



Edna Chamberlain (1921 -2005): A Leader through Times of Transition and Change

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Professor Edna Chamberlain was an outstanding leader in Australian social work. She contributed extensively to social work education at the University of Queensland, the social work profession through her leadership of the Australian Association of Social Workers and to the community through advocacy for progressive social policies. Her life experiences were influential in shaping her career and her particular teaching and research interests. Early in her life, Chamberlain was exposed to individual deprivation as a result of the Great Depression. This provided the incentive for a career in social work. She worked as a social work practitioner for some years and entered the academic world until after the death of her husband. In the university and profession, she was confronted by conflict between traditionalists and those wanting immediate reform. In managing these tensions, she tried to find the common ground but these tensions also moderated and changed her views about the purpose and practice of social work. Her rich practice and later research and teaching background provided a strong basis for her professional leadership, research activities and curriculum initiatives. Whilst social casework methods were influential early in her career she sought in later years to integrate the private pain of individuals with social policy and community planning by focusing on the purpose of social work – demonstrating her commitment to the disadvantaged in the context of social justice.

Edna: student and mother

Edna Chamberlain was born in 1921 at Kangaroo Point, an inner city suburb of Brisbane. Her family were working class and politically conservative. Green (1994) notes many formative influences on her life particularly the Great Depression in 1930s with associated unemployment, hunger, poverty and her own ill health as a youngster. At this young age, her awareness of meeting the needs of marginal groups and the need for equitable treatment were being formed. Although Edna was a high achiever at school, her family was not able to support her through high school or provide her with the funds to attend university. Despite this, and whilst working full time for the government, she attended university as a part time student completing her Bachelor of Commerce. At this point, Edna reconsidered her career options and moved from the world of government, primary industries and commerce to that of social work. In 1943, she won an Australian Red Cross scholarship to attend the University of Melbourne one of few universities providing social work education in Australia. There she

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completed the post graduate diploma in Social Work in 1945. Within two years, she continued her skill development with a twelve month specialist course in medical social work.

In the immediate post war period, she was employed as the Director of Red Cross in Tasmania where she assisted soldiers returning from the Pacific War. She continued this work with returned soldiers as a medical social worker in the Repatriation Hospital in Hobart as this hospital and similar ones across Australia provided the medical care for all service men and women. This work was no doubt oriented to therapeutic practice addressing what we now refer to as post traumatic stress disorder as well as the practical aspects of settling soldiers back into careers, families and communities.

It is not possible to write about women leaders in social work without acknowledging the influence and significance of their families in interests, career and support. After marriage and adoption of her daughter, she stayed at home continuing voluntary work in the local community and establishing the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian Association of Social Workers. It was devastating when Edna's husband died when their daughter was just eight years old. Edna was a widow, a single parent with increased financial responsibilities and the sole care of her daughter. She had to manage a career and parenting alone. After a few years, she made a decision to return to Brisbane to be closer to her family and greater career opportunities. Her first decision was to continue further graduate study at the University of Chicago where her teachers included Helen Harris Perlman. Her time in Chicago (1961 - 1963) made an impact, particularly the level of poverty and the extent of interpersonal community violence. Again she had to deal with single parenting whilst developing her career. Not surprisingly, her thesis focused on the development of a group of children in the care of the Jewish Family Welfare Services in Chicago (Green 1994). On her return to Brisbane she worked at the Schonell Centre where she worked with children and families in remedial education. This employment had significant influences on her views about social policy and service delivery.

The academic: a role model for women

Her academic career began in 1967 as a lecturer at the University of Queensland where she remained. It was here that I was introduced to Edna, the teacher. The social work course at the University of Queensland focused on methods and fields. Students therefore developed an understanding of work with individuals and groups as well as social policy and community work. Missing from this course was work with families. Edna focused components of the practice course on work with families and students were introduced to the new practice concepts of family therapy and the work of Virginia Satir.

The unexpected death of Hazel Smith, the first head of the Department of Social Work meant administrative changes including a full departmental review to consider future structural and organizational arrangements. Edna became the acting head of department and in this position argued for the establishment of social work as a Faculty. Her recommendation was accepted by the Academic Board. At this time, Edna Chamberlain was appointed as a professor making her the first woman appointed at a professorial level in social work in Australia. She was head of department from 1973 to 1983. She was later confirmed as foundation dean of the Faculty of Social Work also being the first female dean at the University of Queensland. She was Dean of the Faculty from July 1975 to August 1976, and again from January 1983 until her retirement in June 1986.

Edna has been recognized as a role model for women. She rose to educational management positions in a profession in which women were strongly represented but men achieved most managerial positions. In her time as Head of Department conflict was ever present with tensions between the traditionalists and those who wanted radical change. It was in this conflict ridden environment that the author commenced her post graduate and doctoral work with Edna as her doctoral supervisor. Undergraduate students are not often given the opportunity to appreciate the characteristics and strengths of their faculty, but graduate students who work closely with their supervisors come to appreciate faculty as people, leaders, role models and colleagues. Edna had many gifts. She allowed her graduate students the freedom to choose their own directions but was always clear about the focus being the value of social work in society. She was generous with her time and expertise and when the author was confronted by a computer system that could not analyze the data set, Edna the person, financially backed an alternative but expensive data analysis. She shared her health advocacy efforts when President of AASW so this historical material could be incorporated into the thesis. Her long standing commitment to her graduate students was evident when, in a wheelchair severely debilitated with Parkinson's disease and unable to speak, she attended the author's conference presentation.

As Dean, she nurtured the talents of her faculty and provided opportunities for them to develop scholarship and opportunities for publishing. *Change and Continuity in Australian Social Work* is evidence of her approach (Chamberlain 1988) as are other pieces of research. The University of Queensland recognized her support of women and developed "EDNA" an initiative for the advancement of women, for career progression, getting published, applying for grants and presenting at conferences.

Her contribution to academic life and service to the community was honoured when she received a Member of the Order of Australia and Doctor of Philosophy honoris causa, The University of Queensland, in 1995.

The profession

Professor Chamberlain was President of AASW from 1970 to 1972. This was and remains a challenging position with tensions evident in industrial relations, fulfilling the professional demands of members, accreditation of social work programs and advocacy. At the time of her Presidency, the AASW was a registered industrial union with the Australian Arbitration Commission. Professor Chamberlain saw the beginnings of discontent with the inevitable exclusion of welfare workers from access to arbitration. It was the will of the profession's membership to exclude welfare workers who were less qualified from any form of membership with the professional association. She witnessed a split between professionally qualified social workers and other welfare workers leading to a split within the professional association with many members not renewing their membership, the deregistration of AASW as a union and the commencement of work to develop a new union representing welfare workers and social workers in the non government sector. This action created a bitter split within AASW which took many years to heal. Although Professor Chamberlain had great negotiation skills and always sought the common ground, this was not a conflict that could be negotiated to the satisfaction of any party. A split was inevitable.

The AASW was also responsible for the accreditation of social work programs. Again, this mandate provided challenges in managing the tensions between the demands imposed by practitioner members who want a particular practice orientation and educators who rail against these requirements. In her role as President, she used her position to advocate on

aspects of social policy including health care and the treatment of patients in nursing homes. She was acutely aware of the sense of disruption and protest in her home state of Queensland (Chamberlain 1975) and of the need for social work to address the social issues of the day.

Social policy: “it’s time”

In 1972, there was a change of government in Australia. The long standing conservative government was replaced by a socially progressive government lead by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam with the slogan of “It’s time”. Although it was time for a reformist government it was also time for progressives such as Chamberlain to take steps to promote policies which addressed the disadvantaged and marginal groups in our society. In just three years, this government made significant social reforms that included equal opportunity for women, multicultural policy, self determination for Indigenous Australians, the abolition of fees for higher education and the end of conscription for young Australians recruited to fight in Vietnam.

As a mechanism to achieve change, the Whitlam government established a number of commissions to set new policy directions. The Social Welfare Commission and the Legal Aid Commission were amongst those established. In 1973, the new Federal Minister for Social Security, Bill Hayden invited Professor Chamberlain to join Social Welfare Commission as a member. Its mandate was broad involving the planning of welfare services such as child care, poverty, national disasters, financial support for single parents, pensions and social welfare manpower. As part of her responsibilities as a Commission member, Professor Chamberlain chaired the Social Welfare Manpower Committee to discuss issues of training and accreditation of social workers and welfare workers.

This body also oversaw the implementation of the Australian Assistance Plan (AAP), a grand plan designed to plan, administer, and delivery social welfare in Australia through Regional Councils of Social Development (Graycar 1974). This plan was bold and innovative but enmeshed in conflict from the outset. Its aim was to transfer decision making and financial allocation of funds for welfare services from a central government to regional levels thus by passing state governments and ignoring local government. It cut across both the central and state institutions and traditions of government by establishing regional councils, some of which were funded to deliver welfare services on a pilot basis. The AAP offended the political establishment both left and right and all levels of government. When the Whitlam government lost power in 1975, the Social Welfare Commission was disestablished and funding for Regional Councils halted.

Professor Chamberlain no longer had the demanding time commitments associated with the Commission. Nevertheless, her commitment to the profession, social justice and betterment of the social work education continued. Edna was Vice President of the Association of Schools of Social Work in Australia, a member of the Social Welfare Research Centre, a member of the Commonwealth Legal Aid Commission and in later years a member of APASWE (Asia Pacific Association of Social Work Education) (Green 1994). It was in this role, that Edna was involved with the International Association of Schools of Social Work. In a review of Chamberlain’s career, Green (1994) noted that Edna was disappointed with the outcomes of the Social Welfare Commission. It is unfortunate that the conflict surrounding the AAP overshadowed the significant policies initiatives of the Commission in the areas of women, children and families, areas of commitment for her.

This era provided Edna with opportunities to research, bring together the private pains of individuals and social policy issues. She held significant positions where she could bring forward her ideas for social policy and social work education.

Research

As a leader, Professor Chamberlain strongly encouraged faculty and graduate students to conduct social work research, apply for research funding and submit the results of their research to refereed journals. Her research interests were diverse, often interdisciplinary and evaluative and frequently done in conjunction with graduate students. Whatever the focus, all projects spotlighted the plight of the disadvantaged comprising psychological and social dimensions, and encompassing an assessment of social needs and service delivery approaches. Funding for these research ventures came through Commonwealth agencies. There are four notable pieces of research; her study of social and economic problems of urban aboriginals, the introduction of social work to legal aid, and two studies of national disasters – Cyclone Tracey and the Brisbane Floods.

Research on urban Aboriginals was undertaken as part of the Commonwealth Commission of Enquiry into Poverty (Chamberlain, Brown, Gibbings and Hirschfeld 1974). Building on earlier work done in the Department of Social Work, this study recognized the social, health and economic needs of Aboriginal people but also the need to engage the participants in the research process. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were employed in both the early stages of research planning and the data collection process.

Professor Chamberlain as a member of the Commonwealth Legal Aid Commission was interested in the legal needs of social security participants. She also appreciated the need to make connections between legal aid and social work practice. She examined the introduction of social work to a local community legal services office with the intention of documenting the tasks and functions of social work in an innovative setting.

During the 1970s there were two natural disasters in Australia. The Brisbane Floods struck on Australia Day 1974 forcing thousands of people out of their homes. Many lost all of their possessions forcing people on relief. Cyclone Tracy effectively obliterated the city of Darwin on Christmas Eve 1974 leaving the city without food, water, shelter or electricity. Officials were concerned about public health especially rotting food, no sewerage treatment facilities, the threat of cholera and other diseases and no infrastructure to provide care. The suddenly homeless population was repatriated to all Australian cities with relief centres established to provide shelter, financial support, clothing, and the basic necessities of life. The decision to evacuate the citizens of Darwin was criticized in the media because of the social and psychological consequences for the inhabitants. Chamberlain conducted evaluations of the personal and organizational involvement in flood relief and examined the psychological and personal problems experienced as a result of the cyclone's impact. She particularly sought the experiences of children.

Curriculum development

In 1975, Chamberlain wrote a paper discussing the value dilemmas in old and new methods of social work. Against a local backdrop of societal and intra-professional conflict, the relevancy of social work was being questioned because of its individually oriented approach and failure to address current social issues. Questioning the goal of social work as 'the enhancement of social functioning', she suggested along with others that the goal for social work should be social justice. *To make social justice the goal, rather than social functioning,*

places emphasis on people's rights rather than the inadequacies of the person in the situation (Chamberlain 1975:6). She argued that it was insufficient to be committed to a particular set of humanitarian values as the real question was how to operationalize these values in practice. She concluded that social work interventions should involve micro as well as macro practice, that social work should address social planning and social policy and protest injustices even when there is no immediate solution. Unfortunately, *her interest in new approaches to social work was not widely shared by colleagues on her own generation* (Green 1994:9).

Social work education, Chamberlain argued, emphasized methods of practice over its goals. A methods focused approach with associated development of techniques meant that practitioners and educators lost sight of the ultimate goal. Dominance of the casework method was not a helpful approach in working with communities or in addressing social change. The casework method focused on negatives and deficits in people and encouraged conformity and adjustment rather than social change. Community work and social planning is a political process which does take account of the external environment on the individual. Although there are challenges with casework methods, social change also brings its own dilemmas particularly the use of disruptive tactics. Some people gain in this process but others lose. These insights came as Chamberlain was discussing strike action with the local branch of AASW to protest again racial discrimination in South Africa and Australia.

It is not surprising given the focus of her paper that the Department of Social Work engaged in an extensive curriculum review process. This collaborative process took many of the ideas and developed them into a framework where there were clear goals and a philosophy of social work. In summary,

the concern of social work was seen to be to confront disadvantage within the general context of a commitment to working to develop a society based on the pursuit of social justice. Given this purpose, the aims of social work education then should include the development of an understanding of the relationships between social forces and processes, on one hand, and individual needs and purposes on the other; it should also include knowledge and analysis of instances of disadvantage and existing and potential responses, and a range of social work strategies and change processes that are consistent with values such as human dignity, justice and equality. (Brown and Chamberlain 1984: 61)

Accompanying this statement, the Department acknowledged the importance of experiential learning and the importance of integration and congruence of the core curriculum with field education.

Endings

After Edna's retirement from academic life in 1986, she visited the author and her family members in Adelaide. At that time she was 68. In a jocular fashion, she said that no other member of her family had lived longer than 70 years but she wanted to be the first person in her family to do that. She achieved this goal living 84 years and dying in 2005.

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