
Peter Cabrera, Washington University in St. Louis

Peter M. Cabrera Jr.

George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, USA


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PETER M. CABRERA, Jr.
George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

The United States follows what has been termed a “residual” approach to its public child welfare system. This article describes the residual model and contrasts it with the policies of other industrialized nations. It also explores the causes and persistence of the residual model in the United States through the lens of structural-functionalist theory. By doing so, this article attempts to respond to critics of structural social work who maintain that it is overly reliant on conflict theory and has nothing to offer in terms of distinct practice methods. Suggestions for a structurally informed social work practice are made.

KEYWORDS child welfare, residual child welfare system, structural social work, radical social work

The cost of keeping a dog in a kennel for a month exceeds the monthly stipend that many states provide foster parents to care for abused and neglected children (Gustavsson & Segal, 1994). It is thus unsurprising that the United States is notorious among industrialized nations for the relative lack of emphasis it places upon the well-being of children (Vleminckx & Smeeding, 2001). The United States follows what has been termed a residual approach to child welfare. This approach demands that government aid...
be invoked only after all private sources of assistance have been exhausted (Lindsey, 1994). The approach is consistent with the nation’s belief in the ideal of rugged individualism, an ideology that has resulted in a dramatic rollback of an already emaciated welfare state (Rank, 2004). The residual model of child welfare often requires that a child experience a horrific level of neglect or abuse before the state will deign to intervene.

This article attempts to highlight the inadequacy of the residual model in the United States by providing a brief overview of a fatal flaw in U.S. federal child welfare policy: inadequate attention to child and family poverty. A brief discussion of recent research into comparative child welfare policy and comparative public welfare is also provided to demonstrate that the United States is substantially less generous than nations of lesser means when allocating funding to care for the most vulnerable members of its population. Such a comparison is necessary to draw attention to the fact that the residual approach to child welfare in the United States is a social injustice of dramatic proportions that fails to ensure the welfare of its children. This discussion is followed by a structural-functional exploration into the causes and persistence of the residual model of child welfare in the United States. Finally, implications for social work practice resulting of a structural-functional analysis are discussed, with an emphasis on practice models and methods that are often pejoratively referred to by some social work academics as “radical.”

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT U.S. CHILD WELFARE POLICY

The United States’ modern child welfare system emerged as a major public institution during the 1950s, when child welfare agencies became professional state agencies charged with providing services such as foster care and adoption (Lindsey, 1994). Lindsey (1994) notes that:

... from the beginning the problem of orphaned and abandoned children was viewed from a residual perspective. Without family or resources, abandoned and orphaned children constituted the social “leftovers” (or residual children) who had fallen beyond the economic and social pale. That this may have happened through no fault of their own was of no consequence. They were to be provided for, if at all, as inexpensively and conveniently as possible, enough to satisfy the social conscience but no more (p. 16).

The social work knowledge base concerning the causes of child maltreatment has increased substantially over the past half-century, yet child welfare policy in the United States does not reflect this empirical knowledge base. One major example of the disconnect between the empirical knowledge
base and U.S. child welfare policy is the public child welfare system's unwillingness to address child poverty in order to prevent child maltreatment. Poverty has been found to be highly associated with certain forms of child maltreatment, and the vast majority of families that end up in the public child welfare system are families living in poverty (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Drake and Zuravin, 1998; Slack et al., 2004). This finding may be used to support arguments that pathologize the poor, but the view is not supported by recent research. For example, Slack and colleagues (2004) found that although poverty was associated with child neglect, parenting characteristics did not mediate the link between financial hardship and neglect. Additionally, an earlier study by Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, and Duncan (1994) found that the stresses specifically associated with poverty, particularly the lack of social support, had a large impact on mothers' parenting styles. Similarly, Vondra (1994) notes that family poverty affects family functioning on every level and creates fertile ground for possible child maltreatment, particularly neglect. Clearly poverty, ceteris paribus, may be a major cause of child abuse and neglect.

Despite its historically unprecedented level of wealth, the United States has one of the highest rates of child poverty among all industrialized nations, frequently rating in first or second place on a variety of measures and indexes of child poverty (Bradbury & Jantti, 2001; Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003). The rate of child poverty in the United States increased dramatically from 13.1% in 1971 to 22.7% in 1997 despite the fact that the United States' economy experienced exponential growth during the 1990s (Bradbury & Jantti, 2001). Rather than using this increase in wealth to take a preventive approach to child maltreatment by proactively addressing poverty, federal legislation has instead forced child welfare agencies to limit their activities almost exclusively to the removal of children from poor families deemed to be abusive, neglectful, or both (DeRouselle, 1999). The casual observer would perhaps be surprised by this apparent paradox. Upon closer examination, however, what initially seems to be a paradox can be understood as a logical outcome of the functions of the residual child welfare system in the United States.

The cumulative effects of the Child Welfare Act of 1980 and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 provide examples of how federal policymakers inadvertently perpetuated poverty while undermining the ability of public child welfare agencies to assist impoverished children and their families. For instance, the Child Welfare Act of 1980 was intended to prevent the out-of-home placement of children and to promote the reunification of families whose children had been removed from the home. The act was never fully funded, and the little funding it did receive was subsequently diminished as a result of the Republican Contract with America in 1994. President Clinton further exacerbated the problem by signing the Personal Responsibility and
Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act into law. This act resulted in substantial budget cuts in public welfare to poor families, a narrowing of eligibility criteria for services, and a loss of entitlement assistance previously provided to families with children living in poverty. This de facto repealing of welfare, combined with the Republican undermining of the Child Welfare Act of 1980, resulted in an increase in the number of children forced into long-term out-of-home placements while drastically reducing the rate of family reunification, the exact opposite of what the Child Welfare Act intended (Braveman & Ramsey, 1997; Wells & Guo, 2004; Wulczyn, 2000).

Foster care is by no means an idyllic situation for children, and it is increasingly becoming a permanent arrangement for large numbers of children despite legislation ostensibly designed to prevent such a state of affairs. The Child Welfare Act of the 1980s essentially unfunded mandate requiring states to make “reasonable efforts” to reunify foster children with their families has been rendered impotent because of lack of adequate funding. Furthermore, juvenile court judges routinely rule that “reasonable efforts” have been made by state welfare agencies simply because resources and services are not available to prevent the permanent dissolution of poor families (Braveman & Ramsey, 1997). As a result, many children are being forced to spend the duration of their childhoods in foster care, an outcome that is unfortunate, given the frequency with which foster care-related tragedies end up as headline news stories.

COMPARATIVE CHILD WELFARE POLICY

The negative attitudes toward the welfare state that may prevent the United States from designing and implementing effective child welfare policies are not as prevalent in other wealthy nations. In one comparative study regarding national attitudes on poverty, Phipps (2001) examined the attitudes of citizens of Norway, Canada, and the United States toward people living in poverty. Respondents from the United States were much more likely to view poor people as being lazy and undeserving than were their counterparts in Canada and Norway. Norwegian participants expressed the most positive view of the poor, and they overwhelmingly shared the belief that poverty results from structural rather than personal failings. Canadian attitudes fell in the middle. It is interesting to note that these cultural attitudes toward poverty were associated with each nation’s reported levels of child physical and mental well-being. Norwegian children experienced the highest level of well-being, followed by Canada, whereas children in the United States experienced the lowest overall level of well-being. As a result, negative poverty-related child outcomes are significantly higher in the United States than in other wealthy nations (Phipps, 2001).
Certain free-market ideologues frequently argue that a generous welfare state acts as a disincentive for the poor to obtain employment. They often point to unemployment rates in certain sectors of the poor in the United States to support their belief that character defects such as laziness and loose morals are the primary cause of poverty and child abuse (Mead, 1986; Murray, 1993). Phipps’s (2001) study, however, found that a generous welfare state actually increases attachment to the labor force. For instance, single Norwegian mothers demonstrated a significantly higher attachment to the labor force than American single mothers. Phipps attributes this difference to the fact that mothers in Norway do not have to worry about losing welfare benefits if they find a low-paying job. Low-paying jobs therefore do not act as a disincentive to work. Furthermore, health care in Norway is universal and not tied to employment. Out-of-pocket health care costs, therefore, do not act as a drain on a modest salary. Unlike American single mothers, Norwegian single mothers do not have to worry that their children will lose Medicaid benefits if the mothers get jobs that provide health insurance policies that have exorbitantly high deductibles.

The United States has not always been the most miserly industrialized country when it comes to providing for the welfare of children. In the 1970s, the United States had a rate of child poverty that was slightly lower than that of Canada. However, the United States quickly caught up with and surpassed Canada during the Regan presidency. By the early 1990s, the odds of a Canadian child avoiding poverty were twice as great as the odds of an American child avoiding poverty (Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003).

When confronted with the reality of the residual approach to child welfare, Americans may be reluctant to admit that their country is comparatively less compassionate than are other wealthy nations. Indeed, some American social scientists may be tempted to dismiss a comparative analysis as being meaningless, given the current demographic differences that characterize the United States as opposed to those in other wealthy countries. However, after analyzing data from the Luxembourg Income Study, Rainwater and Smeeding (2003) found that the United States had the highest rate of child poverty among industrialized nations, even when controlling for demographic factors. Furthermore, they concluded that the extant structural inequities in the United States resulted in a problem of child poverty that is much more intractable when compared to that in all of the European countries involved in the study and in Australia.

The paradox of children in the wealthiest nation on Earth suffering from poverty at higher rates than children in nations with fewer resources begs the obvious question: Why are children who live in the wealthiest nation in history at a greater risk for suffering poverty-related sequelae such as foster care than are children residing in nations of lesser means? This question becomes even more vexing, given that the government of the United States routinely supports collective action to sustain the infrastructure necessary to
ensure that American corporations have the resources they need to compete in the global market. Indeed, “entrepreneurs and investors routinely look to government to provide a suitable environment for their economic enterprises” (Lindsey, 1994, p. 5). A functional analysis of the American residual approach to child welfare may shed some light on this question.

STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

Functionalist analysis in sociology has its roots in the works of Emile Durkheim, Talcot Parsons, and Robert K. Merton. The functionalist tradition of sociology attempts to understand social phenomena by examining the manner in which social institutions fulfill social needs. There has been a rather spirited debate among various factions in the discipline regarding the true nature of functionalism and its utility as an explanatory theory of social structures (Turner & Maryanski, 1988). A detailed history of this debate is clearly beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that functionalism is often assumed to have a conservative flavor, although this assumption is not necessarily accurate. For example, Turner and Maryanski (1988) assert that functionalist analysis “dictates a logic, method, model, and perhaps even an ideology, although this last point has been overemphasized by unreflective and unfair critics” (p. 110). Indeed, a functionalist analysis of the residual approach to child welfare in the United States can sound similar to some of the most radical ideas derived from conflict theory depending, perhaps, upon who is doing the analysis.

Gans’ (1972) analysis of the positive functions of poverty in American society provides a useful template that may be applied to the residual model of child welfare in the United States order to ascertain its positive functions. Gans categorizes the positive functions of poverty into four categories: economic, social, cultural, and political. He then goes on to describe specific positive functions of poverty within each category. An attempt at a functional analysis of the residual child welfare system based on Gans’s analysis of poverty follows.

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE RESIDUAL CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IN THE UNITED STATES

The residual approach to child welfare may have an economic function. The existence of this model creates jobs for a variety of professionals and paraprofessionals. Given the ex post facto, crisis-based approach to child welfare inherent in the residual model (Lindsey, 1994), the legal system is required to be highly involved in monitoring and prosecuting parents suspected of abuse and neglect. Legions of judges, public and private attorneys, social
workers, juvenile court staff, and police officers must be on hand to manage the revolving door of new cases and the progression of existing cases through the legal system. A preventive approach to child welfare could conceivably dramatically reduce the involvement of the legal system by proactively addressing child and family poverty, which has been shown repeatedly to have a strong association with child maltreatment (Drake & Pandey, 1996).

The crisis-based approach to child maltreatment also provides ample employment for social workers engaged in both practice and research. Social workers practicing within the context of the residual child welfare system are charged with the tasks of assessing families for abuse, monitoring dependent children’s well-being, supervising family compliance with court-ordered treatment, and attempting to reunify families that have been shattered to the point where the residual child welfare system was forced reluctantly to begin to provide services. Additionally, social workers in academia benefit from the residual model of child welfare because of the funding that is allotted by government agencies for research into ways of enhancing theory and practice methods within the context of the residual model in order to ameliorate the damages this approach inflicts on children.

Another class of professionals that benefits from the residual model is the group home administrators, private foster family agencies, and private psychotherapists that provide services to children who have been removed from their family homes. These individuals and agencies often receive state funds to provide such services for children who have become wards of the state. An increase in effective child-abuse prevention services aimed at decreasing poverty and the removal of children from the family home could dramatically reduce the need for such services, effectively eliminating a number of jobs.

A less obvious economic function of the residual approach to child welfare is that it serves to solidify the class structure of American society. The intergenerational transmission of poverty in the United States has been empirically demonstrated by a number of social scientists (Rank, 2004). Despite patriotic rhetoric to the contrary, Rank (2004) demonstrated that class boundaries in the United States are virtually impermeable, despite the myth of the so-called American Dream. By failing to take a preventive approach to child maltreatment, the residual child welfare system allows for the perpetuation of abuse-related psychopathology among poor children in the system, thereby hindering their ability to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” Furthermore, the iatrogenic effects of ex post facto state intervention may exacerbate the effects of the trauma that abused children have already experienced (Jones, 1991).

The residual approach to child welfare serves certain social and cultural functions as well. It creates conditions that help to reinforce a number of prevalent norms and values in American society. The association between
poverty and child maltreatment (Drake & Pandey, 1996) provides a chimerical justification for biased academicians and policymakers who are already ideologically predisposed to pathologize the poor. Thus, a propensity for child abuse can be added to the long list of perceived undesirable characteristics of people living in poverty, providing justification for the view that people are poor because of innate character defects (laziness, present-time orientation, frivolousness, loose morals, and so forth) rather than because of structural inequities inherent in American society. The residual approach to child welfare thus serves to buttress the American myth of rugged individualism by stigmatizing families that receive child welfare services.

Another function of the residual child welfare system is that it soothes the collective conscience of the American public by reassuring them that their government is doing its best to ensure that vulnerable children are being “rescued” from abusive circumstances when necessary. The punitive nature of the residual child welfare system gives the impression that justice is being served when parents accused of child maltreatment are aggressively prosecuted and forced to contend with intrusive state monitoring of their daily lives. Furthermore, it allows members of the society to absolve themselves of any responsibility for social norms that contribute to child maltreatment. Child maltreatment is thus viewed as a crime that is best dealt with by the criminal justice system, allowing citizens conveniently to avoid examining their role in perpetuating structural factors that create a social environment conducive to child abuse and neglect.

The residual model of child welfare also serves a political function. Conservative and liberal politicians alike are able to point to the failures of the residual child welfare system when attacking their opponents’ ideologies. Well-publicized tragedies of children being harmed or killed as a result of an overburdened, crisis-oriented child welfare system often become fodder for conservatives in their efforts to portray “big government” programs like the residual child welfare system as being inherently ineffective. Conversely, liberal politicians may seize upon the exact same tragedies to support their argument that increased government spending on social welfare programs is needed to enhance the ability of these programs to carry out their missions. Politicians may thus use the problems associated with the residual child welfare system to support their political platforms and further their own political ambitions and agendas.

STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM VERSUS CONFLICT THEORY

The insights generated by a functional analysis of the residual child welfare system do not seem to differ dramatically from insights that might be generated by a conflict analysis of the residual child welfare system. The primary point of departure between a functional analysis and a conflict-informed
analysis appears to be that conflict theorists hold the view that the dominant class possesses conscious, self-serving motives for perpetuating the residual child welfare system. A vulgar Marxist explanation might involve highlighting the ways in which the ruling class strives to minimize its financial obligations to the welfare state by paying the lowest tax rate possible while shifting the remaining tax burden to the middle class and the poor.

Conflict theorists would also be likely to point out that the ruling class must engage in a public relations campaign designed to devalue the welfare state in order to support such actions. Intellectuals, who generally derive their sustenance from the generosity and goodwill of the capitalist class, assist in this devaluation of the welfare state by generating theories that support the notion that poverty and other social ills are the result of individual character defects (see the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the National Association of Scholars for examples of intellectuals who fit this profile). They also attempt to portray the pursuit of wealth by the ruling class as being good for the entire society, not just the ultrarich.

Intellectuals . . . are specialists in ideas who nevertheless have to make a living by fitting into the economic structure of the time. . . . That is why intellectuals, although free in principle to formulate whatever ideas they can conceive, nevertheless tend to create ideologies favoring the class that feeds them: medieval poets who extol the noble virtues, or priests whose theologies declare the hereditary ranks of society to reflect the eternal order given by God (Collins, 1994, p. 67).

The confluence of low wages resulting from the ruling classes’ ownership of the means of production combined with an increasingly emaciated welfare state create conditions conducive to poverty, a condition known to be associated with child maltreatment (Drake & Pandey, 1996). So far, the ruling class in this country has not been able to generate enough support for its ideology to justify the complete elimination of the social welfare state, and it is unlikely that the American public would support the complete elimination of the welfare state’s functions pertaining to child welfare. Maltreated children cannot justifiably be placed into the category of the “undeserving poor,” although their parents are readily stigmatized in that fashion. Consequently, the child welfare system in the United States has been reduced to a skeletal afterthought that emphasizes primarily the investigation and prosecution of poor families who are suspected of abusing or neglecting their children.

If the residual child welfare system has been intentionally starved, as a conflict analysis suggests, social workers must take this fact into consideration when determining when, where, and how to intervene. Given the functions that the residual approach to child welfare serves in the United
States, social workers may have to go beyond merely working within the system’s structures and following state-sanctioned approaches in their efforts to bring about fundamental change.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

Many social workers attempt to reform institutions by engaging in advocacy through formal organizations under the assumption that once a critical mass has been attained, elites will accede to their demands. Social workers concerned with the effects that poverty has on children and families often follow this approach through their participation in formal organizations such as the Child Welfare League of America, the National Association of Social Workers, and the Children’s Defense Fund. Although formal organizing is one legitimate approach to reforming the functions of the residual child welfare system, this approach may be limited in its effectiveness when analyzed from a conflict-based perspective.

For example, Piven and Cloward (1977) examined four major American social movements and found that elites tend to rescind meaningful concessions once protest subsides. The only concessions that are maintained are those which elites deem to be either benign or compatible with their ability to maintain their position of control. The use of formal organizing to pressure elites to enact meaningful institutional changes is doomed to failure, they argue, because “it is not possible to compel concessions from elites that can be used as resources to sustain oppositional organizations over time” (p. xxi). Furthermore, Piven and Cloward would likely argue that mainstream social workers are delusional in believing that it is possible to create conditions leading to social movements that will yield meaningful institutional changes:

> Organizers do not create such moments . . . but they are excited by them, and the signs of the moment conspire to support the organizer’s faith. One such sign is the sheer excess of political energy among the masses, which itself breathes life into the belief that large organizations can be developed and sustained. Another is that, in the face of the threat of popular insurgency, elites may offer up concessions that would have otherwise seemed improbable. . . . Most important in of all in affirming the viability of the model, elites are likely at times of mass disturbance to seek out whatever organizations that have emerged among the insurgents, soliciting their views and encouraging them to air their grievances before formal bodies of the state (p. xxi).

Enthralled with existing pressure-based formal organizations, social workers involved in advocacy and organizing may actually serve as a moderating
force between disenfranchised groups and the attainment of meaningful structural change by diverting the focus of the very critical mass they seek to create. As Piven and Cloward note, “When workers erupted in strikes, organizers collected dues cards; when tenants refused to pay rent and stood off marshals, organizers formed building committees; when people were burning and looting, organizers used that “moment of madness” to draft constitutions. (p. xxii).

It can be argued that the apparent functions of the residual model of child welfare in the United States appear to support the conflict-informed position that institutions are not subject to meaningful change via mere reformist efforts. For instance, elites responded to public outcry regarding the fate of children in foster care by enacting the Child Welfare Act of 1980. This act was intended to decrease the number of children languishing in foster care by enhancing both preventive and reunification services, thereby decreasing the need for out-of-home placement. The act was signed amid a great deal of fanfare in an effort to assuage public concern. As mentioned earlier, once enacted, it was never fully funded. Meanwhile, social workers in formal organizations (including the academy) continued to engage in advocacy and research on behalf of abused and neglected children via a rather steady stream of federal funding. Social workers were also busy working in state-funded child protection agencies, removing children from poor families and then shuffling them from foster home to foster home unless a more “suitable” family was available to adopt them. It seems that outcry over the lack of funding for the actual welfare of children was muted because the professionals’ mouths were full from their feeding frenzy at the public trough.

Radicals in the field of social work offer a different perspective for social workers to consider when addressing issues of poverty-related maltreatment of children. There is a long history of a radical tendency within the field of social work (Galper, 1980; Gil, 1998; Mullaly, 1997; Reisch & Andrews, 2002; Schram, 2002; Trainor, 1996), although most American social workers are ignorant of this history. Radical social work theory persists, despite the fact that the political climate has been particularly hostile to radical social work (and radical theory in general) since the early 1980s (Trainor, 1996). Reisch and Andrews (2002) argue that the contribution of radical social workers to social change has been intentionally ignored by the mainstream social work profession. Radical social workers of the past were subjected to severe state repression for espousing values that are today considered fundamental to the profession. Ideas formerly considered to be radical have been co-opted by the mainstream profession while the radicals themselves continue to be marginalized (Reisch & Andrews, 2002; Trainor, 1996). Indeed, Reisch and Andrews maintain that the field of social work suffers from collective amnesia regarding the vital role that radical social workers have played in the evolution of the profession.
To understand the history of radical social work, we also need to understand how mainstream institutions responded to the radical challenge, particularly in repressive ways that are often overlooked (Gordon, 1990; Wencour & Reisch, 1989). Just as many Americans are unaware of the darker side of our nation’s history (the true nature of slavery, the genocide of American Indians, the suppression of organized labor and left-wing movements), many social workers today are ignorant of the ways in which politicians, the media, and colleagues attacked their radical predecessors. They are unaware that government agencies harassed radical social workers, often causing their dismissal, blacklisting, and imprisonment. Nor do today’s social workers know how their radical ancestors and their principled supporters resisted such attacks, individually and collectively. In today’s climate, in which powerful political and cultural forces condemn even the liberal values of social work, knowledge of such historical antecedents could help social workers create more effective responses (Reisch & Andrews, 2002, p. 4).

Before proposing a radical social work approach to the residual child welfare system in the United States, it is necessary first to define radical social work. Furthermore, does radical social work offer a unique perspective and approach to the practice of the residual child welfare system? William DeMaria (1992; quoted in Reisch & Andrews, 2002) describes a radical social worker as follows:

The social work radical is someone who has a philosophical leaning towards the importance of discovering first causes of oppression (or injustice or disadvantage). That, however, is only half the story and many social workers who are called radical end here. The next stage is to transform the insights gleaned from the foundation material into immediate social action . . . to move from structural analysis to structural practice . . . with the sobering awareness that the latter is far more difficult to achieve than the former (p. 237).

Radical social workers have traditionally employed a class-based analysis of society, although class-based analyses waned somewhat during the 1980s and 1990s as critical theorists became enamored with identity politics (Trainor, 1996). In his seminal work on radical social work, Galper (1980) contends that “radical social work is social work that contributes to building a movement for the transformation to socialism by its efforts in and through the social services. Radical social work, in this understanding, is socialist social work. Those who practice radical social work are those who struggle for socialism from their position within the social services” (p. 10).

Despite Galper’s definition of radical social work, not all self-identified radical social workers share an affinity for evolutionary socialism, nor do they necessarily perceive the social services as the appropriate context for
such a struggle. Radical social workers differ in their understandings of the consequences of capitalism and the form struggles against capitalist oppression should take, and they are often characterized as being revolutionary Marxists, evolutionary Marxists, or social democrats (Mullaly, 1997; Reisch & Andrews, 2002). The common thread that appears to unite radical social workers is the belief that political and social institutions operating in a context of unbridled capitalism are inherently unjust and incapable of being meaningfully reformed via mere pressure politics.

In his scathing critique of radical social work, Trainor (1996) essentially argues that true radical social work practice does not exist. One of his primary arguments is that ostensibly radical social work methods and theory do not differ from “mainstream” social work methods and theory in any practical sense, although he concedes that radical social workers have played an important role in guiding the development of what today is considered mainstream social work practice. Trainor (1996) rightfully takes self-proclaimed radical social workers to task for their lack of ingenuity, although his reactionary depiction of the radical tendency in social work at times seems to be little more than an expression of indignation that radical social workers would dare to challenge certain features of standard social work theory and practice. Nonetheless, social workers who label themselves as radicals should take heed of his criticism that radical social work has offered little in the way of distinct practice methods.

Trainor also criticizes radical social workers for what he believes to be their overemphasis on conflict-based analyses to the exclusion of other explanatory theories of social problems. Although his intention is to castigate radicals for what he inaccurately perceives to be a dogmatic adherence to Marxism (and feminism and antiracism), his criticism is valuable inasmuch as it serves to motivate social work radicals to develop a more eclectic theoretical basis for their practice. Perhaps the functional analysis of the residual child welfare system in the United States provided in this paper may help instigate the development of novel approaches to radical social work praxis while paying heed to Trainor’s criticism regarding an overemphasis on conflict theory.

FUNCTIONALIST-INFORMED RADICAL PRAXIS: A RESPONSE TO TRAINOR

The functionalist analysis of the residual child welfare system provided earlier in this article suggests that the residual child welfare system in the United States plays an important role in maintaining the current inegalitarian structure of American society. Conflict theory suggests that social work plays into this role by aiding and abetting the functions of the residual child welfare system. Although social workers may not be intentionally perpetuating this
role, it is possible that they are inadvertently enabling its continued existence by practicing in a manner that is consistent with the functionalist description of the residual child welfare system.

The concept of enabling evolved from the 12-step recovery literature. It describes a pattern of behavior in which a friend or family member of an addict helps to create or perpetuate an environment that is conducive to the addict’s continued use of the substance and the shirking of responsibility. In 12-step parlance, enabling is distinguishable from helping because it has the unintended consequence of perpetuating the addict’s destructive behaviors. An addict’s loved ones often plead him or her to stop using the substance while inadvertently enabling the addict in a number of ways: repeatedly bailing him or her out of jail, assuming responsibilities that the addict has neglected, and engaging in actions that help the addict hide his or her addiction. Freed from the responsibility of experiencing the consequences of those actions, the addict is able to continue abusing the substance of choice while neglecting to attend to even the most basic functions of his or her role as a spouse, parent, employee, and so forth.

In such a scenario, the recovery literature would refer to the enabler as being codependent with the addict. In other words, by creating an environment in which the addict can pursue a purely hedonistic and destructive lifestyle with impunity, the enabler shares responsibility for the addict’s continued abuse and the deleterious consequences the use inflicts upon the addict, the family, and society. The purpose of designating an individual as being codependent is not to engage in a campaign of demonization; rather, the label serves as a heuristic device to help the enabler reconceptualize his or her role as that of codependency rather than that of a selfless guardian angel motivated purely by altruism.

Social workers practicing in the public child welfare system in the United States demonstrate many characteristics of codependent spouses or family members, a fact that is evident in the burnout rate among social service workers (Lewandowski, 2003). They desperately plead with the addict to change his or her ways while readily assuming the role of the underpaid, overworked martyr. They also frequently receive the brunt of the criticism that should rightfully be directed at the addict when he or she fails to attend to responsibilities and a child dies in state custody. Convinced that the addict will eventually see the error of his or her ways if they simply work hard enough, social workers practicing within the residual child welfare system strive in vain to play the role of Jesus feeding the 5000 with a single loaf of bread and a few rotten fish. If Piven and Cloward’s (1977) analysis of social movements is correct (and the government’s handling of the Child Welfare Act of 1980 certainly seems to conform to their analysis), no amount of pleading will convince the addict to fundamentally alter its residual approach to the institution of public child welfare.

One of the few unique practice methods radical social workers have at their disposal is the facilitation of critical consciousness, a fact that even
Trainor (1996) concedes. Gil (1998) defines the facilitation of critical consciousness as an emancipatory dialogical process that involves “a sensitive exploration of problems, as experienced and perceived by people; supportive measures designed to ameliorate these problems; and help with unraveling links between perceived problems and their societal roots and dynamics” (p. 106). In addition to facilitating the development of critical consciousness in the poor families at the mercy of the residual child welfare system, radical social workers should also use the insights generated by a functional analysis of the residual child welfare system to facilitate critical consciousness within the field of social work itself.

The facilitation of critical consciousness among social workers practicing within the confines of the residual child welfare system may be beneficial in increasing solidarity among social workers wishing to challenge collectively the practices of public child welfare agencies (and other public social service organizations), which serve to perpetuate child maltreatment by neglecting to address poverty. In addition to participating in advocacy via formal organizations aimed at changing social welfare policies pertaining to poverty and child welfare in the United States, social workers may also use insights gained from a dialogical exploration of the functions of the residual child welfare system to devise practice approaches that may alter their relationship to these functions. Such practice approaches might include collective actions by social workers that involve surreptitious, willful disobedience of agency policies that serve to perpetuate poverty while overtly assisting clients with community organizing designed to fend off the state’s efforts at social control through the functions of the social service agency.

Radically oriented social workers certainly do not advocate engaging in actions that cause social conditions to deteriorate, although their detractors frequently misrepresent their views as such. Indeed, Galper (1980) emphatically states that “social conditions are deteriorating and our lives are becoming more difficult without any help from the radicals” (p. 13). This fact is certainly true for the impoverished children and families who are at the mercy of the residual child welfare system. Radical social workers, he argues, need to be in the business of helping people to meet their own needs in the face of state repression.

Mullaly (1997) provides a number of suggestions for radical social work practice in the context of public social service agencies that may be applied by social workers seeking to undermine the functions of the residual child welfare system:

1. Provide service users with confidential inside information on how to best present a request for service from the agency.
2. Alter or falsify statistics to satisfy organizational requirements, all the while giving more time to needy service users. (For example, an agency may require that each service user receive a monthly home
visit, which is virtually impossible because of the heavy caseloads. A worker may report that he or she has fulfilled this requirement, but in fact has not because he or she has chosen to give more attention to those service users who are most in need. At the same time, the worker has the obligation to protest the heavy caseload to the agency, his or her union, and so on.)

3. Deliberately avoid recording certain facts, for example, that a welfare recipient received some money from an outside source that, if reported, would be deducted from his or her welfare.

4. Turn a blind eye to a service user's violation of policies, rules, or procedures of the agency, for example, residency requirements for eligibility of a service.

5. Become involved in efforts to change organizational rules, regulations, or practices that work against the needs or interests of service users. (p. 184).

Ethical concerns would obviously require that Mullaly's suggestions be adjusted for child welfare workers who, in addition to serving as brokers for agency services, are also charged with the protection of children. For instance, “turning a blind eye to a service user’s violation of policies, rules, and procedures of the agency” would obviously not apply to violations of rules concerning neglect or any sort of abuse. Mullaly’s suggestions would have to be applied judiciously, with the welfare of the children being of paramount concern.

Mullaly also encourages radical social workers to facilitate a process of critical consciousness dialogue in the context of promoting collectivization among agency service users, a process that may be particularly useful for families entangled in the legal bureaucratic nightmare of the residual child welfare system in the United States. Mullaly’s ideas for this process include the following:

1. Drawing the service user’s attention to the links between his/her personal difficulties and the similar problem situations of other service users.
2. Putting service users of the same agency who are living similar problem situations in touch with each other.
3. Grouping service users for the purpose of mutual aid.
4. Grouping service users for the purpose of creating necessary resources the agency itself should provide.
5. Grouping service users for the purpose of creating necessary resources that other agencies should provide.
6. Grouping service users for the purpose of changing aspects of the agency that are problematic for them.
7. Grouping service users for the purpose of changing aspects of other agencies and organizations that are problematic for service users.
8. Referring service users to larger social movements directly related to their situations (p. 177).
CONCLUSION

The suggestions made in this article are not being presented as though they somehow represent the ultimate solution to the scourge of poverty-related child maltreatment that results from the residual model of child welfare in the United States. Rather, they are merely meant to serve as a starting point for dialogue among social workers who seek to alter their relationship to the functions served by the residual approach to child welfare. There is obviously no easy solution to this problem.

The functionalist-informed radical approach to agency-based practice suggested by Mullaly appears to be one of civil disobedience. The radical social work approach to the residual child welfare system described in this article provides one answer to the question posed by Henry David Thoreau, who wrote:

As for adopting the ways in which the State has provided for remedying the evil,I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's (sic) life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. . . . A man (sic) has not every thing to do, but something; and because he (sic) cannot do every thing it is not necessary that he (sic) should do something wrong. It is not my business to be petitioning the governor or the legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me: and, if they should not hear my petition, what should I do then? (p. 82).

REFERENCES


