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In Memoriam: - This paper is dedicated to Arthur Collis (1916-2012), who as Honorary Archivist to the British Association of Social Workers, did so much to preserve the historical archives of the professional associations of social workers.

Abstract:
Following introductory comments about the origins and limitations of the paper, the main text briefly focuses on the broad context within which professional associations of social workers developed. It then moves on to outline the broad histories of professional associations of social workers, before considering five aspects of their activities. A section on the internal issues which faced social worker professional associations leads on to some general conclusions about the interaction between professional associations of social workers and the development of social work as an occupation.

The Origin and Limitations of the Paper.

The paper is based on a PhD thesis completed in 1990 at the University of Manchester, under the supervision of Professor Paul Wilding. This thesis examined the historical development of professional associations in social work, and assessed their role and influence in the development of social work as an occupation. (Sackville 1990). The research was conducted between 1985 and 1989, and was mainly based on archival material then in the possession of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and located at its Kent Street headquarters in Birmingham. The archive covered seven ‘predecessor associations’ of social workers, as well as the ‘umbrella organisations’ which had sought to unify the associations. At the time of the research the archive was in the process of being catalogued by a professional archivist, assisted by the Honorary Archivist – Arthur Collis. (Stacey & Collis 1988). The documents were studied for four years, between 1985 and 1989, by means of a weekly day-visit to Kent Street. Other archives used included those held at the Greater London Record Office, MIND, and the National Council of Women. At the time of the research, discussions had just commenced about archiving the BASW records in the post 1970 period. Both the archive of the ‘predecessor associations’ and the BASW archive are now held at the Modern Records Centre of the University of Warwick. (Warwick University 2013).

As well as the archival material from the BASW archive and from a limited number of other archives, three other major sources of primary material were used in constructing the thesis. Firstly there was a range of official reports relating to social work and to social policy which indicate both the concern and interest of governmental and other official bodies in social work during this
period. Secondly there were the social work ‘texts’ for differing periods, which indicate something of the general approach of social work and which capture the flavour of thinking about ‘professions’ at the time of their publication. Finally there were the social work periodicals, some of which were linked to the professional associations of social workers, but others which were more ‘independent’. This range of material was used to fill out the picture presented by the associations’ archives, but they were also a corrective to the egocentric nature of the associations’ documents, which not surprisingly often suggest that the associations are of vital importance and the social work world revolves around them.

There are a number of methodological issues about archival research which have to be recognised. Webb et al (1977) have argued that there are at least two major sources of bias in archival records, which they identify as selective deposit and selective survival. Selective deposit relates to what the association or its officers determine to record at the time – what is preserved and how it is preserved depends on what contemporaries see as significant. What is preserved in minutes of meetings may also depend on current fashions or fads of minute-taking and even on the technology available to record proceedings. In the early days of meetings (particularly in the period 1918 to 1945) fairly lengthy reports were kept of meetings, and some speeches were even recorded verbatim. In contrast, in the 1980s reports of meetings often consisted of resolutions passed, with no indication of the discussion which led up to the decision. There may also be a factor of the sympathetic bias of editors of minutes, for example, some minutes attempt to present a ‘balanced’ picture of discussion on controversial topics regardless of the actual level of support for both ‘sides’. Another aspect of selective deposit relates to the purpose for which the records were produced. This applies particularly to printed material, such as annual reports of the associations. Annual Reports are clearly more selective than the majority of minutes of meetings. There are constraints on space, limited by production costs; and the annual report itself may not only serve as a report of stewardship by officers to members, but may also be distributed extensively as part of a public relations exercise. A further problem which faces a researcher using such sources is that often a certain level of existing knowledge is presumed by the authors of the minutes or reports. There is a certain ‘taken-for-granted’ knowledge which is omitted. This may be such simple things as an explanation of the abbreviations used, or the mention of certain people, obviously well-known to the readership in the 1930s, without any indication of their relevance to the issue being discussed. The researcher may have a major task in reconstructing the full dimensions of a particular debate. This was particularly the case with many of the early minutes, where it was necessary to have a wide knowledge of broader political and social policy developments in order to understand the debate among social workers of the time. Other researchers using archival sources have discovered the same problem; as Means and Smith (1985) have pointed out the records “are not full of facts waiting to be collected like postage stamps”.

Turning to the problem of selective survival, the records of the professional associations have been subjected to selective ‘weeding’ at several times
during their lives. This is not to imply that the records have been deliberately edited to ensure that certain issues do not come to public attention. From reading the records themselves it is possible to identify times when they were thinned-out, often linked to a change of honorary officer in the early days, or more recently due to a move of premises. When BASW was in the process of formation the then General Secretary Designate issued a circular reminding the constituent associations that they were not obliged to deposit their records with BASW, and setting out guidelines for the type of documents that BASW would be prepared to preserve in its archive. Whilst this document was basically sympathetic to the cause of preserving records, there are what may now be seen as some surprising suggestions as to the type of document which could be dispensed with. This list included – membership application forms; drafts of evidence and policy statements which are not, without subsequent amendment, accepted as policy of the organisation; documents relating to branches, regions or special interest groups other than material incorporated in annual reports; loose photographs and news cuttings or any uncatalogued collection of documents”. Whilst it is understandable that the new association did not want to be burdened with an excessive mass of material, it is particularly unfortunate that when it came to making decisions in doubtful cases, the advice was “if in doubt, scrap it”. The historian would offer contrary advice – “if in doubt, preserve it”.

A second concern was my own involvement in BASW in the 1970s, at both a local and a national level. I chaired the Professional Development and Practice Committee for four years, and was also chair of the Working Party which produced “The Social Work Task” Report. At branch level I was initially Secretary and then Chair of the Merseyside Branch. (Sackville 1979). Whilst there are advantages in that I knew what many of the implied references in the documents for the 1960s and 1970s were, I was also aware of the danger that certain issues, which had perhaps mattered more to me at the time of my participation, would tend to dominate my account of this period.

At the time of conducting the research there were few studies of professional associations of social workers. There had been some ‘celebratory’ histories, for the general reader, written by members of a particular association. (see for example the Golden Jubilee Number of the Almoner, 1953; ACCO,1970 and Jacka,1973). Timms had conducted a more detailed academic study of the Association of Psychiatric Workers in 1964 (Timms 1964) and Younghusband had included a chapter on the professional associations in her history of social work in Britain from 1950 to 1975 (Younghusband 1978). As part of the research it was therefore necessary to initially construct detailed case studies of each professional association. Fifteen of these case studies were written between October 1986 and December 1988. These narrative accounts have not been published, but they have recently been digitised, and copies may be requested from the author of this paper. (See Appendix 1).

The thesis itself had to balance the narrative account of the history of the associations, with a detailed analysis of the activities and role of the professional associations. The result was a historical sociological study of the interaction between professional associations and the development of social
work as an occupation. This paper attempts to summarise a complex and lengthy thesis, and of necessity it has been simplified for presentation within a time-limited lecture. However both the full thesis and the supporting papers are now digitised and available for further study.

There is one final limitation to the paper. Since the thesis was presented in 1990, I have been specialising in other aspects of higher education including institutional management, technology-supported learning, and clinical education. It is only on my retirement from these areas in December 2012, that I have turned my attention again to social work history. I am not therefore up to speed on more recent research in social work history, neither am I fully aware of more recent developments in social work practice, BASW and other associations of social workers. This means that the referencing of the paper stops at 1990. I intend to update this in later versions of the paper.

The Context within which professional associations of social workers developed.

The complex interaction between the development of professional associations of social workers and social work as an occupation cannot be divorced from the wider context within which they are both set. Four aspects of this context appear to be of particular importance. Firstly there are changing ideas about welfare and the extent of the state’s involvement in the provision and/or control of welfare. The idea of welfare changed considerably over the period 1900 to 1990, and this in turn has reflected changes in the broader social structure such as relative levels of poverty and affluence, and demographic and employment changes. New ‘social problems’ have been identified and old ‘social problems’ redefined. At the same time there was a continuing debate, often reflected in actual policy, as to the extent to which the state should be involved in providing services itself, or regulating others’ provision of services. This debate partly reflects different political ideologies, but it is also linked to pragmatic decisions about the level of the nation’s resources which can be devoted to ‘welfare’ services and electoral considerations about the degree of public support for the state’s involvement in the provision of welfare services.

The second aspect of the context which has changed during the period studied is the nature of the government in the United Kingdom. The ninety years have seen the growth of local government and its involvement in the provision of services, although this has been altering again since 1980. At the same time central government has changed its relation to the extent to which it is open to influence from pressure or interest groups. Certain interests become ‘incorporated’ into the state at different periods, whilst others are excluded. There have also been changes in the ethos of government operations – consultation and cooperation between levels of government or between government and interests can change into tensions and conflict.

A third aspect of change relates to professions themselves. There have been changing ideas about the beneficial or oppressive nature of professionalism. Professions which were once dominant in the occupational structure of
society have been challenged and other occupations have claimed ‘professional status’. At the same time as traditional conceptions of professions in the social sciences have been questioned, so both government and public support for professions has waxed and waned. There is now a clearer division between private sector and public sector professionalism, as identified by Perkin. (Perkin 1989).

The fourth aspect of the changing context relates to ideas about social work itself as an occupation. Original ideas of it as a vocation or a calling, have been joined by views which see it as a skilled and essential service. But these perceptions of social work have been challenged by those who see it as just another job, and a job which has increasingly become concerned with carrying out prescribed tasks and ‘policing’ the population, rather than in exercising individual discretion. All these aspects of the changing context in turn affect the ways in which professional associations are viewed by individual social workers, by the state and by the wider society. The story has been one of constant change – change in relation to the formation and continuity of the professional associations; change in terms of membership and activities; change in the context within which the professional associations operate; and change in their degree of influence on the development of social work as an occupation.

Broad Histories of Professional Associations of Social Workers.

This section of the paper has been subdivided into three historical periods. I recognise that such periodisation suggests neat and tidy compartments, but in this case – the periods have been used to help the reader follow through the complex story of the development of the professional associations and the context within which they developed.

(a) 1900 – 1940.
Elizabeth Macadam in 1914 argued that “social work is so vague and elastic an expression that its use is only justified by its great convenience”. (Macadam 1914). Macadam was attempting to capture the growth of a number of occupations which had developed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century including housing management, health visiting, industrial welfare work, youth leadership, settlement work, probation, church welfare work and hospital almoning. What these occupations and activities shared, besides a commitment to tackling ‘social problems’ were two features which were crucial for the establishment of professional associations of workers. The occupations used an increasing number of paid, full-time workers; and they began to place an emphasis on specialist skills and knowledge acquired by the workers through a process of training. Professional associations started to appear from 1900 onwards - the health visitors and women sanitary inspectors started meetings in 1896, although they association was not established until 1902. They were followed by the hospital almoners in 1904, the probation officers in 1912, the relieving officers in 1912, the industrial welfare workers in 1913, and the women housing managers in 1916. (See Davies 1987, Jarvis 1972, Bochel 1976, Niven 1967 & Brion & Tinker 1980).
Alongside these associations of workers, initiatives commenced in the 1890s to offer training to these workers. These training initiatives brought together the Women’s University Settlement, the National Union of Women Workers and the Charity Organisation Society, and in the first decade of the twentieth century higher education institutions became involved, with the establishment of a School of Sociology in London in 1903 (which combined with the London School of Economics in 1912) and the founding of the School of Social Science at Liverpool in 1904. (Smith 1965, Harris 1989).

These early associations of social workers developed conterminously with the development of the occupation they claimed to represent. The early associations were not only concerned to establish a role for themselves, but they were also taking part in the wider process of attempting to identify both the core and the boundaries of the occupation. They were not autonomous agents in doing this, being clearly constrained by the expectations and control of employers. However in the pioneer days there were few large employers, and individual hospitals, probation committees or voluntary associations were perhaps more open to influence, if the associations could determine the right tactics to use. The associations had the model of older established professional associations to guide them, but in the early records there is little evidence of them deliberately debating a strategy of professionalization. Rather, as in the case of the hospital almoners, they tended to follow an internalised model of professionalism, which many of the workers were aware of from their predominantly professional middle-class backgrounds. Their activities involved attempting to influence training and, to a lesser extent, salaries, since there were viewed as reflecting social status. Occasionally the associations became drawn into broader issues of social policy, but in all cases much of their energy was directed to firmly establishing their association. The one attempt to found a broader social work association – the Federation of Professional Social Workers – in the years 1917 to 1923, failed, because the question of individual associations establishing their own identity took precedence.

The inter-war years, so often overlooked in the published histories of social work, saw an expansion in the number and variety of paid posts in the broad field of ‘social work’, and it also saw the growth of state involvement (often in the form of partnership with voluntary organisations) in the provision of services which called upon social workers for their implementation. There were changes in conceptions of social work methods particularly linked to a growing interest in psychology and the importation of psychiatric social work from America. The various occupations which comprised ‘social work’ developed at their own pace, but they were all numerically small occupations, located at the fringe of larger and more powerful professional groups. Yet by 1939 there were signs of a growth of common identity and purpose, which was absent in the 1920s. Not only were there national and international links between social workers, but Clement Brown in 1939 was articulating a new ‘generic’ trend in social work when she wrote of “social workers seeking an explanation of a given social situation in terms of general laws of social behaviour and mental life” (Clement Brown 1939).
As a result of these changes new associations of social workers were established - the Association of Mental Health Workers (1921) and the Association of Psychiatric Social Workers (1929); and existing associations, like the Association of Hospital Almoners, had to adapt to changing circumstances. There were few dramatic developments, it was more a case of associations attempting to establish their identity and their legitimacy to be involved in areas of activity. The models of professionalization followed were very ‘traditional’; but there were differences between the associations in terms of how wide they were prepared to open their membership, their attitudes to involvement in issues of salaries and conditions of service, and the extent to which they should be involved in ‘political’ activity. The associations were however all committed to an expanding and ‘fully-trained’ social work workforce, and all had a vision of the contribution they believed social work could make to society. The inter-war years saw the introduction of a series of international conferences of social work (1928, 1932 and 1936); and the establishment of a British Federation of Social Workers in 1934/35 – which comprised a group of eleven ‘social worker’ associations by 1940.

(b) 1940-1970.
During the 1940s – which included the Second World War and the reconstruction of the ‘British Welfare State’, there were dramatic changes in the use and employment of social workers. Social work became more accepted by central and local government as an occupation for paid workers, assisting in the delivery of the services which the authorities were now mandated to provide. This meant that increasingly social workers were employed directly by statutory authorities, particularly local authorities and the National Health Service, rather than by voluntary bodies. The leading role played by voluntary organisations in the development of social work in the first forty years of the century was eclipsed. At the same time social work as an occupation was subjected to scrutiny by a number of government and independent committees, which not only assessed its potential for future development, but generally endorsed the need for an increase in numbers and in the level of training of social workers.

The development of the professional associations during this decade reflects these changes. Initially, at the start of the war, there was concern among leading social workers to extend their influence with the government, and as part of this strategy they also felt the need to put their own house in order. This led to the formation of two new associations representing old-established social work occupations – the Association of Family Case Workers and the Association of Moral Welfare Workers. But the war years saw a determined effort by the existing specific associations and by the BFSW to influence the climate of debate around plans for post-war reconstruction. The Federation and the individual associations were also concerned to clarify the contribution that social work could make, and a good deal of effort was put into redefining the tasks of almoners and PSWs. This was aided by wartime changes in the delivery of services and by the creation of the NHS. The latter event was of particular importance for the almoners, since they felt freed from the task of assessing patient contributions, and able to concentrate on what they saw as ‘real’ social work.
Both the PSWs and the almoners reorganised their professional associations during this period; and the creation of local authority Children's Departments and Health and Welfare Departments in 1948 was the stimulus at the end of the decade for the formation of the Association of Child Care Officers, and for moves to unite the various associations of local authority mental health workers into a single association – the Society of Mental Welfare Officers (1954). The one negative feature in the 1940s was the demise of BFSW. After a period of great activity in the early and mid 1940s, the last two years of the decade saw the strengthening of specific professional associations and the decline of the ‘generic’ Federation. This can be explained as the result of the need for the ‘new’ occupations such as child care officers, to establish their individual identity, and the need for the almoners and PSWs to adapt to the MHS changes and the threats posed to them in the period 1949 to 1952, when they were in danger of being categorised as medical ancillary workers.

By 1950 the professional associations had developed and extended their activities. Some were now providing direct training for new recruits and for existing social workers; some were becoming increasingly involved in salary negotiations; all were forging new links with central government to try to influence the shape of future services. They were buoyed up with the knowledge that Younghusband, in her reports, had seen professional associations as a major factor in forwarding the development of social work as an occupation (Younghusband 1947; 1951). There were still ‘problems’ however. The associations were, particularly with the demise of BFSW, often operating in isolation. The boundaries of social work were still far from clear, and the status of social workers as independent professionals or as auxiliaries to other occupations was still in doubt. Nevertheless the scene had been set for the dramatic development of social work as an occupation in the succeeding twenty years.

The period 1950 to 1970 again saw many changes in the context in which social work and its professional associations developed. Social work became more accepted by the state. There was an expansion of numbers, of opportunities for training, and even of the mission of social work, which was no longer simply confined to dealing with the casualties of society but embraced ideas of rehabilitation, of prevention and perhaps more tentatively, of social change and social action. Social work expanded its horizons to deal with new ‘social problems’ thrown up by demographic changes and by new conceptions of deprivation. In doing this the occupation experimented with new theories (such as maternal deprivation) and ‘new’ methods of work (group work, community work); and it also developed an expertise in assessment. In a period that was broadly supportive of social work, the potential for development appeared almost limitless. As Younghusband has commented this was the period when professional social workers who had been "small bands of freedom fighters on alien ground" succumbed to "demands that they should occupy whole territories" (Younghusband 1978).

But there were also problems facing this growing occupation, and the vision in many cases was different from the reality. The services which employed
social workers were still fragmented, and they were developing during this period at very differing speeds. There were different standards of service offered to different client groups in various parts of the country; and in many cases the services were inaccessible and unpublicised. Many social workers themselves felt that they still belonged to a ‘cinderella’ service, which was undervalued in terms of financial reward and status. It is within this context that the professional associations have to be set.

The different professional associations developed at different paces during the 1950s, and now they focussed on different issues. This can be linked firstly to the differing circumstances pertaining in their areas of employment. Thus the ‘medical’ associations were concerned about the role of their members and their status within the medical world; the ‘voluntary’ associations were caught up in the general questioning of the continuing role of non-statutory organisations in the welfare state; and the ‘local authority’ associations were more concerned with the changing legislation which affected their role within the local authority. Secondly the different associations had different histories and expectations of the role of professional associations. Whilst the MSWs and PSWs were well established and looked to the ‘medical model’ of professionalization, ACCO was more a part of the new public service professionalism which appeared more flexible and less bound by tradition. Thirdly the associations differed in size, in resources and in the degree of support and commitment they got from their members.

But all the associations were concerned to some extent about issues of training, of salaries and conditions of work, of professional issues, and of social policy. They were also concerned about their identity both as individual occupations, and increasingly within the 1960s they were concerned about their generic identity as social workers. There was a perceptible quickening of pace in the activities of all the associations in the 1960s. A sense of urgency and even a sense of identity started to pervade many of their actions, and this took shape in the movement towards a unified professional association in the later part of the 1960s. Despite misgivings by some members, the associations started to work more closely together; but even in these halcyon days there were disagreements and divisions both within and between the associations on the subjects of training, on salaries, on social action and even on the ultimate unity of the social work occupation. The process of unification was not inevitable – it had to be worked for, by committed and dedicated individuals and, in some cases, elites within each association. These individuals and elites were sustained by a vision of a unified professional association able to influence the shape of the new unified social work services which appeared to be becoming a reality at the end of the 1960s.

1970-1990,
BASW was established in 1970 – at a time of heady optimism about the contribution that social work could make to society; when it appeared that this contribution had been recognised by the Seebohm Report and the subsequent Local Authority Social Services Act 1970; and when social workers had demonstrated that by combined action through their professional
associations, orchestrated by the Seebohm Implementation Action group, they were capable of influencing both national and local government. New Social Work departments had been established in Scotland, and new Social Services Departments were in the process of being established in England and Wales. The social work view on the causes and treatment of juvenile delinquency had apparently triumphed (albeit in a modified form) in the Children and Young persons Act 1969; and new responsibilities for services for people with a physical disability and for elderly people were to be placed on the new Social Service Departments when they were set up in April 1971. Old battles to establish social work as a credible and valued occupation appeared to have been won, and the icing on the cake was the coming together after seven years of negotiations of seven separate social worker associations to form the new unified British Association of Social Workers.

It is easy to overstate this optimistic scenario when studying the period with hindsight. As well as the high expectations of at last being able to undertake social work in a large, well-resourced department, under the control of a fellow social worker, and with broad political support, there were also doubts and uncertainties. There had been very little preparation in depth for the large organisational changes which faced social work; and for many social workers this was a period of great uncertainty in which their existing patterns of work were to be radically transformed. Many social workers faced changes of tile and role; of geographical area; of caseload; of colleagues; of clientele; of agency policy and procedures; and of organisational size and professional orientation. It is not surprising that in many cases the high expectations of ‘Seebohm’ were quickly dissipated.

In the seven years of patient negotiations which led to the formation of BASW, a traditional model of a professional association had been adopted. This initially included closed membership, a desire to raise the status of the occupation, and a commitment to ensure its voice was heard, noted and acted on in policy-making circles. But BASW came into existence at the end of the period which Perkin has characterised as the ‘plateau of professional society’, and there were already signs of challenge to this concept of traditional professionalism. (Perkin 1989). Social work in the 1970s faced a series of major challenges, all of which had implications for the activities of the professional association. There was a dramatic increase in the workforce of the new Social Service and Social Work departments between 1972 and 1975. Many of the formally trained social work staff were promoted into managerial positions, with the consequence that in some departments the majority of basic grade field social workers were unqualified, and in many cases inexperienced. Yet BASW had a ‘closed’ membership, limited to qualified social workers; and this issue of closed versus open membership of the professional association tended to dominate much debate within the association between 1974 and 1978. This inward-looking debate was taking place at the time when public confidence and governmental support for social work was shattered with the death of Maria Colwell in 1973. This and subsequent ‘tragedies’ drew BASW into a defensive stance – drawing up evidence for inquiries, and engaging in damage limitation when subsequent public enquiry reports were published. At the same time – by the mid 1970s,
cuts in public expenditure were posing a major challenge to social work services.

Both the ‘tragedies’ and the ‘cuts’ had a severe effect on social work morale, and they can be linked to another challenge – the growing industrial unrest in the social services and social work departments. This had been sparked off in the early 1970s with a series of local disputes about the financial and other recognition of stand-by or night-duty performed by social workers. By the late 1970s however a growing militancy within some local authorities over pay and conditions led to the situation where over 2,600 social workers from 14 local authorities went on strike for differing lengths of time between August 1978 and May 1979. BASW was faced with formulating a policy about the use of strike action in industrial disputes, and with counselling members who were engaged in strike action, but as well as dealing with its own policy, the association also had to cope with the generally unfavourable media attention which focussed on social work, and fuelled criticism that social workers were not really necessary. This also coincided with a section of the membership having doubts about the representation of social workers within the then local government union – NALGO, and the establishment of a British Union of Social Workers in 1979.

As well as these challenges, social work faced a number of intellectual challenges to its existence and methods of operation during the 1970s. Initially these focussed around the revival of a neo-Marxist critique of social work, and attempts to develop, or at least articulate a ‘radical social work’ practice. Social work had in a sense been softened-up for these criticisms by the Fabian critique of the 1960s which coincided with the rediscovery of poverty and the revival of social administration as a critical discipline. (Brown 1983; Wilding 1983). But the challenge to ‘traditional’ social work also came from various pieces of empirical research which challenged the effectiveness of psycho-dynamically orientated casework, and also questioned the impact of ‘trained’ social workers on cases (Fischer 1973; 1978). In turn this empirical critique was linked to an emerging radical perspective popularised by right-wing critics of social work, who developed a critique of the excessive intervention of the state into areas which should be the concern of individuals and families. (Brewer & Lait 1980; Anderson 1981). This right-wing perspective posed an additional challenge to BASW since it was linked to a broader anti-professional movement which came to characterise the Conservative government which was elected in 1979. (Perkin 1989; Alaszewski & Manthorpe 1990).

By the early 1980s it is possible to characterise BASW as a professional association in deep trouble, Riven by internal dissension about conditions of membership and trade union activity; isolated from NALGO; assailed by intellectual critics and by media and public opinion; existing in a political and ideological climate no longer favouring social work; with a declining membership and a weak financial base; and offering little to the mass of basic grade social workers. This pessimistic scenario is of course over-generalised, and just as the seeds of BASW’s difficulties lay in the period before they became manifest, so there were already indications that BASW might recover
in the final years of the 1980s. This recovery centred around a ‘new realism’ within the association. Membership started to increase from 1983, finances started to improve, priority activities were identified and resources were clearly allocated to these, the structure was simplified, and more services for members were developed.

**Activities: Defining Social Work as an occupation.**

At its most simplistic, the practitioners of any occupation come together to discuss their work. Common problems and approaches are identified, and a common statement about the nature of the work and of the aims and objectives of the practitioners may be formulated. The exercise may extend into developing a consensus about just who is and who is not a member of that occupation. This approach sees the activity in a somewhat idealistic way – the workforce determining its own identity, and explaining its specific contribution to society. But this view suffers from the major defect of conceptualising the profession or occupation as independent of its context. In practice, I would argue, that the parameters of an occupation will to a large extent be determined by the market – with those who commission the work or with the employers. The activity of the professional association then becomes one of using its statement of aims or objectives in this context, to either expand, consolidate or defend its interests.

Social Workers associations may advance claims that social work can deal with particular societal problems, and these claims may take the form of a demand for an increase in the number of social workers, or for an expansion of the role of the social worker, In a period of plentiful resources, such claims may be almost boundless. Claims may be made about the specific knowledge and special skills possessed by the practitioners. There is also a converse side to this activity – where the activity may be used in a defensive manner. It has been used in boundary disputes with other occupations and professions, for example, the attempts by medical social workers to distinguish themselves as an independent profession from medicine. A professional association may also need to defend the occupation from the volunteer, the ‘untrained’ or indeed from ‘lesser trained’ auxiliaries. This involves clarifying appropriate and inappropriate tasks to be performed by trained social workers or by other types of workers.

Three major strategies appear to have been pursued by the professional associations in attempting to define social work. Firstly they followed the ‘idealistic’ course in pursuing their own discussions about their role and takes – about their ‘unique mission’. This led to the production of statements of aims and objectives, and of ways of meeting these. My study found that each generation of social workers has carried out this exercise for itself, and it is a fairly constant feature of association activity. Secondly the associations have presented their case to other groups – particularly to employers, to the government, and to other professions. Sometimes the associations have pressurised for a formal inquiry into the roles and mission of social work; on other occasions they have submitted their views to existing inquiries set up by
employers, the government or other professions. This second strategy broadens out into a wider strategy of attempting to inform public opinion as to the nature and value of the social work contribution to society. Finally the associations have pursued a third strategy of pressing the government for the protection of the title of “social worker”. This involves some scheme of registration or accreditation supervised by either the profession itself or by some independent Social Work Council.

Activities: Influencing Recruitment and Training

There are three major areas of activity relating to recruitment and training in which professional associations have been engaged at different historical periods. The first area which was particularly important in the earlier stages of the development of social work, was the attempt to influence the selection of social workers, particularly at the pre-training stage. They campaigned to have a voice in deciding who would be accepted on training courses. Linked to this were their activities in promoting publicity material to recruit to the occupation, and the tentative development of careers advice and guidance services for potential recruits.

The second major area of activity developed around arguing the case for training, and attempting to influence those parties involved in decisions about education and training – employers, the government, and the educational institutions, particularly the universities. This activity has been ongoing throughout all historical periods, and has included pressurising for the extension of training both in terms of the numbers trained, and in the content and length of training.

The third area of activity has been the provision of education and training by the professional associations themselves. This has included the establishment and running of trainee schemes, the provision of initial training via their own training school, the “validation” of courses run by academic institutions, the provision of staff and student supervisory courses, and the running of in-service conferences and short courses.

Activities: Affecting Standards of Practice

In functionalist accounts of professions, professional associations play a major role in regulating standards of practice, and by guaranteeing standards, they gain the confidence of the public and the government. Merton characterised professional associations as setting rigorous standards for entry, for training, for professional practice and for research, and they helped to enforce these standards. (Merton 1958). In this full model of traditional professionalism, the professional association limits its membership to those who are qualified and who then are bound by a code of ethics. Breaches of this code are punished by suspension from practice. The claimed ultimate purpose of this procedure is to protect the public from exploitation by the professionals, and to ensure a high standard of professional conduct and practice. In sharp contrast to this functionalist model, more critical
perspectives have viewed this area of activity by professional associations with much suspicion. Codes of ethics are viewed as basically designed to gain public or at least political support and approval; and they are used to enhance status, and to persuade politicians to allow the professional association to control entry into the profession and to regulate practitioners’ behaviour itself.

All the social worker associations studied have given this activity prominence in their stated aims and articles of association. For example, the first aim of the APSW adopted in 1930 was “to raise and maintain professional standards”. Similarly when AFCW adopted its constitution in 1942 it used the same words as its second major object. Although ACCO did not immediately adopt a similar aim, by 1961 it decided that it was imperative to amend its constitution to include an objective – “to establish and maintain standards of professional practice, training and qualifications for child care officers”. These three examples illustrate the importance the professional associations attached to activities connected with the raising of standards.

The social worker associations adopted strategies aimed at individual social workers, at employers, and at the occupation as a whole. Clearly this division of levels of influence is artificial since some strategies affect or attempt to affect all three levels.

Activities: Salaries and Conditions of Service

The extent to which a professional association should be engaged in negotiations with employers about salaries and service conditions has been a matter of continuing debate within social work since the first professional association was formed. At various times this issue has led to divisions within the membership relating to the ‘proper’ role of a professional association, and to a large amount of the associations’ energies being devoted to discussions of this question. The social work occupation is not unique in this concern, and similar debates have taken place within other occupational groups, such as nursing and teaching. These debates have to be located within the broader social and political context of the time to be fully understood.

In the early theoretical literature the role of professional associations was often contrasted with the role of trade unions. For example, in 1933, Carr Saunders and Wilson argued that although professional associations may be concerned with economic problems such as the question of fees or salaries and income and monopolies, this was only one of four major areas of activity for professional associations. (Carr Saunders & Wilson 1933) In sharp contrast they characterised trade unions as single purpose associations, with the protective function overshadowing all other functions. Other more contemporary commentators have argued that the development of trade unions or professional associations within an occupation may simply be alternative strategies towards a common goal – the organisation of practitioners in attempt to gain control over their areas of work (including levels of remuneration). Indeed in recent years trade unions may be viewed as broadening their roles to include traditional ‘professional’ concerns, and some of the more traditional professional associations, such as the British
Medical Association, have been redefined, particularly by critics, as nothing more than trade unions anyway. Three possible models of organisation exist:- a single body may perform both professional and protective functions; a trade union and a professional association may exist side by side in a complementary manner; or they may exist in competition with each other.

Activities: Influencing Social Policy

The role of professions and professional associations in influencing social policy was addressed by Carr Saunders and Wilson in their classic work on the professions. (Carr Saunders & Wilson 1933). Although the role of influencing policy was played down in the study, and the importance and service and professional responsibility was stressed, it was argued that professional association inevitably got drawn into the function of “the giving of advice on matters of public policy touching on their own special sphere”. The authors also raised questions which have continued to face professional associations since that time – when is a professional association entitled to express its special opinion? Is it only on technical issues or is it on matters of general public concern? Who determines what are ‘technical issues’? What methods should professional associations employ to present their views? The emphasis in the 1933 study, as in the work of many of the structural-functionalist theorists writing in the period up to the mid 1960s, was on professional neutrality in the giving of advice to policy makers. In most of the ‘trait accounts’ of professions, influencing social policy comes at the end of the list of activities performed by professional associations.

By way of contrast the critical theories of professions which developed in the 1970s saw the influencing of social policy as one of the major activities of professional associations. Johnson’s work focussed on the interaction between the state and professions, whilst Friedson in the USA stressed the deep involvement of professional associations in the political system. (Johnson 1972,1977,1980 & 1982: Friedson 1970,1973, 1977 & 1983(a&b)). Other commentators, such as Reiff, focussed on the power of the profession to define who is deviant, ill or needy, whilst in the UK Wilding in his discussion of the nature and extent of professional power, included a specific section on the power of professional associations in policy making. (Reiff 1974; Wilding 1982). At the same time as ideas about the role of professional associations in influencing social policy were developing in the sociological literature on professions, developments were taking place in the political science literature on pressure groups and the process of policy formation. From being concerned with public administration and the description of the conventional legislative process, political science moved on to examine the ‘anonymous empire’ of pressure groups, and the influence of civil servants and other networks on the process of policy formation. Whilst pluralist political theory focussed on competition between pressure groups to obtain influence, conflict and neo-Marxist theory looked at the power structures which lay behind conventional policy-making and which perpetuated the power of certain social groups and social classes. At the same time as the empirical investigation and theoretical formulation about policy formation proceeded, so the actual practice of groups attempting to influence policy formation developed; from
formal supplication to informal consultation; from ‘amateur’ contacts with MPs to the use of professional lobbyists at Westminster; and from reactive to proactive strategies.

It is against this background of changing knowledge about how policy is formed and the variety of tactics used by other professional associations and pressure groups, that the efforts of professional associations of social workers have to be examined.

Internal Issues: Membership.

The question of who should be permitted to be a member of a specific association is one that has occupied a good deal of time and debate in the history of professional associations of social workers. Debates have ranged around topics such as – should membership be “open” to anyone performing a social work job, or should it be “closed”, with carefully defined membership criteria? How representative of practitioners is the membership of an association? On the one hand there is pressure to be exclusive and to insist on setting strict membership criteria, in the belief that this will assist in maintaining credibility with other powerful groups and will raise the status of the occupation; whilst on the other hand there is pressure to extend membership to all the practitioners of a particular occupation, hoping to increase size, income, the range of activities, and the potential to influence all practitioners. Idealism and pragmatism are mixed up in the debates, and particular associations changed their stance on the issue over a period of years.

Several criteria of membership have been used by the various professional associations at different times, either singly or in association with each other. The most obvious criterion is the possession of a recognised qualification, gained from the completion of a period of training; although the question of defining such a qualification is not unproblematic. For example there may be disputes over who recognises the training – is it the professional association or some other validating body? But other criteria of membership were also used in the predecessor associations including being in paid employment; being in a specific job; the level of post held in an employing organisation; the length of experience in the work; being of the Christian faith; being accepted by the Executive Committee of the association, or even being accepted by the full membership of the association. If the criteria for “full” membership were not achieved, then the associations formulated other types of membership – associate, affiliate, student, guest, honorary etc, which allowed membership of the association, although not with full voting or other rights.

Internal Issues: Internal Government

All professional associations spend part of their time being concerned with organisation-maintenance tasks. On occasions these issues have come to dominate the professional associations of social workers, and indeed other
outward-looking activities have tended to take second place to a concern for internal government matters. Sometimes this focus on internal affairs has been forced on the associations by changing circumstances external to the associations, such as developments in practice or changes in the patterns of employment of social workers. On other occasions the concern appears to have germinated within the association, for example – a concern about the lack of participation by the membership. These concerns about internal matters have often led to the associations being ‘restructured’ – new committee patterns being adopted, changes made in the constitution etc. There has often been the belief, shared with other organisations in the wider field, that if the association gets its structure right, then services will be delivered more effectively and crises will be avoided.

The study identified five major aspects of the internal government of the associations. It initially focused on members and leaders – how is the membership as a whole involved in running the association’s affairs, and what is the role of the leadership in this process? Secondly it examined the committee structure of the associations – how is this determined, and what is the role and function of a committee? The question of national, regional and branch autonomy provided a third area of study, whilst the fourth area identified was the question of finance, both the raising and spending of resources. Finally the question of paid officials and their impact on the associations was studied.

The key question underlying these five aspects are – how are decisions made within the associations, and where in the association does power effectively reside? These key questions also have to be related to the changing circumstances and increasing diversity of the associations. Not only is there the challenge of numerical growth, but there is also the challenge of geographical spread to accommodate within the structures. Closely linked to these challenges is the change from being a small group of workers who share a common training and who knew each other, to being part of a large occupation, coming from diverse backgrounds, experiencing different training, working in different conditions, and having different and changing expectations of the role of a professional association. This growth of diversity is also crucial in the development of the associations.

Internal Issues: Conflict and Consensus

Many writers on professions have viewed professional associations as undifferentiated bodies, and this has been reinforced by some of the professional associations, who in the presentation of themselves to outside bodies seek to convey the message of a strong and undivided profession. In reality the records of the predecessor associations and of BASW reveal conflicts and tensions existing within the associations.

Many actual and potential sources of tension have existed within the professional associations. Some of these arise from the characteristics of members themselves – for example, age, gender and race; or from their employment pattern – not only the type of job, but the part of the country
within which they work. Other tensions arise from the members view of what constitutes social work, and particularly their conception of what a professional association should be like and the activities it should carry out.

Professional associations have pursued a variety of strategies to try to contain conflict and tension and to promote consensus and unity. These strategies include both attempts to positively stress similarities in the experience of being social workers, and attempts to cater for the diversity of membership interests by establishing special interest groups etc. As with the membership issue and with concerns about the internal government of the associations, an association may have to devote time and resources to these tasks if it is to succeed in maintaining its unity. It has to maintain the difficult balance of promoting the discussion of various viewpoints and thus enriching debate, whilst at the same time avoiding potentially damaging confrontation and division.

Conclusions.

My study demonstrated that whilst professional associations have attempted to shape social work to meet their own ideas of what the occupation should be like, so they have been limited and constrained by the opportunities afforded for the practice of social work at any particular time, including the job opportunities, the expectations of employers, and the attitude and involvement of central and local government. The relationship between the professional association and the occupation is essentially a dynamic one. The professional associations were not created in a vacuum, but were formed to deal with particular concerns and problems which existed at the time of their formation; but as those concerns and problems altered, so too did some of the responses of the professional associations. As the occupation as a whole developed, so the professional associations became involved in moving from their own particular conceptions of social work to a broader generalised conception.

But the shape of the professional associations are not simply determined by the opportunities afforded in the occupational context. The associations are shaped by their members (or by an influential section of their membership), and as this study demonstrates, this may also be subject to change as well as continuity. Professional associations may be seen as coalitions of differing interests coming together, with different views struggling for supremacy within one particular association. Whilst the social worker associations have certainly contained a variety of differing ideas, they do tend to have been a focus for those social workers who subscribed to a particular model of social work over the years – a 'professional' model. Now the actual content of this 'professional' model may vary from time to time, but those who do not subscribe to it, tend to stay outside the associations, so that the degree of conflict within the associations is minimised. Nevertheless the associations still have to work hard to maintain unity and consensus, and valuable resources have to be devoted to the task of association maintenance.
The study also found that different associations pursue different activities at different times, and it is possible to chart the waxing and waning of the influence of the associations on different aspects of social work over the 90 year period. At different times professional associations have been over-ambitious in the range of activities they attempted to engage in, and in their desire to demonstrate their influence over specific areas of work. But if they wanted to retain membership, and they wanted to be accepted by those groups they were trying to influence, they had to maintain the outward appearance of success. This was an important pressure in shaping the professional associations.

Despite the fluctuations in the level and type of influence that the professional associations may exert, and in addition to the changes in the roles of the professional associations over the 90 year period, there is also a continuity in the role of the associations which must not be overlooked. There is still a concern to clarify and promote a particular view of social work which incorporates a counselling role as well as the more pragmatic service-orientation role (and the role of social control agent). There is still a concern to stress the skilled nature of the work and the need for enhanced training to enable social workers to carry out their work more effectively. The concern that standards of practice should be maintained remains important. Together with the concern for some form of independent regulation of the occupation. The status of social work is still seen as problematic, with the need to enhance salaries and conditions of service to attract and retain staff in direct social work with clients. Finally there remains a belief that social workers should be consulted about policy changes in the social welfare field, because they have the knowledge and experience of working with 'social problems' in the everyday world. Over and above these activities the professional association often provides a sense of identity, of fellowship and of support for many workers.

But the study also suggested that the associations have had an influence over and above the direct activities that have been discussed earlier. There has been the influence of individual members of the associations on the development of various branches of social work. There have been the wider influences of the range of publications of the various associations. There has been their role in determining and influencing the wider agenda of policy making, and ensuring that the voice of social workers is heard. It is this broader influence on the general ethos of social work which is so difficult to quantify, but which has to be set alongside the more direct forms of influence exerted by the professional associations. Just as the history of social work is not simply an account of the development of the professional associations; so that history is only partial and incomplete without any consideration of the role and influence of those professional associations of social workers.

Andrew Sackville
February 2013.
Bibliography.


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**APPENDIX 1.**

**PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS AND SOCIAL WORK.**

**Working Papers.**

These 15 working papers were written between October 1986 and December 1988, to support my research into the interaction between the development of social work as an occupation and the growth and role of professional associations of social workers in that development. They are primarily dependent on archive research, although relevant contemporary publications and other academic work available in the late 1980s were also used.

They are presented here as a series of case studies, for others who are interested in the history of social work, and specifically – the history of
professional associations of social workers. They are very much working papers – rather than finished products with argued and completed analysis.

Andrew Sackville.
February 2013.

WP01. Hospital Almoners Association 1903-1930. (written October 1986)
WP02. The Hospital Almoners Association in the 1930s. (written December 1986)
WP03. The Almoners and the 1940s. (written December 1986)
WP04. From Almoner to Medical Social Worker 1950–1970. (written April 1987)
WP05. Almoners: The Local Dimension. (written July 1987)
WP06. The Association of Psychiatric Social Workers–The Early Years. (written June 1988)
WP07. APSW – From Feversham to Mackintosh, 1939-1951. (written June 1988)
WP08. APSW – From Mackintosh to BASW. (written June 1988)
WP09. The Society of Mental Welfare Officers. (written December 1987)

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