

I would select Schroots and Carstensen for the support they offer toward developing a theoretically incisive, and humane, psychology of ageing.

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## **Social Work and Older People**

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C. J. Fahey. 1996. Social work education and the field of aging, *The Gerontologist*, **36** (1), 36–41.

B. Silverstone. 1996. Older people of tomorrow: a psychosocial profile, *The Gerontologist*, **36** (1), 27–32.

C. V. Browne. 1995. Empowerment in social work practice with older women, *Social Work*, **40** (3), 358–365.

The three articles considered address the role of social work with older people and contemplate how this is likely to develop in the future. The first two originated from a symposium on ‘The many faces of aging: challenges for the future’, which brought together leaders in the field of social work to consider the challenges of ageing and the role of social work in meeting those challenges. Both articles from *The Gerontologist* emphasise that this is a time of crisis, a potential turning point in society’s response to an ageing population. Silverman compares profiles of today’s and tomorrow’s older people in terms of economic security and productivity, social supports, health and disability. Her picture is one where older people who are better educated and skilled will be more confident about ageing and prepared to tackle the predictable challenges to later life in a world of potentially diminishing resources. In contrast, those in poverty will have little to help them overcome or delay mental and physical disabilities. Both groups will however be vulnerable in their years of frailty, with less reliable primary caregivers able and willing to assist them.

If one accepts her scenario, then social work practice will require significant adaptation and it is this task she addresses in the later half of the article. Practice today, she outlines, is largely age-segmented and concentrates on the isolated, frail and disabled population in need of long-term care case management. ‘Work with the very old in nursing homes has become the hallmark of gerontological social work practice’ (p. 31). As far as the future is concerned, demands for case management and counselling will increase. Alongside this she expects social workers

to interact to a greater degree with frail older people, who will take more control over the management of their care. Such expectations require a dramatic alteration to social work practice along the following lines:

Social workers' approach to disability in later life will need reviewing as more older people take control over their lives; social work skills will need to be sharpened, particularly in working in partnership with informal networks, which will increasingly become the main locations of care; alongside this, the extended family must become a focus of attention, as interdependence between generations becomes necessary. Consequently a systems approach will be called for. Clinical assessment and community organization skills will need upgrading along with an extension of our anthropological knowledge and a heightened cultural sensitivity, as ethnic and racial groups increase. Silverman also outlines the need to interact with clients in different settings – in the workplace through employee assistance programmes, through mental health services and in private agency settings.

Fayer also offers a vision of older people in the future and the implications for social work education. He begins by stressing the demographic imperative and the importance of the third age as a paradigm for social analysis. Fahey calls for greater reflection on the meaning of the third age, which has lagged behind an understanding of the ageing process and service delivery. He also makes the point that societal goals regarding older people are confused with technical skills overshadowing our moral response; he calls for a dialogue that considers the ethical basis for political, social and personal behaviours. In his discussion of the implications for social work education, he highlights the essential knowledge base as well as the 'new arenas' open to social workers. In relation to the core curriculum, he advocates that students should have a grounding in the biology of ageing as well as an introduction to the theories of ageing and the life cycle. Fahey also identifies the need to see the older person as part of a larger system with an understanding of the role of the family as critical to social workers' learning. Details of policy and practice should be imparted alongside ethical insights against which proposed changes can be evaluated. Both authors stress too the need for social workers to become skilled in using information technology.

Opportunities for social workers to practice their skills, knowledge and values will appear in both traditional and non-traditional settings. Fahey sees business and industry waking-up to ageing and calling on the expertise of social workers to assist in easing the transition to retirement, helping working carers as well as providing advice in

developing products for the increasing number of older people. More social workers, he believes, will be involved in managing care provided by a system rather than an individual or agency and empowering clients in that process. 'The appropriate utilization of resources and an emphasis on self help are hallmarks of the new systems approach' (p. 40). Finally, Fahey sees social workers as primary advocates for clients in a hostile environment.

Browne's article goes further and challenges the vague, traditional, feminist and social work definitions and conceptualizations of empowerment: it also identifies issues that are problematic for social workers. Her article suggests reasons for broadening the definition and concept of empowerment to allow social welfare professionals better to address the needs of older women. A traditional definition of empowerment focuses on domination and control, individual gain and upward mobility. Such characteristics are rarely experienced by older women and such conceptualizations make it difficult for social workers to see the strengths and needs of the older population other than from a victim perspective. Hence interventions are often inappropriate. The liberal-feminist view of empowerment has two strands. The first, which negates differences between men and women, can be criticised as differences do exist, particularly with age. The second describes women as possessing core qualities different from men, an argument which has led to the labelling of women as the natural care-givers of older people; this perspective ignores the discrimination against women. Thirdly, the post-modernist perspective stresses the diversity of women's experience, particularly in relation to race, class and gender. This the author criticises for its emphasis on difference to the exclusion of solidarity.

In offering a reconceptualization of empowerment, Browne argues for the need to include the values of connection and relatedness, community and the collective good, and the reality of social power. The ability to identify the value placed on connection and relatedness by older women allows social workers to see friendships as a source of power and strength rather than conflict and domination. Successful ageing can be redefined as stemming from relatedness and interdependence rather than independence, and interventions could aim to support and strengthen connections such as friendships, support-groups and peer-counselling. An emphasis on political rather than personal analysis should also help to make empowerment more inclusive. Such a change will encourage broader interventions around issues of lifetime discrimination, such as pay-equity and family-leave policies. Finally, empowerment cannot ignore the inequalities in health and economy that exist for older women, that can only be eradicated through

political and social change. Empowerment can however be effective if social work moves to combine certain elements of varying definitions.

#### COMMENT

These articles describe a live issue in the United States – social work and older people. The United Kingdom is still grappling with implementing the process of care management with little discussion of the role of social work in the process or what constitutes social work within it. Consequently, there is a great amount of uncertainty as to the skills, knowledge and value base that should constitute social work education, particularly in relation to work with older people. As practice becomes focused on technical tasks, the traditional ingredients of social work such as counselling are squeezed out. These three articles are therefore helpful in the process of drawing up a curriculum, confirming the imperative to retain a strong element of social work and ageing and the need to return to a systems approach. The three papers discuss new opportunities for social work which we need to adopt both in terms of the nature of the social work task, *e.g.* working with employers and in redefining our notions of empowerment. Current notions of empowerment must be challenged and reconceptualized for effective work with older people. Additionally the realities, conflicts and difficulties in empowering older people need to be debated and considered; if social workers do not place empowerment in context, then it could lead to the enforced independence of older people. The articles also challenge our traditional responses and consider the future for older people and ways in which social work must respond if it is to survive. This should be the starting point for a similar symposium in Britain.

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