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# Sociology, Social Work and Social Problems

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Both sociology and social work have contributions to make to the solution of social problems. It seems probable that as social science becomes less academic and more involved in the real world, and as social work becomes less psychiatrically oriented, there will be an increasing need for the two fields to cooperate in the solution of social problems. It, therefore, seems appropriate to discuss the present stance of each discipline with respect to social problems. In order to do this, we must first define social problems (Lee and Lee, 1949; Frank, 1949; Rose, 1964) and define various ways in which they can be solved.<sup>1</sup>

For present purposes, we define a social problem as a dislocation or dysfunction in the social system which is regarded by the society as requiring intervention by its designated agents. In this view, there are three requirements for a given social condition to be regarded as a social problem:

- 1) it must be social in origin
- 2) it must be regarded by the society as a problem
- 3) it must require some form of social intervention

Currently, social problems are seen in such conditions as: socially created inequalities in the distribution of income, rights, or education, and in the growing chaos of our major cities. Crime, juvenile delinquency, care of the mentally

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ill, sexual deviance and other related consequences of these conditions are also defined as social problems. But if events are not defined as problems by the society, no social problem exists. For example, changing standards of individual sexual behavior among middle class persons are not really a social problem. Although public concern is expressed about such matters, no effort is made by the society to sanction and regulate sexual activity in this group. However, the production of illegitimate children among women of low income where the society must make provision for the support of the infants, is defined as a social problem. And so society enforces negative sanctions on sexual activity by these women. The emergence of the "hippy" culture, and the use of psychedelic drugs, particularly by young people, appears to be emerging as a new social problem. Significant segments of the society, particularly those with formal social control responsibilities are urging and enforcing negative sanctions for use (and possession) of psychedelic drugs. At the same time, there are considerable segments of opinion, particularly young, that support this concern with inner experience as legitimate. Thus, what one part of society defines as a social problem another part does not. In fact, the social problem may be more in the conflicting definitions of legitimacy than in the use of these substances per se.

There are at least four separate ways in which a society can respond to a recognized social problem:

- 1) Efforts can be made to ameliorate the negative outcomes or symptoms without affecting the underlying causes.
- 2) Attempts can be made at prevention by modifying the single social institution seen as the source of the problem.
- 3) Revolutionary restructuring of the society involving major modifications in the structure and relationship of an interdependent system of social institutions may be attempted.
- 4) Symptom exacerbation may occur when no clear solution is visible; but there is a concerted effort by one or more subgroups in the society to exert pressure. This pressure (Eglinton, 1964:40) is exerted on the theory that any change is preferable to a continuation of the status quo.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these response patterns arise from different structural situations, and each draws social agents from different subspecialties or subgroups within society. These four patterns can be seen as arising from two different social processes: prevention and amelioration responses arise from social planning within established institutional patterns; revolutionary responses and symptom exacerbations arise from social movements and are patterns of elementary collective behavior (Case, 1964:11).<sup>3</sup> The agents of social change vary correspondingly. In the first type of social process, they may come from within the central structure of the society, being appointed, in effect, by the system, to deal with

the problems created by the dysfunctional situation. In the second type of social process, they may be self-selected, coming essentially from outside the established system. Accordingly, amelioration and prevention responses will tend to be the result of actions by the designated agents of the social system. Revolutionary responses and symptom exacerbation will be instituted by agents who "emerge as natural leaders" from social movements.

Thus, for example, our public welfare system is a form of amelioration which is handled essentially by designated agents of the social system. Public assistance programs are seen as one form of social insurance and are written into the broader Social Security Act. Social engineers designed public assistance programs to ameliorate economic distress rather than to attack the inherent flaws within the economic system. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said (Cohen *et al.*, 1948:101) in 1934:

We are compelled to employ the active interest of the nation as a whole through government in order to encourage a greater security for each individual who composes it.

Such a social plan did not seem to require any basic structural change in either the social or economic system which was in existence in the United States during the depression years. This program could be operated with technicians; e.g., intelligent college graduates who could determine legal eligibility and administer the financial payments. Currently, however, welfare recipients are anything but financially or personally secure. Substandard levels of assistance are provided through a system which has actually developed in a manner which perpetuates a negative self-image and stifles individual initiative. Such a system was originally intended to be a solution to the dysfunctions arising from the inequalities in the distribution of income but it has created another kind of social problem. Although the negative consequences of absence of income are somewhat ameliorated, the basic causes of poverty are left unchanged or have even been exacerbated.

While social planning may be devised as an economic or political strategy, it is often administered by persons who work, not only to administer a law but also to change the distressed individual, i.e., to change not the system but the self. Social welfare planning, for example, led to the design of a "law to flatten out the peaks and valleys of deflation and of inflation—in other words, a law that will take care of human needs and at the same time provide for the United States an economic structure of vastly greater soundness (Roosevelt, 1935)."<sup>4</sup>

But the administration of that law rapidly developed in two divergent paths. One, the social insurance sections of the Social Security Act, was administered by government clerks in the private insurance patterns (efficient, rational, impersonal, and equitable). The other, the public assistance section (Galbraith,

1958:252-253), was administered by professional social workers, who began to seek for the "causes" of economic distress within individuals. These staffing patterns of a twin program designed to ameliorate a social problem have had far reaching consequences.<sup>5</sup> Chief among these has been the separation of the poor into the "deserving" and the "undeserving." The "deserving" poor have had at least limited success in the labor market, and are, therefore, eligible for earned insurance benefits through Social Security, a system applied universalistically for all who meet the eligibility requirements. The "undeserving" poor are dependent on public charity through Public Welfare systems which varies in eligibility requirements and size of payment from state to state. It should be noted that the public welfare provisions were originally designed as much to keep females out of the labor force as to provide support, while presently, at least in some states, efforts are made to return persons on welfare to the labor force.

The ameliorative approach to social problems often rests upon the assumption that the individual's psychological responses need to be restructured. In this view (Furie, 1960; Lubove, 1965), the possibility that social problems arise from the social system is minimized. Hence, attempts at restructuring the individual personality may represent an effort to adjust the individual to a dysfunctional social situation. The ameliorative approach, then may beg the question of the underlying difficulty and avoid consideration of more revolutionary and far reaching solutions to social problems.<sup>6</sup>

Methods for the resolution of social problems through prevention (Fried, 1963:151-171) follow public health models. In the public health model, once a disease has been identified and its carriers specified, massive intervention programs are mounted. Such programs push to vaccinate the population against the disease or to persuade individuals to modify their behaviors so as to eliminate the disease carriers. However, in the field of social problems, the preventative approach appears to generate as many new problems as it solves. The preventative approach attempts to change only a given institution; it ignores the systematic interrelationships of institutions within the social structure. Thus, one reason for the development of public housing programs, combined with massive slum clearance programs, was to provide sanitary housing and other advantages which would then eliminate crime in the slums. This effort did not take into consideration the dysfunctional effects of the destruction of existing neighborhood social organizations.<sup>7</sup> Nor did it consider the possible deleterious effects of the new social organization (Beyer, 1965; Wilner *et al.*, 1962; Jacobs, 1961), creating a great density of unrelated populations. The difficulty of adequate social controls which characterize the social and physical conditions of the great, high rise, public housing projects created a whole new complex of social problems which have not been solved.<sup>8</sup>

The revolutionary response to social problem has been defined as a

restructuring of interdependent institutions. The successful American labor movement represents one example of this type of response. The success of the labor movement resulted not only in a new relationship between labor and management; but even more important, it created a new form of social mobility. In the past, social mobility had essentially been a movement of an individual through the social system. The labor movement created upward mobility on the part of entire groups as these groups were able to achieve greater share of the goods and services of the society, and a greater degree of economic security (Hardman, 1962:431-436). This restructuring of the form and means of social mobility (Foster, 1956; Hill, 1957; LaBarre, 1951; Wilensky, 1959; Yinger, 1966), along with other changes in the economic organization of the society, had repercussions for the education system and the structure, organization, and function of the family.

The civil rights movement has many of the characteristics of a revolutionary movement (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965). It appears to be effecting changes in some of the structures of society.<sup>9</sup> However, the civil rights movement also has many characteristics of the exacerbation response. In many ways, it represents an attempt to achieve change for its own sake without a clear program or goal. Thus, events such as the Watts' and other riots, tend to exacerbate the racial tensions. These riots can be seen as events which keep things stirred up without creating a clear purpose or program.<sup>10</sup>

In the perspective presented here, social problems have their genesis in the structure of the social system. And so a concern with their definitions and solutions may well be the proper concern of sociology. Unfortunately, in recent years, sociology has avoided this concern, preferring to join with the rest of society in delegating this task to legislatures, pressure groups, formal agents of social control, and the profession of social work. For an example of the sociologist's view, Talcott Parsons (1959) reports that sociology is "universally conceived as a scientific discipline which is clearly primarily dedicated to the advancement and transmission of empirical knowledge in its field and secondarily to the communication of such knowledge to non-members and its utilization in practical affairs." Parsons clearly feels that the primary role of sociology is in research and university teaching. Edgar Borgatta (1959) puts the case even more strongly, reporting that, "Not only can the use of graduate school resources for training practitioners be extremely wasteful, it can also lower the standards necessary for training research personnel." Borgatta implies the desirability of setting up first and second class citizens in sociology: first class citizens will obtain their degrees in graduate schools and make careers in university research and teaching; second class citizens will obtain their degrees in professional schools and end up in some applied field.<sup>11</sup>

In one recent publication (Mack, 1964:25), the (ideal) social scientist is described as a "man alienated from his society. . . . As citizen, a sociologist

may have democratic concepts of justice and deplore the ways in which poverty and racial discrimination cause his society to fall short of its own ideals. But at work. . . the sociologist must invest his work time in analyzing the effectiveness of special interest groups, not in cheerleading. . . . Political leaders, educators, businessmen, church administrators are making policy decisions based upon data gathered by social scientists. The growing acceptance of science as a frame of reference can encourage belief that decision makers may come to feel more at home with science as a frame of mind.”

Although science implies prediction and control, few social scientists feel comfortable about making predictions or recommendations for programs designed to create social change. The decision makers often distrust the so called scientific “data” offered by “social scientists” who do not, themselves, seem to see much of genuine scientific worth arising from their work. For example, a quarter of a century of research in race relations has not led to the development of effective corrective or remedial social programs for the American Negro. He has come to know that whatever gain he will make will arise out of political power, not out of “scientific studies.”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the reluctance of many sociologists to enter the social planning area can be traced to their sense of impotence in the face of the enormous social problems arising out of our social structure.

There are some positive trends visible in the sociological world, however. Two new sociological readers, *Applied Sociology* (Ross, 1965)<sup>13</sup> and *Social Welfare Institutions* reflect this trend. Zald (1965), for example, states “. . . . But just as it seems to some observers that social work in its drive toward professionalization, deserted the poor, so, too, sociology, in its pursuit of scientific status, deserted the value-laden problems of social welfare.” Almost in a “reaction formation, social problems and welfare problems become taboo topics for sociology . . . the study was not quite intellectually respectable.”<sup>14</sup>

If sociology has avoided a social change responsibility, the profession of social work has done little better. One consequence of the ameliorative approach in social work has been the focus on what can be called the *quality* of life of the client rather than the *conditions* of life affecting the clients. The quality of life refers to internal psychological motivations and to personal characteristics of individuals. The conditions of life refer to the consequences of social structures and institutions which affect the individuals’ opportunities (Matza, 1964; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). While current trends may focus on personality problems, the great, early research of social work was concerned with a description of social conditions. Thus, the work of such pioneers as John Howard (1784) in his investigation of English prison<sup>15</sup> or Charles Booth (1904) in his studies of London poor pitched social reform to the gathering of information about the nature of relevant social institutions, as well as life qualities. This type of work

was also an attempt to locate the social causes of the unacceptable individual behavior which created social problems.

But the work of these early pioneers came at a time when private fortunes could support most of the work, and the social system was still simple enough so that the efforts of one individual could beget the possibility of significant social change. For example, Dorothea Dix came close to revolutionizing the care of the mental patients through a combination of persistence, indignation and observation.

These surveys and studies reflected the search for causes and carriers of problems and focused on the preventive approach. The consequences of this approach can be seen in such social reform movements as prohibition. For the supporters of the prohibition movement, the hope was that abolition of alcohol would cure the ills of the immigrant, i.e., poverty, ignorance and disease. When such attempts proved fruitless—eventually generating more problems than they solved—the social reform movement fell into disrepute.

The social reformers went on to such issues as the feminist movement. But the system of social reform had already created government and private agency structures which led quickly to the professionalization of the helping function. And these professionals, the social workers, soon became devotees of the personal approach to the solution of social problems. One of the best examples of the pattern that developed is Mary E. Richmond's *Social Diagnosis* (1917) which provided the rationale for the casework method. The mental hygiene movement added the psychoanalytical and dynamic mystique to the individualist social approach to problematic persons. The completed product was an ideology and a rationale for locating all social problems within the individual (Davis, 1935:55–65).

As the social system became more complex, and as the possibility of effective individual action lessened, the change in social work from reform to amelioration became understandable (Eckland, 1967). The great impetus for this change was twofold: the shift of income maintenance from a private to a public function and the coincident professionalization of the casework function. If social work no longer has a significant social change function (in part because of the complexities of the social system and the increasing difficulty in instituting planned social change) then the focus on the quality of life becomes a legitimate area of concern. The profession no longer has the right or the responsibility to differentiate between the deserving and the undeserving poor. This distinction of the deserving poor is now fulfilled by the provision of social insurance through the Social Security programs. The undeserving poor receive charity through the Public Welfare program. The distinction between the deserving and undeserving rests on their work history. But different criteria are implicit in social work. In the development of social work philosophy, the unde-



serving poor do not fulfill the expectations that society has on its members. This inability can be attributed to the quality of poor people rather than to their conditions.<sup>16</sup> Social work practice thus becomes a mechanism for the maintenance of the status quo, despite the generally egalitarian values of the social workers. Attention is directed away from the idea that life conditions should be changed. But if the conditions of life cannot be changed, the quality of individual lives can be—at least in theory—to reduce the discontent and to provide more individual satisfactions. If the person is unable to find a job, egalitarian values and the American dream makes it imperative to focus on that individual's failure rather than economic dislocation or poor preparation for the labor market. Hence, the social worker attempts to manipulate the accessible individual rather than to restructure the inaccessible institutional bases of his participation—or lack of it—in the labor market.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that social workers and their clients do not agree on the problems which the client has, particularly when the client is lower class. Thus, according to Beck (1962), many lower class clients were seen by caseworkers in family service society agencies to have problems different from those presented by the client. Miller (1965) found that on admission to the mental hospital, patients and their families reported quite different problems from those perceived by the social workers. If what the client needs is adjustment to a dysfunctional social system, it is not surprising that he and the worker do not agree on the problem. Mary MacDonald (1960) has claimed that the social worker is "the keeper of the community's conscience." The idea of a social conscience, which the social worker should represent, ignores the significance of different life styles and their relation to place in society and to the values which are held. These styles and the related values result from the division of labor, the existence of a social stratification system and consequent differential opportunities. The values of the social worker and her client are thus radically different. However, the social worker has greater social power than the client (Landy, 1960:127-144). And so her notions of values and how they should be given priorities outweigh those of the client. She can attempt to impose her values on the client. Thus, the social work view of the community consciences, derived from middle class training and experience, upholds the *status quo*. A more pluralistic view of values and a greater understanding of the socially determined nature of behavior might lead to a greater emphasis on revolutionary changes rather than amelioration for the solution of social problems.

It is here that there may be a *rapprochement* between sociology and social work. The sociologist, by training, is concerned with the nature and interrelationships of the social system. But there is current disinterest from sociologists in the practical use of their knowledge and skills for the solution of social problems. In addition, those sociologists who have shown an interest have been

disillusioned (Radman and Kolodny, 1965:93–112). Applied sociologists have complained at length about how they are treated when they intervene in social issues. Nevertheless, the knowledge and skill of sociologists might help to create a social accountability system which would in turn help social work to understand and help to change the life conditions of those about whom society is legitimately concerned. If social work has so far been guilty of acting without conceptualizing, sociology has been guilty of conceptualizing without acting.

The solutions to social problems can strengthen a society as it evolves or they can tear it apart. The successful solution of a social problem must be revolutionary in some form; ameliorative and preventative solutions would seem not to work in the long run, and the exacerbation of symptoms is not a solution. It seems to us that there must be a joint effort to translate sociological knowledge into social action. The skills of the sociologist as a social theoretician and a research investigator, and the skills of the social workers as a designated agent of social change in the society can be used for the solution of social problems.

There is some reason to believe that social work is making greater efforts in this direction than is sociology. Some doctoral programs in social work appear to be providing training that integrates the skills of social science and social work. The importance of this integration of skill and understanding cannot be underestimated. It is to be hoped that social science, in general, and sociology in particular, will also develop such integrated programs for the development of new agents of social change.

The increasing attention that decision makers are paying to social science indicates that social scientists will increasingly be called upon to utilize their skills in areas of social relevance. In meeting these social concerns—in seeking ways to solve rather than rearrange social problems there may be a rapprochement between social work and sociology as both disciplines bring their best thinking to bear on these issues.

## Notes

1. Frank (1949) defines a social problem as any difficulty or misbehavior of a fairly large number of persons which we wish to remove or correct.

2. Eglinton (1964) argues that there is perhaps one other way of "solving" a social problem: to legalize actions heretofore labeled "illegal," "deviant," or "sinful." One example of such a solution might be seen in the repeal of the 18th Amendment, another in Parliament's move to legalize homosexuality in England. This is a technique of solving social problems by revising the sanction system of a society. The argument that legalizing ancient Greek patterns of homosexual love between a patron and an adolescent boy would solve a social problem by reducing alienations of the adolescent from the adult world, i.e. juvenile delinquency. By legalizing homosexuality, Eglinton argues, one would resolve two social problems, homosexuality and juvenile delinquency—an interesting, but hardly respectable idea, at this time.

3. Case (1964) discusses social problems as results of social processes, themselves part of social change.
4. Roosevelt (1935) statement upon signing of the Social Security Act, August 14, 1935.
5. Galbraith (1958) discusses two forms of poverty in the United States, i.e., "case poverty" and "insular poverty." One is located in some defect in the individual, the other is some type of social dislocation. What may ameliorate one type will only confuse the other.
6. Furie (1966) discusses the adverse reaction to social planning by persons who must undergo the "psychological-motivational" assessments of professional social workers in order to benefit from a social plan. See also Lubove's (1965) discussion of the development of social casework as an alternative to social reform.
7. Fried (1963) discusses the effects of forced urban relocation.
8. Beyer (1965), Wilner *et al* (1962), Jacobs (1961) report, for example, a recent study of persons living under slum conditions which does not show large differences between the groups in regard to more adequate or health life styles.
9. United States Department of Labor (1965) in a recent publication of the Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family*, reviewed the crises in race relations and argued that the solution to the social problem created by the emerging Negro movement called for a new approach: "A national effort is required that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government, in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: *the establishment of a stable Negro family structure*" (emphasis ours). This is an interesting answer to a large minority group's claim to social justice—i.e., full citizenship and social justice can be granted only to persons with middle class nuclear family backgrounds! While the present power structure of the country may be in the hands of persons who seem to have such family backgrounds (with certain notable exceptions) it does not seem to follow that full participation of Negroes in the economic and political life requires a stable family structure. Some might argue that the present middle class family structure creates as many problems as it is reputed to solve. The divorce rate, the neurosis rate, and the suburban gang, reveal that middle class family life may, in fact, drive its members into sterile, power-laden, conformist actions which constitute a great barrier to the basic tenets of democracy. Thus, while the civil rights movement calls for social justice, the suggested solution in this report calls for personal and family changes not clearly related to the claim for economic and political freedom. Also see, Rovere (1966) for an account of some of the furor such middle class oriented recommendations made among the various spokesmen of the civil rights movement. Also see, Rainwater and Yancey (1966). They point out that the report itself attributes the breakdown of the Negro family to social and economic conditions. However, because of the way the material was released to the public, the demand for the strengthening and restructuring of the Negro family was perceived, and reacted to, as the major message. In this instance, then, the major social response was to the perceived content, and not necessarily the actual content, of the report. However, the insistence that the Negro family emulate the white family in organization, structure, and motivation, is part of the report, and represents an interesting displacement of a social problem from social conditions to individual characteristics of the problem group!
10. Although, this was true when this was first written during the summer of 1966, it is even more true today, when what are perceived as excesses by civil rights militants exacerbate problems without providing solutions. The actions of groups opposed to military involvement in Vietnam also have many characteristics of exacerbatory responses, particularly since their call for unilateral de-escalation of the conflict or total withdrawal is not seen as a viable alternative by most of the population, not to mention the primary decision-makers. Nor do they appear to have given thoughtful consideration to the consequences of an unilateral decision to withdraw, any more than the proponents of further escalation appear to have considered—at least publically—the consequences of continued escalation. So far, the "peace groups" have been able to do nothing but protest, without, apparently, effecting

policy. Hence, symptom exacerbation results. On the other hand, it is certainly not clear that any other action is open to them at this point in time.

11. Kallen (1966) states that the recent distribution of a questionnaire on Scientific Manpower Resources by the American Sociological Association tends to perpetuate this distinction: sociologists were given the choice of self-identifications as "applied" or "theoretical."

12. Supreme Court (1954) recognized that the decision desegregating public schools was based, in part, on social science evidence that separate schools were inherently unequal. But since that time, little use has been made of social science in the solution of a series of racial crises.

13. Ross (1965) calls upon the scientific associations to "design the means by which social problems which science can help are brought to the attention of scientists, and whatever in science is relevant to those problems is brought to the attention of the appropriate laymen."

14. Bendix (1945-46) comments on the interesting formulation of the scientist-social actor conflict. He stated: "This ambivalence in the role of the social scientific indicates that in our culture the inherent radicalism of the scientific approach is either neutralized by turning social scientists into professional employees or that it is emasculated by confining them to the academic preserve."

15. Howard (1784) reported on the state of prisons in England and Wales, with preliminary observations and an account of some foreign prisons and hospitals.

16. Eckland (1967) feels that recent theorizing suggests that there may be some truth to this assertion, although for reasons different than those suggested by the social workers attribution of personal quality. Eckland, for example, makes a strong case for the differences in the genetic pool of different social classes, with the lower class having less genetic potential.

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