

## IS SOCIAL WORK A LIAISON ACTIVITY? A PROFESSIONAL DEBATE, OF SORTS

*The debate I address is one with which I have struggled since I decided to become a social worker: How is social work to be defined, and what characterizes the social worker's activity and purpose? My thinking related to the nature of social work has its roots in my upbringing in Scotland and my education and social work practice in London and New York. Tracing the development of my ideas might appear self-indulgent. However, understanding this process might enable me to grapple with the history of internal debate and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of my position. Without reference to the development of my thinking over time, my position within the context of the professional debate is not made fully explicit.*

**By Yvonne M. Johnson**

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### FOREWORD

The following debate was to be presented in the usual academic manner. The debate was to be depicted as follows: first, a summary of the opposing views; second, a critique of the positions; and third, an evaluation of the weaknesses inherent in my particular stance. Such an approach is, no doubt, adequate. However, I began to feel that this approach had severe limitations. Questions related to the reasons why I chose this particular debate for discussion, the manner in which my views have developed over time, and the contexts in which my thinking has taken place would not be sufficiently addressed. Several issues crossed my mind while I tried to construct this paper.

I remembered applying to Columbia University School of Social Work. When I applied for a place in the doctoral program (I am now in my third year), I was asked to outline my reasons for pursuing doctoral education. I remember trying to summarize my reasons for applying and what I hoped to gain. Now in my third practice course, I am aware that this is the final course in my area of specialization. Despite

there being no requirement to write an essay that readdresses the questions raised in my application to the school, I feel that this is an opportune occasion to reflect on what I hoped to gain and to evaluate my development thus far. Am I any clearer in my thinking about what I conceive to be the nature of social work? Have I taken the opportunity that doctoral education allows to consolidate my practice-wisdom as well as my critical thinking on professional issues?

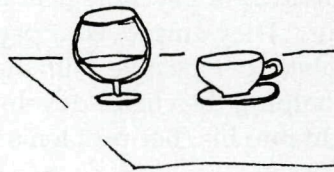
The reader might wonder in what ways the topic of this paper relates to reflection on my professional development. The answer is quite simple. The debate that I will address is one with which I have struggled since I decided to become a social worker: How is social work to be defined, and what characterizes the social worker's activity and purpose? My thinking related to the nature of social work has its roots in my upbringing in Scotland and my education and social work practice in London and New York. Tracing the development of my ideas might appear self-indulgent. However, understanding this process might enable me to grapple with the history of internal debate and evalu-



ate the strengths and weaknesses of my position. Without reference to the development of my thinking over time, my position within the context of the professional debate is not made fully explicit.

I note, with interest, that journal articles rarely address such issues. It is as though an investigation of the author's thinking is "unscientific" or, at least, hardly scholarly. This belief appears mirrored in the split in the social welfare literature. Professionals are permitted to explore the development of their thinking and describe their experiences in the journal *Reflections*, but the professional's more "scholarly" work (usually devoid of the personal) is reserved for other journals (e.g., *Social Service Review* and *Social Work*). Although postmodern thinking connects reader to text, and researcher to person under study, there continues to be, in my view, a split between the personal and academic. This gives the impression that the personal and the academic exist in separate spheres. They obviously do not. Without the personal interest, not to say excitement, that a topic holds for an author, no academic work would be done. Without the development of ideas, no formulations would exist. I am aware that my thinking on whether social work can be characterized as liaison was not suddenly formulated in my recent past. (Or is it fully articulated or in its final form!) As Mannheim points out, thought does not take place in a timeless vacuum, but is "always bound up with the existing life situation of the thinker" (Mannheim quoted in Geertz, 1973, p. 194).

I will trace the history of my thinking on the nature of social work, presenting it in the form of an imaginary debate. The debate draws on the discussions I have had with others and my personal and professional experience, and elaborates on the issues that have framed my academic development. I hope that this format will bring the debate alive, allowing for alternative perspectives on the questions raised, and that a more rounded picture of my position will result.



### A DEBATE, OF SORTS

Most of the diners had left the American Hotel, and only those staying overnight remained. A few residents, after a superb meal, wandered through to the lounge for coffee and brandy. A group of three, Evelyn, George, and Yvonne, headed for the three comfortable chairs by the fire. A healthy looking fire too — it looked as though it would go all night. Yvonne hoped the fire might not last that long. The family had a habit of starting a debate and not throwing in the towel till the early hours. "Well, here's the waiter with the coffee and drinks, so no harm in having that nightcap," Yvonne thought.

Evelyn: You'll be writing that dissertation soon. What was it you were saying — you've nearly fin-

ished with course work?

Yvonne: Yes, I'm in my last practice class.

E: You know, after all these years, I have to admit, I really don't know what made you choose social work as a career. What a job. Not that I have much idea about what social workers actually do!

Y: Join the club!

George: Now, Yvonne, come on. You can't be serious! You're studying for your Ph.D. in the subject. Don't tell me you don't know what social workers do!

Y: Well, I might have an idea, but there is a lot of debate in the profession about how we define social work. (Tries to avoid getting into this debate.) You know something about Aberdeen made me go into social work.

E: Goodness, first I've heard!

Y: I think bumping into all the alcoholics, no matter the time of day, made me wonder what had happened to them. (Thinking: An event can be important despite its drab features and everyday-feel. That it should occur on an afternoon shopping expedition in downtown Aberdeen, Scotland, when I was about seven years old is noteworthy! I was walking down a street with Evelyn and we came across a drunk in a doorway. He was unconscious, and we stepped out of the way to avoid his slumped body and the stream of urine trickling down the pave-



ment. Given the prevalence of alcoholism in Scotland, this wasn't the first or last drunk we'd come across. What was surprising was that a conversation ensued between E. and myself after she had grabbed me by the arm to cross the street. I wondered what had happened to him, and I asked E. what she thought. I cannot recall her exact words, but I remember the general drift of her reply. E's view was that the cause of the drunk's problems resided with him alone. I knew at once that I did not share her views. I could not see how anything related to his character had anything to do with his plight. This view stayed pretty much intact over many years. I think I stubbornly refused to allow issues related to personality to enter this picture, and only gradually allowed for such factors.)

E: Oh, yes, the poor drunks! Yvonne still seems to have more sympathy for them than she does for those who show some restraint.

G: Well, if you're down on your luck and on the streets, you might spend your money on drink. (Much in accordance with Samuel Johnson's [(1709-1784)] views, but exact quotation not found.)

E: (Looking at the glowing fire) Speaking of Aberdeen, this wee place reminds me of our guest house, don't you think?

Y: Do you remember one of the first people who stayed with us — the social worker? She didn't stay long, but she left that

book behind, and I still have it! It is Ferard and Hunnybun's *The Caseworker's Use Of Relationships* (1962). I rather liked this book when I was a child. (I was around nine years old and I would read the case vignettes, the only parts I could really grasp. I discovered that social workers worked with the poor, and, no doubt, the drunks I had seen.) Of course, I now think that the authors of that book are wrong about what social workers do — they thought that social work was defined by case-work that concentrated on the individual's psychological problems. They employed a psycho-analytic perspective with the aim of helping the client develop insight into his/her problems.

G: You've started now! If these authors got it wrong, then maybe you can say who defines social work better. Let's hear you answer Evelyn's question, after all — what is social work?

Y: (Thinking: This is hard. Socratic dialogues appear easy. Yet, when Socrates asked, "What is justice?" for example, the interlocutor would try to answer simply, and make a fool of himself. In a similar vein, answering the question, "What is social work?" appears easy, but it is not.) It's not an easy question to answer, but I'll give it a go. It's not a new question either — over the last hundred years, ever since the profession has tried to define itself, there has been no clear consensus. This has been true on both sides of the Atlantic. Studying in the doctoral program has certainly brought home to me the historical pendulum swings on this issue. At times

the social worker's focus has been the individual, especially the individual's psychological problems, and at other times changing the environment (Germain, 1970; Meyer, 1983; Payne, 1991; Taft, 1937). It's true to say that my own thinking has been marked by its own shifts.

E: Tell us how these changing interests manifest themselves in practice.

Y: Well, when I started my Masters social work training (in the 1980s at the London School of Economics), my first placement was in a teaching hospital. In supervision I was surprised by the undue interest in the client's mental life, and by the content of interviews with clients. (There was also an interest in the mental life of the trainee social worker. When one is a novice, one feels quite self-conscious and fragile, and exploration of personal matters might be contraindicated, though social workers can sometimes overlook this basic fact.) There is no shortage of social work literature on ways to engage a client in the interview: how to encourage the client to open up to the worker, tips on how to listen, and how to make an assessment (e.g., Biestek, 1957). I rarely experienced problems in this part of social work — clients seemed to talk freely, and I did not have to rely on pointers for conducting interviews. I proceeded as Mary Richmond had done at the turn of century: I collected social evidence, that is, "facts as to personal or family history which, taken together, indicate the nature of a given client's social difficulties



and the means to their solution" (Richmond, 1917, p. 43).

E: The social worker tries to help clients, one by one, taking into account their particular circumstances. Surely you need to interview clients to make an assessment, no?

Y: Yes, I agree — one needs assessment in order to proceed. However, I found that the social work literature on assessment and interviewing was not complemented by guidance on finding ways to solve problems. My difficulties arose after the interview. Alone, an assessment is useless. Once the facts were gathered, what could I do? For me, a dissonance resulted. I was being trained to gather information on the client, but not to explore fully the means of alleviating the problems that clients and I identified. This jarred with my ideas on the purpose of social work and where I thought the sources of the clients' problems lay. I believed that one of the social worker's key responsibilities was the provision of services to those in need (Timms & Timms, 1977; Titmuss, 1969).

G: So, training and textbooks prepared you for the face-to face work?

Y: Yes, but social workers spend relatively little of their time in interviews! How social workers spend their time became, and still is, an interest of mine. My experience and interest prompted me to examine workloads in a busy London social services office. My study found that the so-

cial workers spent less than 30% of their time with clients, a finding that concurred with earlier research (Carver & Edwards, 1972). But my training seemed to ignore the activities that occupy the other 70% of my time. The bulk of my time involved advocacy, attempting to obtain resources, attending meetings, writing reports, and collaborating with colleagues.

E: I see what you are getting at. You wanted to refer your clients to services and obtain resources. But are you not implying something else, too? Are you not saying that all of the change has to occur in society, and none in the client? Are you not taking an extreme view — just as extreme as the one you blame Ferard and Hunnybun for adopting — namely, that the problems faced by clients have nothing to do with them personally, and that it is all society's fault?

Y: I think, to some extent, I used to think in this way. I'd created an artificial split between the individual and society. My experience at a community work agency, where the leaders held radical social work views, helped me clarify my thinking. I ended up questioning their emphasis on society.

G: I would have thought radical community social work would have been right up your street!

Y: I found that my community social work colleagues, although they did emphasize the political context, sometimes left

the individual client out of the picture. By the 1980s, in Britain, there was evidence of a growing interest in community work as the intervention of choice (Young-husband, 1978). There was some conflict between social workers, who used casework methods, and community workers. Some in the latter group accused the former of being putty in the hands of the state, and of focusing on the individual and not the wider societal context. While I agreed to some extent with radical social work theory, my practice contradicted some its tenets. For example, not all of the clients with whom I worked on a South London housing estate wanted to be involved in collective action. However, something that radical social workers do highlight (that other theorists frequently underestimate) is the immense power invested in the social worker (Payne, 1991). This power, which is especially evident in cases of child abuse, has been stressed by several authors (e.g., Bailey & Brake, 1975 and Jordan, 1979 in Britain; and Klein, 1968 and Rein & White, 1981 in the USA).

E: Well, I'm not sure I follow all of this. First you say you don't want to focus simply on the individual's problems, and now you don't want to focus solely on the community. Where do you stand?

Y: I have come to the conclusion that social workers need to act as liaison between clients and their wider society, their environment.

G: Liaison...say more about this



if you think it is so important. You mentioned advocacy, now liaison — are they not the same?

Y: I don't think they are. Liaison refers to a broad range of activities, and includes advocacy. Interestingly, liaison was first used by cooks in the 17th century to refer to the substance that binds and thickens sauces (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971). The word now refers to cooperation between agencies and, "a person who acts as a link or go-between" (*Oxford American Dictionary*, 1980, p. 381). The current usage is not far removed from the seventeenth century one — instead of many ingredients, we have a multitude of organizations! Liaison is not the same as advocacy. I define advocacy as representing clients or speaking up for clients on their behalf — this activity is subsumed under liaison and can be done on a micro and macro levels (Kahn, Kamerman & McGowan, 1973; Mickelson, 1995).

E: You're saying that social agencies are so complicated that people need a social worker to get through the maze?

Y: Social systems are very complex — for example, clients become lost in bureaucracies. Social workers can adopt a unique role in providing a link between clients and the wider social system. I agree with William Schwartz that, in this role, the social worker is "not exclusively identified with either the client or the agency, but with the process through which they reach out to each other." (Schwartz, 1969, p. 40). Schwartz calls this role media-

tion. Although I agree with most of Schwartz's depiction of this role, mediation does imply the existence of conflict that needs to be resolved (Gitterman, 1986; Schwartz, 1976). Sometimes there is no conflict; yet, liaison is required.

G: But, isn't it obvious that social work involves liaison?

Y: You know, I think that clients have grasped this, while social workers have been slow to acknowledge this fact. If we examine what clients look for when contacting a social worker, it is interesting (though not surprising) to note that many clients expect the social worker to do something. Clients appreciate a warm and accepting relationship with the social worker, but research has indicated that, often, this relationship is not enough by itself (e.g., Mayer & Timms, 1970; Rees & Wallace, 1982; Timms & Timms, 1977). Indeed, it would be interesting to examine whether clients using social services expect more from the professional relationship than patients do from the doctors, or clients from their attorneys — surely, social workers do not hold a monopoly on relationships characterized by unconditional regard (Wootton, 1959).

Studies of social workers' perspectives on outcomes also suggest that social workers place high hopes on changing clients' circumstances through the relationship itself, ignoring the fact that the environment and clients' social networks play important roles (Maluccio, 1979).

In 1915, Abraham Flexner argued that social work was use-

ful as it linked clients to resources (Austin, 1983). Flexner went on to conclude, however, that the need to refer clients elsewhere demonstrated that social work had no knowledge base to call its own. Instead of attributing sophistication to this linking activity, social workers seemed to have agreed with Flexner that a liaison-profession was an oxymoron. On the contrary, I believe that liaison might be the unique characteristic of social work, as the United Nations has suggested (Kahn, 1979). In addition, liaison involves the development and application of professional knowledge.

E: This discussion seems a bit abstract. Why not give examples of liaison and we can see whether your claims are borne out?

Y: OK...I'll start with an apparently simple example, and move on to a more complex situation. In New York, I often assisted pregnant women and new mothers obtain benefits. Frequently, they required Medicaid, nutrition for themselves and baby, and food stamps for other family members. The social worker needs to match the client with the appropriate agencies. All of the benefits that I've just mentioned have to be applied for separately and at three different offices. Something that was startling to me coming from Britain was the fragmentation and complexity of the social services in the United States. The social worker needs encyclopedic information on eligibility criteria, registration procedures, the locations of and



transport to these agencies, as well as the ability to assist with the completion of application forms. Referrals are successful only if the social worker's liaison has been adequate.

G: Does this liaison role, then, turn you into a glorified clerk, a paper-pushing bureaucrat?!



this might be achieved, and Michael made visits to his sister's home. I mention this because it is sometimes assumed that liaison only refers to connecting clients to concrete assistance. Liaison also involves connecting clients to others, be they family members or support group members.

On discharge, Michael stayed at a hostel, and entered job training. I attended bi-weekly meetings at the hostel acting as link between the hospital outpatient services and the hostel, and to provide continuity of care.

G: I see you're moving from the simple to the more complex.

Y: Liaison activities can "range from the simple writing of a letter or the making of a telephone call at one extreme to a lengthy and complex series of negotiations with a variety of agencies and departments at the other" (Haines, 1975, p. 49) Interdisciplinary collaboration involves interpersonal skill, negotiation, knowledge of institutional practices and familiarity with various terminologies (Leathard, 1994). A few months after Michael's discharge from hospital, I received a telephone call, on Michael's behalf, from a police station. He had been arrested the night before, after being found disorderly and shouting in the street. I went to the police station where I found Michael in a holding cell, huddled on a bed. He was barely recognizable, and at times his speech was incoherent. I said that I would accompany him to court and I could speak on his behalf, a plan to which he agreed. I con-

sulted the police officers who said that Michael would go before the magistrate later that morning. The police were going to charge Michael with disorderly behavior, resisting arrest, and assaulting a police officer. Michael had hit one of the arresting officers, but no injury had resulted.

In the short time before Michael's court appearance, I contacted the on-call psychiatrist (with whom I had collaborated before) to request an immediate psychiatric assessment. I described Michael's behavior. In light of my experience on the psychiatric unit and with other patients, his behavior and speech were of concern to me (though not to the police officers that day). The psychiatrist agreed to see Michael as soon as possible, though he could not guarantee reaching the court before Michael's appearance. The psychiatrist said that if an admission was necessary, a bed was available. I contacted Michael's hostel and they said that Michael had not attended his job training over the last couple of days and had been in touch with his parents by telephone, but only arguments ensued.

G: You know, at first I thought that liaison might involve your being a "middleman," a broker trying to please everybody. But presumably the police weren't too happy with your presence!?

Y: No, I don't think so! Liaison is not conflict-free, by any means. In this case, I did not agree with the police officers' treatment of Michael. The police made their assessment of Michael based on their brief observation of him.

Y: I hope not! I hope I'll be able to convince you otherwise. Let me describe a more complex situation. A few years ago, I worked with a young man whom I'll call Michael. I was working in a mental health team in London, with bases in the hospital and the community. Michael had a history of multiple suicide attempts, and was admitted following his most recent one. Assessment revealed an intelligent young Irishman, with a long history of depression and difficulties living on his own. Michael spoke of family arguments and disappointments in his life. He wasn't talking to his parents in Ireland, and his relationship with his older sister, also living in London, was conflicted. While he was an inpatient, we focused on finding a hostel place (we would go together to assess various residences), and on looking into job opportunities. Michael voiced a wish to reestablish contact with his sister. We talked about ways



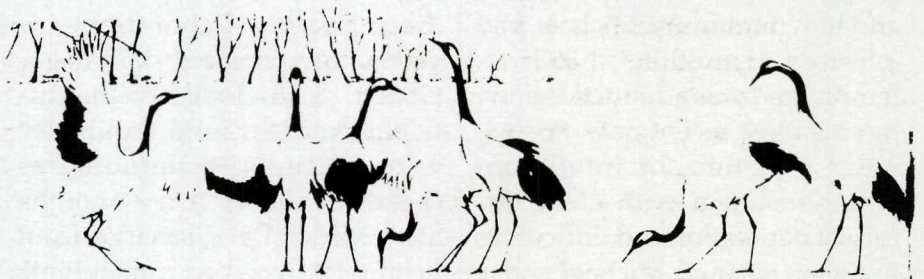
Having known Michael for several months, I could see that his mental state was severely compromised, and a holding cell was not the "treatment" he needed. I didn't agree with their intent to press charges, either. In other instances, my judgment might conflict with that of a peer or multidisciplinary colleague. Getting back to Michael, he appeared before a magistrate, and after the police read out the charges, I asked for permission to speak in court. I summarized my involvement and Michael's contact with the psychiatric service. I emphasized that a psychiatrist had been alerted to Michael's change in mental status and had agreed to assess Michael as soon as possible. My knowledge of the prison system, as well as psychiatric and community resources, prompted me to add that imprisonment would not be the least restrictive, yet safe, disposition for Michael. The magistrate thanked me for my contribution and decided to release Michael on the understanding that the police would transport Michael to the hospital for a psychiatric assessment. The attending psychiatrist met us on our arrival and, following an examination, Michael was admitted.

E: You need to clarify a couple of things for me. You said before, that liaison involved knowledge. Spell out what knowledge you used here.

Y: I brought together knowledge of the English mental health legislation, (which mandates social workers to recommend the least restrictive environment for clients) my experience as a team

member in a psychiatric setting and knowledge about the client and the community's resources. Undergirding this knowledge and experience was my ethical sense of the most appropriate outcome for the client, taking into account client needs, community resources, and the safety of others.

In Michael's case I believe that social work liaison prevented him from falling between the cracks of a complex array of organizations. I feel frustrated at times, not so much with systems and bureaucracies themselves — though hard at times, I see it as my job to help clients navigate them. I'm more frustrated with the social work profession for not cultivating this unique role of ours. If we formulated the skills and knowledge needed, then they could be communicated to the novice, and, indeed, expertise could be shared among colleagues.



Something that is becoming apparent to me, through my conversations with masters students at the school, is that they frequently ask doctoral students what they should do in particular situations in the field. Their questions are important and need to be answered. I think students are asking about liaison. They have learned what to do in the beginning stages of contact with

clients, the assessment stage. It's interesting that we have a lot of literature on beginnings and endings, but the middle stage of our involvement with clients needs to be further developed. It's during this stage that liaison usually takes place.

G: Why the reluctance to articulate the knowledge and skills involved in liaison?

Y: I think there are a couple of factors explaining this reluctance. First, although social workers engage in this activity, not all of them want to! The sociologist, Andrew Abbott (1988), noted that although social workers spent an inordinate amount of time on the telephone, few were keen on this liaison activity. Some find liaison tiresome because they would prefer to spend more time with clients than they do engaged in liaison. This preference appears to be

based on the belief that it is only through the relationship that help is provided. Second, Bartlett observed "that social workers characteristically work through two channels — through a direct relationship with the people being served and through collaborative relationships with others" (Bartlett, 1970, p. 175). Bartlett hoped that these two channels would not be deemed mutually



exclusive, but I think they have become separate in our minds.

I think we continue to think in polarities. (A tangential point: Thinking in terms of polar opposites has been evident in the debate on social work research methodology. Often, the debate (in the journals, and among doctoral students and professors) has been couched in terms of quantitative versus qualitative methods. Only more recently has it become apparent that using both methods might be the way forward, and that triangulating data might yield richer results.)

E: This brings me to the other issue I want you to clarify for me. In your description of your work with Michael, you don't really describe in any depth the nature of the "direct relationship" with him. Don't social workers counsel clients as well as engage in liaison?

Y: I think we have come full circle in this conversation. I started with Ferard and Hunnybun's casework relationship, and I'm glad we've come back to it. As a social worker I do offer clients a relationship that could be defined, in some instances, as a counseling one. And I hope it is therapeutic.

Going back to Michael, it wasn't unusual for us to talk about his relationship with his family, and his childhood experiences. However, I do not see the counseling aspect of my work as being a defining characteristic of my social work role. Counseling is an activity that social workers share with many other professionals, e.g., pastoral care practitio-

ners, therapists, doctors, nurses.

What I was trying to do tonight was define the activity that social worker's engage in that we can call our own — unique to the profession. I think Abbott (1995) is right when he says that "probably the vast majority of what people with the title 'social worker' actually do in the United States is indeed connecting together services provided largely by other professions and other institutions" (1995, p. 559). There is a well-worn phrase in social work: person-environment. I think that liaison is the hyphen in the phrase. Social work liaison links the person and the environment.

G: Have you thought about ways of teaching liaison to the student?

Y: Only roughly, I think.....

At this point, the proprietor of the hotel joins the group, and says that it's great to see people staying up around the fire, engrossed in conversation. Being "half-Scottish" herself, she asks us if we know the little town where her great-grand-father was born.

Proprietor: You're over to the States to visit your daughter, then?

Evelyn: Yes, George and I arrived yesterday. Yvonne's studying social work at Columbia.

Proprietor: Great — you know I even toyed with the idea of going into social work myself. But I wasn't sure I'd be up to it. Tell me...what, exactly, do social workers do?

## POSTSCRIPT

*There is a universal tendency in all human development to progress by extreme swings from object to subject, from the external, the physical and the social, to the internal....At one moment we place all truth in the outside world where we try to analyze the object as a separate entity; again we turn upon the self, the doer, and study him in all his subjectivity. Either concentration destroys or ignores the reality that lies only in the living relationship between the two. (Taft, 1937, p.1)*

To say that there has been an oscillation between the internal and the external, the person and the environment, in the history of social work theory is to state the obvious. However, the liaison function of social work, though not fully delineated in the literature or by myself, appears to be one way forward in bridging the gap between the person and the environment.

As evidenced in the previous debate, my ideas are far from completely formulated. Nevertheless, the chance to pursue doctoral study has helped me draw together my practice experience. Added to this, the opportunity has enabled me to make links between the British and American social work literature. This paper has reflected many of the dualisms that pervade social work, and the separation between the social work literature on both sides of the Atlantic is yet another.

I hope to develop further my thinking based on the my contention that liaison has been underrated and grossly underdeveloped. Today, "we have a welter



of social services so confused that no one can figure it out" (Abbott, 1995, p. 562). Our clients request our assistance in navigating through this confusion. Without social work liaison, our clients will be ill-served. □

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