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Gender, Money, and the Charity Organization Society: 1900-1919

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GENDER, MONEY, AND THE CHARITY ORGANIZATION SOCIETY

1900-1919

by

SARAH ARNOLD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted to satisfy the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

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Abstract

Gender, Money, and the Charity Organization Society: 1900-1919

by Sarah Arnold

Advisor: Professor Kathleen McCarthy

This project looks at the work of the Charity Organization Society of New York from 1900 until 1919. Using reports, case histories, meeting minutes, and fundraising material, it concentrates on the ways in which the performance of gender intersected with definitions of expertise and access to money in the lives of both the social workers themselves and their clients. It begins with an overview of the Charity Organization Society’s evolution from a largely volunteer charity organization focused on the morality of the poor to an organization that would become key to the development of social work as a profession. Then it looks at the monetary compensation given to early social workers and makes connections between ideas regarding masculinity, femininity, expertise, and professionalism to examine their pay. Thirdly, the paper examines two areas in which early social workers claimed expertise—budgeting and cleanliness—and explores the ways in which these claims were closely related to the proper performance of gender. Lastly, the paper looks closely at interactions between social workers and their clients, paying close attention to the ways in which the proper performance of gender determined the clients’ access to money and the ways in which the clients attempted to resist social workers’ attempts to police their lives. Overall, the paper demonstrates that ideas regarding expertise and gender were key to determining access to money for both social workers and their clients.
Acknowledgments

First of all, I want to thank Professor Kathleen McCarthy for her encouragement and patience during this process, and for helping me to grow immensely as a scholar and write something of which I can be truly proud. Thank you to my mom for always encouraging me and believing in me. To Maggie, for her support, and for putting up with paper and books spread all over the apartment. To Mike, for love and support, and for never believing me when I say I’m not capable of doing something. Finally, to anyone who spent time either discussing my paper with me or reading it. It’s hard to be immersed in a project like this while the rest of the world spins around, and I found that the thoughtful feedback and conversations provided by smart friends were often just what I needed to stay focused and excited. Finally, thank you to my dad, for instilling a love of learning in me that will no doubt make the world forever fascinating.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT .................................................................................................................................................. ii

APPROVAL PAGE ........................................................................................................................................ iii

ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................................................... iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................................................. v

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..................................................................................................................................... vi

INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................................ 1

CHAPTER ONE
   The Charity Organization Society and the Development of a Profession .................................................. 7
   The Early Years ............................................................................................................................................. 7
   The Evolution to Social Work: New ‘Experts’ with Some Old Ideas ......................................................... 12

CHAPTER TWO
   Social Workers, Gender, and the Definition of Expertise ......................................................................... 25

CHAPTER THREE
   Budgeting, Cleanliness, and the Struggle for Expertise in the Home ..................................................... 37

CHAPTER FOUR
   The Clients Assert Their Own Expertise .................................................................................................. 49

CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................................................. 81

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................................................... 86
Introduction

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, members of the Charity Organization Society had something to prove. Settlement workers and other reformers promoted new approaches to fighting poverty that stressed environmental factors and societal change, ideas that differed dramatically from the individualistic approach the COS had long favored. In order to continue to receive support from the public, the society had to fight not to be seen as irrelevant. At the same time, work that the COS had long relegated to volunteers was professionalizing. “Social workers” came to replace “friendly visitors” as a new generation insisted that the men and women who worked with the poor needed an advanced education and deserved a salary.

A fundraising circular from the Buffalo Charity Organization Society was indicative of the organization’s work at the time. Published in 1916, the circular was entitled Ten Tales; Or Salaries versus Relief. The “ten tales” were told with the purpose of justifying a salary for social workers; the circular began “Does it cost a dollar to give a dollar? And service or dollar, which helps more? Read and Decide.”¹ It also justified the COS’s intrusion into clients’ lives while simultaneously asserting that the society was not as cold and unfeeling as it had once been: “If you will read them,” the circular read, referring to its ten stories, “you will see that the Charity Organization Society often helps what are sometimes called unworthy families; and that it gives generously; but it could not give four or five hundred dollars a year to one family, as it sometimes does, if it shut its eyes and asked no questions.”² The theme of the circular was that the paid visitors themselves—the circular specifically said that they were paid—were worth

¹ Frederic Almy, Ten Tales; or Salaries vs. Relief (Buffalo: Charity Organization Society of Buffalo, 1916).
² Ibid.
more in the fight to relieve the poor than any amount of money: “A doctor without medicine is usually worth more than medicine without a doctor,” it read.³

As for the tales themselves, they consisted of deserted wives and neglected children, a “drinking wife,” husbands dying of consumption and a man who lost his legs, among others. The clients’ photographs were included, beginning with a photograph of two young children standing outside a health center, one crying with her fist covering her eye and one picking her nose, possibly intended to demonstrate the filthiness and wretchedness of the poor when left to their own devices. The women were photographed staring plaintively at the camera or into the distance and the men were shown absorbed in work or in their own thoughts. Only children were photographed smiling. Although the photographs and stories were meant to justify the COS’s work, some resistance to their methods could be found even here. One woman lied about the existence of her husband. The COS then tracked him down and forced him to support her. Another client commented that the social workers’ existence depended upon their clients’ plight: “You’d better just remember that if it wasn’t for the likes of us the likes of you would be out of a job.”⁴

This project will seek to tease out the specifics of that relationship—between the professionalizing social workers and the clients whose lives they monitored, between women who were trying to carve out careers and women who were trying to feed their families—through the lens of gender and money. The majority of the social workers who had direct contact with the poor were women. Performing a job that had very recently been primarily the responsibility of volunteers, also mostly women, their salaries depended on their walking a tightrope created by ideas regarding gender. They had to simultaneously prove their expertise in a world that still

³ Frederic Almy, Ten Tales; or Salaries vs. Relief.
⁴ Ibid.
privileged male experts while still claiming ownership over the parts of the job that involved
knowledge traditionally associated with women. Their clients were also walking a tightrope.
Despite their own careers, social workers at the COS valorized the nuclear family and held their
clients to a high standard when it came to domestic responsibilities and motherhood. At the
same time, their class position and the COS’s insistence on self reliance meant that their women
clients were expected to work, particularly if they did not have husbands who could support
them. Both sets of women found their livelihoods affected by societal ambivalence regarding
women’s access to money. They were expected to perform at a high level but they had to
constantly fight to prove that they should be compensated for it.

A lot has been written about social workers at the turn of the century, and about the
Charity Organization Society in particular. However, few scholars have concentrated in great
detail on the relationship between gender and access to money as applied to both the social
workers and their clients. Some have looked at the COS through the lens of gender. In
Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London, Seth Koven discusses gender and the
COS in London, but he focuses more on masculinity and the sexual politics behind approaches to
the poor.\(^5\) In an essay entitled “Valuing Care: Turn-of-the-Century Conflicts Between Charity
Workers and Women Clients,” Emily K. Abel looks at disagreements between the COS and its
clients regarding the hospitalization of family members.\(^6\) Although she concentrates a great deal
on the gendered nature of care, her focus is on poor women’s attitudes toward care giving, and
she has less to say regarding their attitude toward and access to money. Biographies of the
women involved with the COS, notably Joan Waugh’s Unsentimental Reformer: The Life of

\(^6\) Emily K. Abel, “Valuing Care: Turn-of-the-Century Conflicts Between Charity Workers and Women Clients,”
Josephine Shaw Lowell and Elizabeth N. Agnew’s *From Charity to Social Work: Mary E. Richmond and the Creation of an American Profession*, explore the lives of the COS’s few female leaders.\(^7\) Agnew pays some attention to the issue of gender and money by focusing on Richmond’s attitude toward professionalization and in looking at Richmond’s career she discusses some of the work of the rank-and-file women who had contact with the poor. Richmond came from a modest background and worked her way up in the COS; however, her career trajectory was exceptional and, while Agnew’s work will be useful for this project, her focus is on Richmond’s attitudes and she does not pay as much attention to the intersection of gender and money in the lives of other women in the COS or in the lives of the organization’s clients.

Scholars who focus on working class women or the history of aid for the poor have looked closely at other charity or reform organizations of this time period, with some examining the work of the COS in particular. Linda Gordon’s *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare*, Vivian Zelizer’s *The Social Meaning Money* and Sarah Deutsch’s *Women and the City: Gender, Space and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* all use the case records of charity organizations at the turn of the century to examine gender dynamics.\(^8\) Zelizer and Deutsch’s work will be particularly useful for this project. Deutsch looks at the ways in which both charity


workers and their clients negotiated space in the city as they attempted to map out their lives. Although ideas regarding gender are interwoven throughout her book, this project seeks to make more clear connections between access to money and the performance of gender—whether that is through the ways in which the COS clients constructed their families or the ways in which COS social workers presented themselves as professionals. Zelizer more clearly connects the performance of gender to access to money. This project seeks to add to her analysis of earmarking and the “social life of money” to look specifically at the ways in which claims to expertise intersect with ideas about gender to affect access to money.  

Chapter 1 of this paper examines the evolution of the Charity Organization Society in the first two decades of the twentieth century and makes the case for the importance of looking at the intersection of money and gender within this organization at this specific point in time. Chapter 2 concentrates on the social workers and friendly visitors themselves, and the ways in which they needed to assert their expertise in order to access monetary compensation for their work. Chapter 3 looks at two areas in which the social workers claimed special expertise—cleanliness and budgeting—and makes the case that the performance of gender was key to both their claims to expertise on these subjects and the ways in which these claims played out in their clients’ lives. Finally, chapter 4 uses case studies and meeting minutes to look at the interactions between the social workers or friendly visitors and their clients, paying close attention to examples of resistance from the clients and points of contention related to the performance of gender, claims of expertise, and access to money.

In Joan Wallach Scott’s Gender and the Politics of History, she calls for historians concerned with gender to move beyond simply describing what men and women did during a

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9 Zelizer, The Social Meaning of Money, 4.
typical time period. The interactions between social workers and their clients in the Charity Organization Society in the early twentieth century provide countless examples of Scott’s description of gender as a “way of signifying relations of power.”\textsuperscript{10} The stakes were high as both groups of men and women interacted with each other in complicated ways and vied for access to money and resources. Far from being incidental, gender was key to establishing who would be able to secure money that could mean anything from professional prestige to the difference between life and death.

\textsuperscript{10} Joan Wallach Scott, \textit{Gender and the Politics of History} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 42.
Chapter 1

The Charity Organization Society and the Development of a Profession

Early Years

We belong to a soft age—ah! how different from that in which our fathers were nourished and bred—and that flaccid quality of our national fibre, in which, I think, no thoughtful mind to-day can fail to see great perils to the commonwealth and nation, runs all through.
—Reverend H.C. Potter in a speech given at the 1887 annual meeting of the New York City Charity Organization Society

Gender was key to the Charity Organization Society from its beginnings, as the leaders of the society both stressed their “tough love” approach to poverty and the moral “uplift” provided by the influence of Victorian “ladies” focused on the proper construction of one’s home.

Founded in London in 1869, the original purpose of the charity organization movement was not to provide aid, but to coordinate relief-giving agencies located throughout a city. The movement first came to the United States in 1877, when a branch was founded in Buffalo, NY, and grew rapidly from there. The New York City Charity Organization Society was founded five years later, in 1882, and by 1892, there were ninety-two societies located throughout the country.11

Other than pensions for civil war veterans, the United States had yet to implement even modest centralized social safety net programs.12 Services for the poor were provided by a mix of public and private sources, with little coordination between differing organizations, which allowed the poor to gather resources from a variety of charities. In the meantime, increasing industrialization, urbanization, and the economic crashes of the 1870s and 1890s brought questions of inequality.

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12 Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992). In Protecting Soldiers and Mothers, Skocpol calls the civil war benefits the “paternalist welfare state” and marks them as the beginning of centralized social safety net programs in the United States.
and poverty to the public’s attention. Charity organization leaders were particularly concerned with the preponderance of indiscriminate “outdoor” relief; that is, relief that was given to the poor outside of institutions and without any investigation into the recipients’ situation.

While their quest to organize and coordinate services for the poor was motivated by their desire to ensure that none of their recipients were procuring aid from more than one source or otherwise being dishonest about their financial situation (they stressed again and again the need to fight “pauperism”), it is also important to note that the COS was formed at a time when the dispersal of public benefits was often blatantly partisan. Epitomized by the notorious Tammany Hall and William Marcy “Boss” Tweed in New York City, political machines in American cities at the time of the COS’s founding dispensed welfare benefits or jobs to the poor, largely immigrants, in exchange for their votes. COS leaders were appalled by this state of affairs, and the corrupting influence they believed it had on American democracy. Despite the material help this form of patronage may have provided for poor immigrants, reformers observed that the benefits bestowed were dwarfed by the amounts lost to corruption and that machines also failed to truly ameliorate poverty.\textsuperscript{13} These benefits were also episodic: “money for a casket to a bereaved widow; a cousin sprung from jail; a food shipment to an orphanage.”\textsuperscript{14} However, while machine politics were often corrupt, it was also rational for the urban poor to look for and appreciate help from party bosses. As historian Theda Skocpol notes, they were often “the only authorities in the United States who responded sympathetically and concretely to the problems of unemployment.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Waugh, \textit{Unsentimental Reformer}, 106.
\textsuperscript{14} Skocpol, \textit{Protecting Soldiers and Mothers}, 97.
\textsuperscript{15} Skocpol, \textit{Protecting Soldiers and Mothers}, 100.
When it came to both public and private aid, the greatest evil that the Charity Organization Society saw in existing forms of aid was the fact that it was “indiscriminate.” In the eyes of the COS, “indiscriminate” aid was given without any attempt to differentiate between recipients; they feared that men who had deserted their families would be treated the same as those who were trying to support them, and that men and women who made efforts to support themselves would be treated the same as those who did not. In order to ameliorate this, investigation lay at the core of the COS’s philosophy and remained so even as the organization evolved.

A charity organization’s jurisdiction was divided into districts. Each district would be responsible for investigating and, if deemed appropriate, tending to the poor who requested their assistance or were brought to their attention. Once a family was brought under the COS’s wing, the respective district would dispatch a “friendly visitor” who would examine the client’s home life to determine if they were worthy of aid and, if so, what that aid should look like. The emphasis was on moral reform and “advice” far more than on material aid. In a speech given at the New York COS’s annual meeting in February of 1888 and recorded in that year’s annual report, president Robert W. de Forest summed up the organization’s philosophy: “We have been accused of collecting a large sum from the public and spending it all for organization and not at all for charity,” he stated. “That is so, if by charity is meant nothing more than material relief, money, free soup and free groceries; but if by charity is meant the ‘alms of direction and good advice,’ then we spend it all for charity.”

Often this advice focused on the ways in which the COS’s clients constructed their family lives, as friendly visitors instructed their clients how to be “proper” wives, mothers, fathers, and husbands.

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The majority of the friendly visitors in the first few decades of the organization’s existence were volunteers. Although many were well off and most were at least middle class, they were not necessarily among the most elite members of society; Waugh quotes historian David Hammack on the fact that of the forty-three officers and directors of the COS in 1892, only one had been invited to Mrs. Astor’s ball for the “400.” The bulk of the organization’s leadership came from a sect of well-off Americans who were not necessarily members of “society” but who were comfortable and had long been involved in reform movements. The leadership of the organization, with the notable exception of women such as Josephine Shaw Lowell and Zilpha Smith, was predominantly male. Lowell was unique as the female founder and leader of the New York Charity Organization Society and according to Waugh, she intentionally chose men for the society’s other leadership roles because she saw the business and philanthropic communities, which were dominated by men, as her best chance for funding. However, Lowell also acknowledged that her foot soldiers were mostly women, as they were far more likely than their male counterparts to volunteer to have direct contact with the poor.

Beyond the gender break down of its workers and volunteers, the COS was formed at a time of profound anxiety regarding gender roles and the “toughness” historically associated with masculinity—an anxiety possibly reflected in the quote cited earlier from Reverend H.C. Potter. Potter was speaking at a time when women were demanding political representation and one of the clearest distinctions men could still hold onto—that of their ability and willingness to fight in a war—was becoming less important. The much-valorized Civil War generation was dying off and a new generation was coming of age in the years before the United States would begin asserting its military dominance through explicitly imperialist adventures. In her book *Fighting*

17 Waugh, *Unsentimental Reformer*, 159.
For American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars, Kristin L. Hoganson makes the argument that these tensions meant that men, more than ever before, felt compelled to protect their status as political actors. While she concentrates the most on men’s need to differentiate themselves from women, she also asserts that men felt the need to differentiate themselves from anyone deemed weak; she states that at one point many men believed that “the kind of character” needed for someone to be able to wield political power “should be defined in contrast to old age as well as to women, savagery and childhood.”

Although the reformers active in the Charity Organization Society differed a great deal from the war-mongering jingoes that Hoganson concentrates on, it is worth noting that they were working at a time when the need to differentiate politically powerful men from the weak was taking on an increased importance.

Whatever their relationship to gender, early charity organization proponents saw themselves as leaders in a dramatic change in the ways in which poverty would be handled, finally bringing it the level of efficiency they deemed necessary to serve the “worthy” poor, distinguish them from the “unworthy,” and extinguish the evils of pauperism once and for all. In The Professional Altruist, Roy Lubove describes the zeal with which adherents to the charity organization philosophy saw their work:

They viewed themselves as exponents of a holy cause, priests lighting a path to secular salvation. Charity organization was a crusade to save the city from itself and from the evils of pauperism and class antagonism.

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20 Lubove, The Professional Altruist, 5
In later years, the “crusade” evolved to one much more rooted in the pursuit of expertise and professionalism, with the quest to fight the “evils of pauperism” tempered by an acknowledgement of factors behind the “pauper’s” control.

The Evolution to Social Work: New ‘Experts’ with Some Old Ideas

“These allied-activities of the new social reform have caught on and, as it were, assimilated many of the old-established agencies for relieving individual distress and misfortune. The hospital is no longer merely a refuge for the sick but also a health center. From it radiates prevention and educational influences as important as the bedside ministrations to the sick. The orphan asylum is no longer a place to keep a few orphans alive, but a child-welfare station, in which the whole problem of organizing the educational, moral, economic and recreational life of the child may be studied, in some respects even better than in the necessarily more complex home life.”
—Edward Devine, general secretary of the COS, and Mary van Kleec, introduction to *Positions in Social Work: A Study of the Number, Salaries, Experience and Qualifications of Professional Workers in Unofficial Social Agencies in New York City*, 1916

Edward Devine and Mary van Kleec’s quotation regarding orphanages is useful in understanding the ways in which the changes that the Charity Organization Society underwent at the beginning of the twentieth century intersected with the organization’s approach to gender and the construction of families. These changes were twofold. First, COS members began to look for social causes for poverty, no longer blaming solely the individual actions of the poor. Thanks in part to the dramatic reach of the panic of 1893 and subsequent depression, it became harder to argue that poverty could not be caused by factors beyond an individual’s control, and newer movements to address poverty, such as the social settlements, focused a great deal on social factors. Secondly, the COS at the turn of the century was heavily involved in the development of social work as a profession, and with that came an increasing emphasis on the development of expertise and the use of evidence-based techniques in aiding the poor.
In their description of the ways in which the “new social reform” delved into studying the ways of the poor, Devine and van Kleeck made the assumption that there could be a neutral place—in this case, the orphanage—to study a child without the “complexities of home life.” For the members of the COS, the orphanage was an environment they could control. One can surmise that at the orphanage, a child would be in the hands of professionals of Devine and van Kleeck’s class, while the child’s “complex” home life would probably be with working class, possibly immigrant, parents. They also implied that there was a neutral child, one that could be studied in its pure state if left in the care of middle or upper class professionals. The child’s parents—probably working class and possibly immigrants—were framed as potential problems in the child’s life to be assessed by child care professionals for the ways in which they could “complicate” the life of their child. As was the case in many COS writings of the time period, the objectivity that Devine and van Kleeck advocated masked an ideological view of families, class, and childhood.

This is not imply that all of the COS’s work in this time period was focused on social control and assessing the fitness of families. Although the core of their strategy for working with the poor remained their social casework, the COS’s interest in the social factors behind poverty drew the organization into addressing a number of recurring ills that its members observed among their clients. Tuberculosis was one of the most prominent. Mary Richmond at one point argued that fighting the disease would be more useful than giving direct aid to widows with children, pointing to a study she had conducted in which one-third of the nine-hundred eighty-five widows she looked at had lost their husbands to tuberculosis.21 In 1902, the COS founded the Committee on the Prevention of Tuberculosis and later helped launch the National

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21 Agnew, From Charity to Social Work, 120-121.
Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis.\textsuperscript{22} Around the same time, the founder of the New York COS, Josephine Shaw Lowell, became involved in the labor movement, lending her support to various labor causes and co-founding the Consumers’ League of the City of New York.\textsuperscript{23} In their introduction to their study \textit{Positions in Social Work}, Devine and van Kleeck listed the myriad initiatives that the charity workers found themselves supporting:

The change is revolutionary and complete. Almost as a matter of course workers in philanthropic activities now sympathize with wage-earners in all lawful, and perhaps in some technically unlawful, attempts to improve their condition. They recognize the absolute necessity of protecting and whenever possible raising general standards of living. They oppose child labor and a seven-day week. They are apt to go beyond labor union themselves in favoring minimum wage laws. They have worked for compensation legislation and are getting ready for sickness and old age insurance.\textsuperscript{24}

It is worth stepping back and thinking about this quote within the context of gender and money. Conspicuously missing, given the date that the essay was written, was the idea of pensions for poor widows with children, an idea that state after state adopted during the 1910s. The philanthropic workers’ sympathy lay with “wage-earners.” Although women worked for wages in high numbers, their work as mothers did not demand the same protections afforded an older or sick worker. Nor would most of these reforms apply to the piecemeal home work that many of them took in, the positions as janitors they held for free rent, or the work they did to house lodgers whose rent payments helped them make ends meet. All three scenarios were incredibly common among women of the time period.

\textsuperscript{22} While tuberculosis was surely a disease that affected thousands and needed addressing, the COS’s emphasis on the disease cannot be entirely separated from the organization’s policing of the family lives of the poor. As will be explored later in this paper, charity workers often associated the illness with defects in the sick person’s family life or character.

\textsuperscript{23} Agnew, \textit{From Charity to Social Work}, 26.

The omission of widow’s pensions is consistent with the COS’s stance at the time, as the organization officially opposed the idea, at least the idea that such assistance would come from the state. In her biography of Mary Richmond, Elizabeth Agnew discusses Richmond’s opposition to mothers’ pensions, as well as her support for old age, health, and unemployment insurance. She states that Richmond “distinguished health insurance from ‘hand-outs.’” She opposed the latter because they could be pocketed, and they carried no guarantee of ‘effective living.’ In contrast, she saw insurance as a ‘gift’ that would ‘release energy instead of crippling it.’”

She also notes that Richmond opposed widows’ pensions for their potential to denigrate the nuclear family. While the pensions were meant to keep families together, Richmond feared that they would allow women to rely less on traditional family structures. Agnew quotes the reformer on campaigns for “state-aided motherhood” in England that would mean that children were raised “quite independent of the family and of family limitations” and says that Richmond viewed this possibility as a “grave danger to our civilization.” Similarly, a memorandum by W. Frank Persons on the COS’s position on widows’ pensions in 1912 included fear mongering regarding the recipients’ sexuality; the statement asserted that widows who received pensions would be in danger of being taken advantage of by “the prey of unscrupulous and designing men” and that conditions would be more favorable to “illicit relations” than remarriage.

Members of the COS were clearly worried that the pensions would make it more difficult for case workers to assert their own authority, as the memorandum also warned that widows’ pensions could encourage the “recognized danger” of a male lodger living with a widow, even

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26 Agnew, *From Charity to Social Work*, 125.
27 W. Frank Persons, “A Serious Step Backward: Memorandum Concerning the Bill (No. 146) introduced in the Assembly by Mr. Schifferdecker,” (New York: Charity Organization Society of New York, 1912).
when accompanied by “the close supervision that accompanies the administration of modern organized charity.”

Key to this debate was the concept of “rights” versus “needs” in aid offered to the poor, and the ways in which these concepts were related to gender and access to money, in this case money in the form of aid. Richmond believed that widows’ pensions, if they were to be used, should be fulfilling a “need” and not a “right.” Widows would have to prove that “need” in order to qualify for them, and would not be given more than they required to fulfill that need. On top of encouraging female breadwinners, Agnew notes that Richmond was afraid that public widows’ pensions would disincentive widows from relying on family members whose good character may have had a positive effect on their life. She quotes from a letter written by Richmond to a charity organization colleague, in which she described a case involving a widow with a “very bad background.” The widow’s pension allowed the widow to reject offers of aid and housing from her late husband’s family, who Richmond said were of “excellent” and “decent” “stock.” Richmond lamented that this pension kept the children—she appeared to be more concerned with their well being than that of the mother—with the relative with the “poorest heredity.” By treating the pension as fulfilling a “need” rather than a “right” and by keeping its implementation in private hands, Richmond would have been able to overrule the woman’s own wishes and the children would have been reunited with the family members she believed were better for their well-being. However, from the perspective of the well being of the widow, the

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28 W. Frank Persons, “A Serious Step Backward: Memorandum Concerning the Bill (No. 146) introduced in the Assembly by Mr. Schifferdecker.”
29 Linda Gordon explores the concept of “rights” versus “need” in aid to the poor in detail in chapter 3 of *Pitied But Not Entitled*.
31 Agnew, *From Charity to Social Work*, 124.
availability of public monetary aid without strings attached allowed her to live the way she preferred, and to stay in the city where she was already living.

The idea of mothers’ pensions—deserted wives and other single mothers would also become candidates—caught on and eventually forty-six states implemented some version of the program.\textsuperscript{32} Although it may seem as if advocates for widows’ and mothers’ pensions fully won the fight and although the programs did legitimize public aid in an important way, the ultimate implementation of the pensions reflected a great deal of charity organizers’ attitudes. Gordon sums this up well, stating: “The smallness and cheapness of the programs guaranteed that they would not threaten private charities, and they left discretion in determining who was deserving and in supervising recipients to social workers who often came from private charities.”\textsuperscript{33} Mothers who received the pensions had to first be deemed “able and willing to keep good homes,” they often had to fill out lengthy applications and they were supervised, sometimes by the very charity organizations who opposed the program, while they were receiving the aid.\textsuperscript{34} Despite her conservative stance on the issue, Richmond herself actually fought one of the stipulations of the aid in many states, which was that the recipient could not work outside the home more than one day a week.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, despite the fact that the intention, according to Skocpol, was for the aid to be “honorable and adequate, a predictable salary of sorts,” the amounts given often did not

\textsuperscript{32} Gordon, \textit{Pitted But Not Entitled}, 37.
\textsuperscript{33} Gordon, \textit{Pitted But Not Entitled}, 62.
\textsuperscript{34} Skocpol, \textit{Protecting Soldiers and Mothers}, 465.
\textsuperscript{35} Agnew, \textit{From Charity to Social Work}, 125-126. Agnew explains that Richmond was both concerned that the pensions would not cover the widows’ living costs without additional work and feared that immigrants in particular would grow “restless under ‘the nervous strain’ of enforced home keeping.” It is important to note that the latter point still does not tell us how the women themselves felt about working outside the home versus tending to their children. As will be explored later in this paper, COS workers often attempted to convince poor, immigrant women to work even when it meant institutionalizing their children and even when the women themselves clearly stated that they would rather stay at home.
come close to covering the cost of living for a family.\textsuperscript{36} Agnew breaks down the numbers, stating that social workers estimated that a family of four needed between $700 and $850 annually, and that most mothers’ pensions provided less than $240.\textsuperscript{37}

Aside from participating heavily in the debate over widow’s pensions, the Charity Organization Society’s work was key to some of the most influential institutions in the development of social work in this time period. The COS founded the School of Philanthropy in 1898 as a six-week course in charity casework. It would later become the first school of social work in the country and exists today as the Columbia School of Social Work. Students at the School of Philanthropy in the first decades of the twentieth century gained practical experience through one of the many Charity Organization Society districts throughout the city. Through the school, the COS was also heavily involved in the debate over the importance of theory versus practical training in the education of social workers, as the leadership at the school repeatedly disagreed and struggled over this balance. This debate concerned the allocation of a substantial amount of resources, as people with power and money became more interested in funding the study and development of social casework. In 1909, Mary Richmond was asked to head the new Charity Organization Department of the Russell Sage Foundation, an endeavor funded by Olivia Sage, widow of the railroad magnate and politician Russell Sage, and dedicated to research, education, and legislation on social problems such as poverty, disease, and crime. In her new position, Richmond used the organization’s considerable resources toward the development of standards for social casework. In the meantime, as Gordon points out, the Russell Sage Foundation subsidized the actual work of scientific charity and casework, contributing $5.8 million to private agencies between 1907 and 1931. Also at this time, the Russell Sage

\textsuperscript{36} Skocpol, \textit{Protecting Soldiers and Mothers}, 467.
\textsuperscript{37} Agnew, \textit{From Charity to Social Work}, 125.
Foundation began to fund *Charities and Commons*, the most important journal in social work, and renamed it *Survey*. Further pointing to the emphasis on developing expertise, the early years of social work saw copious amounts of surveys and papers written about the poor and approaches to poverty; Gordon asserts that “Doing social surveys became so common that it could be called a social movement.”

Of course, the Charity Organization Society of New York was not a monolith, and at times conflicts or differing opinions within the organization revealed the ways in which jobs in the organization were gendered. A series of letters from 1913 between Frank Bruno, the superintendent of the central office, and a number of district secretaries further illuminates the changes in the charity organization movement during this time period while also revealing an internal push and pull between COS workers with varying levels of power in the organization. The letters were written regarding changes to the “face card” to record information on the society’s clients. The idea was to create a standardized form that all caseworkers could use and then share among themselves in order to keep better track of their cases.

The gender break down of this interaction was in many ways indicative of the gender make up of the society in general; Bruno, a man, held the position of power in the central office and all of the district secretaries, who he reached out to because they had worked more closely with clients and had done more of the day-to-day work of visiting the poor, were women. At least one district secretary, Caroline Goodyear, stressed the power dynamics of the situation in her letter. Although there is no way to know whether she was being sincere or playing politics, Goodyear, who incidentally wrote her own comprehensive report on case studies in 1912,

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38 Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, 170. She goes on to estimate that 2,775 surveys were completed by 1927.
39 The letters regarding the face cards are found in Box 91 of the Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
apologized for her potentially “burdensome” correspondence and for being “unduly argumentative” in her previous responses. Although she had a number of suggestions regarding the card, she ended by downplaying her contribution and adopting a subservient stance, stating “Please do not feel obligated to reply to all of this in detail even if you don’t agree with any of it.”\(^{40}\) Even if she was intentionally exaggerating her gratitude for having Bruno’s ear, she was clearly aware of the power dynamics between the two of them.

In the rest of the correspondence between Bruno and the district secretaries, two points of contention come up repeatedly. For one, many of the district secretaries took issue with the category “moral defects,” questioning its usefulness and bringing up its potential for harm. It is clear from these letters that both Bruno and the district secretaries were acutely aware of the history of moral judgment of the poor by the Charity Organization Society, and were attempting to determine where their work fell within that history. Bruno’s response to a woman referred to as Miss Fulton, one of the district secretaries, summed up his thinking on the issue, and why he thought it should be included. “Every one who has seen this card hits this point,” he wrote. “I am not at all sure it will be retained. On the other hand, my reason for putting it in is that it is important. Granting that too great an emphasis was placed by the early workers in charity on moral defects does not warrant their total exclusion as has been the method recently.”\(^{41}\) He then went on to list the moral defects that the society should record—drunkenness, sexual immorality, indolence, refusal to contribute, and criminal record.

It is clear from Bruno’s assertion “as has been the method recently,” that the COS leadership in 1913 was at least under the impression that the organization had moved away from

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\(^{40}\) Caroline Goodyear to Frank Bruno, 9 August 1913, Box 91, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

\(^{41}\) Frank Bruno to Miss Fulton, 15 July 1913, Box 91, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
moral judgments of the poor. Given that they had closer contact with COS clients, it should not be surprising that the district secretaries were more aware than the central office that moral defects were not “easily defined.” Many of them expressed concern that the inclusion of the category would cause future case workers to make unfair judgments about their clients, suggesting that they may have seen and disapproved of colleagues jumping to conclusions when it came to clients. However, their concern regarding the permanence of “moral defects” was not simply based on the idea that they should not be making those sort of judgments about their clients or that this information was irrelevant to their work. Instead, they appeared to have been more concerned about the lack of standardization in defining “moral defects.”

Elizabeth Follow, another district secretary, wrote to Bruno that the inclusion of moral defects in an assessment of clients “sometimes leads to a hasty classification which would be harmful to the applicant,” reflecting the views of a number of the district secretaries that the listing of moral defects could cause future workers to develop unfair prejudices about their clients.42 However, her next sentence is also telling, as she wrote that “moral defects can only be properly estimated by careful reading of an entire record.”43 In fact, most of the district secretaries were concerned that the process by which one determined moral defects was not scientific or standardized enough. When Bruno summed up the face card discussion and the points still to be discussed in a letter to district secretaries at the end of the year, he wrote, “and in regard to so-called ‘moral defects’ would it not be well for an established standard to be agreed upon beforehand so that if inebriety or idleness be used against a wage earner’s name it

42 Elizabeth Follow to Frank Bruno, 23 July 1913, Box 91, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
43 Ibid.
shall mean the same in all districts.” In an earlier discussion regarding face cards in 1910, Bruno had written that moral defects should only be recorded for “those which constitute a permanent disability and, unless apparent, have been diagnosed by a physician,” reflecting the society’s increasing interest in conferring legitimacy on their work through science and the medical field.

Many historians have discussed the COS’s emphasis on standardizing treatment at this time. In *The Professional Altruist*, Roy Lubove makes the assertion that as people more broadly began to accept that there were societal reasons for poverty that were out of the control of the poor, charity workers could not assert their moral superiority merely by virtue of their class. Instead, he argues, “a new relationship had to justify interference in their (the clients) eyes” and, in the eyes of the charity and social workers, scientific and professional “expertise” filled this role. As is apparent in the debate over “moral defects” on the face card, the appeal to “expertise” did not serve to completely eliminate the charity workers’ old tendency to moralize. At times, it instead served to obscure and, in doing so, further legitimize old habits of moralizing. As will be shown later in this paper, this tendency toward wanting to standardize what had once been defined as “moral” judgments is key to understanding the ways in which COS workers justified policing the gender performance of their client and using their clients’ performance of gender to determine their access to aid.

The second most often cited complaint regarding the face cards was more directly related to gender: the matter of the use of the word “family.” The majority of the district secretaries that
Bruno corresponded with suggested the use of the word “household” instead. In fact, outside of the questions they brought up regarding “moral defects,” most of the district secretaries’ concerns in general revolved around how to define families. There was a disagreement over whether to include information on previous husbands and wives, as well as discussion regarding the family status of married children. In one letter, Bruno commented, regarding the matter of extra space to include relatives’ information, “It is interesting to note how many District Secretaries have made the same recommendations.” The district secretaries felt that “family” was insufficient to explain the “households” their clients lived in primarily because so many of the households’ members did not fit the traditional definition of family, whether they were boarders, guests, or other people sharing a living space who were not related by blood. This is key because at the time they were writing, much of the Charity Organization Society’s rhetoric concentrated on the preservation of the nuclear family. The district secretaries here were not discounting that as important—Goodyear was insistent that it was “positively objectionable to include unrelated boarders, lodgers, guests, or servants in the word family”—but they clearly observed that their clients did not live in traditional family arrangements.48

The back and forth of the face card debate was indicative of the COS at the time. While they noted the way in which something as vague as a “moral” judgment may cloud their work, the COS workers did not question the necessity of making those sorts of calls regarding their clients and even sought new ways to justify their judgments. Furthermore, as Goodyear’s quote regarding the use of the word “family” shows, they observed that their clients’ households did not always conform with their preconceived ideas of what a “family” looked like while still

47 Frank Bruno to Miss Concord, 30 October 1913, Box 91, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
48 Caroline Goodyear to Frank Bruno, 9 August 1913, Box 91, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
hanging onto many of the ideals and ideological baggage associated with that word. In looking at the COS’s work at the intersection of money and gender, it is important to keep these contradictions in mind.

In an earlier exchange regarding face cards, this time in 1911, one district secretary, Edith Young, commented that it was her understanding that the face cards should only include matters that would be “useful in every treatment, the really permanent ones and the ones like new addresses, which can bear the date of entry.” She asserted that “the matters of occupation, wages and school have never seemed to come under either of these heads.” Young’s letter demonstrates the ways in which clients’ family lives were seen as indicative of a clients’ personality and situation in a way that occupation, wages, and school—three areas that undoubtedly would have determined their clients’ access to money—did not. Despite the fact that families were constantly changing due to desertion, death, marriage, and any number of other factors, members of the Charity Organization Society clearly believed that matters of one’s family and performance of gender unquestionably did fall under the guise of facts that would be “useful in every treatment.” As the COS moved from a moral to a “scientific” and “expert” framework, their gendered prescriptions did not abate. Instead, they were often given the veneer of scientific and “expert” advice, something that became even more necessary as the social workers increasingly sought respect and compensation for their work.

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49 Edith Young to W. Frank Persons, 3 June 1911, Box 91, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
50 Ibid.
Chapter 2

Social Workers, Gender and the Definition of Expertise

In order to abide by the principles of investigation and classification that guided social workers during this time period, the Charity Organization Society and its peer organizations needed labor. Someone had to visit the poor, reach out to relatives and neighbors, coordinate with hospitals, courts and competing organizations, teach budgeting classes, and ensure that clear and concise notes were kept about each case. Furthermore, if the organization was going to rely on research to make sure that it was constantly improving upon its tactics, someone had to conduct that research, someone had to write it up, and someone had to make sure that it was shared with the appropriate people. The professionalization of social work brought up a number of questions related to the labor performed by social workers, nearly all of which were informed by the intersection of gender and expertise. Should the women who “visited” with the poor be paid social workers or volunteers? If they were to be paid, how much money should they make? What kind of “expertise” should they have and how should they go about acquiring it? At the same time social workers were using gendered definitions of “expertise” to determine their clients’ access to money, the relationship between gender and the performance of expertise affected their own incomes.

Women such as Zilpha Smith and Mary Richmond held high profile leadership roles and women in general were better represented in social work than in many other fields of the time. In her biography of Richmond, Agnew summed up the influence of women in social work, pointing out that the New York School of Philanthropy hired eight men and five woman as instructors for the first years of their summer school programs, and an equal number of men and women on the faculty from 1912 to 1929. However, her analysis (she quotes historian Clarke Chambers stating
that social work was a “unique example of a profession created by an equal partnership of women and men working in coalition”) is a bit too optimistic. While women did hold leadership roles, the work of the emerging field was still more often than not divided by gender. Crucially, women held most of the jobs that involved direct contact with clients, jobs that were usually the most poorly paid in the profession. These were the jobs that most closely resembled that of the “friendly visitor,” a role that had just recently been held primarily by volunteers. Linda Gordon sums up the change in her book Heroes of their Own Lives, stating that in the Progressive Era: “‘Scientific’ charity wanted no sentimental, muddle-headed ladies dispensing alms, but tough-minded men engaged in long-range vision and strategies.”

In 1916, Edward Devine and Mary van Kleeck published a report for the New York School of Philanthropy and the Intercollegiate Bureau of Occupations entitled Positions in Social Work: A Study of the Number, Salaries, Experience and Qualifications of Professional Workers in Unofficial Social Agencies in New York City. The idea was to better understand the ways in which professionalization played out in the pay and training expectations of the four thousand women and men who were employed in private sector social work in New York City. Although not focused on the COS exclusively, the report illustrated the ways in which jobs in the emerging field of social work were gendered. The report’s authors defined social work as an “organized effort to remove the causes of poverty that are known to be removable, and through research and experimentation to develop a better understanding and a more skillful handling of all the

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51 Agnew, From Charity to Social Work, 161-162.
conditions which check the development of wholesome community life.”\textsuperscript{54} Three hundred and seventy-one organizations fell under that definition and were willing to share worker and salary information. The report included both those who worked directly with the poor and those who conducted research and advocated on their behalf.

In 1916, as the report makes clear, the public did not yet unquestionably accept the necessity of paying social workers. The report’s authors wrote that “the man on the street thinks of a salary budget in a charitable society as an unwelcome subtraction from the donations of money for the poor” and that while he may see value in someone differentiating between the worthy and unworthy poor, “the real task of the social worker is unknown to him.”\textsuperscript{55} Charity Organization Society circulars and letters to newspapers from the time period also reflected this reality. When describing the work of the organization beyond providing direct assistance to the poor, this literature often began by acknowledging that some did not see monetary value in it and self-consciously pointing out why these critics were wrong, similar to the circular from Buffalo which began “Does it cost a dollar to give a dollar? And service or dollar, which helps more? Read and Decide.”\textsuperscript{56} The charity workers also dealt with criticism and scrutiny from the press regarding the ways in which they spent their money. For instance, in an article written in 1916 entitled “Charity: Its Uses and Abuses,” William J. Gaynor accused the charities of the city of New York of collecting $19,400,000 annually that did not ultimately make it into the hands of the poor.\textsuperscript{57} The COS, for their part, wrote an article in response calling his accusations “wilder

\textsuperscript{56} Frederic Almy, \textit{Ten Tales or Salaries Vs Relief}.
\textsuperscript{57} William J. Gaynor, “Charity: Its Uses and Abuses,” \textit{New York Sunday Sun}, 29 April, 1913.
than the wildest in this day of extravagant statements” and pointed to the many paid workers who were needed to make charities successful. \(^{58}\)

While social work was a growing field, more than half of the social work organizations surveyed employed fewer than five paid workers, suggesting that most of the organizations cited in the report were very small or depended a great deal on volunteers. Nearly all, 334, employed less than twenty-five workers, while only thirty-four employed more than that. \(^{59}\) In terms of gender, more than double the number of women worked in social work than men (2,857 women, compared to 1,111 men). The institutions for children or the aged, working girls’ boarding houses, homes for temporary relief, or institutions for the defective that were included in the report employed 615 women and only 186 men. Similarly, 1,989 women worked in occupations classified as “Other Work with Individuals,” a category which included settlement work, relief societies, and agencies, while 677 men did. The gender breakdown in the “Community Movements” category, which included research and the development of propaganda, was much more even, with 253 women working in this field and 248 men. \(^{60}\)

Social work overall did not pay very well. The authors compared social work pay unfavorably to teaching and public relief work, two professions that they asserted matched the “responsibility and difficulty” of social work. \(^{61}\) Interestingly, these were also two professions that attracted a comparatively large number of women. Within social work, the majority of women earned modest wages and, while many men did as well, many more men than women ended up in the highest paid positions. Of the women workers who contributed to the report, fifty-nine percent earned less than $1,000 annually, while only thirty-three percent of the men

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\(^{58}\) The Charity Organization Society, “Charities and Critics,” Saturday Evening Post, 3 May, 1913.

\(^{59}\) Devine and van Kleeck, Positions in Social Work, 23.

\(^{60}\) Ibid, 18.

\(^{61}\) Devine and van Kleeck, Positions in Social Work, 41.
did. The median salary range for women was between $800 and $1,000 while for men it was between $1,500 and $1,600.\textsuperscript{62} One in five of the women made less than $700 a year, an amount which was designated by at least one society quoted in the report as the “lowest living income” acceptable for their workers.\textsuperscript{63} While many social work leaders stressed the importance of advanced education, a college education did much more for the men cited in the report in social work than it did for the women. The median salary for college-educated women was between $1,000 to $1,200 a year, not very much higher than the $900 to $1,000 a year men without college education made or, for that matter, not significantly higher than what women without college educations made. Men with college education, on the other hand, had a median salary of between $2,000 and $2,200 a year.\textsuperscript{64}

This was at least in part accounted for by the jobs held by women in social work. As stated earlier, women held more of the jobs that involved direct work with individuals. Forty-three percent of women who worked with individuals and did not receive maintenance received less than $800 annually, and twenty-nine percent earned between $1,000 and $1,600. In contrast, of the 115 women working in the community movements category, which included research and propaganda and less direct contact with poor individuals, only three earned less than $800 a year. Of the men and women interviewed for the survey whose salaries did not include maintenance, only five men in institutional work returned salary information, and their salaries ranged from $600 to $1,600. Meanwhile, the men who worked in general research or propaganda earned a

\textsuperscript{62} Devine and van Kleeck, Positions in Social Work, 35.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 41.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, 45.
median salary of between $2,400 and $3,000. Of the one-hundred and thirty paid visitors
interviewed, all of which were women, all but five made less than $1,000 a year.65

At times, the approach to social workers’ salaries could be juxtaposed interestingly with
the ways in which social work and charity organizations discussed their clients’ finances. In the
introduction to the report, Devine and van Kleeck noted that among those they spoke to who
were reluctant to give salary information, “were some whose chief task is for the investigation of
wages and conditions in occupations other than their own.”66 Due to an increasing interest in the
art of budgeting, the Charity Organization Society and other social work organizations often
conducted studies to determine the expected “cost of living” for their clients. Devine and van
Kleeck noted that one society used a similar approach and found out they were underpaying their
own workers: “It is interesting to note that a few years ago one of the large societies adopted the
principle of a minimum salary equal to the minimum cost of living for workers of the grade
employed by in, and after careful study of actual personal budgets increased its minimum rate to
$60 a month. The society itself is dissatisfied with so low a minimum and anyone familiar with
the cost of living in New York would double its adequacy.”67

Of course, the social workers did not necessarily suffer in the way that their clients did.
They were more often than not at least middle class and had resources to help sustain them on a
small salary that their clients did not have. There were exceptions, however. Richmond herself
was an orphan who lived in her grandmother’s boarding house into her twenties. While her
family was middle class in the sense that they associated with people involved in middle class
reform movements and Richmond went to high school with middle class students, the family

65 Devine and van Kleeck, Positions in Social Work, 38.
66 Ibid, 15.
67 Devine and van Kleeck, Positions in Social Work, 32.
struggled financially. Unable to afford to go to college after she graduated, she supported herself through clerical work before she was hired by the COS. After she became successful, she would receive letters from less well-off relatives asking for her assistance and helped support at least one aunt by sending her $50 annually. It is unclear how many social workers relied entirely or almost entirely on their salaries but Richmond’s experience suggests that at least some of them would have struggled to get by on the wages offered. For them, the debate over the professional value of social work had very significant monetary consequences.

In terms of the Charity Organization Society itself, the report suggested that the COS relied on both volunteers and paid professionals well into the twentieth century. Devine and van Kleeck wrote that at the time the COS was formed “the necessity for professional salaried work was already recognized” and so the society never depended wholly upon volunteers. The COS began with paid district agents who supervised volunteers and, at the time of the report, the COS also had salaried visitors who worked alongside volunteers. The report’s authors wrote that, “The society realizes that the volunteer and the professional have each a distinct function to perform, one supplementing the other.” This attitude, that the volunteer had special characteristics to offer that were instrumental to social work, was reflected in much of the COS writing of the time.

An introduction to a report written by District Secretary Caroline Goodyear from 1911 to 1912 reflected the tensions between celebrating volunteer work and arguing that social workers

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68 Agnew, *From Charity to Social Work*, 96.
needed to be paid. Goodyear both stressed that most case workers felt dangerously overworked and lamented the perceived loss of passion that came with a move from volunteers to professionals. She focused on the “new ideal” of not dismissing any case as hopeless from the perspective of the caseworkers themselves and noted the extra work it created. While she celebrated that this ideal “has had a remarkably vigorous tendency to stir the imagination and revive the ideals of its workers,” she noted “the difficulty of holding to such an ideal under the conditions that obtain in the District Offices.” Goodyear stressed both the physical and emotional strains of the job, stating that “the new view of social responsibility is laying upon the consciences of social workers burdens which a short time ago they failed to recognize as their own.” However, at the same time that Goodyear discussed the ways in which social workers were overworked, she idealized the contributions of participants in social work who were not paid. She stated that “the very life of the work is derived from the intelligent interest of ‘non-professionals; not only as regards support and relief funds but in other equally essential ways” and also asserted that the “experienced Agent” needed the “freshness of enthusiasm and sympathy and the normal horror at abnormal conditions which the volunteer involuntarily brings.” Similar to much of the COS’s writing, Goodyear both argued for a better appreciation for the hard work of social workers and, even if it was not her intention, undercut their worth by stressing the necessity and even the superiority of unpaid labor.

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72 Caroline Goodyear, *A Study of Case-Treatment in the Districts of the New York City Charity Organization Society*.
73 Caroline Goodyear, *A Study of Case-Treatment in the Districts of the New York City Charity Organization Society*.
74 Ibid.
Key to the discussion regarding volunteers versus paid social workers was the debate around the kind of knowledge needed to perform the work and whether or not it counted as “expertise.” Back when “friendly visitors performed the work” charity workers stressed women’s “natural” sympathy, ability to construct a home, and maternal instincts as key to their ability to perform the job. As the writing of Goodyear and other members of the COS demonstrated, this focus on “natural” gifts was then used, whether it was intended to or not, to deny women monetary compensation. Devine and van Kleeck stressed that to the leaders in social work “personality” was the “magic word used most frequently to head the list of desirable qualities” and that many thought there was a “natural gift” for social work that could not be taught.75 The report then went so far as to say that some executives believed that “men and women trained in vocational schools might be lacking in human qualities” and that it was “preferable to employ workers inspired by kindness and love of humanity than those possessing more knowledge or technical ability.”76

While some employers may have preferred social workers inspired by “kindness,” their ability to earn monetary compensation for their labor depended far more on convincing others of their “technical ability.” In their introduction to Positions in Social Work, Devine and van Kleeck discussed the “great difference” in education, training, and compensation among social workers. They asserted that it would be ideal for agencies to increase salaries for social workers “if competent and expert workers could be found to accept them.”77 In “Social Work as a Profession for College Men Women,” an essay written in the same time period, Kate Holladay Claghorn echoed their sentiment, asserting that the “call for social workers is so loud that it is

75 Devine and van Kleeck, Positions in Social Work, 42.
76 Devine and van Kleeck, Positions in Social Work, 42.
77 Ibid, 7.
possible to get a job without training." Claghorn’s essay further demonstrated the degree to which this search for “experts” deserving of high pay was gendered. She asserted that a man in social work, while he “need not expect to die rich,” could command an annual salary of between $2500 and $3500. While she then cited Richmond, Jane Addams and Florence Kelley as examples of women thriving in the field, of women’s salaries in social work she only said that “women are not in high demand for the positions of greatest responsibility and highest pay” in part because of “business traditions” and partly because women “preferred less risk and responsibility.” While the social workers who had direct contact with the poor, most of them women, were expected to perform the “natural” tendency toward sympathy often expected of and attributed to women, their access to money depended upon proving technical expertise and access to advanced education, things that had long been easier for men to attain.

Mary Richmond’s perspective is interesting here. As Agnew points out, she was often ambivalent about professionalization and higher wages for social workers, and she also worried that paid social workers would not bring with them the sympathy that volunteers did. However, she differed from Devine and other leaders in social work in the sense that she stressed the practical knowledge gained from case work over the knowledge gained from research and the study of social conditions, and acknowledged the conditions that may have made it difficult for some social workers to attain advanced education. In the minutes for a meeting of social workers held in Boston in 1910, for instance, Richmond began with a sentiment akin to Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own: “I know that many social workers will envy me that I actually sat down and thought,” she began, and discussed the importance of finally being able to “go off quietly” to

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79 Ibid.
the country to think and write.\textsuperscript{80} She then asserted that social work schools devoted too much
time to teaching how to conduct research and not enough time to how to conduct case work, and
pointed to the stresses of the practical work of social work as a reason that social workers were
often unable to participate in debates regarding their profession. She stressed that she had called
the meeting to hear from the social workers what they were “actually doing” and to base
standards for treatment on that.

For Richmond, it wasn’t so much that social workers needed to be educated by
established institutions but that those established institutions needed to recognize the knowledge
gained from day-to-day case work as legitimate and worthy of study. The effect of this emphasis
provides one of many examples in which the work of middle class professional women
intersected in complicated ways with the lives of working class women. As Agnew points out,
some historians have argued that this perspective had a conservative effect on social work by
favoring the practical over the study of social conditions that may have led to more radical
critiques of inequality, and a more understanding approach to assessing the lives of the social
workers’ clients, both women and men.\textsuperscript{81} At the same time, while the absence of a more radical
perspective on social forces may have influenced the ways in which the COS treated its clients,
Richmond’s emphasis also valued a set of previously undervalued skills held mostly by women.
This wasn’t an intentionally feminist position—Richmond was suspicious of feminism—but it
still involved calling for more women to be recognized as “experts.”

A Charity Organization Bulletin published on December 6, 1916 was indicative of the
ways in which charity organization workers were portrayed as both skilled professionals and as

\textsuperscript{80} Abridgment of Discussion on the Beginnings of Treatment, 23 September, 1910, Community Service Society
records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
\textsuperscript{81} Agnew, \textit{From Charity to Social Work}, 146-147.
women with less definable skills like “personality.”” The section of the bulletin was titled *She Knew How* and it told the story of a woman whose husband drank to excess until a charity organization worker, also a woman, came to speak to him. The section began, “Helping people is an art” and quoted the wife as saying that the charity worker “knew how to talk to him.” Despite the emphasis on “soft” skills associated with women in this bulletin, it ended by making clear how similar to respected professions social work was, summing up the abilities charity workers must have: “as much ability as a doctor and nearly as much training.”

Within the field of social work, women were paid less than men and were more likely to hold jobs that involved direct contact with clients. In order to legitimize their profession, social workers of both genders needed to convince their employers and the general public that they had a set of expertise that was worthy of monetary compensation. The expertise they claimed to have was that of being able to investigate, categorize, and understand the lives of their poor clients. As the next chapters will show, while social workers struggled to prove their expertise to the male-dominated professional world in order to access money and power, their control over relief funds placed them in another struggle over expertise that was also often grounded in the performance of gender and ideas about women’s relationship to money. In this case, the struggle revolved around who would define their clients’ lives.

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83 Charity Organization Society of New York, *She Knew How*. 
Chapter 3

Budgeting, Cleanliness, and the Struggle for Expertise in the Home

The household speaks for the wife, answering unasked questions about her as it does not about the husband.
—Mary Richmond, Social Diagnosis, Chapter VII, Section III

While the women who worked or volunteered for the COS were in many ways bucking traditional gender norms, their status within the COS and any monetary compensation they earned from the organization depended upon their claims to expertise regarding other women’s lives. In this role, they were constantly making decisions regarding poor women’s access to money, decisions with which the women they sought to help often disagreed. As they moved from moralistic judgments to an emphasis on “teaching” the poor, they created more work for themselves in the form of investigations, classes, reports, and time spent with their clients imparting their knowledge. Their claim to expertise was particularly pronounced when it came to cleanliness and budgeting, two areas that were relegated to the domestic sphere and that were considered women’s responsibility.

The COS portrayed domestic tasks as highly skilled activities. Rather than affirm the labor that working class and poor women were already performing to maintain their households, COS workers positioned themselves as “experts” in household management and their clients as amateurs who desperately needed their coaching. For instance, much of their advice to one another suggested that liberties such as monetary aid could only be given if “the woman is wise” and they often justified surveillance of their clients by the need for the “development of
homemaking responsibility” in the women they aided. As the “experts,” COS workers were at least sometimes paid, while their “students” rarely were able to devote themselves full-time to household tasks. Along with this came fear mongering regarding poor and immigrant women’s ability to raise their children. In Heroes of Their Own Lives, Gordon argues that at this time the “enemy” in reformers’ literature on childhood abuse became not the drunken immigrant father but the “possibly untrained mother” who would neglect or simply improperly care for her children. As is reflected in the Richmond quote, women were almost solely held responsible for the state of their household and their access to aid was often contingent upon living up to the COS workers’ sometimes unreasonable standards.

A great deal of these judgments regarding women’s households were related to cleanliness. This concern wasn’t entirely without merit, as people were becoming more aware of germs and the role that dirt played in the spread of disease. Illnesses that ravaged poor communities, such as tuberculosis and cholera, were spread precisely because of a lack of hygiene. However, while charity workers stressed attitude changes and education when it came to cleanliness, there were many factors largely outside of working class and poor women’s control that may have made it more difficult for them to keep their homes clean. In The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life, Nancy Tomes points out that in the early twentieth century discrepancies in both mortality rates and sanitary conditions were “stark and alarming.” Poor people lived in cramped tenements with little sunlight and there were often far more people than there were beds, making it difficult to isolate the sick. Neglectful landlords

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would allow garbage to pile up in hallways and alleys, and tenement residents were not guaranteed to have indoor toilets or easy access to clean water. At the same time, poor and immigrant women did not lack appreciation for the importance of cleanliness; Tomes writes that many immigrant women “showed an extraordinary willingness to expend back-breaking labor in pursuit of a clean home” and that good housecleaning “was one way to maintain self-respect and to disprove charges of being dirty and un-American that were so often levied against them.”

Members of the COS were not entirely unaware of these challenges, and actually devoted a great deal of time to studying and advocating for reform of the cramped, dirty tenements in which so many of their clients lived. They were instrumental in the passage of the New York Tenement Act of 1901, which created new standards for residential buildings in New York, and continued afterward to advocate for better housing for the poor. However, while they were not unaware of the structural problems keeping the poor from adequate housing, in their case files, they showed a great deal of judgment regarding clients who did not keep a clean home. More often than not they portrayed the messiness of their clients’ homes as something that was indicative of their personality or of their ignorance, and in the latter case insisted on educating them. A circular from the New York Committee on Unskilled Women celebrated the committee’s ability to “teach” poor women work habits and also declared that “habits of cleanliness have been promoted and it no longer requires strict enforcement of ‘rules’ to insure the submission to a warm bath,” a warm bath which would have required access to clean, hot

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87 More information on the difficulties facing poor women who wanted to maintain a clean home can be found in Tomes’s chapter in The Gospel of Germs entitled “The Wages of Dirt Were Death,” pages 183-204.


89 Waugh, Unsentimental Reformer, 178.
water that may not have been readily available. Furthermore, like many of the other areas in which they claimed expertise, social workers’ “expertise” in cleanliness also relied on the fact that they were white and American, and it served to differentiate them from their “darker” largely immigrant clients. Tomes addresses this in her work, stating that the “rituals of cleanliness” encouraged among immigrant families became “markers of upward social mobility and of a ‘white’ racist superiority formed at the expense of black Americans.” In that same COS circular, cleanliness is portrayed as something that can literally lighten a woman, as it celebrated “when a tangle-haired, dark-skinned mother is transformed into a tidy parent with clear complexion and well-dressed person.”

A pamphlet published jointly by the Tenement House Department of the City of New York and the Tenement House Committee of the Charity Organization Society in 1914 made clear who was responsible for keeping the home clean: women. The pamphlet included warnings about germs and the money lost to illness but also suggested cleaning because “your husband will like to come to a comfortable place.” Ignoring the difficulties many faced in obtaining decent housing, the pamphlet admonished the reader for not contacting the housing inspector with any complaints, stating that if one failed to complain, “it is your fault if the house is not fit to live in” and asserting that “if you keep your rooms tidy, your landlord will not be likely increase your rent” and that “there are always plenty of vacant flats.” In positioning themselves as the experts in housekeeping and poor women as their pupils, the social workers behind the

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90 Charity Organization Society of New York, Committee on Workrooms for Unskilled Women (New York: Charity Organization Society of New York, 1904).
92 Charity Organization Society of New York, Committee on Workrooms for Unskilled Women.
93 The Tenement House Department of the City of New York and The Tenement House Committee of the Charity Organization Society, For You (New York City:1914).
94 The Tenement House Department of the City of New York and The Tenement House Committee of the Charity Organization Society, For You.
pamphlets put an inordinate amount of responsibility on poor women’s shoulders and ignored the very real challenges that their lack of money would have created for them.

As noted earlier, the COS’s workers’ obsession with cleanliness was closely related to the treatment of disease. In part due to the deference given to science and scientific sources in this time period, this was an area in which it was increasingly easy to justify control over a client’s life and access to money, even while social workers were moving away from some moralistic judgments. One of the most common reasons that the COS cut off aid for a family was because they did not follow their advice in terms of the treatment of illness. Often this meant that the client in question refused to go into a hospital or other institution. Many were similar to the story of a woman called Mrs. R, who had her aid cut off after the COS tried for two months to have her send her daughter, who had tuberculosis, to a hospital, or that of Mrs. J, who refused to go into a hospital because she “would prefer to work a little longer.”95 In Social Diagnosis, Richmond noted in her chapter on medical sources that the field was seeing a “shifting of interest” from earnings and occupations to data about health and disease.96 While disease legitimately was a serious problem among the poor, this interest also worked well with the COS’s decidedly individualistic approach. Industry conditions and the availability of jobs were largely out of control of their clients but COS workers could connect the study of disease more clearly to their clients’ home life and lifestyle.

Budgeting was another realm in which social workers positioned themselves as experts and working class women as their pupils. Although men had better access to decent paying jobs, women were expected to manage the household finances in both working class and middle class

95 Charity Organization Society of New York, Casework Summaries, 1914, Box 100, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
families. This became all the more important in the work of the COS during the first two decades of the twentieth century, as they and other charity organizations began to move from in-kind to monetary relief. Zelizer addresses this change directly in her work, and points out that charity workers paired cash relief with lessons in budgeting under the belief that it would teach “independence and self-reliance” to their clients.\(^\text{97}\) COS documents reveal that this tutelage was highly gendered and that charity workers both thought that budgeting was a skill that could—and often needed to be—taught and believed that the knowledge of proper budgeting was key to successful womanhood. They argued that having cash to spend gave a woman “a feeling of independence” and preserved her “normal relationship as the disburser of family funds.”\(^\text{98}\) It wasn’t a woman’s “independence and self-reliance” to do what she pleased that they were interested in but rather her ability to disperse money within a household, with few if any of the funds going solely to her needs. When charity workers talked about budgeting, they were talking about budgeting within the heterosexual nuclear family.

As Zelizer also points out, the dispersal of monetary aid was contingent upon a woman spending her family’s money in a way in which the COS approved. COS reports were full of discussions on how to develop “better trained wives and mothers” and many reflected the sentiment of the 1912 report of a sister charity that asserted that nearly all of the organization’s clients “need the teacher of housekeeping.”\(^\text{99}\) While the COS sometimes decried public beliefs that a poor family could not be trusted with money—they wrote that this failed to take into account the fact that the family may have spent years “making a successful struggle against dependency”—they usually stressed the need to closely supervise poor women who were given

\(^{97}\) Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money*, 144.

\(^{98}\) Charity Organization Society, *Report of Study of Family Budgets in Relation to Family Case Work*.

Like other household tasks, they portrayed the “art of budgeting” as both inherent to womanhood and something that needed to be taught. Rather than condemn women who, in their eyes, misspent their money, they argued that women could be trained in proper budgeting and used it to justify further supervision of their clients; a large report on budgeting stated that among charity societies that dispersed monetary funds the “tendency seems to be along the line of an increased supervision preferably of a constructive and educational type rather than merely superficial or critical.”

Most of the women who taught budgeting did not have families themselves or, if they did, they were middle class and so obtained their money in very different ways. However, by portraying household budgeting as something that needed to be taught, and implying that middle class women were experts by virtue of their class, social workers were once again arguing for the necessity of their own jobs and salaries. At times this was explicit; in one report from 1912, social workers wrote that the teaching of budgeting was “like all good work, in one sense expensive, and yet in another sense and in the long run, most economical.” Similar to arguments made justifying investigations of the poor, arguments for budgeting stressed that it was cheaper than not teaching budgeting, as social workers made the case that it was cheaper to pay them to do the work of teaching than to not pay them to do it. For example, a report from a COS in Grand Rapids, Michigan explicitly quantified the effect of teaching budgeting, saying

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100 Charity Organization Society, *Report of Study of Family Budgets in Relation to Family Case Work.*
101 Ibid.
that “many shiftless housekeepers have raised their home standards fifty percent after such instruction.”

As with other positions in social work, people in the field differed in their opinions as to how women who taught budgeting—sometimes called “visiting housekeepers”—should be trained. At the New York COS, Emma Winslow, who did much of the organization’s research and writing about budgeting, conducted copious studies looking into the cost of housing, food, and clothing, and kept careful track of inflation and changes to the average cost of living. At the same time, reports from charities across the country revealed that some saw the position as one that did not require a lot of training. A report from Columbus written in 1913 described that society’s “visiting housekeeper,” who had been employed with them since 1909, as “an uneducated woman with no special training but with practical knowledge of housekeeping matters and a tactful manner.” This revealed again the tension between believing tasks such as budgeting and the maintenance of a household came “natural” to women and believing they were highly skilled activities that required training.

Although other charity organizations may have approached the matter differently, members of the Charity Organization Society of New York sought to create a centralized body of knowledge regarding budgeting. An examination of their reports and some of their notes amongst themselves and with other societies on the subject reveals the specifics they expected of the women who were being taught how to budget. For one, they expected saving money to take precedence over cultural or community loyalty; the social workers complained when women would not go to stores further away from home to save money or even when they refused to try

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104 Columbus Associated Charities, Report, 1912, Box 129, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
to move to a cheaper apartment. Secondly, they often assumed that it was ignorance, rather than lack of time or resources, that caused women to fail to live up to their standards. They ran cooking classes and classes to help women learn how to repair broken garments, while devoting little discussion as to whether their clients had the time to do these things.

At times in their budgeting documents, the social workers admitted to the uphill battles their clients faced in order to live up to social workers’ expectations. They wrote a great deal about inflation and changes in prices, and lamented the fact that wages were not keeping up, particularly after World War I began. One New York COS report on budgeting included a particularly honest admission from the Newark Associated Charities, as the charity pointed to the unfairness of their clients being expected to do without so that they could “perform” poverty correctly; “we sometimes cover our applicants with misfit garments and shoes that must painfully illustrate the pinch of poverty,” the organization told the COS, explaining that this was because of the “public attitude” toward what poor people were supposed to have.105 There are also instances in the COS documents where social workers admitted to the burdens that came with holding women solely responsible for family budgeting. Mostly these burdens centered on the fact that a woman’s money was considered household money, while men were allowed their own funds. In that same report on budgeting, the author noted that “a woman’s clothing expenditures, especially if she does not go out to work, often run pitifully low, for she is usually the last member of the family for whom clothing is purchased.”106 Similarly, in a discussion of newspapers—a client had told the COS that she “would rather do without her breakfast than her morning paper”—one report stated that that “quite often” newspapers and recreation were purchased by the men of the family and, as a result, were not included as part of the household funds.

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106 Ibid.
expenditures.\textsuperscript{107} Money handled by women was considered “household” money and needed scrutiny while money handled by men could escape inspection.

In *The Morality of Spending*, David Horowitz explores in depth the connections between increased interest in budgeting and anxiety about what it meant to be a proper American. As he points out, these anxieties had as much to do with worries about the middle class becoming overly materialistic as they did about the poor.\textsuperscript{108} He further argues that this intensified among some reformers during World War I, as war afforded a “moralistic opportunity” to preach thrift and celebrate “thrifty women” as “national heroines.”\textsuperscript{109} The COS’s reports reflected this, as they valorized the ways in which women who learned the art of budgeting constructed good American homes. One celebrated the ways that the working class clients responded to the war effort: “reports also show what splendid spirit these people are making their war sacrifices.”\textsuperscript{110} The report also noted that the clients’ “optimism was remarkable” and that the “danger would seem to be that they will bear considerable hardship for so long a time without complaining.”\textsuperscript{111}

As both Zelizer and Horowitz point out, while poor immigrant women—who accounted for many of the COS’s clients—were held to high standards when it came to thriftiness, charity workers also viewed their ability to become consumers as key to their Americanization. COS workers were deeply interested in the assimilation of their clients. Notes from a 1907 meeting on the working class and the burgeoning film industry reveal the degree to which Americanization


\textsuperscript{109} Horowitz, 103-114.

\textsuperscript{110} Home Economics Committee of the New York Charity Organization Society, *Preliminary Report of Study of Wage Changes and Budget Readjustments*.

\textsuperscript{111} Home Economics Committee of the New York Charity Organization Society, *Preliminary Report of Study of Wage Changes and Budget Readjustments*. 
was prized, even when it came via avenues of which the reformers were usually suspicious. The meeting, which included W. Frank Persons from the COS, was called in order to discuss the potential dangers of film and the penny arcade. However, the report ended up portraying the film industry in a rather positive light. Rather than worry about the encouragement of immorality either through the content of the movies or the grouping of strangers in a dark theatre, attitudes that were common at that time, the authors of the report celebrated film’s ability to bring immigrants together in support of American values. They wrote, “On the wilds of the Bowery we have seen Chinese, Italians, Yiddish peoples, the young and old, often entire families, crowded side by side. They followed the story of Bluebeard, the growing of tropical fruits, shipwrecks in distant waters, patriotic scenes from the American Revolution.” According to the report, within the theatre “Paul Revere rode madly for nearly half an hour,” after the movie “the national anthem was sung,” and “for a moment the many peoples were one.”

In their documents on budgeting, members of the COS often blamed their clients’ failure to budget “correctly” on a lack of assimilation. As with most aspects of budgeting, women were held primarily responsible. Cooking was a particularly contentious issue. Italian cooking was especially controversial, although it was not the only ethnic food that the COS workers worried about; in meeting minutes for the Committee on Difficult Cases, one COS worker complained that a mother from Bohemia was devoted to her children but was “very ignorant about proper diet for them” and clung to her “indigestible Bohemian cooking.” In a letter to the Associated Charities in 1916, the New York COS asked for advice regarding the “Italian budget,” an issue

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112 Horowitz notes that reformers typically held a “suspicion of the communal and expressive aspects of working-class lives, especially when they showed themselves in commercial forms such as saloons, amusement parks and movies,” 84.

113 Minutes of the Theatre Investigation Committee, 19 December, 1907, Box 180, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

114 Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases, 5 January, 1917, Box 99, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
that the organization said was “a problem which we do not feel we are even beginning to solve.” Members of the COS further discussed the problem in a meeting of district secretaries held that month. At the meeting, there was some discussion of allowing Italian women to budget with food with which they were familiar, as one woman, Miss Iaannicelli, decried the “actual waste of money when American food was sent to Italian families” and suggested that Italian women would be able to budget better with Italian food. However, more often than not, workers at the COS portrayed American food as preferable. That same report on their clients’ sacrifices during the war celebrated Italian women’s “dietary adjustments” to save money, including the use of potatoes instead of spaghetti.

The COS’s clients did not accept the social workers’ claims to expertise unquestionably; Italian women continued to cook spaghetti and women continued to clean their home when they felt it was necessary and possible for them to do so. While the COS workers attempted to “teach” their clients, their clients often responded by asserting that they alone were the experts of their lives—whether that involved directly challenging the COS’s orders or simply ignoring them. As the next chapter will show, the COS workers’ responses to these efforts at resistance—and whether they were still willing to give their clients monetary aid—depended a great deal on gender.

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116 Minutes from the meeting for the reorganization of budget work in the district offices, 21 November, 1916, Box 129, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
117 Charity Organization Society, Report of Study of Family Budgets in Relation to Family Case Work.
Chapter 4

COS Clients Assert Their Own Expertise

The primary division, by types, has for its underlying consideration the discharge of the responsibility of the male head of the family, as affected first by the question of his existence or non-existence, and in turn by his attitude, by his physical or mental limitations and by external circumstances; and for each type there is a corresponding line of treatment which, speaking broadly, is usually suitable.

—Caroline Goodyear, *A Study of Case-Treatment in the Districts of the New York Charity Organization Society*, 1911-1912

In her book on women in turn-of-the-century Boston, Deutsch ends her chapter on working class women and the family economy with a discussion of the “multiple-subject positions” women held, asserting that while middle class women were anxious about the “fragmentation” between their identities as “workers/wives/mothers,” working class women did not see a conflict in embodying these multiple identities. “It seemed beside the point,” as Deutsch puts it.118 A close reading of case histories and meeting minutes from the COS in the early twentieth century reveals that this ambivalence on the part of middle class social workers had an immense effect on the ways in which the working class clients of the COS were able to access money. The question of whether a woman was a worker, mother, or wife, along with questions regarding the value of the labor involved in each of those positions, was key to the ways in which COS workers allocated funds. While they advocated for the traditional nuclear family, they oscillated between viewing their clients as mothers who deserved support in order to fulfill that role and seeing them as workers who could be separated from their families if that was what it took to ensure they were economically independent. For this reason, the COS workers both assumed that women without husbands would always be dependent, particularly if they had

118 Deutsch, *Women and the City*, 52.
children, and overestimated those same women’s ability to provide for themselves. The working
class women, for their part, often found their quests for independence from interference in their
lives—no doubt a goal for most if not nearly all of them—constantly at odds with the charity
workers’ ideas regarding gender, class, and money.

In order to gauge the COS’s relationship to its clients, four specific sources were
particularly helpful. First, a collection of case studies from 1913 and another from 1917 provided
some examples of the struggles that the COS clients were facing and how the COS approached
helping them.\footnote{Charity Organization Society of New York, Casework Summaries, 1914, Box 100, Community Service Society
records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.} A handwritten note written by an uninvolved social worker commenting on the
case, which helped to reveal the tactics that the organization preferred and the controversies that
held the social workers’ attention, accompanied most of the studies included in the batch from
1913. The batch from 1917 included letters written from the COS to various interested parties
and, in some cases, letters written by the clients that were attained by the COS, giving a bit of
insight into their perspective. Secondly, a series of letters from the New York COS to the New
York City Children’s Bureau in 1914 regarding the institutionalization of children revealed
attitudes toward the preservation of poor families. The Bureau and the COS hoped to move away
from institutionalizing children solely on the basis of poverty and the Bureau depended on the
COS to send details on families whose children were in danger of being committed and to make
recommendations as to the course of action. Lastly, meeting minutes from the Committee on
Difficult Cases from late 1916 to early 1917 revealed the cases that the COS couldn’t quite solve

\footnote{Charity Organization Society of New York, Casework Files, 1917, Box 284, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.}
or wrap their heads around.\textsuperscript{120} These minutes also included descriptions of the cases discussed. All three sources included comments from both COS leadership and the rank and file. The case records included notes and case summaries from COS workers who did not hold leadership positions, both men and women, and those who did, including Edward Devine. The letters to the Bureau of Dependent Children were typically written by the district secretaries of the various districts. The Committee on Difficult Cases meetings were attended by Mary Richmond, who served as chairman, six or seven district secretaries, and a medical doctor who would comment on the physical and mental health of the clients discussed.

It was not uncommon for a single client of the COS’s to conflict with the organization on multiple fronts. One such case discussed at the Committee on Difficult Cases meetings, that of a woman named Mrs. Hampton, involved disagreements over the ways in which the woman handled her husband, her sexuality, and her health. A mother of three children, Mrs. Hampton’s husband died after having been, in the words of the COS, “unconstitutionally inferior and chronically out of work.”\textsuperscript{121} The COS criticized Mrs. Hampton for not taking action against her husband before he died and reported rumors that she had taken up with a “ne’er do well” in her neighborhood.\textsuperscript{122} In the meantime, Mrs. Hampton tested positive for tuberculosis and much of the discussion surrounding her case related to the struggle to place her in a hospital; she would refuse and then relent, go into the hospital, and then come right back out again. Her three children would alternatively live with her and in an institution. At one point, she tried to apply for a widow’s pension and the COS intervened. The Committee on Difficult Cases notes stated

\textsuperscript{120} Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 1916-1917, Box 99, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

\textsuperscript{121} Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 17 November, 1916, Box 99, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
that they urged the Board of Child Welfare “not to take up the matter of pension until further evidence of Mrs. H’s intentions and capabilities to do right,” thus directly standing in the way of her procuring public aid.\footnote{Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 17 November, 1916.} The last discussion of her case can be found in the Committee on Difficult Cases notes from March of 1917, at which point her children were in institutions and she was found living with distant relatives and working in a pickle factory for $7.50 a week.

The committee’s discussion of Mrs. Hampton began with a common point of contention with COS workers and their clients: they disapproved of her decision not to take action against her “chronically out of work” husband.\footnote{Ibid.} Although seemingly in contradiction with their professed commitment to keeping families together, the COS workers often lamented their female clients’ failure to stand up for themselves in marriages with husbands they deemed lazy and “likely to desert.”\footnote{Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 2 March, 1917, Box 99, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.} The case records included numerous examples of COS workers pressuring women to take their husbands to court for non-support or stepping in themselves to use the state to compel them to pay. The fundraising circular from Buffalo examined earlier used one of these examples as a case with an ideal ending; a man refused to take the job offered by the society, the society then had him arrested and put on probation for “non-support” and through his probation officer he was forced to give money to his wife.\footnote{Frederic Almy, Ten Tales; or Salaries vs. Relief.} The COS seemed to believe that most men who did not support their family chose not to and women were valorized for forcing their husbands to pay up. The COS referred to Mrs. Hampton, who refused to do that, as
“spineless and inefficient” and sided with members of her family who expressed similar sentiments.  

The ability to earn and support one’s family was integral to the ways in which the Charity Organization Society judged the masculinity of working class men, and the COS workers used these judgments regarding their clients’ masculinity to determine their access to aid. When men failed to support their families, even if they remained in the home, their wives and children were already considered dependent enough to come under the control of the COS. This played out in the case of another woman included in the Committee on Difficult Cases meeting minutes, Mrs. Bogucki. Mrs. Bogucki had moved to Elizabeth, New Jersey with her husband, who was sick and could not work. Despite the fact that the couple was living in “four nice rooms” with a cousin boarding with them, the COS was insistent that they move back to New York City so as to be in the society’s jurisdiction. Mrs. Bogucki was earning and thought she might get even more work with “middle class Jewish people” in Elizabeth. However, with a sick husband who may die, the couple were considered dependents much in the way a single woman would be and thus not able to control their own lives. The couple was ultimately “allowed” to stay in New Jersey, but with the understanding that they would return to New York after a year so as to be within the realm of the charity that “owned” their case.

At times, this emphasis on male earning meant that the COS could be quite cold. In a note attached to a case record from 1913, a caseworker wrote of a man who was unable to work because he had lost his sight and was “somewhat intemperate,” that his death “simplified, rather

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127 Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 17 November, 1916.
than complicated” his family’s situation.\textsuperscript{129} This state of affairs also put pressure on women. As was the case with Mrs. Hampton, they were expected to police the masculinity of the men in their family. COS workers believed that women should hold the men in their lives accountable for supporting their families, and they judged these women harshly if they failed to put all of their effort into it. This was despite the fact that most of their clients lived in communities with their own strong patriarchal traditions, a state of affairs, which may have made it difficult for women to stand up to the men in their lives. Even if a woman did simply sympathize with her husband’s inability to support her or just wanted to stay married to him, the COS did not share that sympathy, as much of the organization’s writing on men who did not work or who failed to support their families dripped with disdain. In Lilian Brandt’s \textit{Five Hundred and Seventy-four Deserters and Their Families}, for instance, one can see how the COS’s interest in deserting husbands was rooted in the fear that men were no longer providing for their family. In a section on “the desertion habit,” Brandt described “intermittent” husbands as often leaving when “their wives make the unreasonable demand that they help support the family.”\textsuperscript{130} Even though she went on to admit that some couples split because of “domestic discomfort,” she conflated this separation with a man neglecting his economic duty and, in a sense, losing his masculinity, as she ended the section by saying that some men “returned with affection undiminished, or, to put the case in another way, with fresh conviction that on the whole it is preferable to depend on his wife for his main support.”\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{129} Charity Organization Society of New York, Case #89524, Casework Summaries, 1913, Box 100, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
\textsuperscript{130} Lilian Brandt, \textit{Five Hundred and Seventy-four Deserters and Their Families: A Descriptive Study of Their Characteristics and Circumstances} (New York: The Charity Organization Society, 1905), 14.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 15.
In a way, this focus on non-supporting men should not be surprising. Because women typically were paid less than men and finding childcare could be next to impossible, it was exceedingly difficult for working class women to make ends meet if their husbands should die or desert. While the majority of the women without income-producing husbands that the COS came in contact with lost them to illness and death, it is not surprising that members of the organization would show disdain for a man who, in their view, intentionally put his family in that position. Certainly there were some women who welcomed help in holding their husbands accountable. However, as Mrs. Hampton’s story shows, the COS’s clients’ lives were often more complicated and the relationships with the men in their lives varied, with the men often neither entirely absent or entirely supporting them.

In Mrs. Hampton’s husband’s case, it is worth interrogating the COS’s assertion that Mr. Hampton was “chronically unemployed.” The man was described as a Woodyard “habitué,” meaning he frequented the Charity Organization Society’s Woodyard as a way to generate income. While going over the case of the Hamptons, the members of the Committee on Difficult Cases discussed the prevalence of “Woodyard repeaters” and agreed that once the Municipal House Lodge was able to better set up a “work-test,” the Woodyards should be closed.¹³² The Woodyard paid little and was intended as a stopgap measure for men who could find nothing else and needed something while they got on their feet. Men who took work at the Woodyard were treated like COS cases, rather than COS employees. Although time did not always permit them to do so, ideally members of the COS would examine their circumstances and attempt to “help” these men find more substantial work or otherwise get back on their feet. Often the men who took work at the Woodyard would be given tickets for lodging and meals, rather than cash.

¹³² Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 17 November, 1916.
COS workers did not universally approve of this program, and there was a lot of
discussion over its usefulness. In her 1911/1912 report, Caroline Goodyear stated, “the
unsatisfactoriness of the Woodyard either as a work-test or as ‘relief’ needs no discussion here,
and there is no doubt that the use made of it is often indefensible.”

She did not view men who regularly went to the Woodyard looking for work as men taking employment where they could
get it. Instead, she saw them as men who failed to “earn” the next step in the process, which was
aid and assistance from the charity. In order to earn this assistance, they needed to perform
poverty in a way approved of by the COS. Goodyear said, “In cases where it may be considered
as a fair test, and as such is fairly met, encouragement in the form of supplemental relief would
usually seem to have the desirable educational and practical effect.”

Goodyear lamented, however, that this was generally not the case and that the Woodyard was often treated “as its
own reward.” In order to earn the extra aid, the men needed to act grateful and willing to work
for the fifty-cents offered (Goodyear argued that a man there must “prove his willingness to
work and duly earn his fifty cents”), whether that amount was sufficient to support him and his
family or not. That a man in the Woodyard may actually feel that his labor there was worth
more than that was not considered. When a man finally did come to accept the reality of the
Woodyard, he was given “all the tickets in the world” but no other aid, “even in cases where the
amount paid is insufficient for the needs of the family.”

According to Goodyear, only twenty-two percent of the men who worked at the Woodyard met the standards for continued aid.

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133 Caroline Goodyear, *A Study of Case-Treatment in the Districts of the New York City Charity Organization Society*.
134 Ibid.
135 Caroline Goodyear, *A Study of Case-Treatment in the Districts of the New York City Charity Organization Society*.
136 Ibid.
A letter to the *New York Times* from J.G. Hallimond of The Bowery Mission and Young Men’s Home revealed some of the problems with the Charity Organization Society’s Woodyard. Hallimond wrote primarily to clear up misconceptions regarding the make up of men who frequented a bread line that had recently been established and to express his disagreement with a *Times* writer who argued that the bread lines should be made illegal. Hallimond was sympathetic to the men, stating that they were mostly “self-respecting workmen” who happened to be down on their luck. He also clearly subscribed to new theories that did not hold the poor solely responsible for their plight, as he also asserted that the bread lines would only disappear when a law provided that “whenever a man is able to work, work will be made possible for him.”

Judging by Hallimond’s writing, the *Times* writer had sought to prove that the homeless men in the bread line were undeserving by pointing to the fact that the COS gave 60,000 cards to the men offering work in their Woodyard and only two percent responded. Hallimond argued that this was misleading, pointing out that the homeless men for the most part were not interested in the “test labor” that paid them less and required an investigation into their lives, saying that “What these men declare they want is an opportunity to work honestly for a day’s pay, and who can blame them?” Hallimond sent men to the Joint Application Bureau himself and said that not one of them was given employment, revealing that he also did not view the Woodyard work as “real” work.

In discussing the Woodyard and its significance for the ways in which the COS policed the gender performance of its clients, it is worth also looking at writing on the COS Laundries. In a similar system, women who came into contact with the COS would sometimes be sent to work

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in the Laundries. From looking at the case records and letters between case workers, members of the COS appeared to be much more comfortable with women working long-term in the Laundries than they were with men working long-term in the Woodyard. Goodyear did not include the same amount of hand-wrangling regarding the Laundries in her report, and Laundry work was sometimes included in long-term plans developed for women through the COS. At times, it was treated more like an opportunity for training than a “work test,” with the organization bringing in teachers to train the women in different skills that the Laundries needed (This came with its own problems and was sometimes done at the expense of actually helping women support their families, as the COS at one point charged the women $7 for the training that they received there).\(^{139}\) While women could be in the semi-dependent state created by working at the Laundry, there was something seriously wrong with a man who did the same. Because of this approach to labor and gender, the “kind” of money given to “employees” at the Woodyard and Laundry differed from money given for other work, and the “kind” of money for this type of work differed whether the client was a man or a woman.

This approach to gender and work can be found in other aspects of the COS’s work, as well. For instance, the aforementioned fundraising circular from Buffalo included photographs of the people described in *Ten Tales*.\(^ {140}\) In two of the three photographs that include men, they were shown working and looking away from the camera. They appeared to be busy and absorbed in the task at hand. If they were disabled—one of the men had a missing leg—the viewer could not tell. The third photograph of a man was entitled “Old Age” and featured an old man sitting next to a window and looking pensively forward. He was angled slightly away from the camera so as

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\(^{139}\) Miss Balderston to Miss Sargent, 11 April, 1917, Department of Household Arts of the Charity Organization Society of New York, Box 129, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

\(^{140}\) Frederic Almy, *Ten Tales; or Salaries vs. Relief*. 
to also not be looking directly at it. The women and children, on the other hand, were not photographed doing any sort of task and most were shown looking directly at the camera, although none of their stances were confrontational. Of the two women not looking directly at the camera, one gazed upwards as if to ask something from someone positioned above her and the other was shot looking downward with her side to the camera. All in all, the women appeared far more vulnerable and apt to be begging for aid than the men. Designed to elicit funds from potential donors, the circular featured men at work and women looking vulnerable.

As for Mr. Hampton, we don’t know from the Committee on Difficult Cases meeting minutes how difficult he would have found it to find “real” work at this time period. Although never officially diagnosed, he was suspected of having tuberculosis—his post-mortem diagnosis was tuberculosis of the intestines—and was weak enough that whatever ailment he had eventually killed him. The COS’s files are filled with men and women with the same ailment who they suggested not work and wanted to send into institutions. In fact, most of the discussion regarding Mrs. Hampton’s life after her husband’s death centers on her refusal to enter a hospital for her own tuberculosis.

Given the construction of masculinity they valued, often the first course of action for the COS was to restore the “male head of the family” to what they considered to be his rightful place, whether that meant finding a job for a man who had previously not been earning or tracking down a deserter. Their female clients were not always cooperative in this quest. One such case can be found in the fundraising circular from Buffalo. The stories in fundraising circulars and other writing intended for public consumption should be read with the understanding that they were told with a specific purpose in mind and may not be representative of reality. They undoubtedly shed a sunny light on the COS and focus on the cases that the
organization felt would best endear it to the public. However, points of resistance from clients can be found even in these documents. Whether or not the stories themselves were true, one can surmise that a similar situation must have happened at some point for the COS to consider including the conflict in its literature. This story in question concerned an elderly black woman who was about to be evicted from her home. The woman told the COS that her daughter was the only member of her family left but that she did not know how to find her. Sticking to their focus on exhaustive investigation, members of the COS interviewed her neighbors and found out that there was a “colored barber in a village fifty miles away” who occasionally helped the old woman.\footnote{Frederic Almy, Ten Tales; or Salaries vs. Relief.} The man turned out to be the woman’s husband from whom she “did want to ask aid.” According to the circular, the man was convinced to return home and support his wife, a happy ending in the COS’s eyes. The story ended by asking “Did the salary of this visitor divert money from the poor or did it help the poor?” Clearly, the reader was meant to believe the answer was the latter.\footnote{Ibid.}

The circular did not address the woman’s reasons for not wanting aid from her husband. Was he abusive? Did they separate amicably? Had they agreed to live separately or had she asked him to stay away? Was it just stubbornness? There is some evidence that this was a recurring problem. In the first page of \textit{Five Hundred and Seventy-four Deserters and Their Families}, Lilian Brandt asserted that charity workers were coming upon more desertion cases in part because they learned that they should be “scrutinizing the claim to the convenient title of widow” from women whose husbands were actually alive.\footnote{Brandt, \textit{Five Hundred and Seventy-four Deserters and Their Families}, 7.}
The emphasis on keeping nuclear families together was such that the COS’s interest in single mothers, whether they became single through desertion, death or some other reason, sometimes seemed to be disproportionate to their actual caseload. In a report filled with precise numbers, Brandt could only say that, “It is probable that desertion is really increasing” and attributed the perceived increase in desertion cases to an acknowledgment of the problem.\footnote{Brandt, \textit{Five Hundred and Seventy-four Deserters and Their Families}, 7.} A compilation of statistics on current cases under the COS’s charge in 1918 found that the COS cared for 2,937 individual men, compared to only 1,267 families that had no men.\footnote{Charity Organization Society of New York, \textit{Treatment Statistics} (New York: New York Charity Organization Society, 1918), Box 99, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.} Granted, women were far more likely to come to the COS for aid, as the same report listed 4,076 women under the COS’s care.\footnote{Ibid.} Notably, though, the majority of the women the organization aided, in this report at least, lived with men. An earlier report from 1909 listed desertion as only the sixth most common reason families approached the COS to institutionalize their children and widowhood as third. According to that report, most cases were the result of sickness or lack of employment, and “over half the cases were only aided once.”\footnote{Ibid.} Whatever the numbers, members of the COS remained anxious that American men were not providing for their families; Brandt echoed many of their sentiments when she wrote, “the restlessness of American life, the constant transfer of isolated members or parts of families from Europe to their country and from the older parts of this country to the newer—that all these influences, and others, are at work to weaken the individual’s sense of responsibility for his family.”\footnote{Brandt, \textit{Five Hundred and Seventy-four Deserters and Their Families}, 7.}
While men were frowned upon for showing any signs of dependency, women often were forced to “prove” to the COS that they could handle independence. The COS claimed that they wanted all of the poor—men and women—to be self-sufficient, but a woman’s ability to earn for herself or to otherwise access money did not necessarily insulate her from the COS’s plans for her life. Often women who lived in non-traditional family arrangements found that the COS still wanted to “aid” them, and often these women were among the most vocal in telling the COS that they did not need the society’s help. At times, the COS’s interest in their case meant that the organization stood in the way of the women accessing money they felt rightly belonged to them. In Goodyear’s report, she listed a number of cases that she felt were insufficiently handled. One of them involved a woman whose husband, a skilled mechanic, died. Although he left her insurance money, it was not enough, and the husband’s employer raised money to assist her. According to Goodyear, when the employer discovered that the woman was “of poor judgment and rather improvident” (Goodyear did not specify where this information came from), the employer requested that the COS oversee the management of the money while they held on to it.  

Goodyear clearly saw this as a reasonable request, as she lamented that the woman’s attitude toward the COS was “non-cooperative” and that “so long as the insurance money lasted she was independent of advice and no influence was gained.”

Another case, this one listed in the Committee on Difficult Cases, revealed even more the ways in which gender affected the COS’s attitude toward one’s “right” to money. Seventy-two-year-old Mrs. Van Loan and her daughter Florence did not come under the COS’s jurisdiction

149 Caroline Goodyear, *A Study of Case-Treatment in the Districts of the New York City Charity Organization Society.*
150 Ibid.
because they had approached the COS or any other charity for the poor looking for help. Instead, they became “clients” of the charity after Dr. Parks, a man in Boston, was made trustee of a $5,000 fund left by a recently deceased wealthy Boston woman, Miss Lyman. Miss Lyman had left instructions that the funds be used to support Mrs. Van Loan and her daughter in New York, and that Dr. Parks should decide the rate at which this money would be expended. While the lawyers involved suggested he give no more than fifteen dollars per week, Mrs. Van Loan had different views and, according to Dr. Parks, was “constantly writing” to him to request more money. The doctor then called on the New York COS to investigate.

The COS’s descriptions of Mrs. Van Loan and her daughter were not flattering; they described them as “extremely queer,” pointing to the fact that they “ate off the dishes in which they prepared their food” and had “almost no furniture” in their home. They were particularly concerned about the life of the daughter, whose situation they described as “pathetic.” The relationship between Miss Lyman and Mrs. Van Loan cannot be entirely gleaned from their records. According to the COS’s description of the investigation, Miss Lyman had known Mrs. Van Loan for quite a while. She became interested in her when she was a “very young girl singing in a Boston church” and had been supporting her for the fifty years since until her death. While members of the COS attempted to “investigate” the family in more detail, they claimed that neither the mother nor daughter were ever “in the slightest degree cooperative” and that “every suggestion” regarding a physical examination of the pair was “rejected with

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152 Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 16 March, 1917.
153 Ibid.
scorn.” Mrs. Van Loan, for her part, saw the COS primarily as a barrier in her quest to obtain the money she knew was left for her. Clearly, members of the COS did not see it that way. They asserted that Mrs. Van Loan “labored under the delusion” that the COS was standing between her and her money and described her as “abusive” toward the friendly visitors that called upon her.155

In the meeting minutes, Richmond criticized other members of the COS for visiting the family without a proper introduction and without the family being told that they were coming. In terms of the details of the case itself, she asserted that while she did not feel that the old woman was mentally unbalanced, she had been “made the sort of woman” she was by “philanthropic persons who had supported her and her daughter all of their lives.”156 At the end of the meeting, the social workers concluded that the best course of action would be to confer with the Boston COS and to reach out to the family’s relatives. They did not discuss leaving Mrs. Van Loan alone with her inherited money.

Cases included in the case summaries from 1913 also speak to the tendency of the society to continue to “aid” by way of advice women who could provide for themselves or, in cases like that of Mrs. Van Loan, could provide for themselves if the COS was not standing in the way of the money owed to them. In the note attached to the case study for a woman called Mrs. W, a social worker wrote that the summary was “good, except for the last sentence,” which read, “She seems to have justified her refusal and her failure to accept advice.”157 The note then went on to state that Mrs. W’s refusal was “justified on the ground that she can maintain herself by day’s

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154 Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 16 March, 1917.
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
157 Charity Organization Society of New York, Case #100523, Casework Summaries, 1913, Box 100, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
work—but not on the ground that it is the best way to bring up the children, or that so much
day’s work is good for the woman.”

In other words, the second social worker acknowledged that Mrs. W was able to support herself, ostensibly the goal of each COS case, but thought that she was not performing womanhood or motherhood correctly, and that more action on the part of the COS was needed to push Mrs. W toward a different solution.

What was it about Mrs. W that may have created a less than ideal environment for children? Mrs. W differed from Mrs. Van Loan and the mechanic’s wife in the sense that her home was viewed as satisfactory. Nearly all of the outside sources listed in the report speak well of her. The COS worker found the home to be “clean and well cared for” and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children also approved of it. Her neighbors said good things about her, although they also agreed that the home may not be adequate for children (the report does not specify why). The negative things said about her were vague and unproven, such as that she and her woman companion were “suspected of being intemperate” and that the date of her husband’s death was “doubted.” However, like Mrs. Van Loan, Mrs. W was a widow who managed to support herself by constructing a home life that did not place her either in the nuclear family or in the position of helpless widow. Instead, she lived with her children, another grown woman and women lodgers that she took in to help make ends meet. Also like Mrs. Van Loan, Mrs. W stood up to the COS. Proving again that the “families” they were interested in preserving were almost always heterosexual nuclear families, the COS suggested that she take a place at service with one child and place the other one in an institution. Mrs. W declined, saying that she could provide for both children at home and insisting on keeping her unconventional family

158 Charity Organization Society of New York, Case #100523, Casework Summaries, 1913.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
together—despite the COS’s recommendations to do otherwise. In this case, her access to her own money clearly made a dramatic difference, even if the COS was not happy with the outcome.

While these families were able to resist the COS’s ideas because of their access to outside money, women and men with fewer resources had a more difficult time. An Irish woman, Alice, got pregnant from a German baker who later disappeared. For a reason not fully explained, members of the COS felt it would be a “calamity” if he were to return and marry her, so they went about finding a way for her to be self-sufficient. They decided to find her a “place at service” and, although she did not want to work in service, she agreed to try it.\footnote{Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Organization Society of New York, 15 December, 1916, Box 99, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.} After she had her baby in a hospital in Connecticut, the local State Charities Aid promptly took him away and Alice was sent to cook for a private family. The members of the COS disagreed strongly with the decision to separate mother and child and said that they were not given any “satisfactory explanation” for it.\footnote{Ibid.} The rest of the case history revealed a constant tug-of-war between the COS and the State Charities Aid, with Alice in the middle. Although they did not think she should be separated from her child, the COS continued to believe that work in service was best for her. Finally, Alice made her own suggestion, saying that she would like to get factory work, find a room for herself, and place the baby in a day nursery while she was working. The COS agreed to implement the plan “at least experimentally,” revealing the tentativeness with which they approached the mother’s attempt at self-sufficiency.\footnote{Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 15 December, 1916.} The State Charities Aid, for their part, disagreed entirely with the plan, a problem that was exasperated by the fact that Alice
thought that if she did not follow it, they would not give her child back to her. The COS plan was finally implemented.

According to the story that the COS told, Alice was determined to be with her child and it was aid organizations—both the COS and the State Charities Aid—that stood in her way. She was hesitant to take a place of service and ultimately left that job in part because it did not give her the time to give the child “the attention she felt it should have.”\footnote{Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 15 December, 1916.} Despite her insistence on being independent, the COS ultimately blessed her plan “with reservations” and it took the society’s approval to convince the State Charities Aid not to stand in the way.\footnote{Ibid.} It is important to note that the COS’s stance could not entirely be attributed to concern over Alice’s autonomy. One member of the committee, Mr. Hudson, felt that the central concern of the case was that the COS “owned” it and that Alice’s wishes, even if they had conflicted with the COS, shouldn’t be the deciding factor. He asserted that if clients were given the choice between agencies it would “tend to break down cooperative relations and thus…sacrifice the welfare of many families for a consideration affecting only one at a time.”\footnote{Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 15 December, 1916.} As was usual in the COS at the time, medical concerns also allowed the agency further control over Alice’s life. Minutes from a meeting held one month later reveal that there was an agreement that Alice would be able to implement her plan “upon completion of her dental work.”\footnote{Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 15 January, 1917, Box 99, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.}

As a single mother, Alice was both expected to earn for herself and was treated as a dependent, unable to fully make decisions for herself. Alice, for her part, “helped to shape the
social services offered” by making the argument that work that took her into the “public” sphere was necessary in order for her to have the time and space for her “private” duties. Work in the supposedly “private” sphere of domestic service did not leave room for Alice to also be a mother. While the COS and other middle class reform agencies of the time stressed the importance of women’s role as mothers, for working class women the right to perform this role was contingent on their ability to support themselves financially. Alice was clearly a devoted mother and the COS did not wholly condemn her for getting pregnant out of wedlock, yet there was no question that she would work. As someone who had never been a part of a nuclear family, she was not eligible for the pensions that sometimes supported widows or even families with sick or missing providers.

That said, the COS’s hesitancy regarding Alice’s plan cannot entirely be chalked up to ideology. Women who attempted to work while placing their children in day nurseries did struggle. For one, placement was sometimes difficult. A 24-year-old woman in the case notes from 1913 found that the day nurseries near her were all full and instead paid a neighbor $1.50 a week to watch her children. Later, the baby developed bronchitis and the woman lost her job while trying to care for it. When she refused to place the baby in a hospital, the COS cut off her aid and she left the child in the care of a roommate while she worked. Even if women were able to find a place in a day nursery, an illness could derail the plan. Another woman placed her children in a day nursery only to have them contract whooping cough, again making it necessary

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168 Deutsch explores the influence of the dichotomy between “public” and “private” spheres in poor women’s lives in chapter 2 of Women and the City.
169 Charity Organization Society of New York, Casework Summaries, 1913, Box 100, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
for her to give up work. Finally, placing a child in a day nursery still did not always allow a woman to make enough money to make ends meet. A third woman managed to make a day nursery work for her three children for three months before she had to ask for aid again. It’s unclear how Alice herself managed. The last record that mentions her was from the end of January of 1917, only a month and a half after her original record. It revealed that she obtained temporary work in the same institution where the State Charities Aid placed her child, possibly while she was waiting for her dental care or to find a factory job.

While it would have been difficult for Alice to make ends meet while relying on a day nursery, the COS’s insistence that she work as a domestic was not entirely based on economics. In a case record for a twenty seven year old woman in 1913, the COS workers wrote in more detail why they would want a woman to work as a domestic: “The obvious advantages of this plan were, better physical environment for both mother and children,” they wrote, “and the objections to any plans of relief in the home were, lack of confidence in the character of the mother, based on unfavorable reports obtained from some of her relatives and former acquaintances.” While the COS workers spoke more highly of Alice than they did this woman, it is clear that they considered work in a middle or upper class home safe and conducive to their having more control over their clients.

Much of this attempt to control their clients was related to their sexuality. As Deutsch argues, charity workers’ insistence on encouraging poor women to work in domestic service was

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170 Charity Organization Society of New York, Casework Summaries, 1913, Box 100, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
171 Charity Organization Society of New York, Case #140210, Casework Summaries, 1913, Box 100, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
173 Charity Organization Society of New York, Casework Summaries, 1914, Box 100, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
due in part to their belief that it provided a more “moral” environment. In her book, Deutsch discusses the ways in which middle class reformers tried to “protect” working class women, in part by encouraging them to go into service work so as to work in a “domestic” environment. She describes the angst they felt over women’s changing economic role: “It was this new geography, the concentration of financially marginal women workers downtown, newly visible in vastly increased aggregations, streaming onto the streets during lunch and after work, taking over lodging houses and restaurants, visiting theaters and dance halls, that had fed the increased concern about women’s moral safety.” As Deutsch also points out, in reality, domestic work did not “protect” working class women from dangers they would have faced on the streets. Deutsch points to evidence that men took advantage of their “help” and that jobs in domestic service left women vulnerable to sexual exploitation with little recourse to fight back. Among the COS clients mentioned in the Committee on Difficult Cases meeting minutes and the case summaries from 1913, only Alice agreed even temporarily to the COS’s commonly suggested plan to go into service.

It is worth noting that the COS was somewhat sympathetic to Alice. They described the young woman as “blameless in reputation” before the German baker came along, and stressed how naïve she had been, saying that since she “had but little attention from men,” she was understandably “pleased and flattered by the young man’s attention.” They stressed that she always thought that she and the German baker would get married. As a naïve young woman who had hoped that she would marry, Alice was able to eventually implement her own plan for her

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174 Deutsch, *Women and the City*, 81.
175 Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 15 December, 1916.
life because she performed her gender and sexuality in a way that the COS did not find wholly objectionable.

Other single women whose performances of gender and sexuality were more unconventional often had a harder time maintaining control over their circumstances. At times, they were not allowed the independence afforded women who led less objectionable lives. Furthermore, the COS’s focus on the proper performance of gender meant that the organization sometimes missed the ways in which attempts to control a woman’s sexuality could actually be the cause of her poverty and dependency. “Lavern Hall,” as she called herself, was found in the 72nd street subway station in a “semi-conscious” state while she was on the way to find work in a flower factory. While the COS workers noted that it “did not seem fair to be too suspicious,” they were hesitant to trust the girl from the beginning, stating that she “lay back in a somewhat theatrical (sic) attitude” and that while she was “almost unconscious” she was still able to hold onto a “large picture hat” and a “very much trimmed hand bag.” She told the COS workers that her mother had died, that her father had moved to California and that she was trying to support herself in New York City. Although it was true that her mother had died and her father had moved away, the COS could not confirm a number of the details she gave—they tried to find an old music teacher she told them about and failed, could not confirm that she worked at Bloomingdales as she claimed she did and found out that she went by many different names. They went to various lodging houses to learn more about Hall’s life, and found multiple people who objected to the way in which she conducted herself, particularly in her relationships with men. An aunt she had briefly stayed with wanted nothing to do with her and a number of the

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landladies the COS spoke to lamented that she slept all day and then stayed out all night. One said that she had observed the “peculiar way she attracted the attention of a man on the street” and another objected to the way in which she approached her son: “the girl was very loving to him, throwing her arms about him.”178 Interestingly, while some of these women did not want Hall as a lodger because of her perceived promiscuity, most of these same women did not wholly condemn the girl and stressed her youth to excuse her behavior. The COS wrote that one woman asserted that she “endeavored to attract the attention of every man she came in contact with” but still said that she “thought she was a good girl, was too childish to know what she was doing.”179 Another woman, Mrs. Hopper, said that she “was just a young girl who did not know anything and needed to be taken care of.”180 However sympathetic they may have been, their disapproval coupled with the difficulty she faced in finding work meant that Hall had trouble establishing a stable place to live.

Perhaps in part because of her youth, the COS did not deny Hall aid. Instead, they decided that she needed to be placed entirely in the care of others. They sent her to Bellevue for an examination, where she was regarded as a “psychopath, probably manic depressive type” but “not insane” and thus not eligible to be committed.181 She was eventually sent outside of the city to Hillcrest Farm, where she would be given food and a place to stay, but also would only have fifty cents per week for spending money. In justifying keeping her there, the COS stressed her inability to work and “unstable” state. Hall, for her part, attempted to leave and earn for herself at least once. She lied to the New York Probation and Protection Association, telling them that she owed the COS “quite a sum of money” and suggested that in order to pay it back, she needed

179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
181 Ibid.
to be able to leave Hillcrest to go back to work.\textsuperscript{182} The COS responded that she did not owe them any money and asserted again that the girl did “not seem capable of doing any kind of work.”\textsuperscript{183}

Hall eventually left Hillcrest to live with an uncle and work in a hat factory, although it’s unclear if this plan lasted for any length of time. Whether or not she eventually was able to fend for herself, the letters that accompanied her case notes suggested that the difficulties that the COS chalked up to Hall’s inability to work and possible psychological problems may have had more to do with a history of policing of her sexuality, a policing that was at times violent. Her case notes include one letter written by Hall herself to a man named Stanley. Her language regarding the COS is telling, as she wrote that she “fell into the hands of some Society who said that I had a sad way of acting” and that “it seems now that the Society is trying out my business and I don’t know which way to go first about it.”\textsuperscript{184} She mentioned in the letter a doctor who asked about books she may have read that were “out of the way” and admitted to reading one called “The Isle of Temptation,” which she said would get her into “terrible trouble from my people.”\textsuperscript{185} She also wrote, “Now you know Stanley you have known my history in New Haven and the mistake I made. But I was innocent and I did not know any better.”\textsuperscript{186} Another letter from the COS to the New York Probation and Protective Association provides a clue as to what that “mistake” could have been. A woman named Mrs. Burley told the COS that when she asked Hall if she was afraid of getting pregnant, given her relationships with men, the girl told her that she could not get pregnant “because when she was twelve years old she had been with a boy and that her father heard of it that he did something to her that made it impossible for her ever to

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{184} “Adele Bholm” to Stanley, 17 May, 1917, Casework Files, Box 284, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
have a baby, that she was badly injured and had to go to the hospital for some time (sic).”\textsuperscript{187} This anecdote was not included in the COS case summary and was not mentioned outside of this one letter.

While the COS sent Hall to a place where she would have access to food and shelter, their focus on her promiscuity and failure to perform womanhood correctly meant that they missed the ways in which the policing of her sexuality made it difficult for her to become financially independent. Lavern’s youth and extreme behavior meant that, unlike some other clients whose behavior the COS disapproved of, they would not leave her entirely to her own devices. Instead, they placed her into a situation in which she would be wholly financially dependent on others. The need to control her sexuality trumped the need to help her become financially independent.

Also on the topic of their clients’ sexuality, COS workers devoted a great deal of time in some cases to discussing the amount of children their clients should have, and at times this affected the aid they were willing to give to them. On the one hand, some members of the COS were open minded when it came to birth control, a position that was notable given that contraception was still illegal in many states. There were instances in the Committee on Difficult Cases where they discussed their clients’ desire for birth control or to procure an abortion without judgment regarding the acts themselves. In a 1906 letter to Edward Devine, Mary Richmond, referring to contraception, wrote of the importance of “steady, dignified, outspoken treatment of this most difficult subject, which is always thrusting itself upon our attention and

\textsuperscript{187} The Charity Organization Society of New York to Maud E. Miner, 22 May, 1917, Casework Files, Box 284, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
about which we have felt so helpless.”\textsuperscript{188} She went on in her letter to stress that contraception was not something only supported by feminists and radicals, telling the story of “a conservative woman here, a social leader” who came to her and asked “that I get her a dozen copies to be given to the women in charge of certain charities for working women in this city.”\textsuperscript{189}

The case records and meeting minutes included a number of instances when the COS members argued the relative merits of a particular family being able to control the amount of children they had. Like many reformers of the time period, they were supportive of contraception in certain circumstances while still not wholeheartedly embracing the idea that poor people should have autonomy over their reproductive lives. At times they discussed wanting to limit the size of their clients’ families, a concern that stemmed in part from observing suffering among their clients and in part from a desire to limit the reproduction of “undesirable” people for society’s sake. Eugenics was a popular social philosophy at the time and no doubt played a role in these discussions; however, it is also important to note that members of the COS would have seen the toll that constant childbearing had on women and the desperation with which some of them attempted to limit their families, sometimes through illegal and often through dangerous means. Observing the poverty that large families often suffered, and the ways in which that poverty was exasperated the bigger a family got, it must have been tempting to do everything they could to prevent it, even at the cost of their clients’ autonomy. At times the charity workers used access to aid to control their clients’ reproductive lives. In a series of letters between Frank Bruno and Mary Richmond on a family referred to as Mr. and Mrs. B, the two charity leaders discussed whether giving aid to this family would run the risk of “making the increase of the

\textsuperscript{188} Mary Richmond to Edward Devine, 29 March, 1906, Box 103, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
family too easy.”\textsuperscript{190} The couple in this case was not lazy, but the husband was sickly and had trouble earning enough to support his family. Another COS worker, Johanne Bojeser, used much harsher language and wrote to Richmond that the family was “inefficient except along the line of race propagation” and said that the charity workers “do not want to act as incubators for them.”\textsuperscript{191} While the desire to lessen the family’s suffering was no doubt a part of the COS’s calculations, the social workers also directly connected access to aid to sexual promiscuity. Here they argued that money in the form of aid would directly affect how their clients performed their genders. They implied that aid would allow the clients to let their sexuality run wild, while the prudence they would supposedly show if forced to find other ways to support themselves would cause them to control their sexuality.

At other times, in wanting to limit the size of their clients’ families, the COS came close to being on the side of women who were exhausted by constant child bearing and rearing. Another woman referred to as Mrs. B said that it was perhaps better that she and her husband did not live together, as she could not handle any more children and her husband got angry whenever she told him as much. When she later became pregnant, the COS workers noted that “she is very rebellious at this, and feels that this was at the bottom of her domestic difficulties.”\textsuperscript{192} Members of the COS took her claim seriously and agreed with her that it would be prudent to limit her family. However, their adherence to the proper performance of gender meant that they would not wholeheartedly support her and that their opinion on the case was not entirely based on her desires. They saw the poverty that constant childbearing caused but still turned to men to

\textsuperscript{190} Frank Bruno to Mary Richmond, 12 August, 1912, Box 103, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

\textsuperscript{191} Johanne Bojeser to Mary Richmond, 2 August, 1912, Box 103, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

\textsuperscript{192} Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 5 January, 1917, Box 99, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
determine Mrs. B’s reproductive future. Members of the Committee on Difficult Cases spent at least three meetings discussing whether or not it was “wise” for her or her husband to be sterilized. Much of this conversation focused on what it meant for society for the family to continue having children; they even stated that “from a eugenic standpoint, the family is not promising.” One member of the committee, Mr. Thurston, asserted that the matter was up to physicians but that “personally he would be in favor of putting the matter up to the man and endeavoring to show him the real reason for concern,” with the caveat that he was “open-minded” to the operation even if the man did not agree. A woman named Mrs. Glenn asserted that the decision should entirely be a “moral” one. Ultimately, they decided it would not be appropriate to take a stand on the matter and ended the discussion on what to do to help Mrs. B.

Members of the COS were perhaps most critical of women who refused to be separated from their children or refused to work as domestics while also expecting aid. While the COS conducted study after study on the work that went into maintaining a proper home, they never went so far as to argue for women to be paid solely for doing that work, important as they may have believed it to be. The case records from 1913 included the case of Mrs. F, a twenty-nine-year-old Irish widow with three-year-old twins and a baby. The COS had received an appeal from her when her husband was still alive but sick and she had refused to enter a hospital herself. Because of her refusal to take their advice regarding her illness, their first experience with her was not positive. When they heard from her again after her husband’s death, she was acting as a

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194 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
197 Charity Organization Society of New York, Case #140210, Casework Summaries, 1913, Box 100, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.
caretaker so that she could live in two large rooms free of rent and planned to put her children in a day nursery so that she could get a position as a cleaner or kitchen helper in a department store. The COS then made one of their most common suggestions, that she place her children in an institution, take her youngest with her, and take a position in service. They were strict with her, saying that they “refused to give her relief on any other plot.”

Mrs. F insisted on sticking to her own plan and managed to make it work for four months, albeit with some help from her church. The society did not leave her be but continued to call on her, never finding her at home. When she lost her job, she turned to Mrs. L, the woman who had originally referred her to the COS, who again contacted the society. Things went downhill from there for Mrs. F: the baby died, she was unable to find work, and she became sick. At this point, she was willing to commit the twins to an institution but refused to separate them and would still not take a position in service. Beyond that, she refused to perform poverty in a way approved of by the COS; the records stated that “To all advice she appeared quite indifferent and seemed to feel she had a right to assistance.” The note proceeding the case said only that there was “insufficient investigation” and that the caseworker should have spoken with the woman’s father and brother. For women looking for assistance from the COS, attempts at independence and the desire to be involved mothers—two things which the COS ostensibly highly valued—could not make up for the ultimate sin of feeling they were entitled to aid.

When the COS last spoke with Mrs. F, she had called the society to let them know that she made plans to leave the United States to move in with her parents in England. The COS then helped her raise money for her passage. It is telling that she was willing to leave the country before taking the COS’s advice to separate her children and work as a domestic. It is also telling

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198 Charity Organization Society of New York, Case #140210, Casework Summaries, 1913.
199 Ibid.
that, like many of the COS’s clients, Mrs. F used and even sought out their aid when helpful for
her but otherwise did not make an effort to stay in touch with them, such as when she was
working and they never found her at home.

The COS records are full of examples of clients who disappear and then reappear again
and who make no effort to keep in touch with the society when they are able to provide for
themselves, suggesting that clients of the COS often saw the society as an extra source of income
and not as a source of helpful advice. Richmond’s fear, expressed at one of the Committee on
Difficult Cases meetings, that the COS was going to relegate itself to simply “running the
errands of the poor” was not entirely without merit. 200 When they could, COS’s clients often
acted similarly to Mrs. Brown, a widow who procured aid from the COS while not showing very
much interest in their advice. She refused an operation that the society felt she needed, declined
to listen to a dietician or attend a cooking class, and insisted on providing for her family in a way
that the COS believed was “extravagant,” maintaining that she needed at least sixty dollars a
month to properly feed them. The COS friendly visitor assigned to her case wrote that the
woman was “devoted” to her family but could not figure out why Mrs. Brown would not listen to
her, and the social worker who later commented on the case wrote that it was “almost tragic to
follow the tenacity with which the woman clung to her plans, and the district its.” 201 Eventually,
the COS reacted to Mrs. Brown’s refusal to acknowledge them as experts by cutting off her aid.
Denied monetary compensation for not performing poverty in the way that the COS required,
Mrs. Brown saw no more use for the society and the last time she was visited by a COS worker,

200 Minutes of the Committee on Difficult Cases of the Charity Organization Society of New York, 2 March, 1917,
Box 99, Community Service Society records, 1842-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University,
New York.
201 Charity Organization Society of New York, Case #125055, Casework Summaries, 1913, Box 100, Community
the widow asked that she “cease her visits.” After refusing to acknowledge them as “experts” on her life, Mrs. Brown knew that the COS was not willing to provide for her the only thing that the poor undoubtedly lack: money.

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202 Charity Organization Society of New York, Case #125055, Casework Summaries, 1913.
Conclusion

The COS in the first two decades of the twentieth century was not wholly a punitive organization. Through their work on tuberculosis and tenement house reform, members began to address some of the structural problems that faced their clients, rather than concentrate entirely on how they could reform as individuals. However, their individualistic approach continued to dominate well into the new century, as they compared themselves to doctors and increasingly saw their role as pinpointing the exact “illness” that caused the poverty of their specific clients. This focus on the individual continued to be prominent as social work became more established as a profession, in many ways eclipsing the focus on structural factors and societal reform that the COS’s contemporaries in the settlement movement advocated.

Early social workers were living and working at a time of increasing emphasis on “expertise” and “scientific” approaches to solving societal problems. By looking at their work and the development of their profession through the lens of gender, one can see the ideological underpinnings that were key to the “expertise” developed. Social workers both perpetrated and were impeded by these ideologies, as they held their clients to standards largely determined by gender and saw their own struggle to be seen as objective and dispassionate professionals stymied by societal ideologies regarding gender. As demonstrated by their focus on cleanliness and budgeting, they often found that they could most easily assert their expertise in contrast to their clients in the domestic realm. Race and class were key here, as their identities as white, middle class women allowed them to position themselves as the teachers of the domestic arts for working class women who in many cases may have actually had more experience running a household.
The COS was not alone in attempting to alleviate poverty during the early twentieth century. Through the work of other men and women from the time period, we can see how a different approach to gender could result in radically different approaches to aiding poor people. The work of African American contemporaries of the COS is a good example. Largely shut out of contributing to white-led institutions, African America women created their own organizations to address poverty in their communities. Similar to the COS, they focused a great deal on sexual morality and the promotion of the nuclear family, with the added stress of combatting negative stereotypes regarding black women’s sexuality. However, geographic segregation meant that middle class black women often lived in close proximity to the poor men and women they sought to help and, as a result, they saw themselves as inhabiting the same community. While they still promoted the traditional nuclear family as an ideal, they were far more attuned to the fact that most women would need to work, and would need access to affordable childcare and other structural support to do so. They also were distinctly aware that through either slavery or often-grueling paid work, African American women had for generations been denied the freedom and resources to devote themselves to tending to their families. These differences resulted in a more explicitly feminist agenda, and one that more readily acknowledged the roles that class, race, and gender oppression played in creating poverty. It also meant that African American women were more likely to promote programs that would be available universally, rather than means-tested programs dependent upon middle-class assessments of the worthiness of the poor. Gordon goes so far as to assert that “Had black

203 Gordon explores the work of African American women concerned with poverty in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in chapter 5 of Pitied But Not Entitled.
women activists had their way, the working mothers of the past few decades would have been much better supplied with childcare and other measures to lighten the double day.”

By comparing the work of African American women concerned with the plight of the poor to the work of the COS, one can see how a different approach to gender could radically alter how one decided to distribute aid. Going back to Deutsch’s discussion of middle class women’s anxiety around inhabiting seemingly contradictory identities as “workers/wives/mothers,” African American women in many ways did not seem to make the same distinctions that COS workers did. They expected women to work, as they always had, and believed strongly that that work should not interfere with their right to be parents, as it too often did. For members of the COS, their adherence to the ideal of a supporting man and a woman tending to the home, at least in their clients’ lives, meant that they didn’t recognize many of the economic realities facing their clients, such as the difficulty men faced finding jobs or the impossibility of a family surviving with only one income. On the other hand, when they decided that it was more important that the women clients they were attempting to help assume a “worker” identity, they failed to continue to view these women as mothers and often suggested they construct their lives in such a way that meant they would no longer be able to raise their own children.

Vivian Zelizer begins The Social Meaning of Money by stressing that money has never been neutral, that it takes on different meaning depending on the social context and that it has never been the “single, interchangeable, absolutely impersonal instrument” many have made it out to be. As Zelizer’s work shows, gender is often key to determining the meaning of money

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204 Gordon, Pityed But Not Entitled, 142.
205 Deutsch, Women and the City, 52.
206 Zelizer, The Social Meaning of Money, 2.
at any particular point in time. Members of the COS did not simply approve or deny aid to poor people based on whether or not they accepted the ways in which they performed their gender. The very “kind” of money they thought they were giving their clients, and that they and their clients were earning, differed depending on gender. A widow with children who was impeccable at performing womanhood but could not earn for herself was given a different kind of money than men who admitted their inability to provide for their families—and thus fulfill their duties as men—by seeking out the poorly paid labor of the Woodyard. A working class woman who had a bad reputation and kept her home in disarray after her husband died inherited a different kind of money than a middle class woman whose home and performance of womanhood were beyond reproach. In the social workers’ own lives, a man with a college degree and claim to expertise within the profession earned a different kind of money than a woman whose claim to the job relied partly on “natural” skills she supposedly developed as a woman.

As the focus on gender and money shows, it is not enough to say that the COS took a judgmental view of the poor that some other groups did not. Gender was key to the equation. There were ways in which the COS of the early twentieth century acknowledged the specific challenges that poor women faced on account of their gender and class. Their focus on desertion, for instance, resulted from both ideological beliefs on the importance of the nuclear family and the observation that it really was difficult for poor women to make ends meet without the support of their husbands. However, by not questioning conventional ideas regarding women’s dependence or conceiving of ways to truly support working class or poor women dedicated to domestic responsibilities, the COS’s ability to aid these women in achieving independence was limited. At the same time, beliefs regarding women’s dependence meant that women in the COS struggled to defend their own access to monetary compensation for their work and that social
work would become an often poorly paid and under-resourced profession. Whether it was in the “public” realm or in the home, both the social workers distributing aid to the poor and the mostly male leadership of the COS distributing salaries to their workers never quite saw much of the work of the women dependent on them as worthy of a substantial wage. Through an examination of the work of the COS, one can see how understanding different approaches to fighting poverty lay not just in acknowledging the barriers facing poor people but in understanding the very gendered ways we determine access to money.
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