



Writing Apprehension Among Social Workers: Addressing Internal and Structural Barriers to Writing About What We Do

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Writing Apprehension Among Social Workers: Addressing Internal and Structural Barriers to Writing About What We Do

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Sit down with the least expectation of yourself; say, 'I am free to write the worst junk in the world.' You have to give yourself the space to write a lot without a destination.

Natalie Goldberg,

Writing Down the Bones:

Freeing the Writer Within (1986).

Writing is hard. It is a painful, "messy business, rarely in real life as tidy as textbook descriptions portray it. We don't begin at step one, 'find a topic,' and follow an orderly sequence of events to 'proofread the paper'" (Lindemann, 1987, p. 23).

When faced with writing, many social workers cringe as they conjure up anxious memories of compulsive writing in graduate school, or they remember the dread of staring down at the blank page with nothing to say. If these two specters are not discouraging enough, many social workers view their work serving clients as unimportant to the profession when compared to academic research. They may believe that the larger professional world of social work does not want to hear from the trenches. The direct practitioners' knowledge and experience of human suffering may be too bleak for most readers. Who wants to hear more bad news about the human struggle?

In 1999, Stanley Witkin, then editor of *Social Work*, asked for "expressions of knowledge that seek legitimacy, not in their conformity to authority-conferring criteria but in their authenticity and ability to energize people to change their oppressive social conditions" (p. 8). Asking for practitioners' input in professional journals is nothing new, but as a discipline social work is beginning to "walk the talk" as evidenced by alternative articles

in the October 2000 issue of *Social Work*, which included essays (Rose, 2000; Weick, 2000), a memoir (Sternbach, 2000), and an autoethnography (Donahue, 2000). It is a good thing that as a profession, social work is allowing for these alternative forms of communication in the professional discourse because writing allows the implicit knowledge of practitioners to become "explicit . . . Practitioners who write not only order their thoughts, but also the very act of writing completes the communication process" (Prochaska, 1986, p. 433). The acceptance of alternate forms of writing in professional social work publications is a hopeful sign to practitioners who desire to write in formats that are not necessarily academic, but nonetheless valuable for conveying the wisdom and insights gained in the course of daily practice.

Evaluating practice and sharing about what we do in our fields of practice is something expected of all social workers, according to Ethical Standard 5 in the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (1996). Williams and Hopps (1987, 1988) underscore this ethical obligation and the need to support the writing activities of social work practitioners. However, given the historical record of acceptance in our mainline journal of alternate forms of discourse, an important question emerges as to the barriers social workers face in their journey to share their experiences. In order to explore the notion of barriers, the authors analyzed social work literature and English composition literature to find out "what do direct practitioners need to write more?" The search culminated in a series of workshops conducted for social work audiences titled *Writing About What You Do*.

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The purpose of this article is two-fold. The first aspect of purpose is to review the literature of English composition as it relates to the problem of practitioners contributing writings to the profession of social work. The second aspect is to report the results of an exploratory survey of social work practitioners who voluntarily attended continuing education workshops on writing about one's practice experiences. The results of the survey offer a preliminary look at how social work practitioners view writing and what steps social work educators and social workers need to take to deal constructively with barriers to writing for the purposes of practice evaluation and publication.

Interventions for Internal and Structural Barriers

Daly and Miller (1975) identified writing apprehension when they developed what is now a standard writing-apprehension instrument, the Daly-Miller Measure of Writing Apprehension to better understand the internal barriers English composition students face when writing. Daly and Miller defined writing apprehension as a problem similar to that of communication apprehension. They hypothesized there was a correlated apprehension in writing, especially where there was a threat of negative evaluation. They concluded that writing apprehension negatively affects student attitudes about careers and academic choices that might include writing.

Buley-Meissner (1989) employed the Daly-Miller Measure of Writing Apprehension to evaluate the progress of writing students in her semester-long basic writing course. She found that inexperienced writers are apprehensive because they rely on rules and "struggle for control at levels of composing . . . which are not governed by rules" (p. 14). She concluded that the best way for instructors to counteract this tendency is to encourage deeper levels of composition through "meaningful connections of self, reader, text, and intention" (p. 15).

Social work educators have built on these findings from English composition in order to respond to the challenges of writing for social workers. Rompf (1995) performed an exploratory study sim-

ilar to Buley-Meissner in which she examined writing apprehension in social work students and sought ways to improve students' writing by lowering their anxiety through writing practice and a restructuring of the classroom to enhance discussions about writing tasks. Simon and Soven (1989), in two graduate social work courses and one undergraduate social work course, sought to develop the meaningful connections discussed by Buley-Meissner by having students systematically keep journals, engage in class discussions about readings, and perform detailed writing tasks. As a result, students developed more articulate analytical and critical thinking skills and applied them to class texts. In addition, students "achieved a sense of their own 'voice' and were, therefore, better able to mount convincing arguments" (p. 58-59). Waller, Carroll, and Roemer (1996) employed a similar systematic approach to improving social work writing through using Reading/Writing/Talking model of composition applied to a class on human behavior in the social environment. The students used reading journals, reading reflection teams, and portfolios that contained their reflections about the readings. Through reviewing the students' progress as well as their comments, the authors found that the "Reading/Writing/Talking model helps students to find their own voice and to learn the craft of effective written and verbal arguments to support their positions on critical social issues" (p. 49-52).

Other articles have reported about writing at the undergraduate, master, and doctorate level of social work. Several publications report about behavioral interventions, primarily in the form of group-work (Bibus, Link, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Sullivan, 1999; Haslett, 1997; Padgett & Begun, 1996; Page-Adams, Cheng, Gogineni, & Shen, 1995; Steiner, Stromwall, Bruzy, & Gerdes, 1999). All underscore the role of a group as an important support for writing endeavors. The success of a group-work intervention for writing tasks is attributed to groups providing structure, accountability, constructive criticism, and support for classroom teaching. Other authors chronicle their personal successes at overcoming anxieties and anguish

related to writing, and recommend specific strategies for becoming disciplined writers (Malekoff, 1999; Tasker, 1999).

Though anxiety and apprehension when writing are internal barriers that challenge social workers when they set about the task of writing, practitioners face a number of structural barriers. The first structural barrier presents itself in the matter of form, where the formal research-formatted paper historically has had more currency than the essay-formatted paper. In fact, narratives are the usual forms in which social workers and their clients come to know each other and mutually construct meaning from their relationships and lives. Using a personal narrative may cause a writer to "slide into a 'mea culpa' about giving rein to subjectivity, an apology for letting ourselves be seen and heard in ways we have been taught are inappropriate" (Imre, 1995, p. 64-66). Thus, practitioners are reluctant to write about their practice experiences because narrative essays receive less support from the academic and professional social work communities.

Goldstein (1993) speaks directly to this structural barrier when he called for a reassessment of what the professionals in social work consider to be writing that is appropriate for journals. He maintains that as students social workers are socialized into the profession and receive feedback on assignments, they learn that social work writing should be rational and that it should never be confused with creative writing. While acknowledging that a great deal of the formality in social work writing has kept social work's scholarly activities on par with other more scientifically-based disciplines, Goldstein notes that not every article written in social work has to follow these established conventions for learning how to write professionally.

Furthermore, Goldstein (1993) distinguishes between a readerly and writerly text. In a readerly text, everything is provided for the reader. There is no ambiguity and nothing for the reader to infer. Articles on empirical research fulfill the requirements for readerly text. The writerly text, on the other hand, invites readers to make their own judg-

ments and interpretations. Impressions – not facts or empirical truths – are shared (Goldstein, 1993, p. 445). Goldstein sees the writerly mode as especially relevant to professions dealing with people. The writerly text reflects social work's "primary interest": the person existing in an environment. When social work practitioners attempt to mimic hard science, "too often, the result is victory of form and style over content" (p. 441-442). This victory results in a product that is potentially dehumanizing and may discourage social work writers who may rely more on narratives to develop an article. Ultimately, Goldstein encourages social workers to tell their stories and not be overly concerned with authority: " 'having been there' is enough" (p. 446).

Additional observations about structural barriers are reported by Staudt, Dulmus, and Bennett (2003). Lack of time, concerns about the review and publication process, and lack of knowledge about and inexperience in writing for publication were the structural barriers most frequently encountered by respondents in this study. Other barriers cited included lack of support from employing agencies, lack of resources, and personal responsibilities.

Certainly, much work needs to be done in the social work profession to investigate barriers to writing and finding ways to encourage practitioners to write. Whether it is group work, restructured classroom activities, or written reflection on texts, all of the interventions emphasize the writing process over the product as a means for encouraging potential authors. Yet, complex interactions of internal and structural phenomena manifest as barriers that somehow continue to restrain practitioners from sharing their voices and experiences more readily. Clearly, the social work profession needs to understand more about social workers and the very complex relationship they have with writing. More study in this area may help to advance the premise that writing about one's practice, regardless of form, supports the process of practice evaluation and may reveal implications for discussions about

evidence-based practice. This study was a beginning step in the exploration of the issues connected with social workers and writing.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 90 professional social workers and university social work students who voluntarily attended workshops titled "Writing About What You Do." The participants' demographic data revealed specific information about people who attended these sessions.

As can be seen in Table 1, nearly two-thirds of the participants were 40 years of age or older, and the most frequently reported age range was 40-49 years. The participants were predominantly female (78 percent). Most of the participants held MSW degrees (65 percent), and persons with a BSW/BA represented the second largest segment of degree holders (22 percent). The audience was racially and ethnically diverse. Just over one half of the participants were White (51 percent), and racial/ethnic minority members composed the balance of participants (49 percent). Hispanics were the most highly represented minority group (21 percent), followed by Blacks (17 percent).

Procedure and Materials

The workshops were promoted as a forum where practitioners could discuss their anxieties concerning the challenges of writing, identify practice experiences about which they would like to write and publish, and review the mechanics of effective writing. Data were collected on three occasions at state and national professional conferences.

Each participant completed a 20-item questionnaire adapted from the Daly-Miller Measure of Writing Apprehension (Daly & Miller, 1975). The questionnaire was adapted by deleting six of the 26 items on the Daly-Miller Measure of Writing Apprehension. The deleted questions were specific to students taking a composition class and the researchers considered them inappropriate for an

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 90)

Characteristics	N	%	Characteristics	N	%
<i>Age</i>			<i>Race/ethnicity</i>		
22-29	16	17.78	Black	17	20.00
30-39	18	20.00	Hispanic	21	24.71
40-49	29	32.22	White	46	54.12
50-59	22	24.44	Asian	1	1.18
60+	5	5.56	<i>Degree</i>		
<i>Gender</i>			High school	5	5.62
Female	70	78.65	BSW/BA	20	22.47
Male	19	21.35	MSW/MA	58	65.17
			ABD	3	3.37
			PhD/EdD	3	3.37

audience of social workers. The adapted questionnaire was administered before each session, to capture the participants' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about writing prior to being exposed to the workshop's content and activities.

The answers to the questions were on a Likert-type scale, using ascending levels of agreement with statements that ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Participants were also requested to provide demographic information to enable the researchers to more broadly describe the characteristics of practitioners interested in writing about what they do.

Results

Analysis of data collected during the workshops revealed several dimensions of writing apprehension among the social workers surveyed. These dimensions reflected anxiety and nervousness related to the writing process, varying levels of interest the participants had in writing, the amount of confidence they claimed to have in their writing skills, and the extent to which they were willing to have their writing evaluated by others. A summary of these dimensions and the corresponding levels of agreement, based on percentages, reported by the participants of the workshops are reflected in Table 2. For the purpose of discussion, levels of agreement (strongly agreed, agreed) with survey items and levels of disagreement (disagree, strongly dis-

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Table 2: Frequency of Responses to Dimensions of the Construct of Writing Apprehension (N = 90)

Dimensions	Level of agreement					Dimensions	Level of agreement				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree		Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>Dimension 1: Indications of anxiety/nervousness about writing</i>						<i>Dimension 3: Confidence/self-assurance about writing</i>					
1. I avoid writing	8.89	22.22	6.67	31.11	31.11	8. I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing	24.72	38.20	20.22	11.24	5.62
2. I have no fear of my writing being evaluated	14.44	26.67	15.56	30.00	13.33	11. People seem to enjoy what I write.	8.89	53.33	34.44	2.22	1.11
4. My mind seems to go blank when I start to work	6.67	16.67	15.56	46.67	14.44	13. I never seem to be able to clearly write down my ideas	7.78	15.56	10.00	47.78	18.89
10. I'm nervous about writing	8.89	25.56	15.56	38.89	11.11	17. It's easy for me to write good compositions	15.56	36.67	28.89	12.22	6.67
19. I don't like my composition to be evaluated	4.49	10.11	30.34	41.57	13.48	18. I don't think I write as well as most other people	5.56	23.33	21.11	41.11	8.89
<i>Dimension 2: Level of interest/pleasure in writing</i>						20. I'm not good at writing	2.22	12.22	14.44	50.00	21.11
3. I look forward to writing down my ideas	28.89	38.89	13.33	11.11	7.78	<i>Dimension 4: Willingness to allow writing to go public/be evaluated</i>					
5. Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time	0.00	4.44	2.22	21.11	72.22	9. I like to have my friends read what I have written	14.44	38.89	31.11	14.44	1.11
6. I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication	41.57	24.72	22.47	5.62	5.62	16. Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience	20.22	34.83	32.58	10.11	2.25
7. I like to write my ideas down	33.71	38.20	15.73	7.78	8.89						
12. I enjoy writing	23.33	44.44	17.78	8.89	5.56						
14. Writing is a lot of fun	18.89	40.00	20.00	15.56	5.56						
15. I like seeing my thoughts on paper	27.78	53.33	11.11	5.56	2.22						

agree) were collapsed into the categories of agree and disagree.

The first dimension of writing apprehension suggests writing with the prospect of publication in mind does provoke a sense of anxiety and nervousness among social workers, but not to the point that they are completely discouraged about it. A relatively equal number of the workshop participants agreed (41 percent) and disagreed (43 percent) that they had no fear about their writing being evaluated, followed by 16 percent who were uncertain about this prospect. These results indicate that the majority of participants surveyed on this item were anxious or ambivalent about having their writing evaluated following a workshop about the challenges of writing and the mechanics of effective writing. On the other hand, almost two out of three participants disagreed that they avoid writing or that their minds went blank when initiating the task of writing. Half of the social workers surveyed also disagreed they are nervous about writing, and rejected the notion

that they do not like having their writing evaluated.

The second dimension of writing apprehension was related to levels of interest in writing and revealed more positive than negative regard for writing. Seven out of ten workshop participants agreed they like to write down their ideas, and an equal proportion of respondents disagreed that expressing their ideas in writing was a waste of time. Positive regard for writing was also indicated in the responses of two-thirds of the workshop participants who reported that they enjoyed writing and looked forward to writing down their ideas. Six out of ten respondents perceived writing as fun, and eight out of ten agreed they liked seeing their thoughts on paper. Aspirations about publishing were also reflected in the responses of two-thirds of participants who agreed they would enjoy submitting their writings for evaluation and publication.

The third dimension of writing apprehension related to the amount of confidence or self-assurance one has about his or her writing. Social work-

Table 3: Pre-Workshop Mean Scores of Participants on the Daly-Miller Measure of Writing Apprehension (N = 90)

Item	M	SD	Item	M	SD
1. I avoid writing	3.53	1.37	10. I'm nervous about writing	3.18	1.20
2. I have no fear of my writing being evaluated	3.01	1.30	11. People seem to enjoy what I write	2.33	0.72
3. I look forward to writing down my ideas	2.30	1.22	12. I enjoy writing	2.29	1.09
4. My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition	3.46	1.13	13. I never seem to be able to clearly write down my ideas	3.54	1.19
5. Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time	4.61	0.74	14. Writing is a lot of fun	2.49	1.13
6. I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication	2.09	1.17	15. I like seeing my thoughts on paper	2.01	0.91
7. I like to write my ideas down	2.11	1.10	16. Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience	2.39	1.00
8. I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing	2.35	1.14	17. It's easy for me to write good compositions	2.58	1.10
9. I like to have my friends read what I have written	2.49	0.95	18. I don't think I write as well as most other people	3.24	1.08
			19. I don't like my compositions to be evaluated	3.49	1.00
			20. I'm not good at writing	3.76	1.00

ers who attended Writing About What You Do workshops expressed both confidence and some anxiousness about the quality of their writing products. Almost six out of ten participants surveyed felt confident about being able to clearly express their ideas in writing. Even more respondents (seven out of ten) believed they are skilled writers and disagreed that they have difficulties writing down their ideas clearly. Nevertheless, some anxiety emerged when respondents were asked to assess what others might think about their writing.

Although nearly two-thirds of the participants agreed that others seem to enjoy what they write, over one-third of the participants were uncertain this was the case. Ambivalence about how confident one was about writing was detected in other responses in this dimension of writing apprehension. When questioned as to whether writing was easy for them, responses were almost evenly split. A narrow majority (52 percent) of the participants agreed that writing is easy for them, but the remainder of the respondents (48 percent) expressed uncertainty or disagreement with this statement. Finally, when forced to reflect on how their work compares to others, only one half of the participants agreed they write as well as most other people.

The last dimension of writing apprehension dealt with one's willingness to "go public" and have

one's writing evaluated by others. Although a slight majority (53 percent) of the participants agreed that they like others to read what they write, the remaining 47 percent of the participants were uncertain or in disagreement with this prospect, signaling ambivalence or discomfort about having their work reviewed by others. A similar split in level of agreement was evident when respondents were asked to identify if they enjoy discussing their writing with others. The majority (55 percent) of participants agreed they enjoy discussions about their writing, while the remaining participants (45 percent) were uncertain or in disagreement. The mean scores for each item the workshop survey are summarized in Table 3.

The limitations of this research are primarily related to its design and sampling strategy. The study was exploratory in nature and purposely designed to assess individual experiences of writing and search for evidence of the internal and structural barriers to writing reported in the literature. Social work educators concerned with writing apprehension had previously used exploratory approaches to study the ways in which students gain control over the writing process, reduce anxieties associated with writing, and use writing to enhance critical thinking skills (Rompf, 1995; Simon & Soven, 1989). This research attempted to expand the

exploration of writing apprehension even further, by adapting a standardized instrument (Daly & Miller, 1975) to assess for constructs of writing apprehension among social work practitioners in a more strategic manner.

Although this exploratory survey was designed to measure individual experiences more closely, it was inadvertently limited by the nature of its sample. All participants self-selected to attend one of the three "Writing About What You Do" workshops offered, making it a convenience rather than a random sample. Hence, the generalizability of the findings is limited to the social workers who attended the workshops. Although strong interest in and support for writing activities emerged from the data collected from the participants, the results are not representative of all social work practitioners and social work students.

Discussion

This research identified evidence of writing apprehension among a sample of social work practitioners and university social work students who were primarily interested in writing about their individual experiences in the field. Although the participants expressed strong support for and interest in writing, the data collected reflected clear evidence of anxiety about having one's writing evaluated by others and uncertainty about whether writing came easily or not. Ambivalence about whether they thought their writing was comparable to that of their peers was also evident. These areas of uncertainty represent a composite of internal barriers that may dissuade, even discourage, social work practitioners from transposing field experiences into the written word to share with the rest of the profession.

Although the respondents did express anxiety about having one's writing evaluated by others, when the results of this research are compared to the results of the original Daly-Miller (1975) results with students, it is clear that social work practitioners are actually much less apprehensive about writing than beginning composition students

whose ratings of the majority of questions ranged from uncertain to agreeing that they are nervous about writing and have fears about writing. Very few of the composition students liked to write ideas down or enjoyed writing. Despite their apprehension and frustration with the evaluation process, most of the social work practitioners in this study actually enjoyed writing and wanted to write more. For example, in question 3 more than 67 percent of the social workers agreed or strongly agreed that "I look forward to writing down my ideas," and in question 6 more than 66 percent of the social workers "would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication."

Comparing the results of this study with the results of the Staudt, Dulmus and Bennett article (2003) which focused on practitioners who have published, one can see some interesting patterns among social work respondents. Respondents in both research studies described strong desires to make a contribution to practice by writing about their work. It was also clear from both studies that writing for publication was not an easy process. A major theme in the Staudt, Dulmus, and Bennett study was that practitioners who published had "the support and instrumental help of others" (p. 78). Their respondents specifically mentioned former professors as a major source of support for their publication efforts. The recommendations from their respondents fit well with the results from this study, and identify structural supports for writing. Their respondents recommend more assistance from professors and from professional development/in-service education workshops. They strongly encouraged more collaboration between academic institutions and social agencies. This collaboration should encourage a variety of writing styles and offer opportunities for feedback and collaboration in combining practice evidence with research rigor.

Recommendations

One way that social work educators, whether in the classroom or field setting, could help facilitate the writing process would be to encourage a

variety of reading and writing assignments designed to develop and sharpen analytical and critical thinking skills. Some of these assignments should include the review of narratives written by other social work practitioners and clients to demonstrate the value and currency of narrative expression. The October 2000 issue of the journal *Social Work* included a variety of essays written by practitioners, which contributed to the support for narrative expression and could be used as exemplars of narrative form. Social work educators should also include readings that report first-person accounts of what it is like to be a client or consumer of services and incorporate these accounts into class discussions. Such discussions would compound the value of client narratives or stories about what it is like to be on the receiving end of services or community scrutiny. It is hoped that such discussion might also inspire practitioners to become more compassionate service providers and advocates.

In addition, more social work educators and social work practitioners who have published already should commit to partner with other social work practitioners to develop and write articles that can inform social work practice. Two of the co-authors of this research have partnered with social work practitioners in local communities to produce published, refereed articles that might not have been written without their encouragement and leadership.

Increasing the number and quality of continuing education workshops on writing would be an excellent next step. The social work respondents in this study were extremely pleased with the opportunity to have a workshop where they could discuss their writing and they wanted more workshops. Many of the attendees continued communicating with the authors and asking for follow-up feedback on their work.

Finally, more studies about writing, with larger samples, need to be conducted to lend further insight into ways to encourage writing in the social work profession. Control group studies of social

work practitioners or social work students who have experience with narrative writing and those who have not could be conducted to help discern differences.

In an editorial produced in the October 2000 issue of *Social Work*, Stanley L. Witkin talked about his personal struggles with "writing social work." The challenges of writing for scientific scrutiny, in APA style, and with postmodern interests in mind impelled Witkin to conclude that "alternate forms of writing" are needed to adequately describe the various ways in which people organize and give meaning to their worldly experiences. He suggested that social workers write in a way that pursues the "cherished values" of human rights and social justice, while remaining "critical and reflexive, questioning domination, including the authority of authors" (p. 391).

The authors agree with the proposition that the social work profession needs to expand its writing practices to more readily include alternate forms such as narrative essays. By encouraging the acceptance of alternative forms of expression, the social work profession will perhaps address the internal and structural barriers that keep successful practitioners from becoming successful writers. In addition, if members of the social work community address their personal apprehensions about writing and relate it to the struggles of those less experienced with the challenges of writing, the profession as a whole may be able to expand knowledge about what is essential and valuable in social work writing. As some of the authors noted in this article have indicated, social work has always had an ongoing struggle between academic and professional practice publication interests and expectations. Although a full discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of this article, partnering with practitioners to produce new knowledge may be the venue through which to begin this expansion and may help social work refine its efforts to develop evidence-based practice.

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