STANDARDS IN SOCIAL WORK:
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND EDUCATION*

Harold Lewis

During the last two decades the scope of social work practice and the justifications for its methods have changed. For example, policy and planning has evolved as a basic social work process and is now recognized as a practice concentration. Another example is evident in the broad spectrum of practice approaches, from the extreme rational to the almost totally subjective, legitimized as methods of choice to effect personal, institutional, and societal changes. Concurrently, changes in the character and locus of programs, the range of personnel utilized in their implementation, and the levels of educational preparation designated for such personnel, have each contributed to, reflected, and reenforced the changes in practice scope and justification. But more important are those things that have not changed. For one, the difficulties faced by persons seeking or compelled to use social work counsel have not altered drastically. The basic inequities and inequalities in our societal distributive mechanisms have maintained their relative impact on different population cohorts and continue to influence access to and delivery of social services. The location of power and control over welfare programs and resources have continued largely in the same circles, despite the so-called civil rights revolution, war against poverty, and the ending of our massive involvement in Vietnam. These two decades have, at best, evidenced incremental changes in services provided and in the character of professions that provide them. While the knowledge undergirding practice has continued to grow, additions have come largely in the area that assists the practitioner in knowing where to look and what to look for, but far less in the practice science that influences the "how." It would be misleading and unwise for social workers to accept the rhetoric that magnifies very modest changes in our profession into major and drastic ones. Unhappily, so little has really changed that often dramatic claims are made in order to call attention to what otherwise might be overlooked. If we face up to the facts of our national scene, and take a fair measure of the leadership and

policies pursued in our country's political and economic life during these two decades, we cannot deny the obvious conservative pattern that has typified approaches to meeting human service needs. The serious challenges to the status quo in the fifties and sixties have been turned back: by tokenisms, by force when necessary, by stealth and assassination when other means seemed less effective. Our practice has not changed radically; it has kept pace with the wider scene in which its efforts are realized and subverted in action.

Many processes promote or hinder change in our practice. For example, important structural and substantive changes in practice often flow from minor changes in the basic knowledge and value elements that inform professional action. One important influence on our practice derives from the standards we accept to guide our actions. In the remainder of this presentation I will consider the nature of professional standards and attempt to apply what I understand about such standards to a clarification of a number of important changes now occurring in our profession.

Framework for Analysis

Standards can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. This is important to recognize since one's philosophical position tends to derive from the perspective one chooses. In the drama of action, Kenneth Burke (1945) has suggested that focusing one's attention on the "scene" yields a materialistic perspective, focusing on the "agent," an idealistic perspective, while realism appears to derive from a focus on the "act," pragmatism from focus on the "agency," and mysticism from attention to "purpose." Standards generally are of three types—standards of practice, or what is actually the case; standards from practice, or what is the best among the actual evidences of practice; and standards for practice, which describe an ideal, often nonexistent in practice. Any one of these types of standards can be viewed from the variety of perspectives noted. The perspective preferred is influenced by the economic, political, scientific, aesthetic, and religious norms that coalesce in an approach to action and is not entirely free of societal and personal constraints at any point in time. These general observations are included primarily to provide a framework for the discussion that follows. It should also serve to caution against too rapid a movement to closure on your part, as the discussion develops, since no one piece of the analysis can constitute a full perspective.

Epistemology

The conceptual structures of professions suggest some interesting questions about practice standards. For example, at the level of knowl-