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Social Work and the Industrial Revolution(s)

Social work in the UK arguably traces its roots back to the medical social workers, known as almshouses who began working in the late 19th century, or to Octavia Hill and her methods of supporting the families she collected social housing rents from [1]. Their roles were borne out of the societal changes that occurred because of the industrial revolution, which changed the way that people lived and worked in the UK. Now, as we begin to explore and understand the innovations of industry 4.0, social work is in a position to influence change rather than allowing industry 4.0 to lead us.

One: The Industrial Revolution (mid 18th century - mid 19th century)

This period saw the introduction of machinery in factories, especially for manufacturing textiles. Steam power and the use of iron further drove the revolution. Between 1801 and 1901, the population of London increased from almost 1 million to almost 7 million and by 1851, half of the country’s population had moved into cities [2]. Sanitation was poor, and there were frequent and devastating cholera outbreaks [3]. During this time, concern grew for children working long hours in factories, and a number of laws were implemented to protect workers and to increase sanitation. Individuals such as Octavia Hill began what could be considered early ‘social work’, with Octavia working to improve overcrowded housing and training other women in this work [1]. She also, importantly, recognised the need for green spaces and was one of the founders of the National Trust.

Two: The Technological Revolution (late 19th century - mid 20th century)

Whilst there was increasing use of petroleum products, and electrification was changing the ways people lived and worked, a significant development taking place in the UK was the settlement movement. The first settlement house in London was established in 1884, and there are close links between the development of settlement houses internationally and the professionalisation and development of social work, including the opening of schools of social work in London and other cities [4]. In contrast with the Charity Organisation Society (co-led by Octavia Hill)[1], the settlement house movement recognised the wider environmental impact on individuals and focused on community interventions that sought to change people’s environments rather than blaming an individual for experiencing poverty or other social issues.

Three: The Digital Revolution (mid 20th century - early 21st century)

Also known as the information age or communication revolution, the dates that the 3rd revolution start and finish are contested. Some argue that the invention of the transistor in the late 1940s marks the start of this revolution (5), whilst others believe the invention of the world wide web in 1989 to be the catalyst (6). This aside, the digital revolution has seen arguably the most significant changes to the social work profession and the way it operates in the UK. The Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, based upon the Seebohm Report of 1968, drew together disparate social services teams into one overarching ‘social services’, changing the approach to social work in the UK. The advent of ICT systems changed the ways in which social workers carry out their roles... ICT “permeates virtually everything that social workers do in the twenty-first century” [7].

Four: Industry 4.0 early 21st century - ?

Industry 4.0, encompassing amongst other things “artificial intelligence, robotics, (and) the Internet of Things”, [8] has the potential to transform the planet. Will we be using machine learning to support or even complete assessments in social work, and what are the ethical implications of this? [9] Will social work students rely on virtual reality for training? [10] Whatever the direction of travel, social work has a responsibility to influence the journey and ensure that social justice and ethical practice are at the heart of decisions [11]. Having decimated the planet with the first three revolutions, we all have a responsibility to ensure that Industry 4.0 protects the Earth and is sustainable, reducing inequalities and injustice and not contributing to their worsening [12].

References