

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Professional and Functional Alternative Social Workers: A Case Study of Malaysia

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The objective of this study was to compare “professional” (PW) and “functional alternative” (FA) social workers. The findings suggested that there were no significant differences between PWs and FAs in intervention, evaluation methods, work ethics, and values. The PWs, in clients’ eyes, were better at delivering services, while FAs’ services were more satisfactory to the clients. While PWs were supposed to be “professional,” FAs were more “professional” than PWs in their performance despite their lack of recognition as “professional social workers”. These critical findings should encourage academics and practitioners for further discussion on conceptual implications of both practices and expand future research.

Keywords functional alternative social workers; Malaysia; professional social workers

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Social work as a helping profession has been in existence universally from time immemorial. Since before the advent of mainstream religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism—communities have helped mutually. With the arrival of these universal religions, churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues have acted as major institutions in these endeavors. As acknowledged in modern times, social work emerged in the West in the late 19th century as a charity-based practice and today has turned into a rights-based practice.

Religion is one of the mainstreaming work forces in the welfare process in the Eastern culture. And it is interesting to note that the Asian continent is a homeland for four major religious faiths: Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Yen, 2008). With historically devolved traditions and value systems, religious and non-religious leaders have three sets of responsibilities in Eastern culture. First of all, they are spiritual leaders who provide mental satisfaction to the community. Secondly, they are facilitators of social change and empowerment processes, and are also involved in maintaining the social welfare system in the community. Thirdly, they are “social entrepreneurs” building society by organizing and nurturing collaborative efforts by

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