From the Editor

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Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published two times a year (Spring and Winter) by the school of Social Work at 1925 San Jacinto, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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Social Work on the Move: Emerging Roles and New Directions

Jay Sweifach

Introduction

Social workers are employed in an array of diverse practice settings. Some are traditional, that is, agencies in which social workers comprise the majority of the administrative, supervisory, and professional workforce; and others, delineated as host settings, in which social work is not the dominant profession (Dane & Simon, 1991; Jaskyte, 2005). Host settings are interprofessional, and include agencies such as schools, hospitals, prisons, community centers, nursing homes, employment assistance, and religious organizations. We know from the literature that social workers have been and continue to be valued assets in these agencies and organizations (Agresta, 2006; Evans, 2005; Fleit, 2008). Social workers possess an array of valued professional and organizational skills and competencies including problem solving, communication, interviewing and screening, assessment, advocacy, empathy and genuineness, and counseling, all of which contribute to the effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of the workplace environment. We also know from the literature that the social work labor force, although currently robust, has been subjected to significant downsizing in the past (Hanley, 2004; Jarman, Rohde, McFall, Kolar, & Strom, 1997; Rizzo & Abrams, 2000); being pragmatic and planning ahead with a focus on developing new workplace markets for social workers appears to have cogency.

This article presents findings from a national study of social workers employed in interprofessional organizations. It was hypothesized that this cohort could provide important insights about current and future employment opportunities for social workers. It was surmised that social workers employed within interprofessional settings, with their interdisciplinary experiences, who are exposed to a multi-professional work environment, perhaps see the current and future workforce world through a unique lens. It was imagined that respondents could offer a unique perspective about workforce opportunities currently available, but relatively understated, and insights about roles, thus far unimagined, but which could materialize in the future.

Clarification of Terms

According to the literature, a host setting is defined as a workplace in which social work is practiced, but non-social workers dominate the labor force; the setting is "host" to the social worker. In a non-host setting, the agency is dominated by social workers and has a distinct social work mission (Dane & Simon, 1991; DiFranks, 2008). Interprofessional practice (IPP) is a communication and decision-making process performed by a diverse group of professionals, producing a synergy of grouped knowledge and skill (Bridges, Davidson, Odegard, Maki, & Tomkowiak, 2011). The definition of social worker has been the subject of considerable debate. For this study, the term social worker will be defined as a graduate of a social work education program at the bachelor's or master's degree level who uses his or her knowledge and skills to provide services to clients (Gibelman & Sweifach, 2008). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are approximately 607,000 social work positions in the United States (BLS, 2012).

Literature

Although the literature suggests an array of challenges associated with "guest" status (Dane & Simon, 1991; Fleit, 2008; Munn & Adorno, 2008), many recent studies over the past ten years have noted positive outcomes for social workers in interprofessional settings (Agresta, 2006; Evans, 2005; Kelly, et. al., 2010; Kitchen &

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Brock, 2005; Parker-Oliver et. al., 2009). In general, there appears to be a growing global trend toward multidisciplinary co-work (Abramson & Bronstein, 2008; Bronstein, Mizrachi, Korazim, Korosy, & McPhee, 2010). Organizations have recognized the importance of collaborative or shared decision-making among all professionals on the team. To support these trends, an increasing number of academic institutions are preparing students for interprofessional practice (MacDonald, 2014).

The profession of social work has experienced downsizing and retrenchment in interprofessional settings. Over the years, organizations have looked for ways to cut costs, employing paraprofesssionals, volunteers, semi-skilled workers, and others in positions formerly occupied by social workers (NASW, 2014; Oltedal, 2009; Sweifach, 2005). The literature also reveals that professionals from other disciplines such as nursing, psychology, occupational therapy (Lombard, 2008), and gerontology (McNab & Webster, 2010), have, in the past, replaced social workers or taken over responsibilities formerly held by social workers.

On the other hand, social work has enjoyed consistent growth over time within interprofessional settings, beginning with schools and hospitals during the early 1900s, and most recently in relatively new areas such as political practice domains and forensics (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008). At times, the expansion of social work has paralleled changes occurring in specific fields of practice such as healthcare (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008), education (Whitted, Rich, Constable, & Massat, 2009), and juvenile justice (Rapp & Stewart, 2011). For example, in healthcare, with innovations in genetic techniques and diagnosis, has come the need for genetic counseling, a practice domain relatively new to social work. In education, the Comprehensive School Reform and No Child Left Behind policies have given rise to new roles and emerging opportunities for social workers in schools (Whitted, Rich, Constable, & Massat, 2009). The expansion of the social work role has also paralleled societal changes such as the aging of baby-boomers, which has resulted in an increased need for social workers in settings serving older adults.

The expansion of the social work role has also paralleled changes in social, political, economic, humanitarian, and other contexts. In recent years, social workers have been among the first to respond to natural and man-made disasters (Suppes, 2013). Social workers are actively providing services to military personnel and veterans returning from war (Jackson, 2013), and social workers have provided services to individuals contending with the unique stressors caused by the recent global economic recession (Macai, 2012).

In general, the literature reiterates the call for social workers to articulate the important roles that they play, the responsibilities they have (Altilio, Gardia, & Otis-Green, 2007), and substantiate their contributions and value to stakeholders (Fleit, 2008; Whittlesey & Jerome, 2010). These strategies could aid in creating new roles and workforce opportunities for social workers in ways thus far unimagined. The focus of this study was to ask social workers who are professionally engaged in work outside of traditional social work settings to draw on their knowledge and experience to suggest new areas of practice that might emerge for social workers in current settings and to suggest new types of practice settings in which social workers might find future workforce opportunities.

Methodology

Study questions of this descriptive, exploratory study sought to solicit the views and suggestions of respondents about the present status of social work in their agency, with specific focus on current and projected staffing patterns, emerging trends, and manpower needs. The main research questions asked respondents to identify roles or positions within their agency that social workers currently fill, but are relatively unexplored, and to envisage future roles or positions that may not currently exist for social workers (both within their setting, and in other settings). Findings were expected to offer a snapshot of novel interprofessional workplace opportunities either relatively unfamiliar to the social work community, or not yet "host" to social work.

The main element of the study involved the use of a quantitative online survey instrument. Key topic areas of the survey were derived from a review of the findings and conclusions of previous scholarship on interprofessional settings (e.g., Breiman, 2001; Dane & Simon, 1991; Grissett, 2008) specifically relating to perceptions and opinions about social workers employed in interprofessional settings. The survey was developed using Survey Monkey, a web-based platform for conducting surveys. All responses were anonymous, and no method of tracking individual identity was used.

A database of social workers was created using staff directories from agency websites (identified as interprofessional settings), including government agencies, corrections, hospice, hospitals, nursing homes, employee assistance, community organizations, sectarian agencies, and schools. The cover letter invited respondents to forward the survey link to social work colleagues. This is a mechanism similar to convenience and snowball sampling (Babbie, 2010), termed in the literature as the "pass-along" approach (Norman & Russell, 2006). Some agencies list email addresses of staff, and others do not. An effort was made to include at least five agencies in each state. Agencies in all fifty states were included in the database.

The first section of the survey instrument asked respondents to provide workplace demographics. The second section focused on respondent perceptions about the roles social workers hold in their practice setting. The third section asked respondents to imagine future roles and capacities that social workers might assume within agencies such as their own and in other workplace settings. The final section focused on socio-demographics. In addition to multiple choice and Likert-scale response items, three open-ended questions were included related to perceptions about current and future social work staffing patterns.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 20.0. Means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were used to generate descriptive results. A significance level of .05 was used for all inferential statistics. To establish the significance between variables, both nonparametric (chi squares) and parametric (t-tests, ANOVAs, and Pearson product moment correlation coefficients) tests were conducted.

The Sample

Of the 1,100 surveys sent, 975 surveys were successfully delivered electronically; 225 bounced back as undeliverable, most of which were due to lapsed email addresses, although some could have been attributed to email identified as spam by institutional mail servers. Of the successful transmissions, 426 of those surveyed returned completed useable questionnaires for an overall 44% response rate. Of the 354 respondents who indicated their gender, 87.0% (n=308) were female, and 13.0% (n= 46) male. This ratio is consistent with other data on the human services labor force, which reflects a consistent trend of feminization (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2011). The sample was primarily from two age groups: 30-39 (30.9%; n=108) and 50-59 (29.1%; n=102). In addition, the sample was primarily Caucasian (91.4%, n=318), married (76.1%, n=268), and Christian (65.3%, n=222).

Respondents were fairly evenly distributed across large cities, small cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Respondents also provided their state of residence, which was then coded into the ten federal regions used for census enumeration. For purposes of analysis, the ten regions were then re-coded into four regions: Northeast; South; Midwest and West. The geographic distribution of the 338 respondents who answered the question is as follows: Northeast (n=86), Midwest (n=132), South (n=88), West (n=32).

Respondents were an experienced group of human service professionals. The vast majority (94.9%, n=332) reported having ten or more years of work experience in social work. Only 2.9% (n= 10) reported having less than three years of experience. A large number of respondents indicated being a member of an interdisciplinary team (78.9%, n=336). About one-third of respondents indicated union membership (32.2%, n=134).

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Setting Characteristics

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their practice setting. These questions were included to gain a picture of the mission and workforce of agencies represented in the sample. The vast majority of respondents (88.9%, n=315) indicated that the primary mission of their practice setting was not related to social work. Most respondents of this study work in schools (39.3%, n=139), followed by hospitals (14.9%, n=53), government (6.5%, n=26), and special education schools (6.0%, n=21). Other practice settings, all fewer than 6%, included adoption, geriatrics, hospice, EAP, criminal justice, addictions, and community centers.

Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of employees in their practice setting who are social workers. For 22% (n=78) the respondent was the only social worker in their agency. Just under two-thirds (65.3%, n=238) indicated that 'only a few' social workers are on staff at their agency.

Current and Future Staffing Patterns

Respondents were asked a series of questions about current and future staffing patterns of social workers in their practice setting. These questions were included to gain an understanding of how secure social work positions are in the respondents' agency. The number of respondents answering this series of questions was lower (n=305). Respondents (29%, n=88) did indicate that there has been somewhat of a reduction in the number of social workers employed in their practice setting over the past 10 years. The data suggests that the majority of these reductions have occurred in schools and hospitals. The vast majority of respondents (97.8%, n=298) indicated a continued need for social workers in their practice setting, and more than three-fourths (76.2%, n= 232) indicated a greater need for social workers in the future.

Two open-ended questions related to future staffing patterns. The first asked respondents if they expect the number of social workers in their practice setting to increase over the next few years, and, if so, why. Responses were received from 22 respondents; the most frequently cited reasons were: increased roles for social workers (n=8 from child protection and addictions workers), consistent census growth (n=10 from older adult settings), and recognized need by administrators (n=3 from criminal justice). One hospital social worker indicated that "shortages of social workers are felt and administration is noticing." The second open-ended question asked respondents if they expect the number of social workers in their practice setting to decrease over the next few years, and, if so, why. Of the 13 responses received, 12 (from schools) indicated that "budget cuts" would lead to future reductions of social workers in their agencies. One respondent (from a community center) stated: "social workers are being replaced by cheap labor."

An open-ended question asked respondents to identify the types of positions within their practice setting that social workers might be able to assume in the future given the willingness to obtain necessary certifications/credentials; responses were received from 44 respondents (see table 1). Although respondents were all from

TABLE 1

Type of setting	Type of position
Hospital/Healthcare	Administration, care coordinator
Schools/Education	Principal, Child Study Team Director, Guidance, Administration
Juvenile Justice	All positions except those requiring a degree in law
Special Ed. School	Executive Director, Dean
Hospice	Director, Clinical Manager, Care Coordinator
EAP	Director
Government	Program Director; Manager
CBO	Development Director, Management, CEO, Program Director

agencies in the United States, it is plausible that these same opportunities would be available to social workers outside of the United States.

An open-ended question asked respondents to identify new types of practice settings in which social workers might be able to assume a role or professional position in the future. Responses were received from 120 respondents. Responses were grouped into categories or themes and are discussed below contextualized by background information about each sector.

Educational Settings

Respondents suggested a number of unique roles and responsibilities that social workers could assume within the education sector. One respondent stated, "Teachers normally organize after-school activities for children in schools, why aren't social workers in these roles?" A number of respondents suggested that social workers have the skills and knowledge to assume administrative posts in schools, like principal, vice principal, child study team director, and superintendent. Respondents also identified roles in higher education such as dean of students, career counselor, grants/research, academic advising, and various roles in student affairs (admissions, residence life, student activities, financial aid, and enrollment/recruitment). One respondent stated, "Why aren't more social workers employed in university settings?"

There are an estimated 50,000 school social workers serving 43 countries (Allen-Meares, et al., 2013). Researchers have articulated that school social work is a thriving subspecialty of social work, and school social workers are primary providers of mental health services for some of the most challenging issues within the communities school social workers serve (Kelly et al., 2010). A common recommendation from researchers is that social workers in the education sector could do more to substantiate their value to interdisciplinary colleagues and administrators by clearly articulating their roles and by documenting evidence based effectiveness (Higy, Haberkorn, Pope & Gilmore, 2012; Richard, 2013; Whittlesey-Jerome, 2010). Social workers are uniquely positioned to move beyond historical

and traditional roles in educational settings.

Medical Settings

Respondents proposed a number of original or "uncommon" roles in the health sector for social workers. A few respondents mentioned working with animals. One respondent stated, "my vet has a dedicated employee working with people experiencing loss; a perfect role for a social worker." Another area discussed by respondents was "integrated medical care" and "doctor's offices." A respondent noted that her child's pediatrician's office had a social worker.

A number of states have recently implemented programs to help primary care providers better manage the mental health issues of patients. In Maryland, for example, Behavioral Health Integration Program places social workers in pediatric primary care offices. This "co-location" model might include a consultation with a social worker as part of a routine doctors appointment. The literature suggests that a great number of individuals with concerns about psychological and emotional health seek help through primary care providers (Horevits & Manoleas, 2013), and yet, physicians often report that they do not feel confident or competent providing mental health services (Hooper, 2014). The literature also suggests that many individuals do not seek psychological help because of cultural and stigma-related factors. Acceptability improves if mental health services are integrated into primary care (Yeung, Kung, Chung, Rubenstein, Rolfi, Mischovlon, & Fava, 2004). The literature suggests that social workers are a natural fit in integrated primary care, and that, if a stake is not claimed in these settings, other professionals will fill the void (NASW, 2012).

Another area identified by respondents as an underdeveloped area of practice within the medical sector is rehabilitative services. One respondent stated, "Social workers have been in rehab. services for years, dealing with psychosocial care; it's an area that should be expanded."

Government Agencies

Although a sector in which social work has an

established presence, many respondents suggested that governmental settings have great potential for future social work roles and functions. Respondents suggested, "elected office," "political lobbyist," and "offices of elected officials." Other types of roles suggested by respondents include "working for the parks department," "human resource administrator," and "county health department." Social workers are involved in a broad spectrum of work in governmental agencies (NASW, 2011), and many social workers are employed in government.

Some of these roles are already occupied by social workers. A cursory internet search revealed that at least three Directors of Recreation and Parks are MSWs; in general, it appears that these types of untraditional governmental roles could be expanded. A number of human resource agencies are recruiting social workers. Many county health departments have established positions for "care coordinators" which can be pursued by social workers. For example, in Edgecombe North Carolina, the county health department hires social workers in their Maternity Care Program, Child Services department, and for Enhanced Care Coordination providing services to women at high risk.

Respondents also suggested that the United Nations could be a good setting for social workers, one respondent stated, "You would be surprised by the number of jobs available to social workers or an equivalent field advertised on the unjobs.org website. The UN has many great opportunities for social workers."

Law and Criminal Justice

Respondents noted a number of new or underdeveloped positions within the legal sector. One respondent stated, "Social workers are needed in prosecutors' offices to help victims navigate and access services for issues like rape, abuse, and loss." A number of respondents mentioned that 'Forensic social work is an underdeveloped sector." Other roles mentioned by respondents include divorce mediation, and correctional settings (local courts, prison administration, juvenile justice roles). Ritter & Vakalahi (2014) in their book "101 Careers in Social Work" highlight 17 different roles that

social workers currently hold within the legal and criminal justice sector.

Occupational Social Work

Eight respondents mentioned "big business," corporate world," or "industry," as suggested venues for social workers. Respondents noted a number of specific corporate roles that social worker could assume. Three respondents indicated that factories with a sizeable workforce could benefit from social workers for conflict/ mediation issues. Respondents also mentioned, "hotel management," "corporate event organizing," "EAPs," "corporate community relations," and "human resources administration."

According to the literature, the corporate world, one of the youngest domains of social work practice (Danto, 2011), is beginning to take notice of social workers (Becker, 2014; Graziano, 2011; Macias, 2014). Occupational social workers target interventions and programs to workplace populations (Danto, 2011). The University of Southern California's school of social work recently created a track within their MSW program for students interested in non-traditional settings like big business, that typically do not hire social workers (Macias, 2014). Corporations are in need of professionals who can help their employees navigate the demands of work and life while helping to maintain positive workplace environments, community relationships, motivation and help employees suffering from unique issues like substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health concerns (Macias, 2014).

Aging

The respondents of this study did offer suggestions within the aging sector that are perhaps either underdeveloped or have yet to be explored. One respondent stated, "Social workers are desperately needed in early stage dementia." Two respondents mentioned "mobile geriatric units." A number of respondents mentioned work with populations within the older adult demographic (immigrants, poor, abused, GLBTQ, and newly retired).

Over the past several years, a number of initiatives have been launched attempting to

enhance the education and practice of social work in the aging sector. These include such programs as the Hartford Foundation's Geriatric Enrichment Project, and Partnership Program for Aging Education, CSWE's Gero-Ed Center, NASW's Aging Initiative, the California Social Work Education Center's Aging Initiative, and Boston University's Geriatric Education Model (GEM) Consortium.

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Discussion & Implications

A number of implications for the practice of social work in interprofessional settings emanate from the findings of this study. The major focus of this study centered on discovering novel and unfamiliar roles and practice settings in which social workers could have a future role or function. Respondents were generous with their insights and recommendations, providing a variety of future employment suggestions in educational, medical, legal, government, aging, and corporate settings.

In many ways, social workers are an independent workforce. The number of social work agencies, characterized by values, knowledge, skill, and a mission unique to social work, pale in comparison to the number of interprofessional settings in which social workers are employed. Some express alarm about this reality, for without a good supply of social work-administered and staffed practice settings, the majority of the workforce is potentially subjected to the whims and fancies of the host profession's core discipline, not always in line with the values, mission, or purposes of social work. There is certainly some reality to these fears, as we have seen social workers systematically reduced in a number of sectors, like hospitals and schools (Auerbach, Mason, & LaPorte, 2007; Whittlesey-Jerome, 2012). Some settings that had been viable in the past are less available. Of course, many organizations have been committed in the past and continue to be committed to employing social workers. However, these commitments can change, and without charting new directions, reinventing new options, and pursuing possible opportunities, we risk a further diminution.

Respondents suggest that many undeveloped and underdeveloped workplace opportunities exist. These options can serve as a point of departure for social work students and practitioners inviting further exploration and extending existing boundaries into new and fresh practice domains. Findings also have implications for social work educational institutions, which through new electives or program modifications are capable of preparing social workers for new roles and practice in novel and innovative settings. Specific recommendations might include: (1) developing courses on IPP; (2) developing field placements in settings thus far overlooked or underexplored; (3) presenting guest speakers featuring social workers employed in unique or unusual practice settings; (4) creating content areas within the curriculum that enhance social work marketability; (5) spotlighting those schools of social work that offer non-traditional social work programs such as the University of Southern California's MSW program which prepares students for practice in settings such as banks, television studios, and corporations (Macias, 2014).

Respondents discussed prospects for social workers branching out into new areas in which social work is a relative unknown. The literature suggests that social workers lack efficacy in promoting the profession to others (Garrett, 2006). The opportunity to broaden the profession's influence and attain greater distinction can only arise if social workers are able to speak to their value. Addressing this area of weakness can help both reignite the status of social work in settings in which social work is waning and help to establish a presence in underdeveloped and undeveloped sectors.

Conclusion

The ever evolving profession of social work is positioned to expand and diversify beyond current boundaries. Although a profession with a flexible identity, social workers do not appear to have a good understanding of what that identity is (Skwiot, 2007), and in general, lack the ability to promote it. To the general public, social work is even more of an enigma (NASW, 2004). Many workplace opportunities could very well exist for future social workers, however, the inability to clearly define who we are, and what we offer to

those outside the profession, poses a major impediment. As we have seen, some areas formerly occupied by social workers have been assigned to other personnel (Katz, Lurie, & Vidal, 2014; Pycroft & Gough, 2010; Weiss-Gal & Welvourne, 2008). If we do not move quickly to conceive of, create, and promote new roles, take steps to reclaim lost roles, tasks, and functions, and evolve as a profession, we run the risk of sinking into a complacent morass of the status quo, allowing others to define who we are, what our place and worth is, and what our future will be.

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