The Problem of Judgement in Adoption Social Work —

An Alternative Approach.

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Introduction:

This paper tries to demonstrate how the existing practice in adoption social work, when applied to applicants and prospective parents, is inadequate, unjust and diametrically opposed to the

Emotion charged

No-one can deny that the process of adoption is an emotion-charged, multifaceted area. Descriptions encountered in the literature reflect some of these aspects. It has been described as "society's way of coping with nature's inefficiencies"¹, "a second best way of parenthood"² and "an alliance of the unwanted and the incapable"³. Fortunately, less emotive aspects of adoption also exist.

State control

In Australia, adoption is controlled by statute at the state level, the Victorian statute being The Adoption of Children Act (1964). Adoption "involves the replacement of the legal relationship between the natural parents and their child with the new ties between the adoptive parents and the adopted child. The adopted child is treated henceforth for most purposes as if he had been born to the adoptive parents."⁴

Seen in its application to social work practice and in its social context, adoption may be viewed as a process which has the potential to promote need satisfaction. The various needs under consideration here may be traced to various sources, not only should the needs of the natural and adoptive parents and their child be considered but also those societal needs and obligations which are facilitated and relieved by the adoption process, such as the reduced strain on institutional resources and the increased potential of otherwise institutionalized individuals.³

acknowledged professional ethics and values. As dissatisfaction alone is unproductive, an alternative is proposed to the existing practice based on a Social Change Model of generic social work.

As do their colleagues in other fields, adoption social workers apply practice principles to need reduction. Ideally objective measures of assessment are applied to the outcome of their efforts. However, in the past there have been "very few follow-up studies of adopted children and even these frequently do not follow the children through the crucial years of adolescence". Of the studies previously reported a large section tended to concentrate on the physical characteristics of the adopted child7 in an attempt to provide guide-lines to success. As a result of these studies researchers have drawn the conclusion that these characteristics lack discriminative ability⁸.

Perhaps for this reason, and others to be mentioned later, recent interest has changed its major focus. What one can see is a change of emphasis from 'success' seen as a measure of the child's physical attributes to a rating of adoptive parent attitudes. While certain physical and economic criteria were and are still seen as additional basic prerequisites for parenthood. perhaps the main point that appears to have emerged is "that no other circumstance of adoption . . . is as important as the kind of people the adopters are and the kind of home they create". Therefore to predict a couple's ability to "accept, love and cherish a child not born to them"10 becomes the optimum criterion of success in the selection of adoptive parents.

This altered emphasis, by drawing on a knowledge base which is derived from the psychological and social sciences, makes the social work role more complex. While financial resources and chronological age - the physical and economic criteria - are objective and easily quantifiable measures, the measurement of attitude, is more difficult to evaluate. This writer therefore suggests that the adoption social worker tends to apply a subjective evaluation procedure which inevitably involves personal idiosyncracies¹¹. many Situations of this type are likely to increase the probability of clients being accepted as suitable by one social worker while being rejected as inadequate by another. Thus the situation incorporates subjective judgement where nonjudgementalism is quoted as an axiom of the profession.

Injustice

Other areas of injustice are also apparent. The current legal emphasis in this area may be seen to instigate and perpetuate problematical situation for adoption workers. This situation occurs because the paramount consideration of the Act¹² is the welfare and interests of the child. Social work attitudes reflect this legal focus which may be contrasted with previous practices where the social work role was applicant-centred¹³. While it is logical and proper that the law protect the voiceless child and assures that his interests are "promoted by the adoption"¹⁴, this writer contends that it is wrong for a social work perspective to consider either of these foci as taking precedence over the other. Both are important areas requiring maximum intervention.

Pertinent question

Inevitably, the pertinent question in adoption social work becomes: "Who is the client⁰" While it is acknowledged that the child and his natural parents have specific needs which usually initiate social work intervention, it is the applicants and prospective adoptive parents who are most often denied adequate attention¹⁵.

Often the adoptive applicants are not thought of as 'clients' in the true social work sense of the word. Baker¹⁶ contends that the working alliance is initiated when the "client and helper in both verbal and nonverbal ways, informally and temporarily agree to tackling problems within an ongoing relationship". Thus the adoptive applicants, whether eventually accepted as potential adoptive parents or rejected as such, should be considered as 'clients' once they apply to the agency. Their application is an indication of both felt and expressed needs which the competent social worker is obliged to acknowledge by intervention and goal attainment. A sample of some aspects involved in work with these clients may serve to emphasize the magnitude of their need.

Waiting game

These people are playing a 'waiting game' with a difference'7. They have been moulded by society to conform to the socially accepted criteria of adulthood in which responsibility and parenthood are paramount considerations. "The investment in the expected child, when found to be thwarted, leaves the couple particularly if they are unprepared in a state of loss and deprivation . . .¹⁸ and a conception of being socially condemned as inferior to the accepted norms. This is а stigma which proves more isolating than many others because these people continue to function within the society. Such interactions may be seen to reinforce continually their perceived or felt needs and inadequacies¹⁹.

Another problem area with many repercussions is that of infertility. The enormity of its incidence is emphasized by current reported American statistics where fifteen percent of the population of childbearing age is known to be infertile. This approximates in excess of eight and one-half million people²⁰ which gives some indication of the potential for social work intervention as a great proportion of these will be socially pressured to adopt.

As prospective parents or rejects, they need help. Eck Menning²¹ asserts that "infertile couples seeking to adopt a child are often plagued by unresolved feelings of grief, low self-esteem and threatened sexuality. An adoption agency, as advocate of the child, should assist them in working through these feelings".

Humphrey's findings

Further evidence of need is supplied by Humphrey's²² findings that "the absence of demonstrable pathology associated with infertility was more common among couples who decided not to adopt than among those who did adopt".

While a case may be made for counselling the applicants, often they encounter a degree of attention that they did not seek. Inevaluation vestigation, and registration are procedures through which they must pass successfully in order to be considered acceptable. Only then is it legally proper for the Director of the Social Welfare Department or the principal person in an approved agency to register such applicants as "fit and proper persons to adopt a child"23.

The law remains silent on specific criteria that should be considered by evaluators²⁴ when judging the suitability of applicants so that "agencies are left to make their own eligibility rules"²⁵. This somewhat inexplicit situation is further accentuated by the fact that in Victoria, as in all other States except N.S.W. and South Australia, there is no right of appeal "against the Director's refusal of an application"²⁶.

The applicant has needs that motivate him to apply for a child²⁷. The problem for an adoption worker is to assess these needs as an aspect of his total life pattern to determine whether the applicant is suitable or undesirable as a prospective parent. The suitable parent will accept maturational and personal changes in the adopted child. He will also accept the fact of adoption by not seeking to deny the truth. Accepting reality will include a willingness to share with the child any available knowledge of his origins and natural parents. Anglim²⁸ asserts that such knowledge may be used positively, constructively and beneficially.

Perhaps it is relevant at this point to advocate for the abolition of 'matching'. As an action strategy it should be discontinued because through it there is an attempt to acquire for the prospective parents, a child who looks, performs and is temperamentally similar to themselves. Success in achieving this aim may facilitate denial of reality and lead to undesirable situations of increasing complexity such as the 'Mc-Whinnie stalemate'²⁹.

Applicant's requirements

From the above discussion it appears that applicants must fulfil a number of highly demanding requirements before being considered eligible. Usually only those couples who qualify on existing merits during initial interviews are accepted. By not conforming to idealized standards, usually not even found in natural parent families, the couple is rejected. Because of this misconceived application of practice it is probable that many excellent applicants are being rejected and caused to suffer unnecessarily.

This practice has resulted in many agencies offering a single service, that of finding a home for the child, while ignoring other aspects of the situation. Pre-adoption counselling, alternatives to child placement and post-placement counselling in the event of failure or success, are usually absent. They are not only desirable, but necessary aspects of a comprehensive child welfare service, which are at present being denied the majority of applicants³⁰.

Assessment service

The 'assessment service' as it exists, is a practice which denies such fundamental social work principles as the individuality of the person³¹ and his right to a contracted alliance in the elimination of his needs. Instead it produces a situation in which clients experience the ''added trauma of being processed''³².

Further complication

A further complication adds to the above problem of service inadequacy. In the past, adoption tended to be a relatively simple process which placed available children with couples who best met eligibility criteria. Supply the equalled or exceeded demand³³. Couples on the list experienced at most a three-year wait. Many couples adopted more than one child and few couples were totally rejected. Such a situation may be perceived as a 'balanced state' where the needs of all concerned were being met. However, the situation being experienced at present does not match that of the past. Today the number of couples desiring to adopt far exceeds the number of children available, so that an imbalance exists whereby demand exceeds supply.

Reflected

This fact seems to be reflected in many Western countries. In a special report from the C.W.L.A. Research Centre³⁴ including data collected from 1971 to 1974 in America, statistics show that the number of children accepted for adoption dropped by forty-five percent. As pointed out in the report, the number of "homes approved for adoptive placement have decreased as the need for homes has declined"³⁵. In England, too, the number of available babies has dramatically declined so that "agency placements have dropped by about fifty per cent."³⁶. Victorian figures depict more than a sixtyseven per cent drop in adoptions when calculations covering the 1967-68 figures are compared with those registered for 1975-76³⁷. This downward trend has been reflected in all Australian States³⁸.

Fewer babies

This reduction in the number of babies available for adoption is often explained by changes in community attitudes. Amongs these are the greater acceptance by the community of unmarried mothers, improved social benefits and the increased use of oral contraceptives. Obviously all these factors play some part in the overall picture. However, Kraus³⁹ in an historical appraisal of the situation found that the liberalization of abortion laws correlated most closely with the decreasing number of children available for adoption.

Given these factors, it would appear likely that the trend in adoption statistics will continue in its downward spiral as the initial reasons for it take a more firm position in today's society. The result, a shortage of babies for adoption, will inevitably mean that fewer placements are made and a growing number of couples are disappointed.

Selection

Selection of the few from the many couples applying has had an adverse affect on selection criteria It has been suggested that when the equilibrium of supply and demand is threatened so that demand far exceeds the available supply, agency thinking becomes distorted. In such instances, the aim of assessment becomes subtley and almost imperceptibly changed. It is no longer discrimination of couples on behalf of the child but rather an elimination of couples on highly suspect criteria⁴⁰ in order to effect an equilibrium state for administrative convenience⁴¹.

Delineated

As delineated, this system is traumatic to all applicants, fair to a few and blatantly unjust to the majority. This follows from the fact that attempts are constantly made by agencies to equate supply and demand. As supplies decrease stricter controls or criteria are imposed on couples desiring to adopt 'normal' children. Considered from another perspective, the converse may also be held to be true. Thus as supply increases — when 'less desirable' children 42 are made available -- criteria and controls are relaxed to include as desirable, those couples previously considered inadequate. Thus, the fact of the matter is that, depending on supply, the same couple may be judged as both desirable and undesirable adoptive parents. Surely this is an inequitable state of affairs.

Negates

Thus adoption practice, as at present experienced by the client, effectively negates professional social work ideology. For the majority it increases need rather than providing opportunities in which need reduction is facilitated. It does not behave social work practitioners to allow this situation to continue. Clearly, objective evaluation and change are overdue. By using their own tools of trade, such as the Social Change Model specified in Generic Social Work⁴³, a logical and sequential improvement of performance and practice can be obtained. A suggested outline of the model follows.

At the macro- or societal level the **need** for change arises from a number of sources : the inadequacies

and inequalities of practice carried out by the majority of social workers; changing social attitudes and their concomitant medical and economic changes; and the desirability of an integrated system where adoption, education and selfselection are various aspects of a total programme.

Need

At the micro- or personal level too, need initiates change. This writer believes that the needs of the natural parents, their child and the prospective adoptive parents are all vital considerations in the adoption process. All are subject-specific and require concentrated intervention. It can be demonstrated that as one phase of intervention gives rise to the next, these needs may be seen to intensify, change and diminish. For example, the mother has a need for understanding, guidance and support. After being counselled through the time of decision, she may decide in favour of adoption for her child. Adequate intervention at this time will ensure that she gradually works through her loss and reduces her need. Her decision. however, increases her child's needs. He now requires all that can be supplied by a home and family if he is to mature successfully. Finding a family reduces his need, while at the same time reducing his adoptive parents' need for a child. It initiates their need for post-adoptive counselling and support⁴⁴.

Social Change Programme

Of necessity, the social change programme includes an **analysis** of the situation. It is suggested that this should be embodied in a statement of fact which analyses the adoption situation rather than the clients' situation. Thus the social worker should acquaint the clients with the prevailing conditions and statistics⁴⁵ as it would seem that there is little point in encouraging a couple to proceed with adoption unless they are aware of the probable outcome. This statement of fact would allow the couple to renegotiate the working alliance and work towards an alternative goal if they decide against adoption.

Assessment

Assessment is the phase where through education and counselling, self-selection takes place. This means that a decision is reached by the client for himself. As such it relieves trauma and judgement. Basic to assessment is Kirk's belief46 that "the serious applicant should virtually always be acceptable to the agency and needs to be educated for the adoption role rather than be subjected to the selection process". For those couples who wish to continue in their endeavour of adoption, Jacka's criteria⁴⁷ should be considered as relevant. For those that lack these qualities counselling and preadoption groups are educative tools, the likelihood being that there will be ample time to effect change.

It is most important to note that this practice does not increase need by imbuing the couple with the idea that they are failures in an assessment process or socially inferior persons⁴⁸. Apparently all too often the social worker forgets that clients have the right to be treated with respect and justice.

Each phase

Assessment at each phase determines the progression along anticipated lines and evaluates the factors which may validate an alteration of course. These stages in progession become the **intermediate goals**. For some they may be the preparatory objectives which create eligibility in previously inadequate personalities. For others, they become stepping-stones to new objectives. In this latter instance they constitute the recycling stage of the model. Finding a home for the child or a child for the childless couple should not be considered ultimate goals of adoption work. Current societal conditions necessitate a perspective based on the more global aspects of social work practice. The **ultimate goal** should therefore be : to eliminate or reduce need by utilizing appropriate practices.

With the natural parents the practitioner should work towards a realistic appraisal of future alternatives culminating in a decision regarding their child. Intervention of this nature could be seen to utilize roles such as facilitator, educator, administrator, co-ordinator, enabler, supporter and adviser. The role of advocate should be used with caution here. While it has a place, it should not be used to sway the adoptive decision in either direction⁵⁰.

Ultimate goal

The ultimate goal of social work intervention with the child is the provision of circumstances which will afford a "psychological parentchild relationship"51. A relationship of this nature offers the child the chance to become a wanted and needed member within a family structure. The relationship is a product of the quality of the parentchild interactive process. It is usually found in stable, emphathetic, on-going situations. For this reason, when natural parenting cannot be considered as a desirable alternative for the child, adoption with its viable permanence, given the requirement of psychological parenting, will be seen to be desirable.

By acting on behalf of the child in this crucial matter, the social worker takes on a role seen as equivalent to his legal capacity of **guardian ad litem** which incorporates the role-set of administrator, caretaker, advocate, co-ordinator, facilitator, researcher, consultant, broker, enabler, adviser and mediator⁵². The interaction between the social work practitioner and the adoptive applicant has two **ultimate goals.** These are : to help couples pursue a desirable alternative to adoption, after the self-selection decision; and to ensure that those couples who have decided in favour of adoption are capable at the time of adoption of providing a desirable parent-child relationship.

Both are direct consequences of the self-selection process and necessitate all the direct and indirect roles of the multi-role practitioner⁵³ in order to initiate and continue the selection to its desirable and satisfactory conclusion.

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Summary and Conclusion :

From the above, it may be concluded that practice procedure in adoption work was 'adequate' in the past when conditions were such that a 'balance' existed between the supply of babies considered adoptable. the need for homes for these children, and the number of couples who wished to find fulfilment in adopting infants. Because of the large number of children available, criteria were based on those standards considered as 'average' requirements and as a result, few couples were disappointed. The majority of these adoptions were considered successful by research standards.

Today this balance of supply and demand no longer exists. As a result, stringent and sometimes illogical criteria are imposed on couples who wish to adopt. In the absence of objective measures, there is no indication that the selected parents are necessarily better in any way than those couples who have been rejected. As it is practised, the process simplifies the social work role. However, the result of the 'elimination process' is the creation of disappointed people who view themselves as 'substandard'. Thus the needs of many are increased

without the consideration of further intervention. The fact that these couples are offered 'less desirable' children merely complicates this matter.

That this sytem has worked in the past does not suggest that it will work adequately in the future, when changed factors are operant in the adoption field. Because change is perpetual, social work practitioners should be constantly alert to ways in which practice procedures may be validated and improved. When practice procedures are found to be inadequate they must be abandoned before they result in unjust situations. For this reason, a new practice model in adoption work. utilizing validated criteria, has been proposed.

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Notes:

- 1. Carroll, V., 1970, Adoption in Eastern Oceania, Honolulu, Univ. of Hawaii Press, in Gilling, M., Assessment and Placement, in Picton, C.(ed.), Proceedings of First Australian Conference on Adoption, 1976, p.129.
- 2. Idem.
- 3. Idem.
- Bissett-Johnson, A., Unpublished Notes on Adoption Presented to Social Work Students, Leicester Univ., U.K., 1973, p.1.
- 5. Bowlby, J., Child Care and the Growth of Love, Harmondsworth, Pelican Books, 1953, p. 22.

Rutter, M., Maternal Deprivation Reassessed, Harmonosworth, Penguin Books, 1972, p.66.

Goldstein, J., Freud, A. and Solnit, A. J., **Beyond the Best Interests of the Child**, New York, The Free Press, 1973, p.21.

All advocate the desirability of a wanted-child relationship which, they suggest, is not found in most institutions. The lack of such a relationship has been found to result in incomplete emotional development.

- 6. Rowe, J., **Parents, Children** and Adoption, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p.3.
- For example, Kadushin, A., A Follow-up Study of Children Adopted When Older : Criteria of Success, in American J. of Orthopsychiatry, vol. 37, no. 3, April, 1967, pp.530-539 looks at adoption success in children who were placed when of school age.
- 8. Most studies depict a relatively high level of success. Pringle, M.L.K., Adoption Facts and Fallacies, New York, Humanities Press, 1966, p.24, discusses this point and rationalizes the variance in results.
- 9. Ibid., p.28.
- 10. Rowe, J., **Op.cit.**, p.155.
- For example, many of the 11. defence mechanisms, such as counter transfer and reaction formation, may be influential in subjective decisions. See also McGuire, E., The Adoption Process 8 Relationship between Agency and Family, in Picton, 1976, Op. cit., p.104, who suggests that "workers come to decisions about applicants' strengths and weaknesses from many different bases for judgement".
- 12. Adoption of Children Act, Victoria, 1964, S.8.
- 13. Phillips, E. The Victorian Adoption of Children Act 1964, Aust. J. of S.W., 1965, vol. 18, no. 3, p.6.
- 14. Hambly, D., Balancing the Interests of the Child, Parents and Adopters: A Review of Australian Adoption Law, in Picton, 1976, **Op.cit.**, p.77.

- 15. Because this project focuses on the applicant and prospective parents, it acknowledges the needs of the child and his natural parents but will not dwell on them at length.
- 16. Baker, R., The Interpersonal Process, Bundoora, PIT Press, 1976, pp.27-28.
- 17. For a detailed description of phenomena involved in adoption, see Kirk, H.D., Shared Fate, Glencoe, Free Press, 1964.
- Reilly, E.L., Adoptive Parenting, in Picton, 1976, Op.cit., 106.
- 19. Goffman, E., Stigma, Harmondsworth, Pelican Books, 1963, p.18. He discusses this difficulty and suggests that "the immediate presence of normals is likely to reinforce this split between selfdemands and self, but in fact self-hate and self-derogation can also occur when only he and a mirror are about.
- Eck Menning, B., The Infertile Couple : A Plea for Advocacy, in Child Welfare, vol. LIV, no. 6, June 1975, p.454.
- 21. Idem.
- 22. Humphrey, M., 1969, The Hostage Seekers, London, Longmans, Green and Co., in Kraus, J., Expectancy of Fertility After Adoption, Australian Social Worker, vol. 29, no. 2, pp.23--24.
- 23. Victorian Adoption of Children Act, 1964, S.6f, Reg. 29.
- 24. However, general criteria are specified in Section 12 (1) of the above Act.
- 25. Hambly, in Picton, 1976, **Op.cit.**, p.82.
- 26. Ibid., p.79.
- Kadushin, A., Single Parent Adoptions : An Overview and some Relevant Research, Social Service Review, Sept., 1970, pp.263-274. Kadushin advocates a holistic approach

in the evaluation of motivation and need.

- 28. Anglim, E., The Adopted Child's Heritage — Two Parents, Natural Child Welfare, June 1965, p.343. Anglim suggests that the child has a right to his he itage of two natural parents. The adoptive parents, too, may be seen to acquire positive gains from such knowledge. Further, during discussions and knowledge dissemination, the social worker is given the opportunity to evaluate the capacity of the adoptive parents with regard to the moral issues relevant to adoption.
- 29. Taken from lecture notes on Kirk's theory of adoptive relations and McWhinnie, A.M., The Adoptive Family : Identifications and Crises. Paper presented at Symposium C, "Family Crises and Coping Mechanisms", August, 1970, Jerusalem, p.9.
- Boss, P., Welfare Services for Children : An Overview of Recent Developments. Conference paper, Melbourne, 1975, p.23.
- 31. Gilling, M., Assessment and Placement, in Picton, C., 1976, **Op. cit.**, p.125.
- 32. **Ibid.**, p.124.
- 33. In the past, many older and/or incapacitated children remained institutionalized for indefinite periods. They were considered 'unadoptable' and therefore their needs were not met. They were the ignored exceptions to the balanced state.
- Haring, B., Adoptive Trends, 1971-1974, Child Welfare, vol. LIV, no. 7, July 1975, pp.524-525.
- 35. Ibid., p.524.
- Rowe, J., Adoption in a Changing Society, in Picton, C., 1976, **Op.cit.**, p.14.

- 37. This figure was calculated from statistics, supplied by the Presbyterian Babies' Home, April, 1977. The 1975-76 figures were obtained from the Social Welfare Department Annual Report, 1975-76 (Victoria), Table 11, p.63.
- Kraus, J., Historical Context of the Adoption 'Crisis' in New South Wales, Australian Social Work, vol. 29, no. 4, December, 1976, p.19.
- 39. Idem.
- 40. Gilling, M., in Picton, C., 1976, **Op.cit.**, p.126, suggests that 'overweight' has been used as a discriminatory variable.
- 41. Both Rowe, J., 1966, **Op.cit.**, p.170 and Gilling, M., in Picton, C., 1976, **Op.cit.**, p.126, suggests that this is so.
- 42. That is, those physically or mentally retarded children considered undesirable by 'Normal' many adopters. Third World babies have recently been included in this category. No space will be taken here to debate the desirability or otherwise of the practice of inter-country adoption. However, this writer tends to agree in principle with

the arguments put forward by Professor Thomas Malone, Adoption and Crisis in the Third World : Thoughts on the Future, International Child Welfare Review, (International Union for Child Welfare), Geneva, vol. 29, June 1976, pp.20-25.

- 43. Baker, R. and Campbell, M.D., A Model for the Planning and Promotion of Change in Generic Social Work, Monograph, 1976.
- 44. This description should only be seen as a very superficial demonstration of the waxing and waning of needs in adoption.
- 45. For example, they should be told how many applications are received and how long couples might expect to wait.
- Kirk, H.D. quoted in Adoption Counselling A New Approach for Growth, Middelstadt, et al., (1970), Child Adoption, vol. 62, no.4, p.17, in Gilling, M., in Picton, C., 1976, **Op.cit.**, p.125.
- 47. Jacka, A.A., 1973, Adoption in Brief, National Children's Bureau, U.K., p.5, in Gilling,

M., in Picton, C., 1976, **Op.cit.**, p.125.

- 48. McGuire, E., in Picton, C., (ed.), 1976, **Op.cit.**, p.104.
- 49. Davoren, J., Decisions about Adoption — Uses and Abuses of the System, in Picton, C., 1976, **Op.cit.**, p.122. This writer, when discussing the problems of adoption with an applicant, was told that rudeness and inconsideration were experienced at a number of agencies.
- 50. For a discussion of the problems and considerations concerning the decision, see Rowe, J., 1966, **Op.cit.**, pp46-64.
- 51. Goldstein, J., Freud, A. and Solnit, A.J., 1973, **Op.cit.**, pp.17-20.
- 52. For example, administration of his well-being, researcher and caretaker of his history and records, advocate for him to his future parents, facilitator and enabler so that the adoption and transition occurs with ease and lack of trauma, and so on.
- 53. Baker, R., The Multi-Role Practitioner, in Generic Orientation to Social Work Practice, Mimeograph, 1976.

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