The social work profession: Now and in the next ten years

Merv Hancock

A presentation to the ANZASW Conference on 13 November 1998 by Merv Hancock, a life member of ANZASW and social worker in private practice in Palmerston North.

Abstract

Two themes are canvassed in this article. The first theme is that of the re-establishment and maintenance of trust in social workers.

Unity within the social work profession is the second theme.

All professions in Aotearoa New Zealand are being buffeted by profound forces in society. The professions have all experienced a decline in public esteem. The media highlights professional errors, mistakes or misconduct on an almost daily basis. No simple way out of this situation is immediately evident. In this article a social analysis of the social work profession as an occupational group in New Zealand society is undertaken.

No definition of what makes up a profession is offered in this article. Abbott (1988) suggests that the most useful way of thinking about professions is as something defined and redefined through continuous struggle between different occupational groups. Thus the attitudes of professionals are fluid, and subject to change and struggle. Professional behaviour is a shifting rather than a static phenomena. While social workers as professionals are the focus of this article, similar analyses could be done of lawyers, engineers, doctors, teachers, academics, counsellors or accountants.

Keith M. McDonald (1995) advances the concept of a professional project to assist in understanding the quest of professions for social and economic position in society. This concept of McDonald’s was adopted in a study of four helping professions 1947-1997 (Hancock, 1998). That study revealed that the social work profession conforms to the idea of a ‘professional project’ as argued by McDonald.

Threads of that position are utilised in this article. Economic, social and ethical objectives, along with culture and the state, are discussed in relation to contending issues on professionalism.

Two contending views on the nature of professions have influenced the role of professions to the present time. Throughout the last century the contested nature of the role of professions has been evident. Broadly, up to the mid-thirties an ‘individualistic’ view of professional behaviour dominated. With the vast behaviour and social changes following the world depression (1929-1933) and the impact of the Second World War, a more ‘socially’ based view of professions emerged. It was a ‘socially’ concerned view that the profession should provide, and many within professions wanted to provide, services to the whole of society; thus emerged a social service view of professions.
The shift from an individualistic view of professions to a social service view of professions between 1930 and 1950 was neither painless nor naively altruistic. Although altruism was undoubtedly present, an important part of these struggles by doctors, lawyers and social workers was to try and provide services on the basis of need. And so evolved a state structure of provision which, in the endeavour to meet such need, also substantially benefited the professions themselves. The benefits accrued in two ways: 1. the increased public standing of ‘the professional’ and, 2. their increased economic independence. Thus the expansion of the welfare state with its inalienable right of service in health, education, welfare and employment supported the professions well.

It is this ‘social service’ view of professionalism that is now under substantial attack from an opposing view of professions – which may be called ‘commercial’ professionalism. The ‘commercial’ professional approach stresses the need for a managerial and entrepreneurial philosophy and its associate skills. These skills are: 1. technical ability 2. the ability to manage others, and 3. the ability to bring in new business. As a result of this ‘commercial’ view of professionalism being pitched against the ‘social service’ view we are currently witness to a profound struggle being waged around the definition of professionalism. For social workers, a ‘commercial’ view of professionalism raises the spectre of two competing sets of objectives – economic and social objectives. An explanation follows:

**Economic objectives**

There are two major strands in social workers’ economic objectives; 1. income improvement and 2. control of work. Both these objectives operate independently of the context in which the work is occurring – public, private or voluntary sector – and of the field in which practice is taking place. In 1998 social workers practice in many different fields: health and mental health; care and protection; communities; justice; and education. Moreover social workers practise in different sectors of the economy – in the public sector, in the private sector and in the voluntary non-profit sector. Many function in large bureaucracies, some function in small community groups and some function as sole traders in private practice.

**1. Income improvement**

The spread of social workers across different functions, fields and sectors points to the difficult and major task for social workers in maintaining a unified profession. Just as important, however, is the constant struggle by social workers in all fields for income improvement and economic strengthening. This has been understated in the past, a fact that should not be allowed to obscure the major efforts previously made. In recent times social workers in one public sector agency (New Zealand CYPFS, 1997) used restructuring as a means to income improvement. In all agencies negotiations over salary levels are the continuing issue. In the next 10 years the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) will need to enter this area of professional support, an area largely left to unions in the past. A close eye also needs to be kept on labour market changes and the Employment Contracts Act (1991). It is here that the contested views about professionalism and professional occupational licensing come into contention. For example the social service ethos tends towards higher and enforceable practice standards and the exercise of controls over admission to the profession. On the other hand the ‘commercial’ approach to professionalism seeks to lower entry barriers so as to ensure greater competition which is meant to achieve lower costs and thereby supposedly provide more services.
2. Control of work
The nature of social work practice is personal, varied and somewhat intangible which is opposite to the routine and impersonal approach to work found in large bureaucracies and industry. From such practice springs a desire to have the maximum control over the manner in which work is undertaken, yet always subject to accountability to clients and to the employing agency where one exists. However the agency setting for social workers at the present time is dominated by a struggle between social workers and their managers over the control of work. The focus of managers is on cost containment and effective service in the least possible time. Social workers resist such measures. As a result tension becomes more evident and stress levels rise. It is useful to also see such struggles in economic terms, because underlying the tension are differing (and competing) economic ambitions. Often the economic interest of social workers has been overlooked. But such interest is profound and can be expected to increase in the next 10 years as this struggle over the control of work persists.

Private practice
The assumption of full control over a social worker’s work occurs in private social work practice. A small but significant number of members now earn their living in the private sector. There are two groups of social workers in private practice. One group focuses on social case work and counselling; the second focuses on advisory services and social service planning.

With members of the community bearing the full cost of their service provision and with contracting out of certain personal services for statutory and quasi statutory services to the private sector, social work in this field will undoubtedly grow in the next decade. One imponderable, however, is the effect of the current economic recession on present private practice. Nevertheless, the growth in this field is important for the profession. A number of consequences are possible. One is fragmentation in the profession. For example, will ‘private practitioners’ withdraw from ANZASW and form their own group?

Another consequence is to influence the profession towards a more conservative cast of mind and challenge the more radical professional positions of the past. It is possible that the private sector social workers could adopt a more individualistic approach based on an estimate of the economic advantages to them. It is these new voices within the profession, with views based on differing economic objectives, that will make it more difficult to maintain a unified profession. The reasons for this include the divergent views on methods to achieve more improvement of income and control of work.

Recognition of the efforts of social workers for economic improvement and control of their own work opens up the profession to the charge of using professional tactics to prosper through market closure, restraining competition within and warding off competition without. The argument is that professional self-interest is set against community interest. Professionalism is viewed as the smiling and confident face of a service economy monopoly.

Defenders of professionalism argue that the anti-competitive ethos is in fact an important legacy and essential antidote to the contestability of free-market capitalism. Professional social workers, now more autonomous and more skilled, can claim to include economies of scale within their professional repertoire of skilled technique, sober values and fair judgement. A professional claim to economic revenue, status and self-regulation are matched by
demanding practice standards, specialised knowledge and an ethic of service. Such professionalism is valuable and cheap at the price.

In the light of this, when you take the issue of professional negligence liability, what happens when you apply the views of the two contending professional agendas? The commercial view of profession has the complete contract solution to the problem of negligence. It promotes the free play of self-interest and would push parties to first party insurance. The social service view of professionalism is naturally to the duty to pursue the best interest of clients as an obligation and, where it goes wrong, to the profession’s self-regulation procedures and ad hoc legal regulation.

Social objectives

The pursuit of social status and community appreciation by social workers has a substantial history. Of particular relevance to this in 1998 is the proliferation of university and polytechnic degrees and diplomas in social work. The award of a degree or a diploma carries with it two points of social status significance. A university or polytechnic qualification, in the public eye, suggests the holder has abilities and it carries with it a certain social status. This raises the standing of the social work occupation as a whole in the community.

The granting of full membership by ANZASW after a process of assessment and the award of the Certificate of Competency is, nowadays, another vital aspect of such standing. In addition to the achievement of a qualification, it also indicates acceptance by peers through peer assessment and moderation.

Such social standing and economic success are vitally important for social workers in particular because of the intangible nature of what social workers offer or sell. Social work offers services which cannot be seen in advance (as you might see other products and services displayed in a store), and it is a service which also requires clients to entrust their lives to social workers. Trust is bestowed by clients on social workers who are seen to be genuine and respectable. At present, there is a real struggle for social workers in trying to encourage a benign dynamic between genuineness and respectability. Social workers who have social status and are respected can attract business and perhaps be more successful in assisting those who use their services. If they are also economically successful they can do more for others and themselves.

In the past the social work profession was riven with a debate over professional status. There was a strong anti-professionalism movement. While that debate still has some sting left in it, a new one is more evident. Mainstream social work has found its ethos of social service provision based on need under massive challenge. Some within the social work profession have joined forces with critics in political parties in government agencies and in the community. These voices argue that social workers can be and are unresponsive to the needs of clients and profligate in the use of and unnecessary demand for resources.

The diverging interests between employers and the social workers has become more acute. This divergence of view will reappear in a new form appropriate with the times. If the recession deepens it will push the radical view and the mainstream view closer together in some circumstances and pull the two apart in other circumstances. The recognition of the
importance of the formation and development of an educated person has been stressed less in the last decade as the social work profession turned toward a clearer view on membership and its associated responsibilities and standards. Further developments may be expected on membership and professional attributes.

However, the new decade will likely see the profession turn its attention to be both advocate for and critic of university and polytechnic social work education; as advocate to retain the gains of the last quarter century and, as critic, in its criticism of curriculum. Such criticism, particularly over the core requirements of education and training of social workers in the institutions will likely become more intense.

**Ethical objectives**

One of the defining issues in the professional development of social workers are the core ethical obligations incorporated by social workers into their practice. These obligations are spelt out in codes of practice and codes of behaviour. It is therefore not surprising that ANZASW accepted a code of ethics at its founding conference in 1964. Subsequent amendment to the code has been a constant feature of the Association’s history. The ethical obligations of the profession are set to become not only more prominent but absolutely essential in the future.

Three considerations underline this increasing importance. First the moral nature of social work is even more paramount than before. Devotion to knowledge of what is required in practice or devotion to technical and technologies of practice, whilst important, fail to give direction to and purpose in the myriad of human issues with which social work has to deal. Code of ethics and code of practice provide the necessary guidance in practice.

The second consideration is client demand for good and accountable service based on principles and standards that are external to, yet part of, social work practice. The ever presence of a questioning stance by clients, whilst undoubtedly welcome, makes social work more complex and uncertain. So social work engagement, assessment, planning and implementation requires client consent and participation which is based on clear ethical standards as well as being informed and enhanced by sound theory and practice skills.

The third consideration is that of moral judgement. Public accountability always involves moral judgement. Some mistake has been made; who is responsible? Who is wrong? How can it be put right?

The profession will have to work harder in the ethical field than ever. Complaints will multiply in the next decade. The process of complaint and the work of the disciplinary committee will accelerate.

Many will have noticed the trend in social work agencies to adopt for themselves a code of ethics for their work. Such an important step may suggest the profession can relax its endeavours. The opposite is the case. A profession’s ethical standards spring from a different position from that of agencies. For the individual professional ethical standards are much more important, especially in these days of litigation against social workers for professional failure when social agencies do not stand behind their employees.
There is a broader issue in respect of ethical obligation. This relates to the connection between professional ethical obligations and world views. The code of ethics to which ANZASW is currently committed are rooted in a profound world view in which the principle of respect for persons and social justice are paramount and imply the provision of a service characterised by self-giving for the sake of others. Such a position under present circumstances means that social workers’ economic and social status objectives are of less importance that the ethical obligation. It is by no means clear that all social workers will adhere to such a view. The immediate future suggests debate and disagreement within the ranks.

**The relationship to cultural issues**

**Gender**
The social work profession in New Zealand has always included a greater number of women than men in its ranks. The balance of women to men has shifted in the last decade to a substantially increased number of women in the profession. There is no reason to suggest a change in the next 10 years – indeed a further acceleration in favour of women numbers may be expected. The reasons for this change lie in the economic and social circumstances at the time rather than in personal choices of individuals. What is important is that it portends change in the profession’s approach. The systemic critique made by women social work researchers and writers in the last 30 years of social work practice needs to be acknowledged. The position of women in wider society and in the social work profession itself reveals profound disadvantage. Thus the profession’s own structures will require change.

**Bicultural**
The recognition of the obligations flowing from the Treaty of Waitangi has been on the Association’s agenda for the last 25 years. The Association’s response and the social, economic and political ferment occasioned by the reassertion of Tino Rangatiratanga is worthy of close historical study. For now, however, the profession needs a short-term, medium-term and long-term view of how to support Tino Rangatiratanga and all its consequences both within the Association and outside of it.Whilst the huge investment made by the Association in bicultural matters in the past may bring hope for steady progress in the next decade it may prove harder still. The profound desire of whanau, hapu, and iwi to control fully their own social service resources means there are new standards for social workers which may differ strongly from those that ANZASW has adopted. ANZASW needs to provide support for the view that Maori knowledge and Maori heritage belongs to Maori and this is the basis on which positive Maori development including social service development can flourish. Bicultural institutions and resources which nurture culture, language, traditional knowledge and identity are, as social workers know only too well, the key institutions in the health and happiness of whanau and hapu.

**Relationship to the State**

One of the key arguments of the concept of the professional project is that professional groups struggle and battle to secure market control and if possible a monopoly of the work in its field. To ensure this, professional groups try, and often manage, to enter a relationship with the State to regulate on its and the profession’s behalf. The link between the State and the profession varies over time from strong to weak. The present time sees the State adopting a deregulatory stance on matters relating to the professions. It is one of those interesting
paradoxes that ANZASW is pursuing a policy seeking statutory recognition for its members at the very time that the State is wanting to lessen the powers of professional organisations. To compound the difficult cross currents in the field is the proposal by the State and ACC to attempt to delegate to the professions the licensing and accountability of workers who provide services for abuse, child abuse and sexual abuse victims as well as to clients with disabilities. What this illustrates, though, is the fact that the State and its organs hold views about the professions sharply divergent from the professions themselves. Social work is one example of this divergence. Moreover the State may also fluctuate in its views with contradictory positions adopted within a single five year period and changed in another. A recent example has been in respect of the qualification required by CYPFS for its staff in front line social work positions. If not finally adopting a ‘commercialised’ approach to professions it may well end up taking a different position and acting on it with the same effect.

**Relationship to other professions**

The relationship of the social work profession to colleagues in related professions e.g. counselling, psychology, nursing and medicine (to name a few), is significant. Two features will dominate this relationship in the next decade. The first is competition. The promotion of competition and a competitive environment in the economy by the government and private corporations has major effects on social workers. It converts colleagues in other fields into competitors and changes inter-professional dialogue, and is a potent force for disputes. The second feature is that of accommodation and alliance within the competitive market. Here careful role delineation can assist the coexistence of professions alongside one another. Cooperation may also result from alliances between professions in the face of potential (and sometimes real) common opposing factions such as funding and regulatory bodies (e.g. ACC).

The recognition that the relationship with other professions may be fraught is the first step in working out an approach that will yield better relationships, but it is not going to be easy. All the while social work’s allied professions in counselling, psychology and psychotherapy confront the same tension and contest: which view of profession should prevail – the ‘social service’ one or the ‘commercial’ one?

**Conclusion**

The argument has been thus: the cleavage produced between the two contending views of professionalism which is affecting social work at the present time portends changes for ANZASW. By first recognising that there is a contest and making an effort to transcend the tension may help the Association avoid the fragmentation of the profession that may otherwise occur.

What is certain is that the Association needs to know and articulate what it stands for. The Association must be clear about the interests of its members and represent these vigorously. Alongside this is the essential need for a clear philosophy to assure others that the Association has the fundamental interest of clients (in the widest sense) at heart. It is argued that the adoption of these three strategies will continue to provide a basis of trust between social workers and their clients. The issue of who is trustworthy in present day New Zealand society is of great importance. There is widespread uncertainty about who can be trusted.
Indeed, many argue that cynicism is a prevailing attitude and that the 1990s may, in history, become known as ‘the decade of cynicism’.

The evidence from opinion polls on public attitudes to trust in occupational groups gives a mixed response. When included in such polls, social workers come out about midpoint in the list.

Historically social workers were trusted because of a public perception that the service given was altruistic and the financial rewards for social workers were lower than they should be, particularly in relation to the complexity of the work undertaken.

There is no going back to the time when those views prevailed.

What is now required is for the profession to vigorously pursue its endeavours for the establishment, development and maintenance of trusted relationships in all fields of service. It will be a great challenge.

References