Is Social Work a Profession?
An Incomplete History of Our Journey

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This collection of articles will be listed chronologically rather than alphabetically to get a sense of the flow of evolution in the profession - newest first.

Davis, S. (2023). Lost futures, doomed timelines and unwanted inheritances: How we are handling painful time in social work. *Critical and Radical Social Work, in press.*

This article makes the submission that social work is stuck and needs now to find ways to endure its commitments to caring from inside the suspended time that is so characteristic of late capitalism and not from some imaginary place outside of it. When telling this time in the form of history, there is a tendency to want to pass over what is most difficult about it – the inescapable fact of having to live through it – just at the moment when this is the reality most in need of being carefully thought about. Remembering that in talking about social work, we are talking about a labor of care defined, in part, by a sensitive, practical engagement with time that is difficult to live, I look to recent feminist theoretical work on care that can help us to think about how we might handle being stuck in painful time. (Author abstract.) **Thanks to Dr. Lauri Goldkind for sharing this with me.*

Clarke, K. (2022). Reimagining social work ancestry: Toward epistemic decolonization. *Affilia, 37*(2), 266-278.

Contextualizing disciplinary histories through the personal stories of forerunners creates compelling narratives of the craft of evolving professions. By looking to our intellectual and practitioner ancestors, we participate in a dialogue with a history that shapes our contemporary professional identities and aspirations for the future. Grounded in a decolonizing approach to social work, this article examines how the discipline shapes its professional identity and ways of knowing by centering the role of canonical founders in the social work curriculum. The global social work origin story in the curriculum often centers on Anglo-American ancestors that illustrate the development of the disciplinary boundaries of the international profession. One method of decolonizing social work epistemology at the intersection of ancestors and professional lineage could be to look to public history as a pedagogical tool in the curriculum. The article concludes by examining the use of podcasts as having the potential to decolonize

the process of collecting, analyzing, and disseminating local knowledge of ancestors thus challenging the top-down approach to expert-driven epistemologies. (Author abstract.)

Daley, M.R. & Pittman-Munke (2021). Flexner and the social work profession: Myth vs. history. *Journal of Sociology and Social Work, 9*(2), 1-12.

Abraham Flexner's pronouncement in 1915 that social work was not a full profession came at a critical point in the intellectual development of social work and social work education. It led to strenuous efforts by organized social work to fulfill the criteria of a profession set forth by Flexner. The author suggests that these criteria should be put aside and attention directed toward developmental requirements that reflect the distinctive characteristics of social work as a major profession. (Author abstract.)

Baines, D. (2021). Soft cops or social justice activists: Social work's relationship to the state in the context of BLM and neoliberalism. *British Journal of Social Work, 52*(5), 2984–3002.

In the current dual context of Black Lives Matter/defund the police and calls for accountability to those whom social work has harmed as part of the state machinery, this article returns to the debate on state theory. The article explores three state-linked forms of care, coercion and control: stealth coercion/control (in aged-care); population-linked coercion/control, and police and carceral-linked coercion/control. The article analyzes what is missing in state theory in a neoliberal world and argues that social work needs models of practice and theory that are themselves a form of resistance and relative autonomy from the state in that they challenge the oppressive state machinery while making demands on the state for equity and fairness. This model permits social work to be humble in the face of lived experience and grounded in the priorities of the community, rather than uncritically legitimizing state-linked oppression and securing the ground for profit and accumulation. The article concludes that while this social justice-engaged model will be essential for those moving into the new practice contexts resulting from defunding the police, it is also a model that will serve to strengthen the relevance and integrity of all social work practice. (Author abstract.)

Maylea, C. (2021). The end of social work. *British Journal of Social Work, 51,* 772-789.

Social work literature is saturated with calls to reform social work in diverse and contradictory ways. This article argues that the profession of social work cannot be reformed and must be abolished. Specifically, the master narrative of Anglophone social work must be abandoned along with the institutions which maintain it; the professional bodies, the academic discipline and the formal title. Four reasons for this are presented: social work's lack of coherent theory base, the problem of professionalism, social work's historical abuses and the profession's inability to rise to contemporary challenges. The fundamental theoretical tensions in social work theory are identified as preventing the profession from reconciling its aims of assuaging individual suffering and achieving social justice. This has also hindered social work's aspiration to professionalism, which is both distracting and actively prevents social workers from working with people and communities. While these issues may have once been resolvable, the historical and contemporary contexts prevent resolution. Social work's uncertain theoretical foundations, desire for professional legitimacy, past abuses and contemporary failures put the profession beyond recovery. No solutions or resolutions are suggested. What pieces are to be salvaged

from the wreck of social work must be determined by the post-social work world. (Author abstract.)

Wright, K.C., Carr, K.A. & Akin, B.A. (2021). The whitewashing of social work history: How dismantling racism in social work education begins with an equitable history of the profession. *Advances in Social Work, 21*(2-3), 274-297.

Severe racial inequity has characterized the incorporation of ethnic minorities' contributions to U.S. history and advancements (Sandoval et al., 2016). These disparities are inextricably connected to White Supremacist ideologies and practices, and are perpetuated in higher education through textbooks, pedagogy, and research. Social work, like many disciplines, teaches about its early roots with a whitewashed historical lens. Indeed, review of the social work literature reveals the scarcity of attributions to Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC). Without a more racially diverse perspective on social work's history, social work scholars promote and sustain White Supremacy. The implications of this are crucial since social work education is predominantly populated by privileged White students who adopt this mentality, unaware of Black, Brown, Latino, Asian, Native or Other ethnic "Jane Addams" who have massively promoted the social welfare of communities for decades without historical recognition or the privileged positions of Addams and Richmond. Historical distortions also potentially discourage BIPOC social work students' self-efficacy and future efforts to contribute and excel in the discipline. To properly address this issue, social work history must be refaced with a more equitable and just lens. This review seeks to address the gap in the literature pertaining to the need for a greater integration and infusion of racially diverse social work historical contributions in several ways. Recommendations will be made for future research in this area to dismantle racist perspectives in social work history, and strategies will be offered to help social work educators and researchers address this critical issue. (Author abstract.)

Nissen, L. (2020). Social work and the future in a post-covid 10 world: A foresight lens and a call to action for the profession. *Journal of Technology in Social Work, 38*(4), 309-330.

What is the future of the social work profession? This paper explores what being more future facing might look like for social workers/educators and introduces foresight as a useful and urgently needed framework for the profession. Contemporary realities like Covid-19 and uprisings associated with long-standing racial violence bring added relevance to the need to apply new ways of thinking, use new practical techniques, and strengthen a collective ability to see beyond the current cannon of ideas and approaches. These additions to the social work toolbox are much needed in a world full of inequity, change and turbulence. Utilization of a foresight lens has the opportunity to amplify and deepen the sociological and moral imagination, as well as the strategic effectiveness of the profession of social work now and in the years ahead. The paper ends with a call to action to amplify and evolve social work strengths to join the interdisciplinary community of those using forecasting methods to build a better future. (Author abstract.)

Richie, B.E. & Martensen, K.M. (2021). Resisting carcerality, embracing abolition: Implications for social work practice. *Affilia, 35*(1), 12-16.

Trappenburg, M. & von Beek, G. (2019). 'My profession is gone': How social workers experience de-professionalization in the Netherlands. *European Journal of Social Work, 22*(4), 676-689.

Recently social work in the Netherlands underwent two major changes. Specialized agencies were replaced by one-stop shops (district teams) and the welfare state was replaced by a 'participation society', in which vulnerable groups have to rely on their social network rather than resort to professional care. The first change is termed 'de-specialization'; the second 'basic de-professionalization'. The research question in this article is: how do Dutch social workers experience and evaluate these two developments? Qualitative interviews with 29 experienced social workers show that most of them endorse de-specialization, as this type of aid is deemed better for clients with complex problems. Moreover, many social workers like to take on new tasks. Basic deprofessionalization is met with more reserve. Social workers observe that many clients do not have a suitable network and need professional help. In addition, they feel that their profession is being degraded as lay people and volunteers take over (part of) their work. However, they feel unable to resist this development, because resistance might get them sacked. Some social workers even enhance basic de-professionalization because of their willingness to continue working as (retired) volunteers. Social workers and theorists need to address and counter the move towards basic de-professionalization. (Author abstract.)

Mapp, S., McPherson, J., Androff, D. & Gabel, S.G. (2019). Social work is a human rights profession. *Social Work, 64*(3), 259-269.

As defined by the International Federation of Social Workers, social work is a human rights profession. This is explicitly stated in the professional codes of ethics in many nations. However, the most recent version of the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers continues to exclude any mention of human rights, fitting in with the history of U.S. exceptionalism on this subject. Social workers around the world have a long history of working for the achievement of human rights, including an explicit grounding of practice in human rights principles: human dignity, nondiscrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability. Utilizing these principles, U.S. social workers can move from the deficit model of the needs-based approach to competently contextualizing individual issues in their larger human rights framework. In this way, social work can address larger social problems and make way for the concurrent achievement of human rights. This article explains these principles and provides a case example of how to apply them in practice. (Author abstract.)

Wolf, L. & Goldkind, L. (2016). Digital native meet friendly visitor: A Flexner-inspired call to action. *Journal of Social Work Education, 52:*Supp1, S99-S109.

A century ago, Abraham Flexner offered his perspective on the nascent field of social work, describing the field as educationally unfocused, too diversified in its practices, and too relational

or assistive to other fields to meet the criteria for professional status. Using the example of the imperative to integrate information and communication technologies (ICT) into social work practice, we examine the ways these 100-year-old challenges persist as well as how they are being challenged and reworked. Drawing on three central themes from Flexner—education, diversity of professional settings and functions, and the relational nature of the work—we examine th absence of ICTs in social work practice, arguing that a lack of curricular exposure to ICT tools, strategies, and thinking at the BSW and MSW levels and a failure to incorporate these technologies with clients, agencies, and communities leads to a damaging disjunction between professionals and a changing culture. We suggest that the challenge proffered to social work by technology provides a radical opportunity to create a more socially just practice, offer a preliminary list of best practices for approaching ICT integration, and make suggestions for further inquiry. (Author abstract.)

Gitterman, A. (2014). Social work: A profession in search of its identity. *Journal of Social Work Education, 50*(4), 599-607.

Micro social work practice can be understood in the context of its historical professional traditions and dialectics as well as the environmental pressures and demands placed on the profession. In becoming a profession, social work relied heavily on principles drawn from medicine and science. Although these bodies of knowledge provided the profession certain credibility, their application may have clouded social work's distinctive social purpose and professional identity. In its search for a distinctive function and identity, the profession of social work has struggled with numerous dialectics, as discussed in this article. These help us to better understand the profession's search for its distinctive identity and status and the importance of including this content in social work education. (Author abstract.)

Herbert Williams, J. (2014). Unification, crafting imperatives, and defining a profession. *Social Work Research, 39*(2), 67-69.

Wenocur, S. & Reisch, M. (2013). The social work profession and the ideology of professionalization. *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 10*(4).

Daniel, B. (2013) Social work: A profession in flux. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 26*(6), 394-406.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the current context of social work as a profession and some of the major transition factors that are affecting social workers and social work organizations. Design/methodology/approach – The paper first explores what social work is, and how it has developed as a profession. It reflects on social work academia and the place of social work educators and researchers. It then goes on to consider three factors that are having a major influence on social work as a profession: concepts of risk; personalisation; and the multi-disciplinary environment. The implications of these factors and the kind of transitions they

are driving are discussed in the context of some of the potential implications for professional learning. The paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of all the factors that are affecting contemporary social work – the aim is to offer contextual information to help the reader consider some of the forces at play in social work. The paper does not introduce new empirical evidence, rather it identifies gaps in the existing evidence about these key influential factors. The implications of social work in transition for society are that efficacy may be impeded if the profession is too inward looking. This paper draws from the empirical and conceptual work of others – here the aim is to provide a broad overall context within which to consider the more detailed implications set out in further papers in the present issue.(Author abstract.)

Horn, S.K. (2012) Is social work the work of love? Love practices and Queer doing in the process for full determination. *Smith College Masters Thesis,* Northampton, MA.

The 1915 National Conference of Charities and Corrections, during which Abraham Flexner stated that social work was not a profession because it lacked a “communicable technique”, is understood as a historically significant event in social work history. Part of the discourse regarding the legacy of this conference has spoken to social work’s struggle with comprehending the nature of its purpose and definition as a profession. In this thesis I explore the phenomenon of social work, understood as a profession, and how its professionalization may contribute to its struggle in developing a comprehensive practice method that makes its stated values of justice and full self-determination of the individual intelligible. I look at love as theoretically formulated by Erich Fromm and M. Scott Peck in what they offer in regarding love as a practice, and queer theory in exploring the social and political situation of social work and to illuminate the diversity and multiplicity that is inherent in social work and its humanistic origin. Through this exploration on a struggle for a definition, I posit that this challenge comes from the field attempting to understand itself within the structure of professionalism and academia, both of which value empirical inquiry and scientific positivism in social theory over creative engagement with an inquiry on love and human connection. (Author abstract.)

Carey, M. & Foster, V. (2011). Introducing ‘deviant’ social work: Contextualizing the limits of radical social work whilst understanding (fragmented) resistance within the social work labor process. *British Journal of Social Work, 41,* 576-593.

This paper draws upon case study research to explore deviant social work. This is defined as small-scale acts of resistance, subterfuge, deception or even sabotage that are typically hidden yet scattered throughout parts of the social work labor process. Taking a wide variety of forms that can include recalcitrant attitudes as well as practices, deviant social work can be seen as being distinct from radical social work, most notably due to its implicit, pragmatic, non-idealistic and individual dispositions and strategies that are not rooted within epistemological, professional or other institutionally defined parameters. In contrast, positive deviant social work seeks as its maxim application and tangible support to vulnerable people above theoretical critique, rhetoric or perpetual reflexivity. Just as significant, because of its covert and disparate expressions, deviant social work also largely evades managerial or policy-led forms of location,

surveillance and control. It is concluded that only engagement with an eclectic mix of critical theories is likely to help us locate and understand the many forms of resistance that inevitably emerge within an unpredictable, demanding, highly regulated and under-resourced quasi-professional labor process such as social work. (Author abstract.)

Rasmussen, T. (2011). Knowledge production and social work: Forming knowledge production. *Social Work & Social Sciences Review, 15*(1), 28-48.

Practice research can in itself be regarded as a specific form of knowledge production in social work with substantial potentials. Its possibilities as well as its challenges depend on the broader picture of knowledge production in the field. Important phenomena and trends in this broader picture are identified and discussed by using three perspectives on knowledge production: the epistemology, sociology of knowledge, and conceptualization of professions. Challenges can be identified in several of the newer trends and may be most clearly seen in the substantial changes in the dominant societal recreation of 'professionalism', which at the same time from a traditional point of view must be regarded as deprofessionalization. It is suggested, that practice research in this situation can play an important role in a knowledge production scaffolding a new understanding of professionalism and expertise. (Author abstract.)

Welbourne, P. (2009). Social work: The idea of a profession and the professional project. *Locus, 3,* 19-35.

Social work has undergone rapid development over the fifty years since Greenwood classified it as a semi-profession. In this article, social work's claim to be a profession is examined. It is examined in the light of ideas about what it means to be a profession; the development of theory and internationally recognised ethical principles; and reflection on the complexity of the social work role in both national and global contexts. (Author abstract.)

Healy, L. (2008). Exploring the history of social work as a human rights profession. *International Human Rights, 51*(6), 735-748.

2008 marks the 80th anniversary of the first International Conference of Social Work, a meeting that gave birth to the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and to the predecessor organization of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). It also marks the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (UN). It is therefore an opportune time to examine the historical links between social work and human rights. Twenty years have passed since the IFSW declared that social work was and always has been a human rights profession (IFSW, 1988). Yet the profession is not widely regarded as a leader within the larger global human rights movement. This article traces the historical involvement of the profession of social work in international human rights and the validity of its claim to be a human rights profession. It concludes with a brief analysis of the reasons for the limited external recognition of the profession's roles in human rights and recommendations to strengthen its impact and visibility. (Author abstract.)

Randall, G. E. & Kindiak, D.H. (2008). Deprofessionalization or postprofessionalization? Reflections on the state of social work as a profession. *Social Work in Health Care, 47*(4), 341-354.

Recent literature considering the state of the social work profession has primarily focused on concerns about deprofessionalization. This article provides an overview of the literature on professionalization and professional decline in order to situate the social work profession within a broader context. The article then describes the emergence of a new role for social workers in Canada that crosses the boundaries between clinical, managerial, and legal aspects of client care in the area of mental health forensics. It is argued that the future of social work's professionalization project around the world may not be as bleak as has been portrayed in the literature. (Author abstract.)

Hutchings, Al. & Taylor, I. (2007). Defining the profession? Exploring an international definition of social work in the China context. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 16,* 382-390.

Global social work defies concise definition. In this article, the key terms of the definition of social work formulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) are critically analyzed. It is argued that this definition cannot claim to be 'universal' given the assumptions on which it is built and the rapidly changing global society in which social work is undertaken. This is demonstrated in the form of an analysis of social welfare provision and its implications for contemporary social work in China to assess whether the IFSW definition is applicable in this context. The conclusion is that the emerging aims and practice of social work in China are likely to be quite different from those in the West, and that the IFSW definition of social work has value as a point of reference rather than as a definitive definition or a statement of intent. Failure to recognise the limitations of a global definition risks ignoring the lived experience of social workers in China and those they work with. (Author abstract.)

Gambrill, E. (2001). Social work: An authority-based profession. *Research on Social Work Practice, 11*(2), 166-175.

Although social work is flourishing by many outward signs, such as the increased number of schools of social work, it is argued that this growth has not honored obligations in our code of ethics, for example to inform clients, to empower them, and to offer competent services. A great disconnect continues between what we say we do and value and what we actually do. Change in this pattern will be encouraged by increased client access to information over the Internet and the evidence-based practice movement, which encourages transparency of what is done and to what effect, and involvement of clients as informed participants in decisions that affect their Lives. (Author abstract.)

Holosko, M. & Leslie, D.R. (2001). Is social work a profession? The Canadian response. *Research on Social Work Practice, 11*(2), 201-209.

This article presents an analysis of social work in Canada regarding Flexner's perception of our professional status. It presents an overview of the content of social work practice, highlighting the uniqueness of Canada's social welfare system. It argues that Canadian social welfare has characteristics that distinguish it from social welfare in its U.S. neighbor to the south and that such features need to be understood and identified prior to considering the professional or semiprofessional status of social work in Canada. (Author abstract.)

Bryson, B. J., & Lawrence-Webb, C. (2000). Social work practice and profession: The utility of Black feminist thought. *Race, Gender & Class*, 7-17.

Black feminist thought is introduced, defined and examined as a theoretical perspective and model for professional social work practice. Developed by and for Black women, its utility may serve to alter the methods used with similar marginalized client populations. The significance of historical socio-economic context, the intersections of oppression and culturally specific survival tactics are discussed as omitted themes in practice. Mutuality of the client - worker experience is encouraged through prioritizing client self-definition and direction of problem resolution. Professional social work is discussed for greater inclusion of marginalized perspectives. (Author abstract.)

Ife, J. (2000). Local and global practice: Relocating social work as a human rights profession in a new global order. *Eileen Younghusband Memorial Lecture, IFSW/IASSW Biennial Conference, Montreal.*

O'Neill, S. (1999). Social work - a profession? *Journal of Social Work Practice, 13*(1), 9-18.

British social work is in a beleaguered state. Externally, it has been bureaucratised. Consequently, it has lost much of its internal sense of identity as a profession. This shows in an inhibition of individual judgment, and in the loss of the sense of possession of an inherited body of knowledge. Such a loss renders unavailable existing knowledge which is needed to tackle contemporary concerns for example, the question of how to work in `partnership' with the family as enjoined by the 1989 Children Act; or of how the new orthodoxy of empowerment philosophy is to be critically evaluated and integrated. I argue that amongst relevant models of social work intervention, the place of the treatment model has to be restored. Perhaps, ultimately, only professional self-regulation may restore the necessary conditions for offering effective professional service. Meanwhile, the endeavor to negotiate greater autonomy at a local level, and the recovery of a sense of professional history and inherited knowledge, could contribute much to restore the sense of professional identity essential to responsible practice. (Author abstract.)

Specht, H. & Courtney, M. (1995) Unfaithful angels: Has social work abandoned its mission. Simon & Schuster.

Austin, D. (1983). The Flexner myth and the history of social work. *Social Service Revierw, 57*(3), 357-377.

Abraham Flexner's pronouncement in 1915 that social work was not a full profession came at a critical point in the intellectual development of social work and social work education. It led to strenuous efforts by organized social work to fulfill the criteria of a profession set forth by Flexner. The author suggests that these criteria should be put aside and attention directed toward developmental requirements that reflect the distinctive characteristics of social work as a major. (Author abstract.)

Leighninger, L. (1978). Professionalism and social work education: Substance and structure. *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 5*(2), DOI: https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1275.

This paper looks at effects of the quest for "professional identity" upon social work education and practice. Professionalization in social work is seen as consisting of two major components: concern with producing effective service for clients and concern with gaining autonomy. The impact of these two goals, and the tension between them, is discussed in relation to social work knowledge-base expansion in the 1950's, and developments in the history of undergraduate social work education. (Author abstract.)

Rein, M. (1970). Social work in search of a radical profession. *Social Work, 15*(2), 13-28.

The search for radicalization of the social work profession has taken two major forms: questioning the role of the professional association and changing the essence of the social worker's professional activity. In this paper, the author identifies and discusses four major professional creeds for social work: (1) traditional casework, (2) radical casework, (3) community sociotherapy, and (4) radical social policy. Their identification is based on two dimensions—acceptable forms of social behavior expected of social work clients and theories of intervention. The author concludes that a radical casework approach may be the enduring strategy to pursue. (Author abstract.)

Greenwood, E. (1957). Attributes of a profession. *Social Work, 2*(3), 45-55.

Fabricant, M. (1985). The industrialization of social work practice. *Social Work, 30*(5), 389-395.

The drive to increase the productivity of social workers in large public-sector agencies has contributed to an erosion of certain craft elements of practice. The functions of workers are becoming increasingly repetitive and mechanistic, and opportunities to exercise judgment or

develop specific skills are becoming limited. These trends have contributed to a weakening of the profession's historic commitment to social change and the poor. (Author abstract.)

Flexner, A. (1915). Is social work a profession? The New York School of Philanthropy.

The original text.