Deprofessionalization and Reclassification
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BACKGROUND

Beginning with Abraham Flexner’s paper presented in 1915, “Is social work a profession”, the issue of professionalism has been a prominent point of discussion. Some of the factors contributing to this question included the status of the earliest practitioners: upper class, women volunteers, lack of a professional code of ethics, professional schools of study, and researched focused on social work issues (Flexner, 1915). At the time of Flexner and Jane Addams, women rarely worked for pay. The only acceptable areas of “women’s work” were caregiving and helping jobs such as teaching and nursing. Social work became part of this. Because women were not seen as equal in vocational arenas, work they did was rarely considered “professional.”

Things changed after World War I for social work when there was a shift from apprenticeship training to university based education and when there was more of a need for services. While social work is still predominately a women’s profession (NASW reports 81% of all members are women (NASW, 2006) many concurrent trends have led social work to a clearer professional status. Some of the important trends include the national public service expansions in the 30’s and the ‘60’s, licensing, privatization of social services, the diversification of practitioners, and the growth of managed care. NASW and CSWE now both define professional social workers as “individuals who have graduated from an educational program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education with at least a bachelor’s degree in social work. (NASW, 2006. Chapter 1, p.6). Unfortunately, once the answer to Flexner’s question was “yes,” then the stage was set for the current trend toward deprofessionalization and reclassification.
In 1983, Carol Meyer cautioned, “in every field of practice, on every level of government, and in
the voluntary sector, the declassification of professional social work positions has become a
dismal reality” (p. 419).

Gibelman and Schervish (1996) have documented similar phenomena where the public
sector agencies have a great deal of difficulty attracting social workers. They identify causes for
this as large case-load sizes, decrease in quality of service, insufficient personnel and negative
views of this area of social work practice.

With privatization often comes a decrease in accountability and regulation. As part of this
shift, there is more of a separation between funders and practitioners which in turn affects
professional standards. As this shift occurred, agencies were left without accreditation leaving
them open for possible legal challenges. To protect themselves, agencies sought out
accreditation from groups that “require agencies to use research and business models to analyze
and improve policies and practices.” (California Association of Deans and Directors, 2004).
Additionally, agencies which were once sure of funding now needed to raise their own capital.
A byproduct of these shifts included the hiring of non-social work executive directors. People
trained in finance, business and law are now frequently found in positions previously held by
social workers. (Healy & Meagher, 2004) They were also in a position to evaluate the services
and the staff at these agencies.

Kahn (1981) described deprofessionalization as a trend that results in “reduction in
educational requirements for entry level jobs, assumption of interchangeability of bachelor’s
degrees, reorganization of jobs to reduce educational requirements, non-recognition of the
exclusivity of bachelor’s or master’s of social work (BSW and MSW) skills, and equating
education with experience” (p. 3). Healy and Meager (2004) see the causes of
deprofessionalization as, fragmentation and routinization of social work roles and tasks, a decline in professional categories of social work employment and underemployment of social workers in paraprofessional positions (p. 244).

At times, under various deprofessionalization and reclassification schemes, public and private agencies have created generic job classifications, such as clinical case manager, case management specialist, and social services worker that eliminated the title of social worker. The combined effect of the deprofessionalization and reclassification movement has been civil service systems that permit hiring of unqualified and uncredentialed individuals for social work positions.

Another consequence has been the eradication of chief social worker positions and functions in major agencies and departments. In addition, public and private agencies will often substitute in-service training for formal professional training. Several investigative reports support the position that social work education provides the beginning-level practice knowledge and skills necessary for entry-level positions and that experience alone is an unreliable indicator of job performance. A more recent NASW study concluded that graduate social work education is the best predictor of performance (NASW 2006).

Although the importance of social work education has been denigrated by the change in requirements for specific social service jobs, job performance requirements, such as psychosocial assessment, treatment planning, and discharge planning, have remained unchanged. Paraprofessionals, counselors, or human services personnel often are considered as trained “social workers” and are, at times, sanctioned to function under the title “social worker.” As such, these noncredentialed personnel are held responsible for delivering social services although they lack the social work knowledge base, skills, and values necessary to perform such tasks.
Deprofessionalization and reclassification must focus on factors both external and internal to the social work profession, as well as on the value of social work education. Some external factors include relaxation of social services standards, at both the state and federal levels; reduction in federal and state funding for social services programs; radical changes in personnel policies, the diminished number of social workers in administrative and policy-making positions and the changes in the insurance industry’s payment for social services. Increasingly, people from other human services disciplines are competing with individuals who have bachelor and master’s degrees in social work for jobs that once exclusively required social work education.

Internal factors of the profession include the redefinition of tasks and responsibilities by specialty groups and a preference by social workers for employment in private agencies. Trends in social work education indicate that students interested in social policy, social research, or social services administration choose other professional degrees, and workers with MSW’s often must enroll in doctoral programs to specialize. As a result, non-social workers occupy decision-making and supervisory positions and make policies that affect the status of social workers and social work practice.

Since 1981, NASW has enhanced its capabilities to address deprofessionalization and reclassification. First, NASW has intensified legislative capabilities and lobbying activities at state and federal levels, resulting in the achievement of landmark legislative goals with the inclusion of social workers as payees under Part B and other sections of Medicare and the establishment of standards for social services staffing in nursing facilities. In addition, NASW has blocked legislation in some states that would have required social workers to obtain other professional licenses and certifications to practice in areas traditionally within their scope, such
as family therapy.

Important research done in 2004 and published in 2006 through the Center For Workforce Study in collaboration with the University of Albany gives us a great deal of information regarding licensed social workers in terms of areas of concentration, gender, age, pay among other characteristics. It enables the profession to better define itself and to work toward increasing awareness of and perceived perception of social workers by the public. This in turn helps further underscore professionalization in social work.

In 2001 NASW established the NASW Foundation with the goals to:

- identify, develop and respond to social work policy and practice issues
- assist with rapid response to social crises.
- support practice-based research, so that practice and research are directly linked.
- raise the visibility of social work and enhance public esteem for the profession.
- support the development of cutting edge continuing education that addresses critical issues.
- promote the appropriate application of new technology to the practice of social work.

As part of the Foundations work, in 2004 NASW created “Help Starts Here, a public education campaign geared toward changing the public perceptions of social work and to improve the profession.

Finally, NASW increasingly has demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting the social work profession by assuming a leadership role in the social policy and political arena. In addition, NASW has supported national level projects to increase the number of trained staff in child welfare, student loan forgiveness, and research and resources for major reinvestment initiatives. Since NASW designated social work licensing a high-priority action, all states have
established some form of licensing or regulation. As insurance for high quality social work services and maintenance of professionalism, it is necessary to evaluate our current licensing efforts and refine them. The focus now can move to providing stronger title protection and clearer, more universal licensing requirements for all social workers at all education levels.

ISSUE STATEMENT

Many legislators have failed to recognize the social work profession as a major contributor to effective social services and as an advocate for social welfare policies and programs in the United States. Systematically, social workers are being eliminated from direct services, supervision, policy making, and administrative positions. This elimination is being accomplished by deprofessionalizing and reclassifying traditional social work positions in the public and private sectors. Increasingly, public and private employers are hiring staff members who are uncredentialed as social workers and as such they are, inadequately trained, and not qualified to fill social work positions. (Healy, 2004) To help eradicate the issue, it is important to develop uniform national standards on all levels to define and regulate social work practice. NASW reports the number of practicing social workers to be 840,000 while only 310,000 hold state licenses (NASW, 2006), According a 2007 survey of licensure boards conducted by NASW, all states regulate MSW social workers (NASW 2007). Only 24 states refer to those with BSW’s as licensed though a limited number of other states certify them. Forty nine states have advanced licensing requiring post masters supervised hours. In some of these states, only advanced practice is licensed. A handful of states have licenses for non-clinical social workers. This hodge-podge of licensing requirements only adds to the confusion over professionalism and leaves the door open for further deprofessionalization and declassification.
This trend is a result of the sociopolitical climate of downsizing; devolution of the role of
government; cost containment in health and mental health services through managed care; and
competition with allied professions for direct services, as well as supervisory and administrative
positions. Many of these individuals, hired as a result of deprofessionalization and
reclassification, lack social work practice knowledge, values, and skills, yet are required to
perform such complex tasks as biopsychosocial assessment, treatment planning, interviewing,
and acting as change agents. In addition, in many public sector agencies, work is being
contracted out, again eliminating the assurance that these jobs will be filled with social workers
with appropriate training and licensing. One way to change this trend is to make sure that title
protection is in place not only in licensing professionals, but also in job descriptions at the
agency level. The term “social worker” should not be used unless the person in the position has
had at least a minimal social work education and is licensed at that level. The California Master
plan (2004) includes a “Ladder of Learning” which includes 7 levels from High School
Certificate, followed by an AA degree and ending with the Doctorate (p.13). This can be used as
a national example. By utilizing this or some other such schema on a national level, we can
assure standards of professionalism through uniform requirements at multiple levels of licensing.
In addition to deprofessionalization, declassification remains an issue for social workers.

Contributing factors to this include:

- Because there are insufficient numbers of people with BSW or MSW degrees, (currently

30,000 MSW and BSW’s graduate nation wide each year with an overall ratio of 101

licensed social workers per 100,000 population) (NASW, 2006) or because of a lack of
interest in employing these individuals in public services agencies, vacancies are filled
by untrained staff with undifferentiated undergraduate degrees, causing agencies to
emphasize on-the-job training.

- The general cultural assumption that carework is naturally women’s work and that women do not need an independent living wage. There is a discrepancy of 14% between the mean wages of men and women who are licensed social workers.

- State employee unions have emphasized promotion based on experience and do not support professional education.

- Legislation and administrative rules have allowed other educational degrees and work experience to serve as the equivalent of social work education.

- Fewer resources and budget cuts have led to a justification to lower social work standards and to fill jobs with less-qualified personnel who fit lower salary standards.

POLICY STATEMENT

Professional social workers possess the specialized knowledge necessary for an effective social services delivery system. Social work education provides a unique combination of knowledge, values, skills, and professional ethics that cannot be obtained through other degree programs or by on-the-job training.

Therefore, NASW supports:

- Promotional opportunities for all social workers, including policy-making and administrative positions based on levels of social work education, experience, and competence.

- Service delivery that adheres to its Code of Ethics (1999)

- Clients’ rights to expect and to receive high standards of professional services. Under the equal protection law, clients served by both public and private organizations have the
right to receive the same quality care provided by trained social workers.

- The increased recruitment of high school students and early college students to the social work major in order to ensure an adequate number of social workers filling professional social work jobs.

- Efforts at the state level to implement regulations for the entire profession including title protection, certification, and/or licensure.

- Organizational and public policies that promote the hiring of Council on Social Work Education–degreed social work practitioners and halt the general trend to hire less-qualified staff.

- The promotion of social work as a distinctly different profession from other human services disciplines (such as counseling, clinical psychology, nursing, marriage and family therapy, and so forth) as it focuses on the intra- and interpersonal aspects of clients’ lives.

- NASW asserts that the expertise, knowledge, and skills demonstrated by social workers with bachelor, master’s and doctorate degrees should be actively communicated to clients, colleagues, and others at all times.

- The identification of tangible social work skills gained through social work education such as:—bio-psychosocial assessment, treatment planning, interviewing, discharge planning, and so forth—that are essential to the social services delivery system.

- The education of social workers in accredited programs with courses designed and taught by social work educators that will promote the culture, knowledge, and values and ethics of the profession.

- Research and outcome studies that demonstrate the effectiveness and cost–benefit of
hiring trained social workers. This research promotes the relevance of social work education to the tasks performed in public and private organizations.

- Title and practice protection through regulation for social work in all practice settings on all practice levels

- Efforts to oppose legislation and policies that allow for the practice of social work by individuals without social work education, experience, and competencies.

- Title protection in job descriptions so that the title “social worker” only be used to refer to professionally prepared social workers.

References


