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BEYOND THE REPORT: REIMAGINING FLEXNER'S IMPACT ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract
In a pivotal address on May 17, 1915, Abraham Flexner fundamentally shaped the discourse surrounding the professional standing of social work. Speaking before the National Conference of Charities and Correction, Flexner's inquiry, "Is Social Work a Profession? reverberated within the Mount Vernon Place Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland. His resolute conclusion contended that social work had not yet attained the status of a profession, primarily due to its inadequately defined methodologies for instructional dissemination. Instead, Flexner perceived the role of social work as that of a mediator between client and agency, stopping short of designating it a full-fledged profession. This assessment, though undoubtedly unsettling for an audience anticipating a more affirming declaration, resonated profoundly, given Flexner's renowned expertise in evaluating educational frameworks. His seminal work in restructuring medical education in the United States and Canada (Flexner, 1910) had earned him national acclaim, rendering his perspectives on social work especially significant and thought-provoking.

Keywords: Abraham Flexner, Social work profession, Educational evaluation, Professional status, Mediation in social work.

Introduction

At eleven AM on Monday morning May 17, 1915 Abraham Flexner stood before a general session of the National Conference of Charities and Correction assembled at the Mount Vernon Place Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland and delivered what was arguably one of the most influential addresses on the professional status of social work in history (Flexner, 1915a; Says Social Work, para. 1). On that morning Flexner, who had been invited to speak about education for social work addressed the topic ―Is Social Work a Profession‖ (Flexner, 1915a; Says Social Work, para. 1). His conclusion was clear that social work was not a profession because its methods were not well-defined enough to be taught (Flexner, 1915a; Says Social Work, 1915, para. 2). He viewed social work‘s role as one of mediation between client and agency, but not that of a profession (Austin, 2001; Stuart, 2007). This appraisal of social work undoubtedly stung an audience that was certainly hoping to hear a more positive message. Flexner‘s reputation for evaluating educational preparation was well known nationally, especially for his landmark work on medical education in the United States and Canada (Flexner,1910), and his views on social work were undoubtedly unsettling to his audience.

Flexner‘s speech came at an important time when social workers were exploring ways to solidify their professional status as social work transitioned from a volunteer activity to paid professional work (Austin, 1983). Still a single speech given over a century ago might long ago have been consigned to the dustbin of history, yet Flexner‘s words continue to reverberate in social work‘s self-assessment of its

professional status to the present day (Gelman, 2016; Tosone, 2016). Modern literature on the history of social welfare, social work, and its professional status still contain references to the Flexner speech and social work's professional status (Segal, Gerdes, & Steiner, 2016; Stuart, 2007; Trattner, 1999). The ongoing interest in Flexner's message can also be seen in the *Journal of Social Work Education* which published a supplementary issue in 2016 entitled ―Social Work 100 Years Post-Flexner: Where Are We Now, Where Are We Headed, What Has Been Gained, What Has Been Lost?‖ (JSWE, 2016).

It seems evident that Abraham Flexner's voice from over a century ago is still used as a yardstick for social work's measure of its own professional status, and a guidepost for how the profession can become more professional. Even though social work progressed over time and society has changed a great deal since 1915, Flexner's words appear to cut some members of the profession as deeply now as they did then.

Given the significance attached to Flexner's assessment there have been many interpretations over the years of just what Flexner said and meant. The fact that we still debate his speech despite the passage of a century suggests that his words are open to multiple interpretations but continue to touch a sensitive nerve about how social workers view themselves, and perhaps taps into a bit of professional insecurity. Unmistakably Flexner's main point that he did not view social work as a profession is a constant in all interpretations of his address, and there is little debate about his primary message. But other than his central point, there appear to be varying interpretations of what he meant, and Flexner becomes an important point of origin for examining social work's status then and now, as well as exerting its influence on the direction of the profession's development both past and present.

But what if Flexner's analysis of social work was flawed, and he actually got it wrong, and what influence do his views continue to exert on the social work education and preferred areas of professional practice? Because of his work in the field of medicine his status as a keen analyst of education and professions was often unquestioned in his own time, and subsequent analyses of his speech have muted his message only a little. Despite his status, Flexner's assertions about social work did face criticism early on, and subsequent literature has challenged some of his observations of social work. Both Mary Richmond and Jane Addams questioned Flexner's view of social work at an early time (Stuart, 2007), and others who presented at the same 1915 conference where he spoke offered differing views on social work's status, yet these contrasting views have received little attention (Frankfurter, 1915; Lee, 1915; Morris, 2008). Although more recent analyses of social work have concluded that it is a profession, Flexner's analysis of social continues to guide the profession (Austin, 1983, Morris, 2008. Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Unfortunately, if Flexner's analysis of social work was flawed, then the criteria the profession has sought to meet, then at least part of the quest to become a mainstream profession has been based on faulty premises for many years. Although Flexner's impression of social work has been discussed for some time, perhaps it is time to revisit Flexner and analyze his categorization of social work as a semi-profession in terms of the historical context in which he made his speech. Critical analysis of this kind can help to place Flexner's speech in a different light and evoke alternate interpretation of the long-term effects on the development of social work as a profession that still influence social work today.

After all, Abraham Flexner spoke during a time with very different social, economic, and political conditions. The social welfare system then was distinct from the modern one, and social work was early in its development from an avocation to a profession. The basis for Flexner's contention that social work was not a profession, which has been a focal point of suggesting the path social work should take bears examination in a new light. By giving a historical evaluation in a contemporary light new insight on Flexner's role in the profession, and his advice for professional development, we can gain important ideas about where we have come, where we are, and where we might go for the future. A new analysis of Flexner, the primary purpose of this manuscript, may even suggest why this his century old analysis of social work still intrigues social workers today.

2. Context

Abraham Flexner delivered his speech on social work towards the end of the Progressive Era amidst profound changes that were taking place in American society. The Progressive Era covered a period from the 1890s until about 1920 and saw significant differences in the social, economic, and political arenas emerge (Popple, 2018; Trattner, 1999). Some of these were at least, in part, a response to the economic disruption of a major depression that began in 1893, the widening chasm in wealth between the rich and poor, population growth fueled by immigration, and the increasing urbanization of the country. Gitterman (2014) indicates industrialization of the economy and shift of the population to urban life produced disruptive social conditions including splitting extended families, urban crowding and growth of slums, a shortage of adequate housing and schools, and oppressive work conditions. Many jobs had dangerous work environments, involved long hours, and paid wages that were inadequate to support a family.

The country experienced a great growth in wealth that was increasingly held by larger businesses and the hands of a few wealthy capitalists who represented only a small percentage of the population (Popple, 2018). To the progressives these conditions seemed incompatible with a United States that was more and more viewed as a global economic and military power.

Progressive Era social reform movements arose in order to address the societal problems of concern in the early 20th century. Among the reform groups that addressed social ills, social workers organized to deliver services to people who were most affected by large scale social changes (Kunitz, 1974; Popple, 2018; Trattner, 1999). As Popple (2018) indicates, the progressive movement that emerged into the early 20th Century was closely tied to social work and that social workers were closely tied to progressivism.

Social work had emerged as an occupation for charity workers in the late 19th Century, and by the early 20th Century had begun to extend beyond the traditional charity organization societies and social settlements. In this environment schools for charity and philanthropy had developed in five cities (Morris, 2008; Stuart, 2013). Social work had changed from the volunteer activity of the 19th Century to paid employment in the 20th Century (Austin, 1983), and schools of philanthropy were an innovation to develop better trained workers.

The new occupation of social work had developed along two differing philosophical approaches to providing services to those in need. One approach focused on social and economic change that dealt

with poverty and its consequences, and the other concentrated on helping individuals and families adjust to their current circumstances (Popple, 2018). Although the two groups did not always agree on the approach to helping, they were in contact and members of each group would occasionally need to employ the methods of the other. Mary Richmond referred to these distinctions as the ―spirit of social service‖ and ―the spirit of individual service‖ but noted ―The charity worker and the settlement worker have need of each other: neither one can afford to ignore the experiences of the other‖ (Richmond, 1907, p. 11-12). Thus, Charity Organization Societies became involved in coordinating services, collecting social research data, and involvement in social change, while the Settlement houses delivered some direct services (Axin & Levin, 1997; Popple,2018)

By 1915 social workers, especially those who engaged in individual and family services, were adopting organizational structures that incorporated concepts from the scientific management principles of business, schools of philanthropy had emerged in several cities to provide formal training, and workers began to view their work as more of a paid, rather than a volunteer activity (Austin 1983; National Association of Social Workers, n.d.; Trattner, 1999). And social workers were interested in increasing the status of their occupation through pursuit of professional status, as they were progressively working in as interdisciplinary collaborators with other professionals such as doctors and lawyers (Austin, 1983; Popple, 2018). It was in this context that Flexner was invited to speak on social work education at the National Conference of Charities and Correction (Morris, 2008).

3. Flexner and His Speech

In 1915 Abraham Flexner was Assistant Secretary of the General Education Board established by John D. Rockefeller to improve education in the United States (Austin 1983; Flexner, 1915a; Nevin, 2010). At the time he spoke at National Conference of Charity and Correction Flexner was already well known for his work in the field of medicine. His *Medical Education in the United States and Canada* published in 1910 for the Carnegie Foundation was a widely known and respected (Austin, 1983; Flexner, 1910; Parker, 1962). This report influenced major changes in the field of medical education and research and is still considered a landmark work by modern medicine. Flexner had also authored a 1914 report entitled *Prostitution in Europe* which was widely read and helped to influence anti-prostitution efforts in the United States (Nevins, 2010). Based on his work related to prostitution he made a second, but less well known presentation on prostitution in a section on social hygiene at the 1915 Conference of Charities and Correction (Flexner, 1915b). However clearly it was Flexner‘s discussion of the profession that has the most lasting influence on social work.

Based on Flexner‘s past work and the significance of Rockefeller‘s contributions to support education in the United States, Flexner brought both influence and prestige as a speaker on professional education at the time of his appearance at the National Conference in 1915(Austin 1983; Nevins, 2010). His prior work on professional education in medicine may have been what influenced the organizers of the 1915 Conference to invite him to speak (Austin, 1983; Morris, 2008; Popple, 2018). Indeed Edith Abbott, of the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, Vice Chair of the conference section Education for Social Work, was familiar with his work and may have been instrumental in inviting him (Abbott, 1915; Morris, 2008).

Flexner's invitation came from the Conference's Committee on the Professional Basis of Social Work (Popple, 2018). While the nature of his original invitation is unclear, according to Morris (2008) it is not likely that an assessment on social work's professional status was requested. Based on the conference brochure, the original title of Flexner's address was ―What Makes a Profession‖ (Morris, 2008). This title is more consistent with the addresses given by two other authors who were invited as part of the section on ―Education for Social Work‖, Felix Frankfurter and Porter R. Lee (Frankfurter, 1915; Lee, 1915).

But in subsequent discussions of Flexner's speech the presentations of Frankfurter and Lee were overlooked by several subsequent writers (Morris, 2008). Morris (2008) indicates that some of Porter Lee's remarks may have been misinterpreted as Flexner's by authors who wrote many years later.

When Flexner's speech was later published in the proceedings of the 1915 conference it was given the new title ―Is Social Work a Profession?‖ (Morris, 2008; Flexner, 1915a). This suggests that Flexner's remarks may have been polished and edited before they were published in the proceedings, and it is this version of the speech that is available to those who have examined his discourse since.

Flexner opened with what, at first appears to be a self-effacing statement when he said:

Before beginning to consider whether social work is or is not a profession, I must confess a very genuine doubt as to my competency to undertake the discussion. My acquaintance with social work, with the literature of social work, and with social workers is distinctly limited—far too much so. Hence, if the conclusions that I have reached seem to you unsound or academic, I beg you to understand that I should not be disposed to press them. (Flexner, 1915a, p. 576)

Coming from an educator that had done significant research in the field of medical education this may sound like humility. But humility was not one of Abraham Flexner's notable characteristics when speaking to professional audiences. He was a narcissist, considered himself and educational provocateur, and was sometimes described as abrasive or an iconoclast (Bonner, 2002; Nevins,2010). He was not shy about stirring the pot to get a reaction from this audience. So, in making this introductory statement Flexner may have truly been being honest.

In his study of medical education. Flexner who had no background in medicine, had personally visited and reported in detail on 155 medical schools in the United States and Canada (Parker, 1962). It was the depth and authenticity of his research that made his study of medical education so influential. Indeed, this report was controversial, as it recommended closing many existing medical schools. One of the major points of Flexner's report was that medical education lacked the practical component of seeing patients, as it was all reading and classroom. Curiously he would criticize social work, where field work had already been institutionalized as a key component of education, for not having clear methods to be taught.

When asked to report on professional education in social work there is no compelling evidence that Flexner made any systematic study of the then existing schools offering a social work curriculum. Perhaps the strongest evidence of this can be found in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* of May 17, 1915. The report of Flexner's speech by that newspaper quotes him as saying:

Again, social work fails to measure up to the professional standard on the side of education because its objects are as been stated so many and so varied that no specific educational procedure can be worked out. An instructor in a school of philanthropy troubled by the vagueness of the undertaking once remarked to me we just do not know what to teach them. (Says social work is not a profession, 1915, p. 14)

This was a contemporaneous record made by a reporter about the speech before there was an opportunity to edit Flexner's notes for publication. The newspaper account clearly reflects elements of Flexner's published speech, but the text in the *Proceedings* does omit the passage upon which he based his observation of a single instructor. That text in the Proceedings omits this observation suggests some subsequent editing, as is common when a speaker's remarks are taken from the oral to the written form. It is remarkable that a writer made famous for his meticulous investigation of medical education would base his conclusions on social work education and the status of social work on as thin a thread as the comments of a single social work instructor.

Further, the key points of Flexner's analysis of social work's professional status in the conference proceedings derive from very limited evidence. For example, he used a single paragraph extracted from the Bulletin of the New York School of Philanthropy and concluded that the primary function of social work was mediating between families and agencies to get them needed services (Flexner, 1915a). He further explained that social work is less a definite field than an aspect of work in other fields such as medicine, law, education, architecture -suggesting that social work operated as the social side of other disciplines or professions. He describes the social worker as ―...not so much as the agent grappling with this or that situation, but rather as controlling the keyboard that summons, cooperates with and coordinates various professional specialists...‖ (Flexner, 2015a, p. 586). In this he was describing something that today we would recognize today as generalist practice, case management, or interprofessional practice, but arguing that this was not professional work because the services of other professions were invoked (Flexner, 1915a).

From the Prospectus of the Boston School of Social Work Flexner drew the conclusion that social work's scope was so vast, because social workers were employed in so many kinds of positions, that social work did not qualify as having the limited purpose required for a profession (Flexner, 1915a). Yet, the evidence that Flexner puts forward to support this argument is thin, at best. David Austin's (1983) article on Flexner argues that he was authoritative, but his conclusions were flawed by starting with an arbitrary list of professions and comparing social work to them. If one examines the characteristics Flexner draws from social work to use in his comparisons, the information he cites appears to be limited to brief publications from schools of philanthropy. And when he illustrates how professions meet his criteria, Flexner only drew from medicine.

Still Flexner exhibited some knowledge of social work, but it appeared to be very superficial. He appears not to have been influenced by an in-depth study of education in social work, or the social work practice. This is in sharp contrast to his report on medical education where his research was extensive and done in person. Flexner did not need to look far to find out more information about social work. His brother Bernard was an attorney who was active in the development of the juvenile court, was an active member

of the Conference of Charity and Correction, and who wrote in his book *Juvenile Courts and Probation* that social workers were ―particularly needed‖ in the work of the juvenile court (Flexner & Baldwin, 1914, p. 92; In Memorium: Bernard Flexner 1865-1945, 1945).

There were opportunities at the 1915 Conference to learn more about social work education, as four representatives of social work schools Edward Devine, Jeffrey Brackett, George Mangold, and Edith Abbott presented on curricula in social work schools. Flexner did not reflect any of the richness of discussion about professional curricula that was presented by these educators. Flexner, in his remarks acknowledged that the schools of philanthropy were new and still in the process of defining themselves. As he said, ―… I suspect that they are as yet feeling about for their proper place and function.‖ (Flexner, 1915a, p. 587). This was an accurate observation as social work education had begun only in the late 1890s (Austin, 1983). Flexner (2015a) admitted that occupations that were once non-professional had subsequently achieved professional status, but other than saying that social work met some professional criteria, he indicated that social work‘s role would be subsumed under the existing professions once other professions such as medicine and law developed their social side (Flexner, 1915a). this did not happen as he envisioned. Listing law, medicine, architecture, engineering, and preaching as professions, Flexner ultimately grouped social work with pharmacy, nursing, and journalism as lacking all of the elements of a profession and in effect classified social work and its education as a semiprofession (Flexner, 1915a; Morris, 2008).

Perhaps what is most revealing about Flexner‘s preparation for his speech comes from an interview with Abraham Flexner‘s daughter, Eleanor Flexner, conducted by one of the authors. Eleanor Flexner, a scholar in her own right, indicated that the speech her father gave about the social work profession was written on the train while he traveled from New York to Baltimore. It was one of many such speeches he gave to several professional groups. When he was invited to speak to the Conference again, by then renamed the National Conference on Social Welfare in 1930, he declined the offer because he did not remember what he had said (E. Flexner, personal communication, October 29, 1982). Doubtless Flexner‘s speech on social work as a profession was not as important to him as it was to social work or the current view of it by members of the profession. Austin (1983) indicates that no mention of this speech appears in his autobiography. And Morris (2008) argues that Flexner‘s speech was not broadly accepted and used to spur professional development by social work at the time. There appear few citations to his work at the time, and the current interest in Flexner appears to date to after 1950 (Morris, 2008).

4. Responses to Flexner

Flexner‘s speech was but one of the three in a section entitled Education for Social Work at the 1915 National Conference (National Conference on Charity and Correction, 1915, p. x).

The other speakers were Felix Frankfurter, a professor of Law at Harvard University and later an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, and Porter Lee, Chair of the New York School of Philanthropy, who later helped to found the Association of Schools of Social Work. Arguably they both knew more about social work than Flexner. Both agreed with some elements of Flexner‘s analysis, but disagreed with others.

Frankfurter (1915; Defer on Social Work, 1915, p. 3), whose speech was entitled ―Legal Training and Social Aspiration‖ in the Conference schedule before it was changed for the Conference Proceedings (Conference Program for Today, May 17, 1915), spoke following Flexner's address, and expressed his opinion that social work ―was a profession of continually widening scope‖. He noted that social work was a new professional endeavor that had a history of only a little over a decade, whereas medicine and law had existed for hundreds of years.

Frankfurter (1915) went on to explore professions in terms of their historical development. In the case of social work, he noted that it had begun as private charity, that had developed a social aspect, and moved to being delivered on an organized scale. He characterized the social work of 1915 as a form of ―social engineering‖ that transcended working with individual cases, as mere reason and will were not enough to resolve the problems that existed (Frankfurter, 1915, pp. 594). Frankfurter (1915) indicated that what was needed for social work to take the next step as a profession was to move from the private schools that trained social workers to university-based education guided by experienced teachers and scientific thought. He described the universities as the ―workshop of the professions‖ (Defer on Social Work, 1915, p. 3), and argued a move to university-based education would benefit both social work and the universities. Frankfurter believed the ―social engineers‖ (social workers) who were entrusted with making society a better place needed the ―best equipment for the task‖, and that was to be found in university education (Frankfurter, 1915, p. 596).

Porter Lee (1915), Chair of the Conference Committee on Education for Social Work, spoke to deliver the committee's report on social work education after Frankfurter (Lee, 2015, Defer on Social Work, 1915, p. 3). Lee (1915) contended that social work often concentrated on the type of work or approach to helping rather than the key feature that is needed for a profession – that of expertness, and that to be able to reach professional status social work would need to be based on scientific knowledge. Essentially professional social workers would need the technical knowledge and skill to address common problems such as social diagnosis, and social work had not yet established the content of the education or training that was needed to do that (Lee, 1915). His concept of this education or training was that it should include elements of helping persons adjust to their environment as well as dealing with the effects of the social and economic structure. Lee's (1915; Defer on Social Work, 1915) report argued for practice-based research as it emphasized that social work would move from an occupation to a professional through development of a body of knowledge drawn from experience and an ability to apply it.

Flexner, Frankfurter, and Lee agreed that social work was early in the process of transition from an occupation and that social work did important work. They also agreed that social workers required education of an intellectual character that was influenced by science. There was also apparent agreement that the curricula of schools of social work were still evolving and that there was not yet a clear method or model of work around which social work could coalesce. There was disagreement about whether social work in 1915 was a profession, but even Flexner admitted the possibility for new occupations to move into professional status.

5. Effects of Flexner's Address on the Profession

Flexner appears to have taken a path with social work that identified areas for evaluation and improvement as he did with other professions such as medicine and higher education (Flexner, 1915a; Nevins, 2010). While his message may have been construed as harsh, it was not as harsh as the verdict he delivered to medicine, but in character for his tendency to be blunt. However, his presentation occurred in a broader context that would soon overshadow what he said and muffle the response to his remarks as social work and the nation began to focus on the Great War that was raging in Europe and other parts of the world.

In May 1915 the Great War, now known as World War I, had been raging in Europe for almost a year and was spreading into a global conflict with the war much in the news. With that war came major social and economic disruptions. While the *Baltimore Sun* on the day Flexner spoke contained reports for the Charity and Correction Conference, ads for modern appliances like oil burning stoves, and sporting news such as the hometown Terrapins Federal league game with the Chicago Whales, the first two pages of the 12-page paper were devoted to war news.

Only ten days before Flexner appeared before his social work audience, the German submarine U-20 torpedoed the British passenger liner Lusitania with the subsequent loss of nearly 1,100 lives, 124 of which were American. This act sparked outrage in the United States and became an important factor leading to American entry into the First World War in less than two years. Indeed, the war in Europe had already entered the discussion of social workers as indicated in a resolution adopted by the 1915 Conference of Charity and Correction (Gavisk, Mangold & Johnson, 1915) supporting President Wilson on his position of neutrality. The front page of the Baltimore paper also ran stories of the US diplomatic note protesting submarine warfare, President Wilson‘s review of the Navy‘s Atlantic Fleet, and numerous items of war news (Germany receives US note, 1915; Wilson voices pride in the U. S. Navy and its readiness for work, 1915). An indicator of the seriousness of the situation is that both a note of protest and review of the fleet represented serious posturing that could precede a declaration of war during this period. Although the immediate crisis was averted, the United States would enter the Great War, and the attention of the country and social work refocused on matters like war relief and working with service members and their families. The new focus would make consideration of professional status for social work secondary.

By 1916 issues related to the Great War had become part of the conference as Ernest Bicknell (1916) of the American Red Cross gave an opening address on War Relief and the humanitarian crisis of the Great War, and sessions on the professional status of social work and social work education did not appear. By the 1917 conference the United States had officially entered the First World War. The newly renamed National Conference of Social Work included a section on the Social Problems of the War, including a speech by former President William Howard Taft (Taft, 1917).

Mary Richmond (1917b), Director of Charity Organization for the Russell Sage Foundation, who had earlier that year published her landmark *Social Diagnosis*, delivered an address to the Conference entitled The Social Caseworker‘s Task (Richmond 1917a), in which she defended the title of her book against the criticism that it should really be titled Individual Diagnosis. She also took issue with

Flexner's analysis of social work, arguing that social workers were not switchboard operators and simply placing clients into slots to receive services, but there was real skill involved in identifying the social relationships that were problematic, the ability to determine the core of the difficulty, and by mindful action help with adjustment of their situation (Richmond, 1917a). In a more contemporary context, Johnson (2008) agrees that Flexner misread the knowledge and skill needed to do what social workers were then doing.

Ultimately there was not a strong reaction to Flexner in the aftermath of his speech. Austin (1983) argues that most social workers accepted Flexner's critiques of social work, although he acknowledges that Richmond did not, arguing that social work had techniques and expertise that were communicable through education (Austin, 1983, Richmond, 1917b).Morris (2008) indicates that Flexner's remarks became influential more than thirty-five years later. At that point the context for Flexner's speech may have dimmed with time, although his reputation had not waned. The immediate aftermath of the 1915 speech saw increased focus on the First World War and its aftermath with displaced people and near starvation in Europe, drew social workers to tend to these issues, while social work's own development post 1915 may have made some of Flexner's criticisms moot until reopened much later.

Flexner's reputation and the conviction with which he delivered his verdict on social work may have influenced some social workers to accept his view of social work as a semi-profession. And Flexner's analysis has been used over time and is still used as a basis for assessing whether social work has reached true professional status. The three enduring elements of Flexner are his emphatic no to social work as a profession, his six criteria of a profession, and his presentation of medicine as the ideal profession. Yet, while other subsequent writers have concluded social work is a profession, and more modern criteria have been proposed to evaluate social work's professional standing (Austin, 1983), the aspiration to emulate medicine remains.

Yet there were flaws in Flexner's analysis. First, there was the issue of his incomplete knowledge of social work. There was not then a generally agreed set of criteria that applied to all professions, even though this is the basis of Flexner's analysis. In evaluating social work, he only drew from medicine. Frankfurter (1915), who came from a legal background, had little doubt that social work was a either a profession or close to it, albeit early in its development. And the semi-professions that Flexner placed in the same category as social work were occupations in which women predominated (Austin 1983). This may reflect some bias of the period about whether it was appropriate for women to be in the professional workforce.

Flexner, given his limited knowledge of social work, was likely unaware of what social work was already doing to professionalize itself. One of Flexner's key criticisms of social work was the lack of a method that was educationally communicable and based on scientific knowledge, something with which Lee (1915) agreed. (Austin, 1983; Flexner, 1915; Lee, 1915). Flexner believed what social workers did was so diverse that it could not be readily classified as a discipline and taught. Yet, Mary Richmond (1917b) was already at work on the landmark *Social Diagnosis* in 1915, as work on this had begun as early as 1910 (Richmond, 1917b). Richmond's work was based on descriptive research (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2019) that involved short papers about their methods written by social caseworkers, case reviews of

agency case records in five cities for over a year, and interviews with agency case workers to determine to identify best social work practices (Richmond, 1917b). Qualitative analyses of the information collected about social work practice was then used to develop general principles for the profession that could be taught.

Since *Social Diagnosis* is generally considered the first practice text for social work, it was based on qualitative analyses of effective practice using scientific methods. And Porter Lee (1915) disagreed with Flexner's view of social work as simple mediation. Lee stated that social work required unique skill not necessary to other occupations, namely the diagnosis and treatment of social disabilities, and the determination of the effects of the social economy on social life.

Additionally, the 1915 conference also had a section entitled The Curriculum of the Professional School, specifically discussing social work (The Curriculum of The Professional School, 1915, p. x). In this discussion it is appears clearly that social workers had, though structured observation, already developed some consistent ideas about what was needed to prepare professional social workers through education. Lee (1915) indicated that this training should include preparation for social casework and social investigation or macro practice, but he also recommended that education be based on economics, biology, and psychology. Social workers would also need to scientifically interpret the ―facts of social economy‖ (Lee, 1915, p. 606), suggesting a scientific basis for the study of social work. Edward Devine (1915) of the New York School suggested that a course in individuals and families and their disabilities, one in family rehabilitation, one in the study of workers and the social structure, along with courses in social welfare organizations, social statistics, administration, and field work.

Jeffrey Brackett (1915), Director of the Boston School for Social Workers suggested a two-year program of study with the second year for specialization, as well as course work in helping an individual, to organizing community effort, and included ―practice work‖ (p. 611) under supervision. He also mentions learning practice with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations. Student preparation in areas like physiology and hygiene, psychology, economics, government, and societal structure. Mangold (1915), Director of the St. Louis School of Social Economy recommended training in casework and social justice, the history of social welfare and economic systems, social investigation and social research, psychology, and public service. Edith Abbott (1915), Director of the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, spoke to the importance of the importance of field work and particularly the need for coordination between the field agency and the school. Zilpha Smith (1915) of the Boston School, recommended a two-year field placement with first advanced, and then specialized work.

This does not sound like the discussion of either a profession or semi-profession that did not have an educationally communicable method. Rather, it sounds more like a profession in its early development having a discussion to enable them to coalesce around common principles and subjects, where there already appeared to be substantial areas of agreement. Remarkably in the discussions we can see the foundation for what has come down to us in our modern social work curriculum.

What perplexed Flexner and has subsequently been raised as a concern about social work is that the educationally communicable method that was developed did not appear to be a *unitary* method because social work addressed problems of individuals and families as well as society and economics. Austin

(1983) refers to the social work struggle to maintain structural unity among professionals with functional diversity. This is what confounded Flexner and has raised tensions in social work since its beginning.

Flexner (1915a) also raised the concern that social work was not a profession because it did not draw its material from learning and science (Austin, 1983). Yet the subsequent discussions on social work curriculum at the conference suggest that social work education,

While still outside university structures, had a clear plan for forging links with academic disciplines such as biology, psychology, statistics, economics, and others as a foundation for teaching social work (Brackett, 1915; Devine, 1915; Lee, 1915). These disciplines were based on science as even Flexner admitted.

Frankfurter (1915) indicated that a next step for social work was university affiliation so that social work could develop a connection with social sciences that be mutually beneficial as social work‘s applied perspective could provide fertile ground for experimentation in the social sciences. Social work education would forge a formal link with universities within a few years. Still Flexner‘s original comments have led some in social work to question social work‘s scientific base.

Flexner (1915a, p. 581) stated one of the criteria for a profession was the tendency to ―self-organization‖ that provided a means of socializing its members, for communication, and setting criteria for who entered and who did not. At the time he spoke social work had the National Conference of Charity and Correction as an organization, but it included more than just social work. The conference would change its name in just two years to reflect greater emphasis on social work, and social work would have its own professional associations by the early 1920s (Austin, 1983; Popple, 2018). With these associations came increased communications in the form of journals, conferences, and newsletters that helped facilitate common views and solidify the principles of practice. And in the creation of journals, social work moved further towards promotion of a scientific based profession.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

As Austin (1983, p. 367) indicates, Flexner‘s status as an authority on professions led to some acceptance of his analysis of social work in its time, and despite the defects in his arguments his speech to risen to ―mythlike‖ status over time. Johnson (2008) concurs and thinks this status is unjustified. These viewpoints appear supported by the available evidence that suggests Flexner‘s review of social work and its education was cursory and shallow.

Undoubtedly Flexner, who saw himself as ―intellectual provocateur‖, would have been pleased that a discussion he generated on social work‘s professional status would still resonate over a century later (Nevins, 2010, p. 83). This is a testament to Flexner‘s reputation, and perhaps, to some degree, social work‘s own selfimage in the professional world. From these perspectives Flexner‘s comments still matter and continue to serve as one measure by which social workers assess their own professional progress in the contemporary era.

It is important for a profession such as social work to engage in serious self-examination over time in order to strengthen what it does and how it does it, as professionals are about providing a service and meeting a societal need. But, whether Abraham Flexner‘s analysis of social work should still be a metric

by which the profession is measured today is an important question. Despite his reputation as a knowledgeable source on professional education Flexner's assessment of social work is suspect and the conclusions he made should be as well.

All the speakers on social work education and social work's professional status at the 1915 conference agreed that social work and social work education had elements of a profession. Flexner (1915a) agreed that social work was an intellectual endeavor, that it drew from the sciences, had a commitment to meeting the needs of others, and a strong professional spirit. He also said that the schools of philanthropy were still searching for their proper purpose, which is not at all surprising for a profession as new as social work was at the time. His chief criticism was what he perceived to be the lack of a clear purpose. He then presented medicine as the model for a profession, although he had found medicine deeply flawed only five years earlier.

Flexner's analysis of social work does not appear to have been careful work and may have been both superficial, flawed, and biased. Although he may have known a little more about social work than he admitted in his opening, it is questionable how much he knew about social work, and his application of what he knew to his own professional criteria is questionable. Rather he drew his evidence about social work from brief anecdotal pieces developed by two schools of philanthropy that were written for other purposes, and a conversation from a single faculty member. It was unfair to judge an entire profession from this limited amount of evidence.

Flexner misread what social workers did, classifying them as middlemen (although many were women) who simply connected people to available services like a switchboard operator routing calls, or perhaps someone routing mail. Richmond, who knew social work well, disagreed, indicating there was much more knowledge and skill involved in connecting clients to services than Flexner understood.

Indeed, social workers were making decisions about meeting needs created by gaps that were not adequately met either by society or the existing professions. They did work with physicians and attorneys as collaborators but were not entirely under their direction as suggested by Flexner.

The social work leaders who spoke at the 1915 conference appeared to be intelligent, articulate, and committed to professionalizing social work. There is evidence of some agreement on elements of the social work educational curriculum, even if complete agreement had not been achieved. The development of professional organizations and journals for social work was on the horizon, although the advent of United States entry into the First World War may have delayed progress. The affiliation with universities by the existing schools of philanthropy to educate social workers had already begun, as the Social Science Training Center for Practical Training in Philanthropy and Social Work had become part of the University of Chicago by 1904 (University of Chicago, n.d.).

Flexner appears to have been unaware that schools of philanthropy were already teaching principles of social casework. These principles were drawn from extensive experience in the private charities, and Mary Richmond in *Social* Diagnosis would provide principles in a matter of months (Richmond, 1917b). These practice principles were drawn from collective experiences of social workers but based on systematic, qualitative, and empirical study across multiple workers, agencies. Richmond's work was widely embraced in social work education, and elements of some of her principles may be found in

modern social work. Flexner may have been technically correct in his assessment of social work at the time, but the profession was new and still in the process of developing its identity. When one reviews the presentation of these social workers in 1915, it is difficult not to be impressed by their intellect, clarity, and vision for social work. Indeed, many of the foundations of our modern educational curriculum for social work may be found there.

Unfortunately, relying on Flexner's lead to guide its development as a profession may have been problematic for social work for several reasons. The first of these is that his analysis of social work was flawed because of the limited amount of his prior knowledge and the casual and limited manner by which he apparently collected his information. Thus, it is concerning to consider that some weight may have been given to Flexner's conclusions in charting a course for the profession. In retrospect it appears to be most prudent to consider his speech for what it was – an exhortation to do more coming from someone with limited knowledge of social work. Yet the continued reputation of Abraham Flexner as an expert in professions gives his words credence beyond any strength of his analysis.

A second problem in drawing on Flexner is that he was wrong about at least two important things. Clearly, he could not be expected to see into the future. But medicine and law did not develop their ―social‖ elements in way that he envisioned. Because of this the need for social workers to mediate between these professions and the clients and patients in need of their services did only not diminish, and today these social work roles are perhaps more important than ever. And several occupations that Flexner believed did not rise to the level of professions, including social work, nursing, and pharmacy, clearly became professions.

Arguably the most significant long-term effect of Flexner's speech to the social work leaders in his audience is his discussion of medicine as the ideal profession for emulation. To the extent that social workers saw professionalization as a means of achieving societal legitimacy for themselves and their work, becoming more like medicine became an attractive aspiration. Specht and Courtney (1994) argue that Flexner may have spurred social work to seek a common and systematic body of knowledge as in medicine. This led social work to pursue psychiatry, Freud, and psychoanalysis (Austin, 1983; Specht & Courtney, 1994). But this type of common and unitary approach became increasingly willing to sacrifice the social reform element of the profession. This is something that Specht and Courtney (1994) indicate has not only continued into the modern era but has accelerated with the emphasis on mental health and private practice. This is a bit concerning in a profession that prides itself for its commitment to social, economic, and environmental justice.

We should move on from Flexner. His assessment of social work was flawed, based on limited knowledge, and perhaps, biased. He did correctly identify the dilemma of incorporating a single method for social work practice that incorporated both the micro and macro elements, and this is something with which the profession struggled and continues to struggle. Flexner's solution was to seek a unity of method based on the ideal profession of medicine. It remained for the emergence of generalist practice in the 1960s and 1970s to reconcile the compatibility of micro and macro practice before social workers had the language and framework to meld the two traditional elements of practice successfully. Flexner has left social work with a legacy promotes a bit of professional insecurity, which

leads the profession to pursue avenues that tend to minimize the important role that social change and intervention has played in making social work unique. Social work is not medicine, psychiatry, psychology, or counseling.

Being told you don‘t measure up by the foremost authority on professions casts a dark shadow for a long time. Social work is unique among the professions in that it helps individuals and families, as well as addressing broader social ills. In a sense that is good because it led social work to continued introspection about who we are and what we do. But we should focus on the present, on social work‘s unique qualities, and its strengths and not rely on a questionable analysis and pursue professional status at the expense of what social work has traditionally been at its core.

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