focus for intervention as well as the underlying cause of the problem of poverty. Specifically, COS applied the scientific method, then especially in vogue, to the distribution of aid. This method, which became known as “scientific charity,” placed great emphasis on the investigation of each individual requesting aid (Popple, 1995, p. 2283). This was based on a belief that COS workers (at that time primarily volunteers) conducting

a thorough investigation would be able to determine the underlying problem that resulted in a given individual's need for aid. This move toward a "logical, evidence-based method for helping" also led to a focus on practice technique (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989, p. 350).

The Settlement House Movement (SHM), by contrast, focused on meeting the needs of the individual while simultaneously addressing the underlying societal causes of poverty. Established primarily in urban settings, the SHM implemented a wide range of services in response to the problems caused by industrialization and urban slums (Koerin, 2003). Whereas the COS focused primarily on technique-based investigation (function) of the individual, the SHM "reflected a dual responsibility for social service and social reform" (Koerin, 2003, p. 54). The primary belief underlying this approach was that by addressing the societal factors leading to poverty the need for aid would be eliminated. Consequently, the SHM became associated more with social reform (cause), although the settlement houses did provide numerous services at the individual and community levels.

The debate on function versus cause in the social work profession was not held in a vacuum. The prevailing worldview of the time, influenced by Catholic and Protestant themes of redemption and compassion, emphasized the provision of moral guidance in conjunction with material aid (Leiby, 1978). The Protestant work ethic reinforced the idea that individuals could improve their situations through hard work as well as good use of moral guidance. In this worldview, poverty was seen as an individual failing originating from a "lack of moral will" (Weick et al., 1989, p. 350). However, this tradition did call upon Christians to be charitable toward those in need: "a Christian was obliged to recognize and love the Christ in the sinner, but also to hate and correct the sin" (Leiby, 1978, p. 21). The religious tradition, then, provided meaning for those suffering from poverty as well as those who sought to alleviate this suffering (Leiby, 1978).

From the Age of Enlightenment, a scientific tradition emerged which emphasized logic, rationalism, and empiricism (Weick et al., 1989). This tradition led to the development of scientific philanthropy and the COS method of scientific charity (Leiby, 1978). As Weick (1992) characterizes this approach, the scientific tradition provides "a secular version of this same drama. Instead of sin and moral insufficiency, the scientific method devoted itself to problem-solving" (p. 20). The use of a scientific approach

to resolving individual problems led to the development of techniques to provide for an orderly distribution of aid.

Flexner and Lee Sharpen the Debate

Two influential statements in the first third of the 20th century—Abraham Flexner's report ("Is Social Work a Profession?") to the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1915, and Porter Lee's speech to the National Conference of Social Work in 1929 ("Social Work as Cause and Function")—contributed to sharpening the division between the two approaches of the profession: an individual focus for change associated with the COS, and a societal focus for change associated with the SHM (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Flexner, an educator who had authored a report in 1910 evaluating the nation's medical schools, took a similar evaluative aim at other professions such as social work, business, and law (Iwabuchi, 2004). The importance of the Flexner report in increasing social work's preoccupation with function and its companion, technique, cannot be overstated. Comparing social work to other developing professions such as medicine and law, Flexner "denied that social work could ever become a genuine profession, claiming that it lacked a specific skill applied to a specific function"¹ (Lubove, 1969, p. 106). Even though the profession was already on its way to developing training schools, the results of the Flexner report were a "redoubling" of efforts to develop additional social work methods and techniques grounded in the scientific method (Costin, 1983, p. 101), and "status anxiety," leading to increasing efforts toward professionalization (Weick, 1992, p. 20). These efforts to correct the problems Flexner identified eventually led to a diminution of social reform efforts in favor of casework techniques (Popple, 1995). Schoen (as cited in Saleeby, 1992) remarks that the Flexner report took the profession toward a position of "Technical/Rationality," "a conception of professional thinking and doing smitten with the notion of professional as applied technologist" (Saleeby, 1992, p. 4). Richmond's *Social Diagnosis* best exemplifies the profession's determination to correct for the deficiencies Flexner identified (Blundo, 2001).

As social casework proliferated, there arose a pressing need to develop consensus among the various casework specializations in order to keep the profession unified (Wenocur and Reisch, 1989). The vehicle for fulfilling this commitment was a series of meetings of prominent social workers, held annually from the early to mid 1920s (Wenocur & Reisch,

¹ Other disciplines Flexner denied professional status include business, journalism, home economics, and library science (Iwabuchi, 2004).

1989). Called the Milford Conference, these meetings in particular helped the profession to organize around a unifying conceptualization of “generic social casework” (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989, p.137). A key participant in this conference (and the chair of the committee responsible for the final conference report) was Porter Lee, director of The New York School (a training school known for family and psychiatric casework specializations) (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989, p. 136). Lee’s speech to the National Conference of Social Workers in 1929 cemented the separation of cause and function, or social reform and individual intervention in the form of casework:

Since cause and function are both carried on by human agents, they make use of the same human characteristics. Nevertheless, their emphases are different and their demands in the long run require different combinations of human qualities. Zeal is perhaps the most conspicuous trait in adherents to the cause, while intelligence is perhaps most essential in those who administer a function. The emblazoned banner and the shibboleth for the cause, the program and the manual for the function; devoted sacrifice and the flaming spirit for the cause, fidelity, standards, and methods for the function; embattled host for the cause, an efficient personnel for the function. (as cited in Leiby, 1978, p. 180)

Lee’s assertions made apparent the increasing polarity of the two traditions within the profession. They also expressed a belief held by many on the function side of the debate that the professionalization of social work required a narrower definition of social work that excluded many of the SHM techniques (Popple, 1995). The decline of the SHM coincided with social work’s “...transition from an avocation to a paid vocation. As the idea of professionalization took hold, the social reform segment *could not sustain this definition* of social work”[emphasis added] (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989, p. 139).

To a large extent, function (casework) was elevated to the exclusion of cause (social reform) in order to advance the modernization and development of the profession, although there is evidence that this advancement of function/casework had been hastened by the changing “structuration,” which emphasized casework tasks (Abbott, 1995, p. 556). In addition, economic instability and crisis caused COS agencies to become overwhelmed with requests for material assistance; the ensuing rush to provide sufficient agency staffing continued the focus on function (Simon, 1994).

The emphasis on function over cause was intensified by social work’s application of psychoanalytic theory to casework methods; this trend would continue until the implementation of anti-poverty programs in the 1960s (Popple, 1995). The profession eventually began to relegate social reform efforts to separate activities altogether, such as community organization (Abramovitz, 1998). Saleeby (1992) notes, “the tension between reformist impulses and the development of a professionally respectable body of theory and technique...[had] been resolved in favor of the latter” (p. 14).

The Debate Shifts: The Functionalist-Diagnostic Divide

As social casework evolved, many in the profession became aligned with psychiatry and Freudian doctrine (Lubove, 1969). The move toward understanding clients based on their inner experiences (psychology) was quite radical in a time when morality still played a large role in understanding people’s behavior (Simon, 1994). However, not everyone in the profession was pleased with social work’s adherence to Freudian principles. As Lubove (1969) notes:

The absorption of Freudian doctrine and a general interest in psychotherapy contributed to a shift in the caseworker’s orientation from social environment to mental process. They identified themselves with the psychiatric clinic team rather than the social meliorist, who seemed a bit old-fashioned. (p. 86)

Beginning in the 1930s and continuing into the 1950s, the profession was polarized between two schools of thought for social casework: the diagnostics, affiliated with The New York School of Social Work and the Smith School for Social Work (now known as Smith College), and the functionalists, affiliated with the Pennsylvania School of Social Work (Tyson, 1995). While each approach was based on principles drawn from psychology, each was also unique. The functional approach, with its “emphasis on phenomena as processes, the concept of wholeness, relationship, and human potential,” retained the narrative of the cause tradition of “advocating for social change, social justice, and the search for meaning and purpose in human endeavors” (Early & GlenMaye, 2000, p. 122). In contrast, the diagnostic approach, drawing upon Richmond’s theories about casework, focused on social study, diagnosis, and treatment, thereby continuing the function tradition (Woods & Robinson, 1996).

The dispute between the functionalists and diagnostics was bitter and intense (Woods & Robinson, 1996; Tyson, 1995). Proponents of each school, strongly believing their approach was right, not only for clients but for social work as well, fought hard for dominance within the profession. At one point the division within the profession became so great that, as Tyson (1995) notes, “adherents of one approach found it difficult to obtain employment at an agency that supported the other approach” (p. 56).

An Old Debate Finds New Expression

The 1957 publication of Helen Harris Perlman’s *Social Casework: A Problem-solving Process*, while possibly resolving the polarization between the diagnostic and functional schools, also served to solidify the profession’s emphasis on function by its continued focus on problem identification (diagnosis) and treatment (McMillen, Morris, & Sherraden, 2004). Recently, though, the strengths-based approach has given new expression to the inclusion of cause in the profession. The introduction of this approach has created conflict within the profession between advocates of the strengths-based approach and proponents of the problem-solving approach. So, the dualisms and debate continue.

The problem-solving approach, with its roots in the diagnostic school, continues the profession’s reliance on function and technique in its step-by-step approach to working with clients. “Problem-solving offers a logical process for assessing a social problem, reviewing options for addressing it, and working out a plan designed for its amelioration” (Turner & Jaco, 1996, p. 504). This approach is also consistent with social work’s long alliance with psychiatry; adherents of the problem-solving approach generally use assessment and diagnosis, leading to a structured treatment plan. The scientific tradition and a positivist viewpoint also strongly influence the problem-solving approach, as indicated by the reliance of those who use this approach on logic, empiricism, and rationality (Payne, 2005). The problem-solving approach has been so thoroughly incorporated in social work curricula that “it has essentially become the basic method that underlies much of practice” (Turner & Jaco, 1996, p. 519). Indeed, given responses to a recent query on the Baccalaureate Program Director’s listserve, the problem-solving method still appears to be the preferred method for teaching the generalist approach to social work practice (R. Birkey, personal communication, November 28, 2005).

In contrast, the strengths-based approach has largely remained outside the mainstream of social

work education and practice (Blundo, 2001). Emerging in the 1980s from a constructivist standpoint and an empowerment perspective and having its roots in the functional school, the strengths-based approach was first utilized for case management in community mental health centers (Early & GlenMaye, 2000; Brun & Rapp, 2001). It has been included in the problem-solving approach in a way that strengths-based proponents consider to be superficial and unsatisfactory (Blundo, 2001). In the view of strengths-based proponents, problem-solving practitioners who include a strengths-based perspective in their work do so in a way that makes it a supplement, and subordinate, to an approach that still gives pre-eminence to the worker’s expertise. Inclusions of this kind leave the strengths-based approach at the periphery of social work education and practice in the view of strengths-based practitioners. Interestingly, there is some anecdotal evidence indicating a preference among undergraduate social work students for the inclusion of a strengths/empowerment perspective in practice courses (Cox, 2001). This suggests that social work students are willing to accept a variety of practice approaches as generalist practitioners and points to the need for social work educators to consider including both approaches in practice theory/methods courses, especially at the undergraduate level.

A strengths-based approach places less emphasis on technique and more on a set of underlying concepts. “The strengths approach, with its emphasis on growth and change, collaborative relationship, and the center of change located in the client, has as its foundation a subjectivist understanding of human behavior and purpose” (Early & GlenMaye, 2000, p. 123). Assessment emphasizes discovery rather than diagnosis. Clients are seen as experts in their own right; mutuality in the client-worker relationship is stressed. This approach is consistent with the philosophy expressed through the functional school that emphasized “human purposive action, self-actualization [and] human potential...” and is seen as continuing the narrative of the cause tradition (Early & GlenMaye, 2000, p. 122).

The fact that the empowerment perspective is incorporated in the strengths-based approach suggests a renewal of interest in cause and social reform. By stressing the expertise of both worker and client, “a relationship is formed between a professional and an individual, a family, a group, an organization, or a community for the purposes of empowerment and promotion of social and economic justice” (Poulin, 2005, p. 3). This collaborative relationship, in which

the standpoints of worker and client are given equal credence, has strong potential for addressing inequities. Moreover, according to Poulin (2005), social reform becomes possible once both the client and the worker recognize that *every* environment has resources (emphasis added). This view is reminiscent of the work of such settlement house workers as Mary Parker Follett, Mary Simkhovitch, and Edith Abbott (Simon, 1994).

The debate among social workers regarding which approach—problem-solving or strengths-based—represents the best practice approach for the profession has at times taken a rancorous tone (McMillen et al., 2004; Saleeby, 2004). Attempts to advance one approach over the other have resulted in disparaging, hyperbolic language, and unfair characterizations. For example, some social workers have described the debate as a “grudge match” with one side wearing “black spandex” and “in the other corner, [the social worker] with her white flowing robes...” (McMillen et al., 2004, p. 317). The passion and tenacity with which proponents of each approach hold their viewpoints is strikingly similar to the early debates between social work pioneers such as Jane Addams (cause) and Mary Richmond (function), and those between the functionalists and diagnostics.

Moving Beyond Debate

Given the complex political and economic realities of the 21st century, it is incumbent upon the profession to move past these divisive debates. We live in a global economy in which job outsourcing has the potential to displace vast numbers of unskilled workers, most of them without the protection of union support. At the same time, there has been an overall retrenchment by the government as a provider of social services. Social services are increasingly controlled by private markets, such as the insurance industry, which exert powerful control over people’s lives (Saleeby, 2004). These factors point to the profession’s need to pay more attention to cause in order to keep its commitment to social justice and help clients cope with the many uncertainties of daily life.

Previous attempts by the profession to unify around one theory or approach never seemed to satisfy the profession because these efforts usually favored one tradition (function) over the other (cause) (McMillen et al., 2004). Perhaps instead of trying to agree on any single unifying theory, the profession can be unified by its core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and

competence (National Association of Social Workers, 1999). The current trend toward eclecticism and integration of practice approaches, emanating from both the cause and the function traditions, suggests that social workers are already moving beyond debate to an acceptance of both traditions. Instead of having only a few practice approaches from which to choose, as was the case for much of social work’s history, there is now a plethora of practice approaches available to social workers. Many of these have strong ties to the cause tradition (i.e., feminist, empowerment, narrative, client-centered) signaling a willingness on the profession to accept both traditions rather than being stuck in a forced choice between them (Turner, 1996). The “growing tolerance of differences among theories and theorists” is certainly a positive indication that the profession is ready to take a pluralistic approach to social work practice (Turner, 1996, p. 699).

While the profession will not likely be unified by any one theory or practice approach, the profession can choose to organize around the “external threats to our values and foundations in [the] changed world outside the profession” (Rossiter, 2005, pp. 195, 201). Ironically, the realities confronting clients of this century are not unlike those that clients faced at the end of the 19th century: social upheaval brought on by external and unpredictable economic, political, and social forces. If social workers are able to move beyond internal disputes and debates, it may be that an integration of practice approaches, drawing upon *both* the function and the cause traditions, will enable us to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

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After a twenty-year career in the field, Carol Jarvis, LCSW, entered the doctoral program of the School of Social Work to pursue a Ph.D. Her research interests include peer-run grief centers and non-traditional women students. She is an adjunct faculty member in the Social Work and Women's Studies programs at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana.