

**The Social Welfare Institution:  
An Analysis of Its Position and Function Within the Societal Model**

**By**

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SOWK 479

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March 1989

Note: The hard copy of this paper scanned and digitalized. Hopefully, all related errors have been corrected. Minor editing was carried out.

## Introduction

The societal model was developed as a framework to conceptualize the social assignment domain of social work. This model outlines the multi-relational holistic structure of the Person-in-Environment (PIE) life system, and in that way it is intended to be used by social workers as a compass to guide them through the various interactions relevant to that perspective. It is based on a tetrahedral design that connects together a particular system with specific environmental components. This arrangement allows the social work practitioner to systemically focus on, understand, and assess the interdependent and transactional patterns of any person-in-environment system (Ramsay, 1986, 1988).

The societal model comprises two conceptual categories: “single otherness” and “plural otherness.” The “single otherness” element of PIE domain refers to the actual self-system being studied. This might be an individual, a family, a group, or a community. “Single otherness” focuses on the four general areas of physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual capacities relevant to a self-system over the course of a life cycle (Ramsay, 1988: 56).

“Plural otherness” refers to the unique environmental elements significant to a particular system. These include the areas of “personal otherness,” “resource otherness,” and “validator otherness.” The “personal otherness” element encompasses those informal social support experiences that are intimately or closely related to the original self-system, i.e., those primary interrelationships of emotional and physical significance to a specific person or group (Ramsay, 1986: 53).

“Resource otherness” refers to a broad spectrum of formal and informal socio-economic resources and services developed in a society for the benefit of the members of that society (Ramsay, 1988: 58-59). Generally, these resources refer to formal societal institutions such as schools, social welfare programs, employment resources, community organizations, political groups, and churches. However, they also include informal resources such as friends, acquaintances, neighborhood networks, and social support groups. Together, these constitute a significant part of the environment of a particular system.

“Validator otherness” is the final element of the environmental components. It refers to those social values, ideologies, and traditions which are significant enough to influence and sanction the behavior and activities of each of these other elements (Ramsay, 1988:57). Validators might be “centralized” in that they are formal laws or cultural customs which members of a society have agreed to follow; or they may be “decentralized” as flexible and informal beliefs regarded as valuable within a society.

Together these elements constitute a PIE system at its minimum. They provide a clear framework by which a social work practitioner is able to systemically comprehend the diverse relationships pertaining to a particular self-system. In this way, the societal model ensures that the focus of social work practice remains steadily directed towards the dynamic patterns experienced by any system in relation to the important facets of its environment.

The purpose of this paper is to focus specifically upon the position and function of the social welfare institution within the context of this societal model. Social welfare is clearly a constituent of the “resource otherness” component; however, it is also closely connected to the activities intrinsic to the role of “validator otherness” within this environmental framework. This discussion will focus primarily upon this last relationship, i.e., the ongoing interaction between the social welfare institution and the prevailing values and beliefs of this society. A specific review of the social welfare functions of social integration and social control will be undertaken in order to clearly

illustrate the dynamics of these connections. It is hoped that a clearer comprehension of the nature of the social welfare institution will be achieved through an analysis of these particular roles within the context of the societal model.

### **The Nature of Social Welfare**

The Canadian welfare state represents a concrete manifestation of the ideals of liberalism. It is consistent and supportive of individualism within the context of a competitive and aggressive economic lifestyles. Liberalism is committed fundamentally to the structures and values of the free market system, and serves as the formal political ideology of capitalism. It encompasses the belief that society has some responsibility for the prosperity of its citizens, and upholds the attitude that the prevailing social system is the best and most desirable way of meeting human needs within the context of a capitalist economy.

Out of this philosophical perspective evolved the social welfare institution. This institution has developed into a major resource within our society, for it serves as a direct means by which society is able to respond to the needs and wants of its members in an organized and collective manner. Ideally, it expresses society's humanitarian interest in the social and individual well-being of its citizens, and it reflects a genuine effort directed towards enhancing the quality of life for all of its members.

Social work practitioners (in conjunction with many other human service workers) are key functionaries of this institution. They are expected to translate social welfare policies into acts of responsible assistance. Consequently, they provide a diverse spectrum of services to a wide range of people. They provide appropriate resources to individuals who would otherwise remain extremely disadvantaged. They offer tangible help in very difficult circumstances, and they frequently succeed in facilitating changes that allow people to regain control over their own lives. Social workers demonstrate in practical terms society's concern and commitment for the overall well-being of its members.

According to this description, the social welfare institution fits clearly into the area of "resource otherness" within the context of the societal model. It is an environmental factor that directly influences the daily experiences of a vast number of people in this society. It is a significant social resource which provides an array of socio-economic services to a wide range of systems. At the same time, the social welfare institution is also closely connected to the functions of the "validator otherness" component of the societal model. Every state comprises a variety of institutions which relate reciprocally to the dominant ideology of that society. These institutions are structured to legitimate the ideology. The ideology, in turn, offers a framework by which credibility of these same institutions is ensured, and through which the prevailing social order is justified. The ideology functions as a paradigm by which people are able to interpret their everyday experience in a manner that seems sensible and logical.

The social welfare institution is one of the many institutions which reinforce the tenets of liberalism. It espouses the liberalist notion of what constitutes the good life, the good society, and the means by which to achieve it. It adheres to the various values and perspectives outlined above, and incorporates all those functions within society which lead to intervention for securing human well-being. According to the framework of liberalism, the social welfare institution serves a primary social purpose of "representing the public pursuit and extension of social values... through the specific social welfare programs that impose social values concerning people's rights to certain minimum standards of living on otherwise unfettered economic forces" (Galper, 1975:12). Thus, the social welfare institution reinforces the tenets of liberalism in this society, while at the same time, its service

content and scope are shaped by these same values.

A review of the functions of social integration and social control will highlight this reciprocal interaction. These roles will illustrate how the social welfare institution as a resource is influenced by the values and conventions intrinsic to the “validator otherness” component of the environment, and how it in turn continues to promulgate these same beliefs.

### **i) Social Integration**

For a society to remain stable, it is necessary for the majority of its members to accept the established values and norms of the prevailing order. In this way, the authority of the state is kept intact, and specific goals and objectives designated by that authority as important are most easily achieved (Mishra, 1977: 71). Social institutions are structured in such a way as to reward behavior which reinforces the status quo, and to sanction those behaviors which are viewed as anathema to the prevailing norms.

Thus a major function of the social welfare institution is that of social integration. This institution has consistently been concerned with influencing citizen attitudes and behavior (George & Wilding, 1984: 201). Successful integration becomes possible through the inculcation of the key values of individualism, freedom to pursue self-interests, self-reliance, inequality, regular work, and acceptance of authority.

Social work practitioners play an important part in this imbuement process. A major responsibility of social work is to induce conformity among its clients to the dominant order. It strives to achieve this purpose through programs of socialization and resocialization. It offers services which are intended to assist people in adapting to the requirements of society, and in that context it exalts success and achievement. Practitioners step in to provide help when conventional vehicles for social integration have broken down temporarily or permanently--that is, socialization of children when family structures have collapsed; the resocialization of actual or potential delinquents; the resocialization of criminal offenders; the support and resocialization of families whose lifestyle and patterns of parenting seriously threaten their children's well-being; the resocialization of the mentally ill and mentally handicapped as they are released from institutions; the resocialization of the short-term or chronically unemployed; and the resocialization of the aged as their status in society diminishes (George & Wilding, 1984: 208-209). The extent to which each of these groups internalizes society's expectations of them and, therefore, the extent to which they conform to the “right” behavior, is appropriately rewarded through the granting of desired goods and services.

Generally, social work practitioners assume that society's call for social integration of all groups, according to the prevailing values, automatically proves the veracity and legitimacy of those same values. Practitioners tend to accept society's normative categories as objective fact, and mistake belief in the consensual society to be synonymous with actual consensus by all members of that society. An adjunct to this perspective is the belief that a normative theory appropriate to the experience of one group in a society is equally applicable to interpretations of other groups' experiences in society (Horton, 1966).

Social integration is an integral function of the social welfare institution. It is a process which emphatically highlights and promotes the prevailing values of our society, and thereby defines the nature of service of the social welfare institution. Thus, it ensures that the ability of this institution to serve as a resource to specific systems varies with the extent to which such clients align themselves with society's norms. This arrangement encourages conformity to the dominant social conventions and beliefs, and in this way, reinforces their continuing influence as validators within Society.

## ii) Social Control

It is not possible to discuss social integration without referring to the function of social control. This second role is also an intrinsic component of the social welfare institution. In all social services, notions about the ways in which people are expected to behave are built directly into program policies and rules. These expectations are again based upon those social values which are dominant within society, and resource allocation is directed towards those systems in society which exhibit behaviors that reflect those values.

Society's assertion that social discipline is a necessary function of the social welfare institution is rooted in a number of liberal values that perpetuate the belief that responsible citizens should have no need for social services, and that claiming them is the result of individual failures. In this context, need is primarily understood as a consequence of personal deficiency, and only secondarily, as an unfortunate side effect of larger social patterns (George & Wilding, 1985: 10).

The role of social work within the social welfare institution plays a large part in upholding this social perspective. Practitioners reinforce the prevailing system by adhering to a service process wherein social and economic problems are increasingly defined in emotional terms. As Buchbinder comments, control is maintained through "treatment processes which deflect criticism from the social order by interpreting social pathology as personal pathology, with the responsibility placed on the victim" (Buchbinder, 1981: 365). A stance of "blaming the victim" makes administration of disciplinary measures easier. It continues to convey the message that problems of clients, whoever they may be, are, in fact, problems of individuals and not of society as a whole.

Beginning with this premise, it follows logically that society will need to be explicitly directive in what it views as acceptable behavior, and that it will offer assistance only to the extent that clients cooperate to achieve that end. Thus, social service regulations are designed to shape client behavior in every aspect of life. Regulations cover everything from sexual conduct to household purchases to child-rearing practices. "Decisions are made for the welfare client in his or her role as consumer, provider, parent, and citizen" (Galper, 1975: 52). In this way, parameters for specific behaviors, which are rooted in acceptable values, are clearly outlined.

It would be naive to think that social workers do not hold a large array of weapons in their arsenal with which to encourage clients to act according to the dictates of these social norms. Social workers control access to the resources which clients desire, and the flow of these resources, whether financial or emotional, is conducted through an authority relationship. From this solid position of power, social workers can easily sanction behavior which is incongruent with the prevailing social values. They can "punish" people in a variety of ways such as non-provision of goods and services, removal of children from homes, or simply by dictating whether one is entitled to a telephone or not (Fox-Piven & Cloward, 1971: 166-168). Conversely, they can reward appropriate actions through the distribution of desirable goods and services. The range of their influence is potentially very extensive.

Clearly, practitioners hold powerful leverage over the lives of their clients, and their ability to induce conformity in the most deviant of individuals is significant. In a time when the pressures of competitive society are increasing because of scarce jobs, fiscal restraints, and inadequate welfare relief, it is not surprising that in the end it is the social worker who makes the critical decisions (Carniol, 1987: 95). Thus, the extent to which a practitioner's influence inhibits clients from exercising their own abilities to differentiate between alternatives, to decide which of these choices is most beneficial to themselves, and then to act on that decision, is the degree to which the practitioner is an agent of the dominant social system and a promulgator of its values (Chenault, 1969: 90).

Thus, the function of social control is a forceful extrapolation of the process of social integration. It is a means by which society can directly induce specific behaviors by formally linking access to resources to adherence to certain values.

### **Conclusion**

Each of the four components of the societal model are linked together into a pattern of ongoing interaction. Within this framework, it is clear that the social welfare institution is a constituent of the “resource otherness” element. It is a societal institution which provides various social and economic services to the members of our society. It is a significant environmental factor that is utilized by an array of self-systems in a variety of ways.

However, the social welfare institution displays an interesting reciprocal relationship with the component of “validator otherness” within the societal model. The nature of its function and role is directly shaped according to the social values and conventions intrinsic to this particular component. Essentially, the scope and content of service of the social welfare institution is determined according to the value criteria underscored by the “validator otherness” element. Simultaneously, social welfare policies and programs serve to legitimate these values, for they provide experiential credence to the dominant liberal paradigm within society. The social welfare institution reinforces a sense of consistency between the way the world is explained and the way the world is experienced by the majority.

The functions of social integration and social control highlight the dynamics of this ongoing interaction. Each of these activities ensure that accessibility to resources is contingent upon the degree to which systems conform to the dominant values of our society. The more that an individual or group adapts to these norms, the greater their opportunity to receive goods and services offered by the social welfare institution. In turn, such adaptation serves to legitimate these values even further.

Thus the social welfare institution is a unique environmental factor within the societal model. It serves as an important resource in our society, as well as a significant custodian of the prevailing social values and norms. An understanding of its position and influence within the PIE domain contributes to a greater understanding of various systems within their environment.

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