

Should Child and Youth Care Go the Craft or the Professional Route? A Comment on the Preceding Article by Zvi Eisikovits and Jerome Beker

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ABSTRACT: The respondent suggests some additional perspectives on the craft model and its relationship to a traditional professional orientation.

KEY WORDS: craft model of child and youth care work; professionalization of child and youth care work; youthwork; youth development.

Child and youth care work should for the present be cast as a craft rather than as a profession, so say Zvi Eisikovits and Jerome Beker in their provocative article. Their argument for a pro *craft* position is based upon their understanding that such a perspective would enhance the quality of client services by “providing a more effective conceptual handle than more traditional approaches to analyzing the field, the content of the work, and the selection and preparation of effective personnel” (Eisikovits & Beker, p. 426).

Eisikovits and Beker’s endeavors can be applauded, but it is possible that their rationale can also be viewed differently. My comments are not intended to tip off a debate whether child care is or is not a craft or a profession. It is not a question of choice between two alternatives; rather it is a matter of identifying the point on the craft-professional continuum where one can presently locate child/youth care work. Law, medicine, nursing, and social work were once pure crafts with a heavy reliance upon apprentice/master learning systems and a pursuit of precise occupational techniques before they became acknowledged as professions. Child care is presently sliding or inching along this craft-professional continuum.

The authors of the lead article make it clear, and I concur, that professional status is associated with the *how* each professional group

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approaches its work—its way of thinking and its inherent frame of reference. The authors stress that professional status is derived from the quality of service performed. Their message is akin to Robert Morris' valid observation that "In a sense, professional regard comes from the ability to focus on the central problem being addressed on behalf of society, rather than on professional stature" (1977, p. 354). At the same time, professions do not account for the process or content of work undertaken in their name. What practitioners actually do is outside of the immediate concern for professionalization. For child care work, however, the central issue has been and still is: What constitutes the actual *doing*—the content of child care work—which can be defined, duplicated, tested, and transmitted (taught/learned) from practitioner to practitioner.

Interestingly, the history of current professions reveals the pattern of originating by fixing difficulties and evolving to provide *professional* quality services for such difficulties. The same process of evolving occurs in child care work. Many child/youth care practitioners are still struggling to find the right "fix," while others are working equally hard on improving their effectiveness through refinement and thoughtful scrutiny of their activities. The latter see themselves as a distinct class of professional-like service deliverers. In Piagetian terms, the former are working basically situationally within a trial-and-error and intuitive knowledge approach; the others gravitated to a working base of "concrete operation." They can figure out what needs to be done by use of concrete, informational observations of complex events. "Professional" status may be attributed to such work when the work has actually achieved to a point where child/youth care activities essentially proceed with tested hypothesis formation (Piaget's "formal operations"—Maier, 1978, Ch. 1). Child care work seems to be shuttling between trial-and-error and intuitive handling of child care tasks on the one hand, and well 'figured out,' but not yet empirically grounded and formalized caring operations on the other.

Readers will note that my comments coincide with the article's call for a move "toward greater concern with the quality of client service and toward more conceptually-based consideration of the content of the work" (Eisikovits & Beker, Abstract). Also, readers hopefully will notice that I depart from the article's dichotomy-prone craft vs. professionalism debate by placing both forms of service delivery on a single developmental continuum.

Eisikovits and Beker suggest: "Craftsmanship, the work of the crafts-person, is viewed as an individualistic, expressive process that can, nonetheless, be taught, generally through modeling rather than academically, but with distinct conceptual principles at the foundation. The notion of apprentice, protege, and working with a mentor fit more

comfortably than those of student and teacher” (p. 412). I question the argument that an occupation has to be classified as a *craft* with a primary apprentice/master mentor training system in order to assure legitimate practice skills acquisition. Particularly in the North American continent, in the transmission of everyday life skills, whether it be training of people in the arts and crafts from acrobatics to welding, from home-making to parenting, the teaching has for some time moved out of primary settings (home or the workshop) into the realm of educational institutions. Much of what once belonged to the guilds and familial home training has moved into the province of universal education. Why not also child and youth care work training?

The emphasis upon *modeling* in the “Beyond Professionalism” article points well to a major avenue of learning for child and youth care workers. Or, to quote Eisikovits and Beker once more: Child care work can preferably “be taught, generally through modeling rather than academically” (p. 412). I wonder whether child care has to be identified as a craft in order to rely heavily upon modeling. Modeling is an educational process. In the arts and crafts courses it plays a significant role in a wide spread of educational endeavors. In many instances, teaching through modeling might not be of a quality desired for training in the child care services; it is then more a question of the *quality* of teaching rather than one of the reclassification of teaching.

In general education, especially in academic settings from community colleges to the graduate divisions and professional schools of the universities, modeling, including student/mentor relationships, is employed as a major educational device. For instance, this is so in the learning of the scientific procedures in physical science classes or in learning of the writing of essays in the various levels of English writing courses. Moreover, in medical education, modeling becomes paramount in teaching/learning of skills. An example would be in the learning of performing a throat examination or in the pursuance of surgical procedures. In fact, community colleges and more and more universities incorporate so-called craft occupations as worthwhile higher education courses or curricula (e.g., computerism, varieties of training programs in special education). Modeling remains central for each of the educational endeavors. Why not also for child out youth care work training without much ado whether it is a craft or a profession-in-the-making.

The article brings the reader effectively close to the practice scenes of child and youth care work emphasis and the workers’ personal relationship to their work, their clientele, and their administrators Eisikovits and Beker’s vision for child care work as a *craft* is cogently represented in that the interpersonal aspect of child care work is strongly affected by situational circumstances and particularly by the organizational context. True. I see this factor, however, as not necessarily an

argument whether child and youth work has craft or professional aspirations. Rather, it is intimately related to the inherent strain between primary (personal) and secondary (organizational) requirements (Resnick, 1980). This has been until recently a much overlooked factor by the human service professions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and especially by child and family service professionals (Garbarino, 1982). The authors' case illustrations could be equally matched by examples from the practice activities of physicians, social workers, nurses, attorneys, and other professionals. Their professional activities, treatment decisions, and intervention behaviors are decisively different from one setting to another. Professional practices vary depending on whether they are carried out within a private or public clinic, as part of a university or Veteran Administration program, within a small, isolated community, as part of a service to an impoverished population, or by a member of a clinical team.

It is important to see that professional or craft-like *caring* individual personal requirements and organizational demands of the service setting (Maier, 1983). Eisikovits & Beker report vividly the workers' dilemma and complicated struggle to do 'well' with their charges, while also doing 'right' in terms of the organizational demands of their host settings. Their accounts parallel Polsky's earlier reports of such service dilemmas (Polsky, 1962). It is my position that the issue is not craft or profession but, in either event, individualized caring services within the context of effective organizational services are destined to find themselves in a paradoxical situation. Logical organizational (bureaucratic) and sound caring (psychological) service demands rest upon different, conflicting premises (Parsons, 1964). These conflicting forces have to be studied, understood, worked with, and continuously encountered by workers, clients, other professionals, and administrators as well as by the teachers or mentors of those service providers. Neither a professional nor a craft route can obviate these conflictual circumstances.

Not all of my comments need to be: "Yes, but—" Eisikovits and Beker's essay has many additional teachings worthy of our full attention, and, hopefully, separate articles on each will follow within the near future.

Their references to the *idiosyncratic* nature of child care work in this articles serve as a valid reminder that a worker needs to be free to be adaptively creative in meshing with clients' care requirements and creatively adaptive in sustaining the service program.

Eisikovits and Beker's salient, but fleeting, observation deserves further attention when they remind us that workers' *marginality* within the service hierarchy may serve them well in meeting with marginal populations. This phenomenon is also a point well accounted for in

Maxwell Jones' *Therapeutic Community* (1952, pp. 31–32). The question before us is: will care workers' effectiveness be limited as they assume more central (organizational) service roles? Or, I want to add: Will greater organizational power positions further enhance worker-client identification?

We find yet another gem in the authors' formulation that specialists tend to define the territory available, to generalists based on their own specialties, "rather than in accordance with what the generalist, with a broader, contextual perspective, can do best" (p. 419). It is an apt accounting of the current situation for care workers—the generalists in the child and youth welfare fields. These factors set up another reminder for us: the necessity to define more rigorously and concretely the specialized field of child and youth care work. The latter might be akin to recent development of the U.S. medical profession, where the general practitioner is now becoming the "specialist" in family practice. ("Family practice" carries essentially the tasks formerly exercised by general practitioners.)

A child and youth care work specialist would have to be well grounded in understanding children's development and in the use of such knowledge in order to help children to live competently within their cultural life spheres. Such knowledge, intertwined with a relevant practice repertoire, can be and is being taught (VanderVen, 1982; Maier, 1979). Here I differ with the authors' pessimistic characterization of the field. Much has to be done to enrich and to focus practitioners' knowledge base. In general, in a wide variety of settings child/youth care practitioners work not only with their 'hands and hearts,' but also very much with their 'heads.' To be a sensitive, actively engaged, and competent intervening worker is, after all, the aim of care work.

While the answer may be a decade away, we may wish to ask the following question: Can we identify the point on the craft-professional continuum where, in general, child/youth workers now find themselves? Some workers and practice settings at a good number of places here and there are very likely within the professional range of such continuum; the majority is typically at a pre-professional and craft-like level. *Prior* to professionalism, as the authors Eisikovits and Beker express so poignantly in their theme, "Beyond Professionalism," the challenge is before us to define and operationalize the *content* of child and youth care work and to establish in which way can quality work be assured and accounted for. Only when workers, administrators, and their teachers (or mentors) are clear about what the content of care work constitutes can we find an answer as to whether or not care work constitutes a discipline which ranks as a trade, craft, or a profession.

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