The "Warmth" Profession: Societal Perceptions of Social Work Practice

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Ronald E. Hall, PhD

Introduction

Perceptions of social work evolved from a history of social services including child welfare and mental health (Carlton-LaNey, 1999). Modern-day practitioners permeate the ranks of political, educational, industrial, and health care organizations. Furthermore, said practitioners have expanded their client base, extending services to controversial populations such as prisoners, the homeless, and AIDS patients. Although the literature acknowledges social work among the list of legitimate professions, scholars have questioned its professional status (Flexner, 1915; Rein, 1970). In the aftermath, practitioners are perceived as warm, but less intelligent, by their public and professional peers. As a profession contingent upon community sanction, the potency of perception necessitates that social workers document and inculcate the core of what social work is. In an effort to accomplish the aforementioned, this paper discusses the nature of social work services. It very briefly reviews the literature pertaining to the public's perception of social work practitioners and their grounding in ethics. The objective is to minimize and/or dispel untruths in an effort to enhance the reputation of the profession in toto.

Semi-Profession

Critical scholars perceive social work as a semi-profession. According to Etzioni (1969), social work qualifies as a semi-profession because its training is presumed less rigorous, and its status less esteemed, giving its practitioners less right to privileged communication. Furthermore, according to some, social work lacks a technology that would oblige practitioners to be independent of societal control, an independance indicative of legitimate "professions." However lacking, social work cannot be construed as a lay occupation, given that it meets the minimum standards of a legitimate profession. Hence, among critics, "semi-profession" is the most suitable reference for an occupation above that of lay, but arguably below that of professional.

Semi-professions share a host of common traits. The most obvious is that they aspire to professional status. In spite of challenges, semi-professionals view themselves as professionals, as does a significant portion of the service population. Their motivation for seeking professional status extends from an effort to avoid the lay alternative. In fact, much like professionals, semi-professionals are more often college educated and fear being grouped with the laborer, secretary, or other non-professional employee. Amidst constant challenges to their status, semi-professionals then make a concerted effort to identify with those farther up on the occupational hierarchy (Toren, 1969).

According to critics, the social work agency is among the typical semi-professional organizations. Although such an agency does apply a knowledge base, it remains semi-professional to the extent of its minimally trained workers, who in some instances engage in minimally privileged communication (e.g., courts). Conversely, among more legitimate professions, the extent of training and educational rigor facilitates practitioner independence and professional status. In fact, social workers apply knowledge, but the gap between agency practitioner and administrator varies to a greater extent than is true for some of their educated cohorts, such as attorneys. For example, the ability of the social worker to authorize hospitalization of a client is diminished by the authority of a legal knowledge base, less varied and more specialized (Bogolub, 1998). Under such circumstances, the social worker is only indirectly associated with client freedom or incarceration. They may be more intimately involved with the client's welfare than the judge or attorney whose training is differentiated only by years of experience. In this instance, social work status, even as semi-professional, may suffer a reduction in prestige.

Ronald E. Hall, PhD, is a professor at Michigan State University.

Correspondence should be addressed to Ronald E. Hall, Michigan State University, 421 West Fee Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

The argument for social work as a semi-profession is enabled by the authority differential between agency practitioner and administrator. The limited amount of knowledge that the practitioner is presumed to have imposes upon his or her independence in relation to administrative authority (Stein, 1961). He or she is apt to practice more on the basis of credential than technology. When practice operates absent of technology, the administrative relationship is manifested hierarchically. That is because among social workers, the practitioner has less autonomy vis-à-vis technology, and he or she is then more amenable to the administrative hierarchy, although less so than the lay worker.

The occupational technology of social work is perceived universally as less rigorous than that of the so-called true professions (Cnaan & Parsloe, 1989). That perception is the product of a methodology where performance is less measurable and less amenable to public scrutiny. Said methodology may also be performed in a less amenable setting, necessitating the need for constant evaluation. Subsequently, social workers seek and require community sanction and are at times admonished for what they do. Such actions are less indicative of bonafide professionals. That is, the public is not likely to review the work of attorneys for quality assurance. No attorney will be expected to justify his/her courtroom strategy to anyone other than the client. External checks and balances are rare among legal professionals, unlike the semi-professional social worker (Rosen, Proctor, Morrow-Howell, & Staudt, 1995).

The perception of social work as semi-profession is reinforced by racism (Morelli & Spencer, 2000). Culturally, the assignment of authority has been to a white male and/or female domain, resulting in less prestige for occupations significantly populated by people of color. Thus, the semi-professional perception of social work is due partly to the fact that the typical professional environment is white, whereas the typical semi-professional enviroment is perceived as including people of color

(Ugorji, 1997). Despite continuing efforts to bring about racial equality, in the aftermath, people of color represent a reduction in occupational status where defined by the influence and control of a white power structure (Vaz, 1995). As a group, they are less educated, less esteemed within the culture, and less likely to occupy positions of authority than are their white counterparts (Kitano, 1997). A similar prestige scenario can be constructed on the basis of gender.

Public Perceptions

Public perceptions of social work yield important information pertinent to the profession's viability in a changing racial, ethnic, and cultural environment. Kaufman and Raymond (1996) concluded that public perceptions regarding social work and social workers in general are significant because community sanction is essential to the survival of both. Andrews (1987) contends that a favorable public perception is a needed element in sustaining a profession, and the sustaining process should involve continuous marketing of the profession and its services to the general public, as well as to political factions. In addition, according to Roff and Klemmeck (1983), perceptions of social workers can be an indirect measure of the potential support for any manner of social services. Public perceptions also significantly impact upon individual willingness to seek assistance from social workers and similar helping professionals (Andersen & Newman, 1973; Von Sydow & Reimer, 1998). Finally, and perhaps most important, the perceptions of social work contribute to the ability of the profession to attract qualified students and other prospective personnel (Kaufman & Raymond, 1996). The outcome will influence the ability of social work to sustain a viable future.

Contemplating early film and theatre, Hiersteiner (1998) undertook an analysis of said media of the 1920s and 1930s. The objective of Hiersteiner's study was to illustrate the most common perceptions and/or stereotypes of social work-

ers. She proposed that political ideology, the audience factor, and attitudes toward women and people of color in general may have influenced public perception of social work more than actual experience with practitioners. Hiersteiner makes note of several commonly portrayed prototypes. Included are women as deluded, pampered members of the upper class, suffering from "misplaced maternalism" or escape from a shameful past. Hiersteiner further contends that these prototypes remain unchallenged in public perception to this day (Hiersteiner, 1998).

As pertains to perception in the modern era, researchers examined media portrayals of social work and social work practitioners. While the rigors of social work methodology are subject to challenge, the empirical data greatly enrich the documentation of perceptions. In Andrews' 1987 study, a popular American television program about social work ("East Side/West Side") is analyzed in terms of content, audience response, and the reactions of social workers to program content. Whether or not it was their intention, the fact that the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was intimately involved as a consultant to the series suggests that the series served NASW's public relations campaign. The social worker character was portrayed as a fallible, compassionate anti-hero "committed to social change for the betterment of the poor and oppressed." Despite the series' initial success, it was ultimately cancelled. The contention of Andrews is that the show's liberal deportment alienated sponsors. The image of an anti-establishment social worker committed to social change sparked debate within the profession between those who contend social work should emphasize social change and those who favor a more clinical role. Accordingly, such disagreement among professionals facilitates confusion about what it is social workers actually do (Andrews, 1987).

Verification of Andrews' findings exists in the research of Von Sydnow and Reimer (1998). Their compelling calculations employed a meta-content analysis of attitudes or stereotypes pertaining to

psychotherapists. Although there exist distinct differences between psychotherapy and social work, analysis of a helping profession can enlighten practitioners as to how social work is viewed by the general public. Unfortunately, the works of Von Sydow and Reimer support the perception of untruths extended from little basis in fact (1998). The outcome necessitates a need for further investigation including that based upon empirical research.

Empirical research provides evidence of the public's perception of social work and social work practitioners. Roff and Klemmack (1983) documented decreases in public support for welfare associated with the perception of welfare recipients and social workers as less than honest. Using a questionnaire design that included Lickert-like indices, mailed to 1030 adult residents of Alabama, they found that a majority of the population saw social workers as practicing welfare "fraud." A similar study conducted by Kaufman and Raymond (1995) assessed public perceptions and attitudes towards social workers through random-sampling telephone interviews with a Lickert-like scale. Additionally, they found that respondents perceived social workers negatively absent justification. In a study of college students' perceptions, using written questionnaires with an Adjective Check List and Lickert-like scale, Alperin and Benedict (1985) concluded that, in comparison to psychiatrists and psychologists, social workers were most often perceived as warm and approachable but "not particularly intelligent." Sharpley's 1986 study investigated the Australian public's perception of social workers and other mental health professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors), using a six-page confidential questionnaire administered to 502 adult respondents. The results of the questionnaires were categorized and analyzed to specify perception of the various professions as follows: (1) professional activities; (2) training, title, income, access, and place of work; (3) fees; and (4) value, benefits, drawbacks, and approachability.

Social workers were again perceived as warm and helpful but lacking in expertise, particularly when compared to psychiatrists and psychologists (Sharpley, 1986).

Perhaps the most startling perception of social workers is revealed in the examination of stereotypes held by helping professionals themselves (including social workers) towards one another. The findings concur with the negative notions of the general public. Koeske, Koeske, and Mallinger (1983) surveyed mental health care professionals' attitudes towards one another, concluding that clinical social workers were rated highest vis-à-vis warmth by all respondents but received the fewest referrals from others employed in the field. In a comparable study, Folkins, Wieselberg, and Spensely (1981) concluded that psychiatric social workers were more likely than psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychiatric nurses, and psychiatric technicians to harbor negative stereotypes of other professionals. These findings were attributed to the assumed "vulnerability" of psychiatric social workers based upon relatively lower rates of compensation and prestige. Studies such as the aforementioned, while less than complimentary, reveal the need to establish, with some consistency, a synopsis of what social work is.

What Social Work Is

By way of serious scrutiny, social work qualifies for acceptance into the fold of professional occupations. The rationale for its acceptance extends from the generalist concept. The generalist concept facilitates the use of various models, theories, and techniques as necessary for effective micro- and macro-level practice (Tucker, 1996). This concept is particularly useful upon initiation of service with a specific client. It enhances the ability of the practitioner to define, assess, and identify the most appropriate intervention for a desired outcome.

Historically, social work assumed a generalist posture. Such a posture enabled practitioners to approach service with a broad, general knowledge base and skills in several disciplines and fields. Educational rigor is subjective, and from the social work perspective, the rigor of generalism enables practitioners to move with minimal difficulty from one methodology to another. Thus, unlike professions characterized by limited specialization, the generalist is less limited and more prepared to approach a multitude of problems from a multitude of perspectives (Petracchi, 1999). This allows the social worker to circumvent potential conflict vis-à-vis values, belief systems, ignorance, and pathological family patterns. The potential wide range of problems requires practitioners to assume a wide range of roles. They must be prepared to advocate like an attorney, teach like an educator, diagnose like a doctor, and investigate like a researcher. In consideration of client autonomy, the generalist concept prohibits the worker from selecting a methodology without client input. The generalist concept is most applicable because social work practice necessitates multiple role performance. This profound aspect of training is an accreditation requirement of all baccalaureate programs that seek to prepare graduates for social work practice (Kasper & Wiegand, 1999).

"Generalist" subscribes to the eclectic methodology for what social workers do. Eclecticism extends from a multi-disciplinary history that has resulted in a complexity of interpretations that frequently overlap. Under the circumstances, there can be no singular practice methodology. Furthermore, in traditional terms, no singular standard demarcation exists between those social workers who are technologically competent and those who are technologically incompetent.

By literal definition, traditional schools of thought suggest that technological competence means the capacity to execute a particular task (Jones & Alcabes, 1989). This simple definition becomes obsolete when applied to social work. It fails to consider variation in client populations and desired outcomes. Furthermore, when applied to social work, technological competence cannot be

standardized because the tasks may vary in accordance with differing treatment methodologies (O'Neal, 1999). The tasks for a macro practitioner will differ from that required of a micro practitioner. Thus, it logically follows that traditional assessments of social work technology — unlike definitions — are all but impossible to apply unless a single criterion for the evaluation of competence can be specified. The definition of competence, however, should not be assumed to alter as different tasks are performed. While the concept of task-specificity eludes the idea of a single set of competence criteria, social work cannot be disqualified as a profession for that reason alone. Whereas decision-making ability, treatment modality, and knowledge base are important, none of these as a single criterion reigns sufficient given the multiplicity of practice objectives. However, considered in toto, they comprise social work's eclectic technology.

Attuned to their professional function, social work practitioners are presumed legitimate and therefore held responsible for their authority and actions. Students in the field who advocate on behalf of a client may meet the normal conditions of competence but may not be considered professional because of their student status. When a student graduates, more is involved than the assumption of competence to perform certain tasks. Graduation is a convenient — but not always reliable — means to establish that adequate knowledge, intelligence, and experience has been accumulated, so that the student may formally enter the profession. They are immediately endowed with a set of rights by which they are presumed in authority to exercise the eclectic technology. Said authority in most instances implies that one is capable of understanding and communicating relevant information, of weighing risks and benefits, and of making a decision about acceptance or participation in the context of eclectic knowledge, norms, and values. Such a graduate also has the ability to select appropriate goals and choose appropriate channels to goals in accordance with some standard of what the

profession, grounded in a system of ethics, does.

Unlike lay occupations and many semi-professions, ethics in social work is a necessary component of what social work is (Abramson, 1990; Beckerman, 1991). Ethics may lend profound credibility to social work, and as such, transcend traditional competence and/or good work (Levy, 1976, p. 14). However, vis-à-vis social work literature, the profound importance of ethics has not been maximized in the "semi-professional" debate. Lack of maximization has weakened the ability of advocates to address challenges to social work's professional status. The aftermath is a reduction of prestige that erodes authority. Ethical problems are then unnecessarily illuminated that may actually extend from otherwise appropriate courses of action in a given set of practice circumstances, creating ethical dilemmas (Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1992, p.7).

Ethical dilemmas in social work commence from mutually exclusive moral actions or choices pertaining to occupational tasks. For example, in macro tasks, Bailey and Brake (1975) allude to the dilemma faced by social work organizations that must hire practitioners on the basis of meeting client versus organizational needs. In micro tasks, problems may seem relatively minor, such as the use of first names versus "Mr./Ms.," or may seem relatively complicated, such as the same client's desire to terminate mentally sustaining psychotropic medications. Thus, ethical dilemmas are in fact an inherent component of social work practice (Goldmeiner, 1984). This inherent association is less obvious in the context of competence. Acknowledging the role of ethics in the eclectic technology will stir little debate. Necessitating its role will prove more difficult.

The application of ethics in social work is more compulsory compared to other occupations (Kugelman, 1992). The link between competence and ethics can be used legally to challenge a worker's qualifications and justify hiring decisions— such a link is not applicable to hiring practices in lay occupations. For example, consider the state-

ment, "He/She is a social worker." Such a statement is not always reducible in meaning to "He/She is a competent social worker," without some ethical dimension. Traditional competencies include tasks that the unethical practitioner may or may not have the ability to carry out. However, in social work, ethics serve as a standard from which an assessment of competence can be made. Peculiar to social workers, task performance does not exhaust the "competence" universe (Reamer, 1990). This is due to the extent that social work as a profession values client rights, welfare, autonomy, and confidentiality (NASW, 1996).

In professions where ethics imposes less upon competence, the two concepts may coexist as separate entities. When attorneys use the term "competence," they may be referring to the courtroom skills of a peer. When doctors refer to competence, they generally use the term to infer a physician's ability to make decisions and/or certify that they are entitled to a significant measure of control regarding patient treatment. The ethical dimension in these situations may be implied but does not necessarily impact technological skill and/or quality. Conversely, ethics in social work directly impacts the quality of social work practice. That is, ethics determines whether the delivery of services is done in a manner commensurate with client welfare and problem solutions. The ethics requirement to which a competent social worker must adhere is a technological mainstay of what social work is. It distinguishes practitioners from semi-professionals and lay workers, who may have the ability to perform similar tasks, but without the benefit of an eclectic knowledge base or social work values, arguably the ultimate test of the social work profession.

Conclusion

Societal perceptions of social work are hampered by tradition, philosophy, and theoretical notions of how a profession is defined. From the perspective of social work practitioners, the problem extends from the myopia of less informed crit-

ics. The ever-expanding knowledge and skill base of social work assures that it will continue to exceed the public's expectations. The outcome will persist as a significant challenge to practitioners at both macro and micro levels.

A number of critics have raised questions about social work's professional prestige. Some, such as Abraham Flexener (1915), who contends that social work requires the use of research, have had little influence. Others, such as sociologist Etzioni (1969), have had more influence in the public arena. In fact, according to Flexner (in Etzioni, 1969, p 145), "...social work could not qualify as a full-fledged profession because it was not founded on a body of scientific knowledge." Such challenges to the status of social work impact public perception negatively. However, a measure of progress has been made, which is reflected in the growing number who consider social work on the way to becoming a profession, though many continue to support a semi-professional status as the most applicable. They contend that in a variety of ways, social work meets some, but not all, criteria for elevation to the rank of formal profession.

By virtue of NASW, the reality of social work, unlike lay occupations, is bound by ethical standards (NASW, 1996). Among lay occupations, sanctions are infrequently applied to ethical violators (Van Wormer, 1997). Ethics, in fact, is an ideal means of enhancing the public's perception of the social work profession. Unlike lay occupations, under the auspices of a practitioner, clients are more often than not vulnerable to abuse, and applied ethical norms control these situations, making ethics compulsory to competence.

Professional definitions of competence include the ability to do something well (Dillenburger, Godina, & Burton, 1997). Traditionally, social work has failed in this strict interpretation, which is attributable to assumed specificity. Furthermore, much of what social workers do is done apart from public view. But the perception of competence can be determined by social work itself. Instead of ask-

ing, "What specifically are you competent at?" social work must unify the multiplicity of methods under the auspices of a single eclectic technology, utilized to effect a particular practice outcome.

By and large, social work has made gains in public prestige. However, it needs to further clarify and codify its practice methods in a way that is more measurable and objective (Rein, 1970). The required use of single subject design by private practitioners is an example of a measurable codification of practice methods (Spiegel & Springer, 1997; Huxley, 1993). Continuing development of an esoteric nomenclature will be instrumental in that effort. Precise outcomes following practice intervention will prove useful if they can be measured. Such measurement will enable the profession to better defend its reputation. Accordingly, it may then take control of who can use the title of "social worker" and under what circumstances. In the aftermath, the facts of what social work is may ultimately reach public perception absent dispute from less informed critics.

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