Trajectory Revisited: How Social Work Planted Itself in Mental Health during the Profession’s Nascent Stage in America

BACKGROUND
Psychiatric social work during the early period (1910s-20s) of social work development in America:
- Changes in Psychiatry – an “epistemological transformation”
  - Margin (the insane) → Center (the general population)
  - Moralist → Medical → Medical + Social
- Emergence of the Social Work Profession
  - Seeking “scientific basis” for the establishment of its professional credibility
- Mary C. Jarrett
  - Founder of psychiatric social work
  - Established the training courses → Smith College School of Social Work

METHODOLOGY
A Historical Study
- Reviewed academic articles from (81+12+10):
  - Mental Hygiene (1917-1922)
  - Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work (1917-1922)
  - Mary C. Jarrett’s academic articles (1910s-20s)
- Method of extracting contents:
  - Round 1: extracted all contents relevant to the topic
  - Round 2: organized contents according to six broad categories
  - Round 3: under each category, hand-coded contents and grouped them into thematic clusters

HIGHLIGHTS IN PRELIMINARY RESULTS
- Social Workers had a wide range of functions in mental hygiene practice
  - Social examination
  - Assisting treatment
  - Family involvement, prevention, education
  - After-care
  - Comprehensive community supportive services
  - Public prevention & education
  - Research and advocacy
  - …...
  - Collaborations between social workers and other professionals, and between hospital and community were crucial:
    - “Natural go-between” or “great intermediate” professional
    - Practices outside the hospital wall – borderline cases, prevention, public education
    - Controversy: “trained aides to experts” OR unique expertise addressing the limits of psychiatry?
- Psychiatric Point of View:
  - Individuality, personality, mental quality as fundamental to all social work practices
  - Individuality in terms of (mal)adjustment – person-in-environment
  - Psychiatry as the scientific study of behavior – objective, observable
  - PSW as a fundamentally different way of viewing social work, as a profession
- Trainings and Research as Strategies of Professionalization:
  - From trainings in PSW → Smith College of Social Work
  - Research as the standardization of practical experience
  - Research – a habit of thinking and acting – measurability & consistency

IMPLICATIONS
- “Psychiatric Point of View” as a Double-Edged Sword:
  - “Scientific basis” for social work → professional status
  - Over-emphasis on the individual personality and readjustment → the professional move towards psychotherapy and private practice (away from structural-level interventions)
- Social Work Research, Who and How?
  - Experienced social workers
  - Accumulation, organization, and standardization of practical experiences
  - Localization, or Situated Knowledge?

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