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Looking at the Social Work Profession Through the Eye of the NASW Code of Ethics

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This article examines what the NASW (National Association of Social Workers) Code of Ethics says about issues faced by contemporary social work practice and considers its implications for the acceptance of social work as a profession. How social work measures up to Flexner's attribute of a profession "altruistic in motivation" is examined in greater depth. Concern is raised about the growing gap between social work practice and social work ethics. Social workers' acting more assertively on the social justice responsibilities contained in the code is seen as crucial for the future of the profession.

As the executive director of the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) for more than 25 years, I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the profession of social work. I have had access to considerable data on issues in social work practice, particularly workplace issues and ethical issues/dilemmas faced by social workers. My PhD dissertation (in 1990) was based on a survey of chapter members and interviews with agency directors about their implementation of the social justice aspects of the NASW Code of Ethics (the old code). I also had the honor of being a member of the NASW committee that wrote the new NASW Code of Ethics and the companion manual, *Current Controversies in Social Work Ethics: Case Examples* (NASW, 1998). An analysis of the profession was necessary for these projects. The perspective presented in this article on the current state of social work and on our acceptance as a profession flows from these experiences.

Codes of ethics are windows into a profession. This article will, in part, be organized around the new NASW code as a window into the social work profession. What can we learn about contemporary social work practice and about the acceptance of social work as a profession by looking through this window?

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Let us begin by addressing the question that has plagued social work since the early 1900s: Is social work really a profession?

THE ACCEPTANCE OF SOCIAL WORK AS A PROFESSION

Improving social work's status as a full-blown profession has absorbed the considerable energy of educational institutions, social work researchers and thinkers, the Council on Social Work Education, and professional organizations such as NASW. Why is this issue so important? The real concern is about society's granting community sanction, authority, and status to the profession, which is crucial for the continued growth of social work.

Social work has achieved significant accomplishments in all the criteria that have been used to evaluate the profession since Flexner's (1915, p. 581) initial article in 1915. The six criteria of a profession delineated by Flexner were (a) features "essentially intellectual operations with large individual responsibility," (b) is based on "science and learning," (c) uses knowledge for "a practical and definite end," (d) possesses "an educationally communicable technique," (e) "tends to self-organization," and (f) is "altruistic in motivation." The theoretical base of practice has received considerable attention, and intellectual production is more prodigious. The profession is expending a great deal of energy on research and evaluation. Professional education has a substantial amount of required core knowledge, which is crucial for social work to remain one profession in spite of specializations, diverse practice settings, and differing methodologies.

As a professional organization, NASW has grown in membership and has expanded its leadership role while other specialty social work organizations have strengthened the profession as well. Clearly, a great deal could be said about where social work stands on all of these attributes of a profession. However, I am going to primarily focus this article on the sixth of Flexner's criteria of professions, that of being altruistic in motivation.

Altruism can be seen as the founding motivation of social work. Throughout its history, helping people and making this a better society have been the bedrock of the profession, even when there were extreme differences about how to accomplish this goal. I am greatly concerned, however, that the context of contemporary social work practice has been eroding the profession's ability to put the client first and to work for the social good. What is the context social work is practicing within, and how is it affecting the profession?

THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN THE 1990s

To understand contemporary social work and the status of social work as a profession, it is crucial to look at the impact of the social, economic, and political contexts of this society on social work practice. The enormous changes in our society have reached into our everyday lives, our work sites, and our practice. They have certainly affected our clients. Here are some of these major changes:

1. A philosophical change has favored a more limited role of government, conservative tax policies, reductions in human services, the revamping of the welfare program and immigrant services, and tighter eligibility for most services.
2. Federal outlays for human services between 1980 and 1996 declined from 28% to 15%. There is an aura of "people should take care of themselves," "tough love," and "punishment is OK." This can be seen, for example, in the increased funding for the criminal justice system, where incarceration, not rehabilitation, is the watchword, and in the draconian welfare "reform" laws.
3. During the same period, we have seen considerable community disintegration in our nation, evident in the serious problems of homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and discrimination. Although the 1990s have supposedly been good times economically in this country, the question is, "Good for whom?" Underemployment, unemployment, job instability, and the need to hold two or three jobs have become the norm in many working and middle-class families, which puts considerable stress on family life. Clients have more difficult problems and life situations, and there are fewer resources to help them.
4. Our society has had major population shifts, including a growing population of people of color and a growing elderly population.
5. New health and information technologies are continually being developed.
6. There have been major changes in health policy. With the failure during the Clinton administration to achieve any major progressive overhaul of the health care system, managed care has grown by leaps and bounds.
7. The culture of consumerism and a "me first" attitude has grown. "For profitism" has taken hold in the human services arena. There has been, however, some public backlash to this trend, with considerable public questioning of the ethics and commitment to public service of professionals.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIETAL CHANGES ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

If we look at the impact of these societal changes on social work, we see that social workers are facing more complex issues than ever before, that they

are expected to practice effectively and efficiently with fewer resources, and that at the same time they are constantly being required to prove their worth. In fact, they are practicing in a context that has created more and more ethical challenges and dilemmas; has made adhering to the social work values of service, integrity, and social justice much more difficult; and has made it more problematic for social work to continue to be altruistic in motivation. For example:

- Tensions between the resources available and the needs of clients give rise to ethical challenges.
- Technological developments create ethical pitfalls—such as computerization of records' raising confidentiality issues.
- Changes in funding sources create ethical problems for social workers: In the late 1970s and '80s, funding decreased for traditional social work interventions, such as home and school visits and ancillary family interviews, because more funding was coming through third-party payments, which only reimbursed strictly defined mental health services. Grave concerns were expressed about how the requirements of funding sources were limiting practice and perhaps leading social workers to practice unethically. The issue of whether requirements of funding sources were forcing social workers to practice unethically is one that the Massachusetts Chapter of NASW's Ethics Hotline has received increasing calls about from social workers.

Then, managed care exploded dramatically, and social workers were faced with additional questions about social work practice and social work ethics. Was practice mainly market driven, rather than responsive to client needs? Eligibility of clients for services was greatly constricted. Those served were primarily the more seriously disturbed, and help was available for shorter periods of time. Currently, what is fundable often drives service decisions.

Increased requirements by funders for accountability have affected social work. On the positive side, the profession has begun to look more carefully at having measurable practice goals. This can help social workers improve practice and sell their services more readily. On the debit side, this "prove your worth" environment can be highly stressful to practitioners and can be more problematic for some approaches, such as longer term treatment.

The job market has changed enormously. Privatizing service delivery and contracting out services at all levels of government have grown tremendously. The result has been downsizing, declassification of positions, and the loss to social workers of salaried positions with benefits. In the private sector,

contract/fee-for-service positions at lower wages, without job security and benefits, have been replacing salaried positions. Fee-for-service social workers are generally not paid for ancillary work, such as making phone calls, seeing collateral family members, or meeting with other professionals involved with the client, yet, these interventions are necessary to provide good client service. This move to contract/fee-for-service positions has been going on for some time in our society and is not just a social work problem. In fact, Manpower (a temporary/contract worker agency) is now the largest employer in the country.

Social workers who still hold salaried positions too often have caseloads that are too large to provide quality client care. In addition, the threat of losing their jobs through downsizing, mergers, declassification, or conversion of their position to a fee-for-service slot is ever present. Social workers also face increased competition from new human service professional groups and potential encroachment on their jobs by other human service professionals who are having job problems of their own.

More social workers are feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and disempowered. Many are questioning whether they can carry out their ethical mandate to put clients first and provide quality services to all who need them. These workplace changes also adversely affect their willingness to be advocates and to tackle social justice issues as part of their practice. The new situations interfere with carrying out the altruistic motivation of the profession.

Another controversial issue stimulated by the changes in the social work job market is unionization. Most social workers are in settings that are not unionized. Unionization is seen by some social workers as unprofessional, and they believe the public perceives unionization and professionalization as mutually exclusive. However, workplace issues have even moved doctors toward unionization. They have made the case that many of their concerns have to do with patient care, which takes some of the antiprofessional stigmatization away from unions. More social workers are now asking whether unionization would be helpful to them, given their current workplace problems. The profession will have to deal more seriously with this issue.

Clearly, the changing context of our society has created a variety of circumstances that affect social work practice. These circumstances have led, I believe, to a growing gap between social work practice and social work ethics. This is particularly so in carrying out our role as advocates for our clients and as agents for social change. This also affects how social work is viewed as a profession. These issues will be discussed later on in this article.

THE NEW NASW CODE OF ETHICS: A WINDOW INTO THE PROFESSION

In talking about the ethical standards developed by social work, Frederic G. Reamer (1997), who was the chairperson of the NASW Code of Ethics Revision Committee, states, "These standards have evolved over time, reflecting significant changes in the broader culture and in social work's mission, methods, and priorities" (p. 1). The new NASW Code of Ethics, adopted in 1996, which embodies current social work practice standards, can be seen as an important window into the state of the social work profession and can add to the discussion of how social work is viewed as a profession.

The first NASW Code of Ethics was adopted in 1960 and was revised in 1979. There was a major rewriting of the code in 1996. The new NASW code stands out in its articulation of our profession's mission, values, and principles; the extensiveness of its standards of practice; and its unique integration of practice standards relating to social justice issues throughout.

We can learn a great deal from the code about the current state of the social work profession. Let us start with the mission of the profession. This is the first time NASW has published an official mission statement. It begins,

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, oppressed, and living in poverty. A 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. (NASW, 1996, p. 1)

This mission statement, and the core values of social work that are delineated in another new section of the code (NASW, 1996, pp. 5-6), are a reaffirmation of the essence of the profession of social work and of our being altruistic in motivation. These values still provide a guiding light even when it may seem hard to live up to them in the context of contemporary social work practice.

Other elements of this code underscore issues of contemporary social work and the importance of protecting clients in this changing practice environment. The following are attributes of the new code:

Reflects changes in practice approaches and settings. Social workers are integrating new approaches into practice, functioning in new settings, and using their skills differently in old work settings. The code is responsive to

these changes through detailing behavioral expectations at a greater level of specificity (with 156 practice standards) and covering more fields of practice, as well as emerging issues for practitioners. For example, nonsexual physical contact with clients (NASW, 1996, p. 13) and issues of misrepresentation of competence of the social worker (NASW, 1996, pp. 8-9) are addressed for the first time.

Lays out the limits to confidentiality. This is a crucial issue for social workers in the currently complex legal context of practice with laws about reporting abuse, the need to act to protect third parties from harm, managed care requirements, and computerization—all presenting challenges to confidentiality. There are also new practice standards in the code about documentation of records.

Acknowledges the use and implications of technology in practice, which provides both opportunities and problems.

Emphasizes the importance of avoiding conflicts of interest. The new code includes dual and multiple relationships, which can be harmful to clients, and extends time boundaries of professional relationships, tackling the issue of the ex-client. There is disagreement in the social work community about these issues. Open discussion and a definition of some practice standards on these issues in the new code is a positive step forward.

Expands standards of practice around informed consent. This was needed because administrative requirements in work settings are more often interfering with really informing clients about consent issues.

Raises issues regarding sexual relationships with, or sexual harassment of clients, students, supervisees, and research subjects. These issues have received great attention in our society, and it is time that our profession acknowledged them.

Deals with issues of ethical termination of clients, a special concern in the current context of practice.

Examines expected behavior with colleagues in greater detail. Issues tackled include support for colleagues who are being treated unethically and the responsibility to protect clients by dealing with the impact of impairment of a colleague's ability to deliver service or colleagues who are practicing outside their area of expertise. The need to help impaired social workers is

being recognized more openly by the profession, stimulated by current workplace stresses. The code makes it an ethical responsibility for the profession to come to terms with this issue.

Expands coverage of standards regarding administrators. The context of current social work practice often results in social work administrators' feeling caught in the middle between needing to keep services funded, provide ethical services, and treat staff ethically. The code helps these social work administrators by including guiding ethical standards of practice.

Addresses general concerns around research, supervisory relationships, and faculty/student relationships. These issues arise as the profession becomes more aware of the importance of social workers' being mindful of the power differential in these relationships and the potential for harm.

Emphasizes in all sections of the code the importance of cultural and ethnic diversity issues in practice. The extensive inclusion of these issues is an indication that the social work profession has, at least formally, recognized that no one can practice ethically today without cultural/ethnic sensitivity and understanding of diversity issues.

Reasserts the focus of the profession. This focus includes vulnerable and oppressed people, the importance of providing services to all who need them, and the need to understand the impact of discrimination and oppression on our clients, our profession, and our society. The code asserts the importance of working for social justice and positive social change. Under "Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society," the code states,

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice. (NASW, 1996, pp. 26-27, standard 6.01)

Explicitly discusses the social worker's responsibility to question agency policies and procedures and intervene when the agency has poor practice standards or is discriminatory in any manner. The code, for the first time, also acknowledges that "instances may arise when social workers' ethical obligations conflict with agency policies or relevant laws or regulations" (NASW, 1996, p. 3). This is a clear commentary on the difficult situations in which social workers are finding themselves where behaving ethically

may require breaking laws or not adhering to agency regulations' behavioral requirements.

It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that the profession as a whole still has a long way to go in dealing with issues of discrimination and oppression on an institutional level. Because of their constrained work situations, individual social workers are finding it harder to engage in the advocacy role. Social workers clearly need help to understand the impact of diversity and discrimination/oppression issues on their practice and to be proactive about such issues in their work settings and in society.

We have just used the NASW Code of Ethics as an analytic tool to learn about the state of contemporary social work practice. What can we also learn from the code about the question of whether social work is indeed a profession? By its very existence, the new NASW Code of Ethics contributes to social work's status as a profession. Its clear statement of the mission and values of the profession provides a unifying focus for social workers and is a public statement about what the profession of social work stands for. Regardless of their work setting, field of practice, service population, or practice modalities, all social workers are drawn together by the mission and values of the profession.

The detailed practice standards contained in the code testify to the complexity of social work practice and speak strongly to the profession's deep commitment to protect the public. For example, the importance of maintaining confidentiality is not just stated broadly. There are 18 specific standards related to confidentiality issues, from not talking about clients on cell phones to protecting client's computerized records. Addressing sexual relations with former clients, dual/multiple relationships with clients, and the imperative to deal with the harm that impaired colleagues could do to their clients is a step forward in codifying the profession's concern with public protection.

Social work's roots are in public service. Service is one of the six core social work values the code delineates. This value is integrated throughout the code, speaking both to the social worker's responsibilities to individual clients (or client systems) and to the need for agencies to provide services that are culturally, ethnically, and class sensitive to all clients who need them. The code also enumerates responsibilities for grappling with social injustice concerning clients and the broader general welfare of society. Indeed, the NASW Code of Ethics is a clear manifestation of the altruistic motivation of the profession.

We have so far examined societal changes that have affected social work and some of the challenges and problems faced by the profession. Through the NASW code, we see many of the major issues the profession is dealing with that present formidable hurdles for social workers to overcome. Never-

theless, the ever-changing human services environment can be seen as presenting a continuing opportunity to strengthen the profession. Social work's strength lies in our experience in working in different types of settings, including non-receptive environments; our ability to move into new practice settings; our skills in problem solving; our eclectic practice base; our receptiveness to new approaches; our ability to use traditional skills and practice modalities differently; and our way of seeing the person in the environment. The continued growth of social work education and research is also a plus for our profession.

The activities of social work in the political arena have helped increase our status as a profession. Our role as advocates will continue to be important in carrying out our mission, holding true to our values, strengthening our practice, closing the widening gap between social work practice and social work ethics, and enabling us to proclaim that we are indeed a profession that is altruistic in motivation.

ADVOCACY AND POLITICAL ACTION

Although social workers have extensively debated the issue of how professional it is to advocate for social change, particularly in the political arena, the profession of social work currently is playing a more active political role. For example, national NASW and most chapters have legislative networks and political action arms, which work for political candidates who embody social work values and support social workers as political candidates. Currently, more than 200 professional social workers hold elective office all across the nation (Nieves, 1997, p. 7).

The conservative shift in the political, social, and economic contexts of this society have also educated social workers to understand that what goes on in the political arena clearly affects our clients, funding of our services, and social work practice in general. In addition, the fight for social work licensing, vendorship, and recognition by managed care companies also served to help politicize the profession. It was clear that social work had to work in the political arena to achieve these important professional goals. Social workers have also seen that being politically active on social justice/social change issues (and not just on strictly professional issues) has helped us to build relationships with public officials, other advocacy and professional organizations, and the press, and to reach the public. These links

have helped social work on more professional issues and have resulted in strengthening the profession.

Social workers now need to speak out in an even stronger voice on the important issues of our times. We must be bolder than we have been in pointing out that major social, economic, and political change is needed to solve the problems of this society. Basic changes are required to achieve a more equitable distribution of wealth, which necessitates a much more progressive tax policy and the abolition of corporate welfare. Spending substantially less money on the defense budget is also crucial. Then, creating full employment at a living wage, affordable housing, child care, and national health care for all will be more attainable. Preventive programs to help families, children, the elderly, and other groups will become more feasible. Social service, substance abuse, and other programs needed for the general welfare will be more readily affordable. The profession of social work must also work to empower people and make grassroots democracy a reality in this country.

Social work has taken a big step in this decade by moving away from the belief that political activity is unprofessional. We now have to act on the social justice/social change responsibilities contained in the NASW Code of Ethics. The NASW Code of Ethics in the section on "Social and Political Action" (NASW, 1996, p. 27, section 6.04) requires social workers to

- "engage in social and political action to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully";
- "be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice";
- "promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally"; and,
- "act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability."

By working to implement these sections of the code, we can reverse the growing gap between social work practice and social work ethics and strengthen the profession's ability to be altruistic in motivation. As social workers, we must be even stronger advocates in shaping the future of our nation, or it will continue to be shaped in a manner that is unacceptable to us. In the words of the great social worker Charlotte Towle, "the role of social work is to mobilize the conscience of the community."

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