

During the early 1800s, most people lived in small communities, and farming was the primary livelihood. By the end of the century, a tremendous influx of immigrants contributed to the explosive growth of cities, where factories engaged in large-scale production of goods. With so many more people living in crowded cities, far away from ancestral homelands and extended families, and working in factories for low wages, social need grew. Local communities could no longer meet the needs of people, and poverty-related social problems increased. Two attempts to respond to social need that developed during the latter part of the 1800s were the Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement Movement. The profession of social work traces its history to the actions and principles of these two organizations.

Charity Organization Societies

The first **Charity Organization Society (COS)** was established in Buffalo, New York, in 1877 as an organized effort to eliminate poverty (Erickson, 1987). Its goal was to discover what caused poverty among individuals, eliminate the causes, and thereby rid society of poverty. In accordance with the sentiments of the time, scientific techniques were used to investigate social problems and organize helping efforts.

The focus of the COS was on the individual and reflected the belief that poverty was a character defect. By rehabilitating individuals, COS participants believed, poverty would be eliminated. These principles gave rise to the use of friendly visitors, at first volunteers and later paid professionals trained to guide people to change behaviors that contributed to poverty and to become productive, healthy adults. Friendly visiting was regarded as a better alternative than charity because it used scientific investigation to determine need and to organize the giving of relief (Breitland, 1995).

COS leadership was exemplified by Mary Richmond, who began her social work career as a friendly visitor in Baltimore in 1891 and spent years as an administrator in several COS agencies. Richmond was a key figure in the nationwide COS movement and in the early development of the profession. She wrote *Social Diagnosis* (1917), the first social work practice book to present professional ways to identify clients' problems. Richmond strongly advocated for the development of professional curricula for training social workers. Her efforts contributed to the development of the first school of professional training, the New York School of Applied Philanthropy, which later became the Columbia University School of Social Work (see Box 2.4).

Box 2.4 More About...Mary Richmond

Mary E. Richmond (1861–1928) was a contemporary of Jane Addams and an influential leader in the US Charity Organization Societies. Ms. Richmond was orphaned at a young age and was largely self-educated. Her charity work was consistent with the social gospel movement of the

time. And although she initially performed acts of charity as a means of self-support, she eventually turned charity work into a vocation, organized profession. A century later, her legacy continues to echo in social work and welfare reform (Agnew, 2003).

In spite of the good intentions of COS workers, changing the behavior of poor people was not enough to solve the social problems of the period. Major social and economic systems were in disarray. The Settlement Movement evolved in response to the greater social need.

Settlement Movement

The **Settlement Movement** began in this country in 1887 with the opening of the Neighborhood Guild settlement in New York City. The second settlement, Hull House, was opened in Chicago in 1889. Hull House was directed by Jane Addams, possibly the best-known historic figure in the social work profession (see Box 2.5).

The Settlement Movement was based on the belief that in order to help poor people, workers had to live within the community and provide services from their dwelling or settlement. The philosophy of the movement was that an individual's well-being was directly linked to external surroundings. Most settlement houses were located in poor neighborhoods, and much of the workers' efforts involved helping immigrants adjust to life in the United States. The ultimate goal was to shrink the gap between people who were poor and people of the wealthier classes.

Therefore, to help individuals, settlement workers focused on changing the environment by advocating for better neighborhood services, public health programs, and employment conditions.

Box 2.5 More About...Jane Addams

Jane Addams was born in 1860 to a middle-class family in Illinois. Her early life was one of economic and social comfort. Her father was a well-respected businessman who had served in the Illinois House and was a good friend of Abraham Lincoln. Jane was greatly influenced by her father, and he helped shape her political views. College educated and well-traveled, Jane was deeply struck by the social experiment of Toynbee Hall in London, a residence where university students could learn firsthand about the plight of poor people and work in the neighborhood to improve conditions. Jane realized the potential for this kind of work and brought the idea to Chicago, where she founded the Hull House settlement in 1889.

Jane Addams lived at Hull House for over 30 years. During those years, she fought tirelessly for social change and created numerous social programs to benefit the residents of the surrounding neighborhood. In its first year, 50,000 people came to the house, then occupied by two residents. Within 10 years, there were 25 resident workers and a large volunteer network. The services and programs developed at Jane Addams's Hull House included the first organized kindergarten, an employment bureau, adult

education classes, a library, social clubs, and the first public playground. Legislative advocacy was also an integral part of her efforts, and she was instrumental in the passage of legislation that limited child labor, created the first juvenile court in the nation, and expanded public education.

Until World War I, Jane Addams was immensely popular, with tremendous national recognition for her work and her prolific writings about her experiences at Hull House. Her firm belief in the destructiveness of war led her to assert herself as a pacifist and oppose the nation's involvement in World War I. This position cost her much public support, and her views became less central to American values. By the 1930s, with the economic upheaval of the Great Depression, Jane Addams's message for world peace and social reform returned to national favor. In 1931, she won the Nobel Peace Prize. She spent her last years writing and contributing to work for social change. She died in 1935.

Source: Siegel, E. A. (1995). Jane Addams in Hegel, F. H. and L. Grant. *From history: American women* (pp. 21–25). Princeton, NJ: Siegel Press.

In spite of the shared goal of improving people's lives, the Settlement Movement and Charity Organization Societies had serious disagreements about how to work with people and communities.

The settlers defined problems environmentally and engaged in social melioration. The charity workers, for the most part, defined problems as personal deficiencies and emphasized the need for moral uplift to achieve social betterment. . . . The conflict continued and left the new profession with a legacy of struggle between those who seek to change people and those who seek to change environment. (Germann & Hartman, 1980, p. 329)

COS's friendly visitors were trained to focus on individuals and families as well as on organized ways to coordinate the provision of social services and to determine individual need. Early training of settlement workers included a focus on individuals as active participants in their surroundings, on work with groups and communities, and with an emphasis on social reform and political action, and acknowledgment of the strengths of different immigrant groups. Part of the philosophical difference between the two movements was how best to empower people. COS workers did not view empowerment as a critical concern of personal change, whereas Settlement workers strove to empower people and communities to demand social change. This struggle has continued to color social work. Today's social work combines elements of both the Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement Movement.

Social work's founding year was 1898, when formal training of social workers was initiated. The New York School of Philanthropy (which is now the Columbia University School of Social Work in New York City) opened that year at the urging of Mary Richmond—the leading voice of the Charity Organization Societies—and others involved in efforts to establish charity work as a profession (Popple, 1995). Within 20 years, there were almost 20 schools of social work in the United States (Brieland, 1995).

Outside criticism of the developing profession came early. In 1915, Dr. Abraham Flexner, a leading authority on graduate professional education who represented the General Education Board, addressed the question "Is social work a profession?" in a paper with the same title, delivered to the National Conference on Social Welfare. His conclusion was that social work was not a profession because it lacked a unique methodology. "Lacking its own 'technique which is communicable by an educational process,' social work was no profession" (Flexner, 1999, p. 257). Flexner's criticism propelled the profession to define its role, trying to determine what makes social work unique and developing formal intervention strategies.

Mary Richmond's *Social Diagnosis* served as a guide for the beginning caseworker; it outlined ways to diagnose and assess need, and greatly influenced the new profession. Mary Richmond's work codified the emphasis on casework in the tradition of focusing on the individual (Popple, 1995).

Porter R. Lee, the president of the National Conference of Social Work, outlined the struggle in a slightly different way. In his 1929 presidential address, Lee depicted the conflict between cause and function as inherent in professional social work. Lee felt that the social worker of his day was "meeting more exacting demands for performance, assuming a more specific

type of responsibility, meeting with fair success more intricate and elusive problems" (Lee, 1929, p. 12). Because of these growing demands, the professional social worker needed to embrace a more functional role by focusing on organization, techniques, efficiency, standards, and accountability. The challenge, as Lee saw it, was to find a way to balance cause (the belief in ideology) and function (the administration of that belief). In the end, Lee thought, although those with a cause might sway the beliefs of people, it should be the professional social worker's role "to administer a routine functional responsibility in the spirit of the servant in a cause" (p. 20).

Bertha Capen Reynolds, who in recent years has been embraced as the inspiration for a progressive social work movement, embodies the personal cost of the struggle for social work's professional identity. Trained in the psychoanalytic tradition with emphasis on the individual, she questioned the effectiveness of that form of practice. As a result of her criticism of mainstream social work practice during the 1930s, she was removed from her professional position at Smith College School of Social Work in 1938 (Frederberg, 1986). Reynolds's beliefs demonstrated the "fundamental conflict in the definition of social work: the professional individualized approach to human beings in trouble comes up against the intractable fact of a social service that ultimately is dependent upon the resources of the larger community" (Frederberg, 1986, p. 105). Reynolds's push for social action kept her at odds with the then mainstream professional shift toward individual casework.

In 1951, the National Council on Social Work Education launched a project to define what social work was. The task was difficult. "Any attempt to define the scope and functions of social work must grapple with many formidable obstacles, the most insurmountable of which is the absence of criteria that can be used to identify a professional social worker" (cited in Brieland, 1977, p. 342). The task force summarized the state of the profession as undefinable and not yet professional. "There is not yet enough of an analysis of social work practice to identify the major functions of positions that should be classified as professional" (cited in Brieland, 1977, p. 342).

The debate about purpose has continued. In the 1980s, Frumkin and O'Connor (1985), social work academics, viewed social work as "adrift" and "failing to maintain a core identity." They contended that the profession had abandoned working with both clients and the environment, and in place of that dual focus, social work leaders had "called for the establishment of a psychologically oriented view of social work practice stressing intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics and intervention strategies aimed principally at influencing changes in individual behavior, family or group dynamics" (p. 14).

During the 1990s, the social work educators Specht and Courtney (1994) argued that social work was not simply struggling to find its identity, but that the profession had also abandoned its mission. This was strong criticism. They maintained that the historical mission of social work—to deal with social problems—had been overtaken by a move to embrace psychotherapy and focus totally on individual change.

The concern of psychotherapy is with helping people to deal with feelings, perceptions, and emotions that prevent them from performing their normal life tasks because of impairment or insufficient development of emotional