

Norma Parker Address

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Remembering, Apologies, and Truth: Challenges for Social Work Today

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

Santayana, 1905, p. 284

These often-quoted words of the philosopher, George Santayana, resonate with the challenges facing professional social workers today. As we seek to build our profession and defend its worth to employers, communities, service users, and prospective students, we face urgent questions about our past, present, and future. In this Norma Parker address, I will focus on the question: How should we remember the past in which our profession emerged and developed? Addressing this question is vital to building a profession of which we can be proud and in which employers, communities, and service users can trust.

The act of remembering is challenging for the profession of social work. As a profession, we have a responsibility to record our history in its complexity, not only so that we do justice to the men and women who built our profession and to the clients who were served (or not) by our profession, but also to create a future based on the truth of our past. This is no easy task, given that our profession is largely a product of the ‘welfare state’ of the twentieth century; a ‘state’ that we now know was associated with human rights transgressions. Remembering is further complicated by the emotionally charged character of the events being recalled. In her review of truth-seeking commissions, Lanegran (2005) identified the challenge of remembering in such contexts: ‘[there are] several challenges in formulating

collective memory and establishing justice. By demanding to know ‘the truth’ about past atrocities, do societies risk oversimplifying [sic] their pasts?’ (p. 112).

In this essay, I focus on the challenges facing our profession as we acknowledge the past in which our profession emerged, and seek to build our profession based on the truth of this complex history.

The Age of Apology

In the past decades, government and institutional leaders across the world have apologised on behalf of their nations and institutions for a plethora of crimes and transgressions; and the twentieth century provided governments and institutions plenty to be sorry for. In Europe, for example, leaders have apologised for the unspeakable crimes against humanity during the Second World War. In 1970, Willy Brandt, the West German Chancellor, dropped to his knees before a commemoration monument to the Jewish victims of the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943. Brandt’s silent apology was widely reported as a profound act of sorrow and repentance. Such acts of contrition, when sincerely offered, are vital for recognising the past and to at least begin a process of healing and rebuilding trust (Wohl, Hornsey, & Philpot, 2011).

In the past decade, too, government leaders have apologised for the transgressions committed in the name of ‘social welfare’. In Australia, like many other colonist nations, governments and institutional leaders have begun to acknowledge the role of ‘state’ and ‘church’ services in forced separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. In 2007, as we know, Prime Minister Rudd apologised to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who were separated from their families and communities as a result of racist government policies. In 2008, Stephen Harper, the Canadian Prime Minister, apologised to the first nations people of Canada who were victims of child welfare institutions.

Governments across the ‘developed’ world are also being confronted with the horror of institutional abuse that appears to have been endemic in residential institutions. In Australia, as in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Canada, our societies are only now beginning to face the catalogue of abuse that vulnerable children faced in residential homes and

detention centres. In 2009, the Australian Prime Minister apologised also to the Forgotten Australians. The apology included the young child migrants, as well as Australian-born children, who faced, at the very least, the trauma of separation from their families and who, in many instances, were subject to appalling abuse and neglect in the institutions that were supposed to care for them. Public apologies to the victims of government policies and social welfare institutions hold extraordinary symbolic significance and can provide the necessary foundation for nations and institutions 'to move forward' (Hocking, Scott, & Allen, 2010, p. 130; Wohl et. al, 2011). In the face of overwhelming evidence of past wrongdoing and harm suffered, there seems little question that governments and social welfare institutions have a moral responsibility to apologise and to make recompense.

Similarly, today, the social work profession faces the challenge of how to respond to the atrocities of social welfare policies and institutions of the past. As a product of the welfare state and as a lead human service occupation, the profession needs to acknowledge the pain suffered by former 'clients' of health and welfare services. It is appropriate and important that professional social workers, and their professional associations, join with national and institutional leaders as well as other human service occupations, in acknowledging the suffering of former clients of human services. We are moved by this suffering and we are sorry for it. However, it is important that as a profession we do not confuse our moral duty to recognise the suffering of victims of human service institutions with our responsibility to record the history of our profession. To do so, risks oversimplifying both the history of the profession in Australia and of its relationship to the health and welfare institutions of the early to mid-twentieth century. So how do we remember our past in ways that do justice to the complex position of professional social work as both part of the machinery of the welfare state, yet also an advocate for social change? And how do we use this remembering to inform our present and build our future as a profession, which is committed to the values of respect, social justice, and professional integrity? (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010).

Questions of Guilt and Responsibility

Over the past 15 years, a range of Public Inquiries have highlighted the experiences of victim/survivor suffering in child welfare institutions. Accounts of the Stolen Generations, Forgotten Australians, and of mothers who relinquished their children through forced adoptions, make for harrowing reading. These Inquiry reports leave little doubt about the lack of care of governments and social welfare institutions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or for the vulnerable children, young people, and parents who came to the attention of health and welfare authorities.

Given the responsibility social workers today hold for practice with vulnerable children, young people, and their families, it is surprising to find that Inquiries also provide thin and inconsistent accounts of the social work profession. In the Inquiries to which I have referred, social workers are rarely mentioned and reports on their practice vary. To be sure, there is criticism of social workers. In the 'Bringing Them Home' Report (Wilson, 1997), witnesses reported that in the 1950s 'social workers' from the Aborigines Welfare Board policed the homes of Aboriginal families. The report also criticises social workers for lacking an appreciation of childrearing values in Indigenous societies. Respondents to the Inquiry into forced adoptions (Community Affairs References Committee, 2012) recalled poor treatment at the hands of social workers, including being bullied, denied information, and one respondent reported being 'slapped ... across the face' (p. 57). In the report of the Forgotten Australians it was remarked that child protection investigations were mishandled, often leaving children to face an accuser following a botched investigation. In the report, it was also remarked that 'Departmental officers were often younger social workers with less developed views who arguably made decisions coloured by their own value judgements rather than what may have been in the best interest of the child' (Community Affairs References Committee, 2004, p. 131).

Yet, some Public Inquiries have also suggested that professional social workers also contributed to positive changes in health and welfare systems. The Forde Inquiry noted that 'the situation improved considerably from the mid-1960s when the first qualified social workers began to be employed by the Department [of Children's Services], heralding a gradual improvement in its level of involvement with the children in its care' (Forde, 1999, p. 101). Forde (1999) noted, among other things, that professional social workers challenged

the use of corporal punishment in children's homes, and ushered in a new focus on understanding and promoting children's psychological and social development.

The recent Senate Inquiry into forced adoptions undertook a review of AASW documents and professional social work manuals. This review found evidence of the profession's active support of birth mothers' right to informed decision making. As stated in the Senate Inquiry (Community Affairs References Committee, 2012) into forced adoptions:

The social work profession from the late 1950s was supportive of mothers' rights to access their children prior to adoption, to be free of pressure to adopt, and to be informed about alternatives to adoption. Professional social work and child welfare manuals from New South Wales published in the late 1950s were emphatic about the seriousness of adoption as an irrevocable act, and the steps to be taken in explaining the options to a woman considering adoption for her child. These manuals refer to options to assist the mother to support the child, and say 'only when the mother has considered these [options], and still wishes to proceed with the surrender for adoption, should the consent be accepted'. (p. 211)

The evidence from the Senate Inquiry suggested that the social work profession recognised practitioners' legal and ethical responsibilities to support self-determination of birth mothers. The standards asserted by the profession placed social workers in considerable tension with what appears to have been the widespread practices of adoption services and maternity hospitals at the time.

Understanding Our Past

How do we account for the limited and contradictory accounts of the social work profession in these public inquiries? First, we need to recognise that social work was a newly emerging profession with little presence in the health and welfare institutions until the later part of the mid-twentieth century. While the profession of social work first came into being in the late nineteenth century in the northern hemisphere, it was during the mid-twentieth century that the profession established a solid foundation with a clear program of university-based

professional education in Australia. Furthermore, until the 1970s, the number of social work graduates was limited by the relatively small number of universities offering professional social work programs. In Australia, professional social workers were rarely employed in social welfare institutions such as residential homes or in child welfare departments, in part because of the small numbers of graduates. For example, in an historical review of abuse in children's homes in Queensland, Forde (1999) noted that social workers were not appointed to the child protection services agency until the mid-1960s and the first social worker in one of Queensland's largest orphanages was not appointed until 1969 (Forde, 1999, p. 96).

Furthermore, there is good reason to be cautious about the extent to which survivor experiences of social work practices, both good and bad, can be said to reflect professional social work educational or professional standards. In the context of the lack of protection of the professional title and the lax employment practices in a variety of health and welfare institutions, it is impossible to know how many, if indeed any, professional social workers were in the roles referred to as 'social work' in the various Inquiries. Reviews of the abuse of children in care have shown that very few of those employed in roles we might now refer to as 'social work' or 'human services' roles, such as child protection officers or youth workers, had any kind of professional education or training. The Forde Inquiry (1999) pointed to the indiscriminate employment practices in residential institutions that led to the recruitment of human service personnel who were, at best untrained, and at worst posed a serious threat to the children in their care.

As a profession, we must also recognise the structural position of social workers, as an emerging profession in the mid-twentieth century, and how this position shaped our capacity to influence dominant practices in social welfare institutions. For example, in the Senate Inquiry (Community Affairs References Committee, 2012) it is stated that:

The policies and practices espoused by the social work profession were regularly disregarded in the hospitals and maternity homes. The practices complained of by witnesses to this committee, and defended as accepted in that era, were simply not accepted by the social work profession at that time. (p. 212)

In remembering our past, we must question the extent to which social work, an emerging profession in the mid-to-late twentieth century, can be held accountable for the institutional conditions into which it emerged.

Remembering and Responsibility

At the crux of our dilemma in remembering the past is the need to acknowledge the harm experienced by 'clients' and residents of health and welfare systems, while also recognising that evidence of the profession's perpetration of this harm is uncertain and contested. It is possible that individual social workers were involved in harmful acts, either both failing to act to protect service users or through involvement in abuse. At no point in the plethora of recent inquiries has it been suggested that the social work profession condoned these practices. Our fault as a profession, it seems, was our relative weakness and inability to contest systemic injustices. Indeed, there is also evidence that the social work profession sometimes advocated against the dominant standards of the past, for humane and just responses to clients of health and welfare services.

Notwithstanding the ambivalent evidence surrounding the profession's past, we have a moral responsibility to acknowledge and apologise for harm from health and welfare systems. Indeed, such apologies are vital for healing and laying the foundation for building trust and practical reconciliation. However, the profession cannot, in truth, accept responsibility for acts of the past in which the profession's involvement is uncertain and for practices that the profession opposed. To accept responsibility in the face of considerable contest about events may cause further harm. Such an apology risks being viewed as insincere insofar as it relies on an incomplete and contested view of the past (Wohl et al., 2011). Furthermore, acceptance of responsibility in the face of evidence to the contrary, dishonours those members of our profession who worked to establish and reinforce standards of professionalism, sometimes in the face of considerable opposition.

For an apology to have a practical significance for those harmed, we must commit to preventing reoccurrence of wrongdoing. To do this, we must understand the past in all its complexity, particularly the conditions that gave rise to and fostered harmful practices. This means we should avoid seeing history only or primarily in terms of personal accounts. A

focus on individual experience risks detracting attention from the continuing structural injustices that need redress. As Radstone (2005) observed:

The current politics of memory and its associated culture of victimhood draw attention away from collective forces and issues, and produce a shift from collective obligations and modes of accountability to narratives of individual suffering and accusations of individual blame. (p. 141)

We need to understand and address the structural conditions that gave rise to the harm perpetrated on victims and survivors of government policies and health and welfare institutions. For instance, we need to ensure that the power structures that allowed abuse and wrongdoing are not replicated in contemporary health and welfare institutions. Further, these various reports urge change in the way social work services are organised and delivered. For example, the Forgotten Australians (Community Affairs References Committee, 2004) report drew attention to the urgent need to address workforce and career development issues in child protection services so that families might receive services from workers with the maturity and skill needed to respond effectively to their often complex needs.

Our further responsibility is to support practical redress of the injustices suffered by victims and survivors of unjust government policies and harmful practices in health and welfare institutions. As Wohl et al. (2011) remarked:

An apology itself cannot alter continuing systematic discrimination and disadvantage that often accompanies historical victimization. However, an apology may be considered successful if it catalyzes a series of measures that together work to dismantle the legacy of an historical injustice. (p. 88)

Many survivors of the outrages committed as a result of government policies and in human service institutions suffer life-long disadvantage. For example, we know that educational and

employment outcomes of the Stolen Generations were poorer than those who were not removed (Wilson, 1997). Few of the Forgotten Australians had educational opportunities commensurate with the standards of the day. For an apology to be a practical expression of the value of social justice, it must be linked to redress and to opportunities for social and economic inclusion (Hocking et al., 2010). The social work profession has an important role to play in working alongside survivors and with advocacy groups to promote these practical kinds of redress for the injustices suffered.

A Future Based in Truth

As a profession, we should aspire to build our future based on the truth of our past. Yet, we know that truth is a slippery concept. Public Inquiries can be a starting point but there is much more work to be done to understand our profession's history. Remembering our past so that we may build our future based in truth is an intellectually-demanding and time-consuming process. As Nigel Biggar (cited in Lanegran, 2005) observed, 'in public life as in private, remembering and dealing with the past is likely to be a process rather than an event. We can do it bit by bit over years, and probably generations' (p. 121). Our profession's history in Australia is as both an insider and an outsider to government and various human service institutions. We have a duty to recognise and apologise for the harm committed by past government policies and human service institutions. However, we also have a responsibility to ensure that the historical record reveals the past in all its complexity and uncertainty. This is a duty we owe to survivors of health and welfare policies and institutions and also to those men and women who, as social workers, performed their roles with courage, diligence, and care. Such understanding is also vital for building a profession based on the truth of who we are and who we may become.

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