One Hundred Years of Social Work: A History of the Profession in English Canada, 1900-2000.

For those who are deeply committed to the profession of social work, One Hundred Years of Social Work is neither encouraging nor easy to read. Therese Jennissen and Colleen Lundy, both faculty members in the school of social work at Carleton University in Ottawa, have provided a history of the social work profession that pulls back the covers on the mishaps, foibles and conflicts that have dogged the emerging profession of social work in Canada in the 20th century.

One Hundred Years is the first book-length history specifically focused on the social work profession in Canada, although there are a handful of others that chronicle the development of social welfare. The authors’ extensive use of primary sources makes this history especially strong, although it also exposes a weak spot. The majority of sources come from documents connected with the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) or its provincial chapters, which together provide access to an archival treasure-trove. These sources, which include not only minutes and briefs, but also correspondence between various leaders, allow the authors to uncover details that make a substantial new contribution to knowledge about the historical developments of the social work profession in Canada.

But reliance on these sources also limits the book’s scope. In effect, the book is more a history of CASW (along with other Canadian and American organizations that specifically supported and identified with the social work profession, such as the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) and its forerunners, the Council on Social Work Education and its forerunners, the National Association of Social Workers and its forerunners) than of social workers—or those who thought of themselves as social workers.

Tellingly, one of the chapters deals extensively with the question: what is social work and who is a social worker? While these questions are not unique to this history, what becomes clear is that One Hundred Years is really only a history of a fraction of those who have identified themselves with the work that many would understand as social work. The data the
authors report show that CASW membership has rarely exceeded a third of those who consider themselves working in social work or related fields, with representation even lower in some provinces.

So one must ask: whose history is this? As Jennissen and Lundy chronicle, it is a history of a minority of social workers who prioritized their own professional advancement by establishing and working within various narrowly-defined organizational structures to promote their own definition of social work while the majority of those working in these areas (social welfare, social services, human services, applied sociology, or whatever else it was called) ignored or opposed that minority and focused instead on the vulnerable and needy. As noted above, this is a sobering interpretation that is not easy to digest.

A significant aspect of that majority includes those who have worked in explicitly religious—mostly Christian, but also Jewish, Muslim, and other—organizations for all of these one hundred years and more. Furthermore, many of those working in these organizations have never identified themselves as social workers; in other words, they pursued their work with those who were vulnerable completely outside the organizational structures that attempted to define and limit the boundaries of social work. Of course, it isn’t only religious organizations that have been outside the social work profession—many others have as well. In labor movements, in community development organizations, among “rank and file” workers, in public and community health centers, in schools, in community action programs, and many more, there have been people and organizations doing what could be labeled social work, but not being recognized or defined as such. And many of them don’t care. Rather, the work they do with the people they’re trying to serve is more important than their professional status. Again, this is not a new insight, but Jennissen and Lundy are not afraid to tell it straight out: as a profession, we’ve mostly chosen our own interests above our clients, and left it to others (who neither care nor obsess over what they’re called) to do the work with those who really need it.

Jennissen and Lundy acknowledge upfront that they take a feminist and structural approach that leads them to examine specifically how the social work profession navigated tensions arising from gender and class inequities. With regard to gender, they point out repeatedly how the official structures of the profession privileged men over women. They connect these longstanding gender inequities within the profession to economic and class issues. One of the prevailing tensions was the push
and pull between the pursuit of social action and social reform on the one hand, and the desire for professional legitimacy on the other. The authors argue that the dominance of men in social work leadership made it lean more towards professionalizing and stray from a more radical social reform agenda. In the postwar development of the welfare state, CASW collaborated extensively with the federal government in responding to a variety of policy initiatives. However, seeking professional legitimacy, CASW tended to offer a limited critique that often ignored larger issues of sexism or other inequities. For example, CASW was conspicuously absent in commenting on the 1960s Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which Jennissen and Lundy find remarkable: “Given that social work is a profession with a preponderance of women, this was a very serious oversight and a lost opportunity” (p. 251).

The authors are not afraid to reveal the deep divisions within the profession that have often severely hampered its ability to influence public policy, expand its own ranks, or make the types of advances that have characterized other professions. Instead, they lament that “through the years, social workers have been preoccupied with achieving professional status, legitimacy, and recognition from members of social and political strata and from colleagues in other professions” (p. 229). Their conclusion is harsh: a century of preoccupation with professionalization has left social work in a precarious position in the 21st century. As they note, both CASW and the CASWE “are in peril” (p. 293) from fragmentation and loss of a national voice, many of those working in social work and related fields “have chosen not to belong to [professional or regulatory organizations] because of ideological differences, financial concerns, or apathy” (p. 292), and the support and consensus for a unifying ideological perspective rooted in Marxist and structural practice is unraveling, which they describe as “disquieting” (p. 297).

A predictable response from social workers to these sorts of criticisms has been to rally the troops and try once again to push for professional recognition. Although Jennissen and Lundy do make a plea for the continued voice of CASW and CASWE, they leave open the possibility that perhaps it is time that the social work profession back off from prioritizing professionalization. Instead, they end their history with a call to return to the roots of social justice, arguing that this is a more worthwhile aim which is also more likely to unite social workers than professionalization. Unfortunately, their definition of social justice is shaped by their feminist and structural perspective, and therefore they
appear not to want to make room for those in social work from other ideological perspectives. Here they seem unable to escape the same exclusive tendencies of professionalization, since they espouse “justice, not charity” (p. 302), and thus (inadvertently?) denounce and exclude those workers in religious and other similar organizations who provide daily help to those suffering from poverty and related problems.

This book is a challenge to all those who think of themselves as doing social work (in all its forms and titles). For those social workers who have uncritically endorsed the pursuit of professional status (either individually or for the profession as whole), this book will challenge you to question the costs of professionalization. For those who consider themselves to be social workers outside the professional infrastructure, this book may challenge you to look beyond your own specific area of work and find new ways to join in solidarity with others working in similar fields. One Hundred Years makes an important contribution to our understanding of the history of social work, but its dependence on sources from sanctioned organizations should spur others who have identified themselves as social workers to also tell their stories.

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Working Mothers and the Welfare State: Religion and the Politics of Work-Family Policies in Western Europe and the United States

IMPORTANT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DEBATES CENTER AROUND ISSUES related to child rearing. Some mothers choose to stay at home full-time while others work full or part-time by choice or necessity. This book offers a comparative analysis of different governmental responses to this issue by looking at the development of work-family policies regarding childcare, parental leave, and flexible work time arrangements in Sweden, France, the Netherlands, and the United States. This book is the result of extensive research by the author that began as a dissertation and continued through several years of post-doctoral study, including