

The Public and the Profession's Perception of Social Work

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The social work profession has long been concerned about its mission and perception. The two interests go hand in hand, because to have an effect on how we as social workers are viewed, we must be self-aware about who we are and what we do. This paper will address how social work periodically reflects upon and re-assesses its purpose because of internal considerations, such as the profession's ethics, and external forces, including the job market and public perception. Some of the research conducted over the years into public perception of social work—as well as that of our clients—will be presented and compared. In addition, I review how the media have portrayed the field, and how we as professionals have marketed ourselves. Finally, some suggestions will be offered, which can be applied at various levels, including direct practice, program development and evaluation, administration, and branding of the profession as a whole.

When counterterrorism police officer Lawrence DePrimo bought boots for a homeless man in November 2012, the New York Police Department (NYPD) posted a photo to its Facebook page. The photo elicited a significant response to NYPD's new online presence, and shortly thereafter DePrimo appeared on the "Today" show focusing on his heroism and humanity (Bell, 2012; Goodman, 2012). The tourist who took the photo works in the communications department of the Pinal County Sheriff's Office in Phoenix (Ruelas, 2012). This was self-promotion to some extent, but the action and response demonstrates a profession re-evaluating its mission as well as seeking to enhance its image. Social workers serve the homeless population but are rarely featured on national television. We can learn from this story on two counts: by growing in awareness of our mission and by learning how to influence the public perception of social work. Many children look up to police officers or firefighters, others strive to become doctors or lawyers, and some endeavor to follow in the footsteps of a teacher; few children, however, aspire

to be social workers. Culture and gender (Liben, Bigler & Krogh, 2001) and public image and prestige (Auger, Blackhurst & Wahl, 2005) influence desirability of a particular career. The perception of social work is therefore important in attracting highly committed, professional individuals. We must first determine if control over our profession's image lies more firmly in the hands of social workers or in other outlets like the media. Ultimately, "the image of social work" is not simply a cosmetic matter: A positive image is important to the vitality, effectiveness, acceptance, and funding of the profession. "The more that social work is perceived positively, the more likely it is to gain support for its programmes, to have its services utilized, to maintain morale, to attract recruits and to have its voice heard" (Kaufman & Raymond, as cited in Reid & Misener, 2001, p. 194). This article will review how the social work profession has reflected upon its mission and perception, consider some of the research into public perception of its work and clients, examine media portrayal, and look at how social work has marketed itself. I will conclude with some suggestions for the profession that can be applied at multiple levels, including direct practice, program development and evaluation, administration, and branding of the profession as a whole.

The Importance of Defining Social Work

Social work's concern for its image must begin with a clear understanding and definition of its role and mission (Corvo, Selmi, & Montemaro, 2003). Since its inception, social work has been concerned with "how it is defined, practised and perceived," undergoing many evolutions that have shaped how it is viewed (Staniforth, Fouché, & O'Brien, 2011, p. 192). Social workers' activities include "direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008, Preamble). Defining parameters of social work potentiates artificial limitations on the profession (Gibelman, 1999).

In addition, professionals vary across qualifications, ex-

perience, and training levels. The Bureau of Labor Statistics revealed that 70% of social workers in the U.S. either had no college degree (27.9%) or a degree in a field other than social work (44%) (Gibelman, 2000). Many workers without a social work degree—or any degree at all—find a place in the field because of needs for staff or population-specific expertise. Consequently, “in the public mind, all social workers are lumped together – credentialed or not” (Gibelman, 2000, p. 466), which can perpetuate misinformation.

External factors like the job market or the political atmosphere force our profession to evolve, leading to disparate understandings of social work’s identity over time (Gibelman, 1999). Sometimes, mid-career social work professionals can lose sight of their original purpose. Passion and ideals are constrained by the resulting stress of unmanageable responsibilities, low wages, and little recognition from others.

Professional Self-Awareness and Its Relationship with Public Perception

The social work mission changes over time to meet evolving global needs and establish purpose (Baron, as cited in Gibelman, 1999). Consequently, two somewhat opposing pressures emerge: (a) fidelity to the core values of empowering vulnerable and oppressed populations considering their environmental influences, and (b) openness to the fluidity and dynamic change inherent within “the expansive and expanding boundaries of social work and the difficulty in providing succinct, encapsulated descriptions of a complex and multifaceted profession” (Gibelman, 1999, p. 301). Staniforth, Fouché, and O’Brien (2011) argued that social workers throughout all levels of organizations should engage in critical reflection. They should practice self-awareness about the field’s evolving mission, have vigorous discussions about it in supervision and at conferences, and pursue it in research and writings. They contend that all professionals “can sit within a practice framework which holds social justice as an overarching principle” (p. 194). Operating under common ethical principles to promote society’s general welfare, empower people

and communities, and positively affect the social environment, social workers must evaluate performance internally, debate the aim of the profession, and externally assess how the public perceives their work.

Silverman (2012) reflected that without self-awareness of our own profession, mission, and professional identity, how can we presume that others will understand us any better? Internal exploration of how the field should outwardly present itself is complex because of pressures to serve clients and communities while maintaining confidentiality. Yet perception affects financial support of programs and efficacy of our work. A conflict emerges over who defines the social work brand: social workers, the public, and/or the media. When social workers abdicate their responsibility, it allows others to control their image.

Assessment of the Public's Perception

The social work profession wants public perception of its mission to align with its core values. Despite the profession's regard for its self-image, there have been few comprehensive efforts to survey public opinion. Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, and Kane (1978) described early surveys that found little consensus about the role of a social worker, but that "a vaguely negative connotation of social work seems to have been the stereotype" (p. 47). Only 6% of respondents perceived social workers as "sources of help for emotional problems," compared with 28% for religious leaders, 26% for psychiatrists, 22% for physicians, and 11% for psychologists (Condie et al., p. 51). Positive takeaways included an understanding that social workers were more than just caseworkers and showed care for all populations regardless of income level.

LeCroy and Stinson (2004), recognizing changes in social work practice in the 25 years since Condie et al.'s (1978) research, sought to reassess public perception. The authors reasoned, "if the general public is confused, uninformed or even hostile toward social work, the profession is less able to fulfill its mission of helping those in need" (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004, p. 164). Finding only limited recent studies, they executed a nation-

wide survey to assess public sentiment toward social work. They discovered that the public associates social workers with frequent media stories reporting children being taken from their parents, indicating little change since Condie et al.'s (1978) study about the role of social workers. Strikingly, almost 1 in 5 respondents believed the stereotype that "social workers take advantage of the government" (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004, p. 169).

Dennison, Poole, and Qaqish (2007) explored what incoming college students from various courses of study thought about social work. The authors were curious to learn if the students, though smaller in number and younger than those previously surveyed, reflected more current views of the profession. Significantly, students did not completely understand the range of social work activities or the levels of training needed.

Zugazaga, Surette, Mendez, and Otto (2006) described a study, commissioned by the NASW, which investigated how the public viewed the profession. Participants had little direct experience with social workers; their perception of the field was shaped predominantly by the media. They associated social workers with child welfare, the government, and the poor or underprivileged. They had an altogether positive regard for the profession despite the prevalence of negatively portrayed child welfare cases.

Fall, Levitov, Jennings, and Eberts (2000) presented five case histories of individuals with mental health or relationship challenges to a group of subjects who ranked their confidence in a range of clinical professions. Participants consistently expressed a low level of confidence in social workers, almost always by a substantial margin. Hodge (2004) discovered how the public might be confused, because the "social worker" title can be purported by a doctoral, master's or bachelor's degree in social work, or another degree entirely. If the public is only moderately aware of what social workers do, its hazy perception of social workers is worsened by association; Trattner (as cited in Tirado, 2006, p. 27), states, "social workers, through no fault of their own, are disliked by the public because they work with (or are perceived to work with) people in society who are feared and/or despised."

The limited research conducted shows that the public often takes a polite view of social workers because of the belief that

compassionate work is being done. However, there are also common negative perceptions: (a) an overall ignorance of the extent of social work's mission (often thought to be predominantly child welfare); (b) a lack of understanding of what social work roles include (often perpetuated by the profession's lack of clarity); (c) a negative view of social workers' competence when compared to similar helping professions; and (d) an unfavorable view of some client populations with which social work aligns itself.

Media Portrayal of Social Work

Much of the public does not interact directly with social workers, so a large part of the profession's perception is attributable to depiction in the media. Zugazaga et al. (2006) discovered that most social workers believed the media cast a negative image on their profession. Freeman and Valentine (2004) examined American movies from 1938 to 1998 with a "social work" character. Twenty-nine of the 44 movies focused on child welfare. Most social workers were women, white, middle-class, and incompetent. They were caretakers in a subordinate position of authority and served as a buffer between oppressed groups and their oppressors. Many characters had sexual relationships with a client. Overall, the characters reinforced rather than challenged the status quo (Freeman & Valentine, 2004).

Gibelman (2004) reviewed three "social work" television characters in the 1990s–2000s. She observed that without consultation from social work professionals, characters reflected no social work education, questionable ethics, and made a mockery of the profession. She argued that in shows featuring lawyers and hospitals, professional qualifications were clearly emphasized, even if their moral character sometimes was suspect. However, social workers were portrayed as "uneducated and bumbling, if not outright laughable" (Gibelman, 2004, p. 332), reinforcing stereotypes and denigrating social work. She concluded, "We should be getting the message. Television is not kind to social workers" (Gibelman, 2004, p. 331).

Although a survey of 60 newspapers and 399 articles over a 4 1/2-year period by Reid and Misener (2001) demonstrated a

largely positive image of social work, they concluded that more could be done. The positive stories portrayed social workers as experts, described program innovations and interesting direct practice work, and demonstrated the potential impact of positive publicity.

Opportunities for Enhancing the Public's Perception of Social Work

If perception does not match the profession's stated mission, social workers must learn how to influence public understanding. "Social workers themselves are best suited to enhance the public's knowledge and opinions about the profession... [because] no one else is likely to step forward" to do so (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004, p. 174). In 2005, the NASW set out to raise the public's esteem of social work given the stereotypes the profession had endured (NASW, 2004a). This goal, developed in concert with the 50th anniversary of the NASW's founding (NASW, 2004b), spurred an advertising campaign to increase awareness, which included magazine and newspaper ads, press releases, appearances on radio and television programs, and a new website. Moreover, the campaign stimulated efforts to engage social workers in the topic of effecting change in social work's perception.

Murdach (2011) cited Mary Richmond's classic *What is Social Case Work?* and Richmond's biography of early social workers as efforts to develop public appreciation of social work (Murdach, 2011, p. 92). Reid and Misener (2001) suggested that social workers learn how to place stories in the media; furthermore, collaboration between social work and journalism schools could provide social workers with strategies, resources, and contacts to produce more positive portrayals. "[S]uch initiative can be directly tied to an important social work function—to educate the citizenry about the needs of its clientele" (Reid & Misener, 2001, p. 200). Then, not only does social work's image improve, but the needs of clients are highlighted and stigmatizing myths about certain populations and issues can be dispelled.

As social workers, we can view efforts to increase self-awareness and enhance positive public perception as a service to

self and clients, not an additional burden. This effort can allow for reflection on our original motivation for becoming a social worker and open up a variety of opportunities for intervention.

Learn how you can broadcast your work. Be mindful of doing so in a way that does not glorify yourself or jeopardize confidentiality, but calls attention to the empowering work of your organization. Research local media and develop contacts across various media outlets. Then, learn how to prepare a press release, place an Op-Ed, or appear on a local radio or television show. Learn from social media experts how your organization can publicize its work through the ever-changing world of social media. Most importantly, consider internal and external collaboration, recruiting assistance from the NASW if necessary; advocate for the importance of these efforts in your organization even if you are not the individual to complete the tasks.

Tower (2000) provided the clearest mandate for action: “[S]ocial workers are responsible for debunking myths when the public is misinformed about the profession and the people served by it” (p. 575). She helped create a *Social Work and the Media* course at the University of Nevada, Reno, that taught students about the film production process; students eventually developed documentaries to air on local television and public broadcasting stations. She argued that social work students and professionals need to learn how “to shape the public image of social work through effective use of popular media” (Tower, 2000, p. 575). College and university programs can offer similar elective courses intended to produce documentaries.

Another perception-changing and image-enhancing possibility is interdisciplinary collaboration where social workers partner with other professions to serve a common population. Cacciatore, Carlson, Michaelis, Klimek and Steffan (2011) presented an innovative intervention in which social workers formed a crisis response team to assist a municipal fire department. Social workers served in a direct practice trauma intervention role either with the public or the first responders, allowing for direct engagement with individuals who normally would not interact with social workers.

Conclusion

Returning to the example of Officer DePrimo, there were two resounding outcomes: (a) police officers and the public reconsidered the role of police officers, and (b) public perception improved. Perhaps a few well-placed stories of social work in action could attract the same self- and public awareness of professional mission and image-bending attention that the DePrimo case did for the New York Police Department.

The social work field must regularly reflect on its purpose, assessing how its programs and efforts serve clients and communities. Gibelman (1999) suggested that we should not lament “the lack of a durable definition of the profession, its practice, and its boundaries,” (p. 308). Instead, she reasoned that periodic re-examination reflects positively on the profession’s ability to respond to changing environments. However, becoming more self-aware about our mission is not sufficient. We must engage with society and culture to reflect on our image. When our efforts are poorly received or misconstrued, we must attempt to shift those views. Tower (2000) exhorted us: “The image problem is real... and social workers should be concerned. Educators who are not convinced that an image problem exists need only ask students if someone close to them disapproved of their decision to enter the social work profession” (p. 584).

Finally, taking an active approach and defining our role is better than allowing others to speak for us. As one of the taglines from the NASW 2004 campaign proclaimed, “Social workers: If you don’t tell your story, who will?” (NASW, 2004a).

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