

Review of: "A Deeper Look at the Origin and Evolution of the Social Work Profession"

Sylvia Ramsay¹

¹ Griffith University

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As my social work education was undertaken in Australia, where we are told that the profession originates from Britain and the USA, I found the premise that the profession developed from India intriguing. However, this article seems to focus on the history of charitable welfare, which is not the same thing as social work. While I am interested to read about the history of charitable organisations in India, the International Federation of Social Work makes clear that the practice of social work is more than charity.

The social work profession includes critique and action to challenge societal norms that cause disadvantage and integrates evidence based on research and established academic theory. While social workers do assist disadvantaged people, this is motivated by ethical codes that focus on the principle of social justice rather than fulfilling a religious obligation. The way that social workers assist is through applying their knowledge of peer-reviewed evidence to shape effective interventions. This differentiates the profession from almshouses or religious organisations that care for and support those in need.

Including a definition of what social work is would benefit this article. A definition can be obtained by looking at the International Federation of Social Work or the India Network of Professional Social Work Associations. This would allow the reader to assess what aspects of the modern profession reflect the historical traditions that are detailed in this article and how the modern profession is different.

It would be very helpful to have evidence about the existence of a historical link between the almshouses of Ceylon and India and the development of almshouses in Europe. European cultures, from Scandinavia, pre-Roman Britain, and the Germanic tribes, also had strong cultures of hospitality that obligated people to aid travelers. Celtic traditions obligated the lords (heads of clans) to provide for their disadvantaged people. These themes of hospitality and helping the poor were also expressed by the Christian religion, which has been very influential in the development of welfare in Europe. It would be very interesting to untangle the influence of these traditions on social work vs. the traditions that developed in India.

It would also be interesting to know what was happening in India in relation to social work while Britain's welfare state was developing, from the Magna Carta to the establishment of Social Work in the USA by Jane Addams and Mary Richmond. The western perspective is covered in numerous textbooks already. Rather than rehashing this, it would be more interesting to know if there were any developments in India beyond providing charity to the disadvantaged and assistance to travelers. What about the influence of humanistic philosophical schools in India that predated the European humanists?

Is the story that the ruler who built the Taj Mahal looked after widows true, and did this influence any laws in India? It would also be interesting to include the history behind the development of models of activism made famous by Gandhi and the Chipko activists from India.

I am surprised that an article like this, which challenges the dominant Western narrative of welfare development, overlooked the influence of Kurus (Cyrus II) of Persia, who instituted laws around 559 BC-530 BC that are often referred to as the first Bill of Human Rights and predate the Magna Carta. Even though claims that Kurus was active in providing public goods like housing, food, and maternity leave are contentious, the idea that authority figures and the law ought to defend the welfare of ordinary people, including religious tolerance and freedom from slavery, did make it into the Bible, which has had a big impact on welfare development in Britain and the USA and thus the development of social work.

The method section in this article is very sparse. It would be helpful to have more detail about the methodology – What were the qualifications of the individuals with knowledge in the field? What were the techniques used to gain information from the individuals? Were they formally interviewed? I note that some of this information is available in footnotes, though it would be helpful to have it in the method section.

It would be helpful to know if the author undertook a narrative review or some other form of literature review and what search terms were used. This helps a reader to understand what information was left out as well as what information was left in, demonstrating that the information is representative rather than selected specifically because it supported specific assumptions. From reviewing the reference list, there do seem to be a lot of sources that would not be accepted as academic sources, including web pages and news articles. It would be a stronger article if the sources were peer-reviewed.

I would agree with the author's assertion that it would be helpful to revisit the literature. Perhaps it would be beneficial to collaborate with historians who can supply more detail about any links between the development of welfare in Europe and Asia.