
Nature of Work and Future of the Social Work Profession

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Social work practice and education long have been influenced by trends in the U.S. economy, particularly as these trends affected patterns of employment and unemployment. This article assesses the implications of recent changes in patterns of economic production and the nature of work for the social work profession. The authors conclude with recommendations on how schools of social work can address these implications in their curricula and their relationships with the communities in which they are located.

Key words: *economy; inequality; unemployment; work*

Social work practice and education have long been influenced by developments in the broader U.S. economy, particularly as they affected such issues as employment and unemployment. A century ago, the settlement house movement and the Charities Organization Societies emerged, in part, in response to the employment problems of immigrants and low-income residents of America's growing urban centers (Chambers, 1965; Patterson, 1994; Trolander, 1987). The early social workers who developed "welfare capitalism" as welfare secretaries in corporations and through union-based services programs addressed the workplace needs of industrial workers (Brandes, 1976; Popple, 1981; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). The construction of the limited U.S. welfare state from the 1930s through the 1960s also reflected the central concern of social workers with the labor market, particularly its economic, social, and psychological effects (Karger, 1988; Sherraden, 1985; Straussner & Phillips, 1988). In the 21st century, social work will be shaped by the new global economy and the growing

gap between high and low wages, permanent and temporary employment (Reich, 1991; Rifkin, 1995; U.S. Department of Labor, 1995b).

This article assesses the implications of two interrelated phenomena for social work practice and education. The first is the shift to what Head (1996) called "the new, ruthless economy," characterized by a growth in inequality, a shift in power from labor to capital, and a proliferation of low-wage employment.

The second phenomenon is the steady reorganization and mechanization of production, which could result in the "end of work" as we know it. Rifkin (1995) argued that we are in the midst of "a third great industrial revolution" that is displacing millions of workers and eliminating or changing "whole job categories." The end of work raises the possibility, and perhaps the necessity, of reducing the workweek, separating the concept of income from work, and introducing a guaranteed annual income. In a world without work, reconstruction of the social infrastructure could become a central focus of human activity. This, in turn, could enhance

the role of volunteerism and private, nonprofit institutions by paying a "social wage for community service" (Rifkin, 1995, p. 258). This idea, which expands on programs already underway, such as AmeriCorps and VISTA raises profound challenges for social workers.

We analyze the key features of the "new economy" and the issues raised for policy, practice, and education and conclude with some recommendations as to how schools of social work can address the implications of the new economy in their curricula and their relationships with the surrounding community.

The New Economy

The roots of the new economy lie in the early 1970s. The previous 25 years (roughly 1945 to 1970) constituted a "golden" era, during which income inequality declined and most groups saw their standards of living improve (Fischer et al., 1996; Sawhill, 1996). Between 1959 and 1969, as a consequence of economic growth, a moderately progressive income tax, and the expansion of income transfer programs, the per capita incomes of the bottom 20 percent of households increased at a faster rate than those of any other group. At the same time, real median family income grew by 40 percent (Danziger & Weinberg, 1994).

Since 1973 this picture has changed, as economic growth has slowed, the nation's tax system has become increasingly regressive, and the value of income transfers to the most vulnerable segments of the population has declined sharply (Danziger & Weinberg, 1994; Madrick, 1998). Although hotly debated during the 1980s, the "reality of widening disparities" of income and wealth can no longer be considered a "hypothesis" but "simply a fact" (Krugman, 1997). Between 1973 and 1994 the share of income received by the bottom 20 percent of families fell from 5.5 percent to 4.2 percent, while the share received by the top 5 percent rose from 15.5 percent to 20.1 percent

(Danziger & Weinberg, 1994; Krugman, 1997). Between 1965 and 1997 the ratio between the earnings of a typical corporate chief executive and those of an average worker increased from 20.3:1 to 115.7:1. Although income inequality has continued to grow in the 1990s, it has grown at a slower rate during the 1996–1998 period as a result of wage increases (Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 1999). Whereas the share of household wealth owned by the bottom 40 percent of families fell, that owned by the top 1 percent almost doubled (Fischer et al., 1996).

Closely related to this increase in inequality has been the growth of "severe poverty" (Krugman, 1997). A recent study found that people in low-income families experienced much greater material deprivation than often thought (Federman et al., 1996). It has become more difficult for low-income people to move into the middle class, and "the chances of middle-class Americans moving into poverty have grown" (Bernstein, 1996; Krugman, 1997).

Why has inequality grown? Many theorists blame a widening gap between those with college degrees and those without (Bluestone, 1994). Yet, this is only part of the problem. During the 1980s, the only men who gained ground economically were those with six years of college; their real wages increased 9.7 percent. Men with four years of college saw their wages grow by only .2 percent, and those with fewer than four years lost ground (Bluestone, 1994). Between 1989 and 1997, men with some college experience saw their real hourly wages fall by a greater degree (6.9 percent) than those for individuals with high school degrees (5.2 percent). Men with college degrees experienced real hourly wage increases of only 1.2 percent, suggesting that a college degree is not a guarantee of economic success (Mishel et al., 1999). The latter trend was particularly pronounced for white men with low levels of education (Blank, 1997). Among African Americans, the

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large number of less-educated men who have dropped out or never entered the labor force, or who are incarcerated, masks this trend.

Among women, those with high school degrees or less lost ground. Women with one to three years of college, however, saw their wages increase 3.8 percent, while women with four or more years saw wages increase by 12.6 percent (Bluestone, 1994).

Another often cited cause of growing inequality is technology and the ensuing reduced demand for unskilled labor (Howell, 1996; Sawhill, 1996). Yet, as we have seen, many workers with skills and college experience have seen their wages stagnate in recent years. Although the education level of the work force has increased since 1973, wages have not kept pace (Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 1996a). Moreover, during the 1980s, when inequality grew, demand for highly skilled workers did not increase dramatically (Howell, 1996). Finally, technology today seems to have "no greater impact" on jobs than it did during the 1970s (Mishel et al., 1996a; Oliner & Wascher, 1995). High-tech solutions, therefore, clearly are no panacea for the nation's social ills.

Foreign competition and the imbalance of U.S. trade also are often cited as sources of inequality. Freeman and Katz (1994) estimated that foreign competition accounted for as much as 20 percent of the increase in wage inequality among male workers in the 1980s. Although competition has had an adverse effect on many workers, particularly in manufacturing, it does not explain everything (Barlett & Steele, 1996; Howell, 1996; Mishel, 1995). As Shulman (1996) noted, 75 percent of the "private-sector jobs in the United States are not subject to global competition" (p. 78).

One often overlooked cause of rising inequality is the decline of unions, which played a key role in raising living standards and reducing inequality in the early postwar era (Brinkley, 1995). Today, however, only 11 percent of private-sector employees are unionized, compared with 45 percent in 1970 (Fischer et al., 1996; Shulman, 1996). Freeman and Katz (1994) estimated that the decline of unions explains about 20 percent of the increase in wage inequality (Bluestone, 1994; Fischer et al., 1996). A closely

related phenomenon is a decrease in job stability. Although unemployment has fallen to record lows, "underlying levels of job stability and job security are lower" today than during the previous two decades" (Mishel et al., 1999, p. 253). Involuntary job loss through downsizing and "other job displacements" has increased, and workers can no longer assume that their current job will last into the future. Nonstandard (that is, contingent and part-time) work, which have lower wages and fewer benefits, also has grown to account for nearly one-third of all current jobs.

Additional factors, which are also linked with the trade gap and the decline of unions, are the decrease in the number of high-paid, manufacturing sector jobs and the growth of low-wage, services sector employment (Economic Policy Institute, 1996). The virtual freeze on Aid to Families with Dependent Children/Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits since 1973 and the increasingly regressive nature of federal and state tax systems also partially explain the increase in social inequality.

The End of Work

A second important trend shaping social work in the 21st century is the reorganization and transformation of work. Some observers have argued that this portends a "jobless future" and the "end of work" (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Rifkin, 1995). The transformation and "progressive mechanization" of work noted in the early 1980s by Leontief (1982) is now a matter of historical fact even in the social services sector (Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992; Ginzberg, 1982).

According to Rifkin (1995), "After years of wishful forecasts and false starts, the new computer and communications technologies are finally making their long-anticipated impact on the workplace and the economy, throwing the world community into the grip of a third great industrial revolution" (p. xv). Unlike earlier decades, new industries have not emerged to employ the millions being displaced by technology. Even the computer services and engineering industries, which many believed would take up the slack, have experienced declining job growth, largely because of the spread of technology (Goodman, 1996).

Head (1996) pointed out that the workplace also is being transformed by "lean production," a range of techniques aimed at expanding productivity and reducing labor costs. These include the simplification of production, the replacement of skilled workers with unskilled workers, and the introduction of "outsourcing" (whereby corporations farm out production or support services to nonunionized firms with lower labor costs). This "re-engineering" has spread to the services sector, resulting in the displacement of many lower-level workers and "middle-level" managers. The introduction of managed care has produced the identical effect among hospital social services workers and social workers employed in mental health settings, threatening their future in these practice arenas.

Greider (1997), noted that the industrialized world faces a massive oversupply problem, characterized by growing capacity and declining demand. By the mid-1990s, excess capacity had become a serious problem in the automobile, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, steel, and other industries. According to Clough (1998), the chief investment strategist for Merrill Lynch, U.S. "retailers and financial institutions have added capacity faster than Americans can either spend or save" (p. A31). In this context every firm tries to shift the burden of overproduction to others through restructuring, downsizing, selling off assets, writing off "weaker investments," or expanding surplus capacity by building "new factories that will be more cost-efficient than one's rivals" (Greider, 1997, pp. 103-104).

Although these arguments seem persuasive, they are not completely convincing. First, in a sense, lean production and re-engineering are neither new nor dramatic developments (Braverman, 1974; Giedion, 1969). Oliner and Wascher (1995) noted that layoffs were common during the 1970s and 1980s, and government programs for technologically displaced workers date back to the 1960s. Second, the worker displacement rate, which measures the fraction of the work force permanently losing jobs as a result of restructuring and downsizing, has not increased dramatically (Oliner & Wascher, 1995). (A key change is that white-collar workers and managers are now more likely to face displacement.) Third, it is not

clear that we are really going through a productivity revolution (Madrack, 1998). Although productivity increased an average of 2.7 percent a year between 1995 and 1999, it remains unclear whether this is an anomaly or the beginning of a new upward trend (Blinder, 2000).

However, focusing on short-term trends in a sense, is missing the forest for the trees. From a long-range perspective the mechanization of work and the displacement of workers are proceeding. Although growth in productivity has slowed since the 1970s, it has not disappeared. Between 1973 and 1997 productivity increased 29 percent (Mischel et al., 1999).

Since 1900, the share of the labor force working in agriculture has declined from 40 percent to 3 percent (Ginzberg, 1982; Rifkin, 1995). Between 1960 and 1990 manufacturing employment fell by half (Helibrone, 1995). Rifkin (1995) predicted that by the middle of the 21st century, "the blue-collar worker will have passed from history, casualty of the relentless march toward ever greater technological efficiency" (p. 140).

Although the services economy will continue to create jobs, particularly for highly skilled and educated workers, many more jobs will disappear. The emergence of new industries that might employ masses of displaced workers seems unlikely. Addressing these issues will remain a key challenge for society, in general, and social workers, in particular, in the decades ahead.

Significance of "Work" in the History of U.S. Social Work

The concept and consequences of work have had a lasting effect on the development of social work in the United States for several reasons. First, social work emerged as an organized occupation during a period of unprecedented industrial growth that dramatically transformed U.S. society. Unemployment, seasonal employment, broken employment, and low wages produced a new kind of poverty, and urban slums created new or more widespread forms of social dislocation (Patterson, 1994). Industrial accidents, occupationally related diseases, child labor, and union-management conflict dominated the agenda of social reformers and charity workers.

Second, the growth of the social work profession coincided with those periods of U.S. history that witnessed increasing government intervention to counteract the effects of the marketplace on the distribution of work, the economic benefits of work, workplace conditions, and the political rights of workers. The profession acquired much of its political strength and social status through its association with both reform activities and the creation of services that focused on work-related issues in both the public and private sectors, particularly in the Progressive Era (approximately 1890–1917), the New Deal period (1933–40), and the 1960s. In this way, the ideology of the profession complemented the prevailing values of the socioeconomic system, even as social workers addressed the system's institutional and structural problems on an individual and societal level (Rose, 1997).

Third, social work practice incorporated an understanding of both the socioeconomic and psychosocial dimensions of work into its conceptual frameworks. This distinguished it from other mental health professions that, with few exceptions, ignored the effect of such issues as workplace pressures, economic insecurity, and unemployment on their clients (Reisch, 1987). The emphasis of social work practitioners on conscious use of self and on the functions of the worker in an agency context also have required social workers and social work educators to develop a critical understanding of the nature of that work itself (Lewis, 1982). Most recently, these concepts are reflected in the increasing popularity of the person-in-environment (PIE) approach as an assessment tool in social work practice (Karls & Wandrei, 1994) and the expansion of interventions such as employee assistance programs (EAPs) in the workplace (Lewis, 1997; Root, 1997).

During the Progressive Era, social work focused on a variety of concerns that pertained to employment and workplace issues. These included chronic and cyclical unemployment

among urban immigrants, the regulation of child labor and the number of hours women could work in factories and mills, occupational health and safety, and workers' rights to strike and engage in collective bargaining. Despite Jane Addams' assertion that Hull House examined all sides of the "social question" carefully, most of the public believed that the settlement movement and its allies were staunchly pro-labor (Addams, 1895; Karger, 1988; Sklar, 1989).

The work of Florence Kelley, Lillian Wald, and somewhat later Mary van Kleeck and Helen Hall "recognized that issues of employment were critical to well-being" (Root, 1997, p. xx).

It was no coincidence, therefore, that Frances Perkins was appointed as Secretary of Labor by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and that Harry Hopkins, Secretary of Commerce, recognized the significance of work-related policies in the development of New Deal programs such as the Work Progress Administration (Rose, 1989).

During the Great Depression, social workers joined with other reformers inside and outside the Roosevelt Administration to advocate for emergency relief measures, unemployment insurance, and the old age provisions of the Social Security Act. Social workers also became more conscious of themselves as workers and either created social services unions or joined more broadly based unions in the public and non-profit sectors (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Unions helped social workers acquire greater understanding of the lives of their clients, to join social movements spearheaded by organized labor, and to develop a greater sense of mutuality in their practice (Karger, 1988; Reynolds, 1951).

In the 1940s and 1950s, however, a combination of heightened professionalization, anti-Communist "redbaiting" and the retreat of social work agencies from services to low-income and working class clients produced a rapid decline in the unionization of social workers

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(Alexander & Speizman, 1980). It also produced a retreat from the profession's historic advocacy for work-related reforms and for recognition of work as a component in the life experience of individuals, families, and communities (Specht & Courtney, 1994). One manifestation of this development was the de-emphasis on socioeconomic issues in practice texts written in this period, a trend that continued through the 1970s (Ephross & Reisch, 1982). Policy initiatives focused on poverty rather than on work and on selective rather than universal social services programs, during both periods of social services growth (1960s–1970s) and retrenchment (1980s–1990s).

Current and Future Trends and Implications for Social Work

During the past decade, there have been numerous studies that forecast the impact of changing economic conditions on the nature of work. One of these studies, commissioned by the United Way of America (1988), predicted the following developments would emerge early in the next millennium:

- A growing interrelationship between individual, family, and community issues and the workplace environment. Examples include the impact of alcoholism and drug abuse on family well-being and worker productivity and the effects of work-related stress on the incidence of domestic violence.
- Increased employment opportunities for those groups traditionally denied access to the workforce, such as women, people of color, and individuals with physical and mental disabilities. It is estimated that by early in the next century people of color will constitute about 30 percent of the total work force and that women and people of color will be a majority of all new workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 1995).
- A growing need for ongoing worker education, staff development, and training.
- A dramatic alteration in traditional patterns of employment resulting from corporate restructuring (including downsizing); the growth of small firms; the use of "outsourcing" by large companies; the

decline of unionization; and the spread of automation, computerization, and robotization. These trends would lead to the loss of stable employment for many workers.

- The growing impact on the workplace of AIDS.
- Rising concerns over issues of worker privacy.
- An increase in the number of workers with no health insurance or retirement benefits (now estimated at 40 percent of all workers and rising).
- An increase in the number of workers over 65 years remaining in the work force for economic, social, and psychological reasons. This trend will likely be exacerbated by changes in the retirement age and alterations in Social Security and Medicare benefits.

One significant consequence of these changes, of particular relevance to social workers, is the decline in the standard of living for working people, while the income of the upper 1 percent has soared. The falling purchasing power of wages has contributed to the appearance of narrowing the gender and racial gaps in income. The reality is that the seeming improvement in the relative incomes of women and people of color is the result more of the dramatic decrease in the wages of white men than to the benefits of the economic growth or the social policies of the past two decades (Rose, 1997).

Another set of consequences has been the persistence of high levels of unemployment, even in times of aggregate prosperity. We have experienced a dramatic increase in the number of workers who are underemployed, a chronic differential in the unemployment rates of people of color compared to whites, and a growing problem of high unemployment rates among youths, particular in urban ghettos (Wilson, 1996).

Implications for the Future

Recent welfare reform legislation offers social workers an opportunity to address these issues in concrete, socially useful ways. Because work is mandated to receive social benefits, it would be instructive to initiate a serious debate as to

what constitutes "work" in a postmodern, postindustrial global economy. This would include such issues as

- number of hours per week individuals are expected to work in order to be considered "productive" and to earn a living wage
- types of activities deemed useful or productive in an information-based economy, when commodities are less tangible and creativity is more valued than output alone
- the question of what is considered adequate compensation for labor
- recognition of the social supports (for example, child care, health care, housing, public education and transportation, and job retraining) necessary for individuals to participate as workers to their fullest potential.

Given the differential cost of living in major metropolitan areas and the overall rise of living standards and expectations, both the so-called poverty line and the minimum wage need to be recalculated as a guide for the distribution of economic and social benefits. In their present form, these measures provide insufficient information about the condition of marginalized and discouraged workers and their families. If necessary, we should seek ways to reduce the workweek rather than the work force. The benefits of work are not luxuries for individuals alone in a changing economy; they are, instead, assets that accrue in value as they acquire a social character.

As the experiences of workfare programs around the country demonstrate, the assumption among some policymakers that only economic rationality guides the behavior of adult recipients of TANF also needs to be reexamined. Researchers have found that mothers' concerns over quality of child care, number of hours worked, and nature of the time they spent with their children all increased their overall level of stress, sometimes with deleterious effects to their health (Berrick, 1991; Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, 1998). The experience of earlier welfare-to-work programs reveals that the quality of jobs available is also a decisive factor in people's ability to enter the economic mainstream. As we debate local responses to "welfare reform," we must recog-

nize that no reforms or adjustments in one area of policy, for example, income maintenance, can succeed unless they are complemented by significant improvements in related areas, such as housing, health care, child care, and education.

In the present climate, the lack of this awareness may produce solutions like wage subsidies to private-sector employers that will be exploited for short-term profit enhancement yet not provide the long-term escape from welfare dependency proponents suggest. The effect of such subsidies on the already declining wage scale of current workers in our cities, particularly in public sector and service unions, also needs to be considered. In addition, so-called "opportunity policies" may exacerbate interracial strife as competition for scarce jobs heightens prevailing social tensions. To reduce the possibility of such conflict, we should develop regional partnerships that emphasize the creation of jobs among public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations. Areas of potential employment include housing rehabilitation, education, child care, recreation, and the arts.

As workplace and employment issues become a growing focus of social concern, the role of EAPs will probably change in two ways. There will be an overall growth in the use of EAP-type services coupled with a widening gap between "quality" EAPs for high-paid workers and "skeletal" EAPs for low-paid workers (Root, 1997). In this two-tiered system, even quality programs will focus increasingly on cost containment issues and the "management" of workers' family and mental health problems to maintain high levels of productivity and reduce employee absenteeism. These goals will create practical and ethical conflicts for social workers.

Role of Social Work Education

Given the magnitude of contemporary economic and social changes, it is puzzling how schools can satisfy the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) requirement (1995) to teach students to work toward economic and social justice when most students lack an understanding of how the economy works or how it developed. It is ironic that among many accreditation requirements, there are none that compel schools to teach theoretical or practice-focused

content on the nature of work and its significance for human development and family well-being (CSWE, 1995). Nor do most doctoral programs address the theoretical, research, policy, or practice implications of these phenomena (Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education, 1998).

Schools of social work can address these deficiencies through significant curricular adjustments. Policy courses can incorporate content on macroeconomics, the social implications of the shifting labor market, the legal and regulatory framework for employment, and the socio-cultural significance of work. They could include such topics as organizational behavior and program innovation; the structure and dynamics of the labor market; assessment and response to the special needs of workers; skills in cost-benefit/cost-effectiveness analysis; and legal issues that affect employment (Root, 1997).

Practice courses could include content on the psychosocial dimensions of work, particularly within a multicultural perspective; interventions to address the symptoms of work-related stress such as alcoholism and drug abuse; physical health problems; depression; family and community violence; and the ethical issues for practice in the new environment. Scholars such as Lewis (1997) and Herbert (1998) suggested other curricular enhancements, such as the development of practice skills to work with youth in school-to-work-type programs and with older workers in vocational rehabilitation and training programs, and skills in evaluative research methods. They also have proposed teaching students how to design and implement research projects and program interventions that reflect sensitivity to the different needs of different elements of the workplace (that is, women, persons of color, and individuals with disabilities). An important addition to students' education would be the development of skills in assessing the effectiveness of different models of occupational social work (Straussner, 1990).

Conclusion: Meaning of Work in a Global Economy

As we explore policy options for the future, we need to keep in mind that the significance of work goes beyond the material goods it provides.

Broader work force participation is an essential ingredient in the elimination of poverty and the stabilization of families and communities. In this regard, the provision of a living wage is an essential component to the attainment of economic and social self-sufficiency. Without active societal intervention to arrest the problem, joblessness and its consequences become self-perpetuating phenomena exacerbating existing problems within the community and the family (Wilson, 1996). Yet, policy reforms are necessary but insufficient conditions to produce these results (Smith & Joe, 1994).

To provide a framework for these policy reforms, social workers need to articulate an alternative vision for our society. This vision could include a stronger focus on the family or household wage in the structuring of social and fiscal policies. It could recognize the interrelationship of the physical and social infrastructure to sustained economic growth. Finally, it could include expanded public-private collaboration around job training, apprenticeships, and school-to-work transitions. Above all, our policies need to make it desirable and feasible for people to work by acknowledging our mutual interdependence.

As we seek ways to ameliorate the plight of those individuals and families who will soon be devastated by the impact of changes in federal welfare policy, we should discard our unrealistic assumptions regarding the ability of the marketplace alone to solve a problem of this magnitude. We should strive to overcome our historic habit of competing for scarce resources in the political arena. At the same time, we also should recognize that the problems we confront cannot be solved by small-scale solutions no matter how well-intentioned our motivations. As we approach a "world without work" we must abandon those assumptions that constrict our policy responses so we can think and act boldly. To do otherwise would be to concede defeat and usher in an era in which our vision of community yields to that of a social nightmare. ■

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