PERSPECTIVES ON THE MISSION OF THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION: A RANDOM SURVEY OF NASW MEMBERS

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Abstract: *Individuals with MSW degrees and who were members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the United States (N=862) were surveyed and asked what best represents the social work profession mission for them. They were provided with 7 pre-selected choices (i.e., advocacy; lobbying; social justice; community organization; clinical work with individuals, families, and groups; advancement of the social work profession; or other) from which to choose one response. Over 66% of those responding chose clinical work with individuals, families, and groups as the mission of the social work profession. With the complex problems facing societies today will social work be at the forefront of the challenge or have we turned away from our historical mission of promoting social justice? This paper focuses on the findings from this research study and discusses its implications for social work education and the social work profession, as well as those individuals whom social workers serve.*

Key Words: *profession, mission, social justice, social work education, NASW*

The social work profession prides itself in its commitment to serve clients who are disenfranchised, marginalized and oppressed. From its inception, social work has demonstrated this commitment to advocate for "the least among us" (Haynes and White, 1999) as evidenced by the work of Jane Adams and Mary Richmond (Byers & Stone, 1999). Social work students are taught through our historical roots how the profession's mission and organizing values include social justice. This traditional mode of helping exemplifies the uniqueness of the profession and is what sets social work apart from other helping professions. Though professional social workers are increasingly choosing clinical and/or private practice over public social services (Wodarski, in press), does such a change in practice settings demonstrate an abandonment of the profession's traditional mission of social justice?

Merriam-Webster (1989) defines mission as a task assigned; a specific task with which a person or a group is charged. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 1996) states that the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, op-

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pressed, and living in poverty. NASW (1996) further states that:

> An historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. 'Clients' is used inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice (p.1).

All professions have missions that drive their ideals and practices (McMahon, 1996). The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values that social workers have embraced throughout the profession's history. Social work's foundation is built on a unique purpose and perspective that includes service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. This constellation of core values reflects what is unique to the social work profession (NASW, 1996). Regardless of which population or practice setting that social workers provide services in, the core values should be present and the mission of the profession should remain constant.

There has been discussion that the profession of social work has turned its back on its original mission to serve the underprivileged (Specht & Courtney, 1994), having migrated to private practice and work with the middle class. Walz and Grove (1991) attribute some of the transition from the original mission to cultural, political and economic trends and to the value systems of a new generation of middle class social workers who lack exposure to poverty and other social ills. Certainly, social workers have expanded their practice roles and settings, but does this constitute a change in how they view the mission of their profession? In considering the mission of social work, all considerations of social justice rest on a core belief that every human being is intrinsically valuable. Social work educational programs are charged with focusing on the promotion of social and economic justice. Social justice involves the idea that in a perfect world, all citizens would have identical "rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits" (Barker, 1995, p. 354). Similarly, economic justice concerns the distribution of resources in a fair and equitable manner. Social work education programs are required to provide "an understanding of the dynamics and consequences of social and economic justice, including all forms of human oppression and discrimination" (CSWE, 1992a, p. 6; CSWE, 1992b, p.8). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) went a step further in 1994 mandating that content on social and economic justice be a central component of the social work curriculum (CSWE, 1994).

The NASW Code of Ethics supports the concept of social justice when it stresses that social workers' ethical responsibility to the broader society is to advocate and work for people's general welfare. They specifically state that "social workers promote social

justice and social change with and on behalf of clients" (NASW, 1996). Thus, social workers are expected to seek social justice, a condition described by Barker (1995) in which all members of a society have the same rights, protection, opportunities, obligations and social benefits.

Our professional code of ethics and social work education curriculum statements continue to emphasize the traditional and historical mission to promote social and economic justice. However, traditional thinking about the mission of social work appears to be in conflict with the current emphasis on clinical practice (Wakefield, 1988). In an effort to explore how practicing social workers view the mission of their profession, the following survey research study was conducted among master level social workers in 3 states.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

Members from four chapters (Maryland; New York State; New York City; North Carolina) of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) with Master=s degrees in Social Work (MSW) were randomly selected to participate in this study. A sample of convenience, these states were selected for the sample as they were of particular interest to the researchers as they had previously practiced social work in these states. Two thousand mailing labels from NASW that were randomized and equally selected from the 4 chapters (500 per chapter) were purchased. An anonymous questionnaire designed by the authors for this study was mailed to each participant for completion, along with a letter explaining the study, and a self-addressed stamped envelope to return the questionnaire in. A 43% response rate was obtained, with 862 completed questionnaires returned. The sample (N=862) includes 27% of the responses coming from the Maryland Chapter, 21% from the New York City Chapter, 29% from the New York State Chapter, and 23% from the North Carolina Chapter. Data was collected in the spring of 1999. SPSS was used for data analysis.

Questionnaire development

A 24-item questionnaire was developed by the researchers for this study. Researchers formulated item questions and then received feedback from colleagues as to specific question content and overall questionnaire design. Modifications to test questions were incorporated as indicated from the pilot testing among these 5 colleagues. In addition to demographic information, the questionnaire included quantitative questions related to the participant's educational background, practice experience, and views as to the social work profession's mission. In regard to practice experience, questions specifically targeted their current social work position as to the setting (i.e., nonprofit; for profit) and field of practice (i.e., public mental health; health care; consultant; public welfare; private practice; educator; school;other). Additional questions asked if they called themselves a social worker, if they would belong to NASW if malpractice insurance was not available through the organization, if they would pick social work

again as a career choice if they had to do it over again, and lastly, their views as to the mission of the social work profession. When asked how they viewed the mission of the social work profession, respondents were provided with 7 pre-selected choices and instructed to choose one (advocacy; lobbying; social justice; community organization; clinical work with individuals, families, and groups; advancement of the social work profession; other).

Demographic Characteristics

Details related to the characteristics of the sample are provided in Table 1. Overall, the majority of the sample was female and Caucasian. In relation to age, 55% were under the age of 50, with 6% reporting they were over 70 years of age. Years in the field ranged from 44% with less then 10 years of social work experience to10% with over 30 years in the field.

Initial Results

With 98% of the sample answering the mission question, results indicated that over 66% of respondents chose clinical work with individuals, families, and groups as the mission of the social work profession, 13% social justice, 11% advocacy, 4% advancement of the profession, 3% community organizing, 2% other, and less than 1% lobbyist (see Table 2).

The researchers were also interested in how strongly participants identified with the profession and their satisfaction with social work as a career choice. When asked if they called themselves a social worker 90% of respondents reported yes. When asked if they had it do over would they again pick social work as their career choice, 20% of respondents reported no and 6% stated they were unsure. Furthermore, 20% of respondents stated they would not belong to NASW if it did not offer group malpractice insurance.

Further analysis

Further analysis on how respondents answered the profession's mission question was conducted. The responses of social justice, community organizing, lobbying, and advocacy were re-coded into one variable (hence forth referred to as social justice); advancement of the profession and other responses re-coded into a second variable (other), and clinical practice with individuals, families, and groups left as a single variable. Chi square analysis was conducted and no significant differences were found for demographic variables of age, gender, locality (chapter membership), if respondent held an associate's degree in human services, undergraduate major, years since obtaining the MSW degree, if degree was obtained in an advanced standing program, what setting (profit or nonprofit) their first social work position was in after completing their MSW degree, if they called themselves a social worker, or if they would pick social work again as a career choice.

TABLE 1: Characteristics of Sample (N=862)

Characteristic	n	%
Age		
20-29	80	9.3
30-39	140	16.2
40-49	250	29.0
50-59	261	30.3
60-69	79	9.2
70+	52	6.0
Gender		
Female	656	80.3
Male	161	19.7
Race (n=777)		
African-American	60	7.7
Asian American	7	.9
American Indian	2	.3
Caucasian	678	87.3
Hispanic	18	2.3
Other	12	1.5
Years in social work field (n=860)		
0-2	141	16.4
3-5	112	13.0
6-10	126	14.7
11-15	120	14.0
16-20	107	12.4
21-25	98	11.4
26-30	71	8.3
31+	85	9.9
Current social work position (n=859)		
Nonprofit	488	56.8
For-profit	253	29.5
Not employed in a social work position	75	8.7
Retired	43	5.0
Employment setting (n=743)		
Public mental health	192	25.8
Private practice	183	24.6
Health care	125	16.8
Public welfare	60	8.1
School	55	7.4
Educators	33	4.4
Consultants	21	2.8
Other	**74**	**10.0**

TABLE 2: Social Work Profession's Mission (N=848)

Mission	n	%
Advocacy	91	10.7
Lobbyist	3	.4
Social justice	111	13.1
Community organization	23	2.7
Clinical work	563	66.4
Advancement of profession	36	4.2
Other	21	2.5

In relation to their concentration in the MSW program respondents were provided 9 pre-selected choices (child & family; administration; community organization; clinical; aging; health; mental health; casework; other) from which to choose one. Significant differences were found for this variable (chi square = 76.332, df =16, p<.001) indicating an overrepresentation of individuals whose MSW concentration was clinical or mental health selecting clinical practice with individuals, families, and groups as the profession's mission. In relation to those who identified social justice as the profession's mission, significant differences were found (chi square = 21.462, df = 6, p = .002) indicating an overrepresentation of individuals whose MSW concentration was administration or community organization.

Though not significant for the variable of years since obtaining their MSW, those in the 3-15 years range since obtaining the MSW degree tended to be higher in identifying clinical practice with individuals, families, and groups as the profession's mission.

Participants were also asked what their current social work employment setting was. They were instructed to pick one choice from a selection of eight (mental health; health care; consultant; public welfare; private practice; educator; school; or other). Significant differences were found for this variable (chi square = 77.930, df =14, p=.000) indicating an overrepresentation of individuals identifying clinical practice as the mission of the profession among those whose current social work employment setting was mental health, private practice, or school.

Limitations

This survey research study utilized a self-administered questionnaire. Though the sample was randomized, it was selected from a limited geographic region and only included members of NASW with MSW degrees. Utilizing limited available information from NASW, the sample characteristics of gender and ethnicity were comparable to the sampling frame of NASW 1999 membership. That year females comprised 80% of the membership, with ethnicity breaking down as 3% Hispanic, 7% African American, and 86% Caucasian (B. Corbett, personal communication, September 3, 2002). Additional limitations of this study included the lack of a standardized instru-

ment with good validity and reliability for data collection, as well as the constraints within the instrument used. Respondents were allowed to choose only one answer from a pre-selected list of potential missions of the social work profession. A different approach might have captured a more complex view.

DISCUSSION

Implications for the profession

With the complex problems facing societies today, will social work be at the forefront of the challenge or have we turned away from our historical mission of promoting social justice? The results of this study, though limited in interpretation and generalizability, certainly are worth noting as over 66% of those surveyed chose clinical work with individuals, families, and groups as the mission of the social work profession. Only 13% selected social justice as the profession=s mission. Even when combining social justice with community organization, lobbying, and advocacy the total percentage was 27%, which is considerably less than the 66% that selected clinical work. Certainly clinical work with individuals, families, and groups can be one vehicle utilized to achieve social justice, though some in the profession would question its effectiveness to do so. Jacobson (2001) argues that "social workers make excellent clinical practitioners and the profession should continue to train people for this work, however therapy is not a particularly useful intervention for alleviating poverty, building sustainable communities, or generally improving outcomes for disadvantaged people-- goals at the core of the social work mission" (p. 53).

Implications for social work education

This initial study begs for replication and further exploration. If future research concurs, the social work profession should exam its mission and organizing values and how the mission and values are taught to social work students and to understand how practicing social workers view clinical work as our mission. Furthermore, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body established to oversee social work education, should ensure standards in regards to our mission. Specht and Courtney (1994) admonish CSWE for leaving large gaps in the education of professional social workers and further criticize social work educators for failing to provide leadership for the profession stating; " As social work has drifted into the field of psychotherapy, most schools of social work have drifted along with it. Some schools have actively pushed the profession further in this direction " (p. 149). Certainly the need for social workers providing mental health services is substantial as currently the majority of professionals providing such services are social workers (Wodarski, in press). It is not the motive of the authors to discredit this field of practice within the profession, but to recognize that we are a profession made up of multiple roles within multiple practice settings and systems and our mission of social justice must be reflected in them all. The flexibility to practice in multiple settings is one of the strengths of the profession and we must find a way to keep the mission of social justice central to our work with

all clients. Haynes (1998) states:

> We must strengthen our commitment both to help individuals
> clinically as well as to intervene or advocate for more expansive
> and humane social welfare policies. While we broaden our client
> base and our fields of practice, we must not lessen our attention to
> disadvantaged clients and public social services. We must not lose
> sight of nor reduce the value of those attributes of our profession
> that distinguish it from other professions (p. 509).

In addition to CSWE standards, it is essential that social work educators not only teach evidence-based approaches to working with a variety of populations and systems, but also provide students with a firm grounding in our mission. Longres and Scanlon (2001) question if social justice is defined consistently within the profession though "CSWE standards and NASW principles generally proceed from the belief that social justice is definable, desirable, and possible" (p. 448). CSWE must be clear in its definition of social justice, its presence within our mission, and its place within curriculum standards so that social justice is taught consistently across programs. Though integration of the profession's mission throughout the curriculum would be best, Haynes (1999) questions if we can assume this will be achieved. He proposes a theoretical framework that integrates social work professional values with the "personal, social, and political value dimensions of students" that is taught in a separate course in the social work curriculum in lieu of the assumption that these values will be integrated throughout the curriculum (p. 48). Both approaches speak to the importance of students being provided a firm grounding in our mission. Failure to do so may result in the profession of social work being indistinguishable from other helping professions, which could lead to its distinction.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides initial findings as to how practicing social workers view the mission of their profession. Future research should further refine measurement and replicate the study to also include expanded geographic regions and non-members of NASW. The expansion of this line of research is important as such findings could have profound implications for clients. If indeed professional social workers view clinical work as the profession's mission, who will be the voice for those individuals and client groups who are disenfranchised, marginalized and oppressed? Since the inception of our profession this has been our charge. Did we give it up along the way? If additional research concurs such, it may be time to formally redefine the mission of the social work profession. But do so with caution, as such redefinition will not only have a substantial impact on our profession and social work education, but also on the clients we serve.

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