Epilogue: Clinical Social Work Practice—Past, Present, and Future

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Recapitulation

We were motivated to bring to life this special issue following increasingly compelling concerns by our students, our colleagues in both the field and academia, and noted by us in our practice, teaching, consulting, and applied research regarding at least the perceived—if not actual—degradation of clinical social work knowledge, values and skills in so many critical aspects of our profession. These crucial areas include the following:

- Pressure in social service organizations to implement evidence-based protocols regardless of clinician expertise or clients' complex circumstances or preferences.
- Minimal clinical supervision of students due to increasing demands on supervisors and field instructors' dearth of theoretical knowledge.
- A marked privileging of research over practice in social work doctoral programs, resulting in less full-time faculty with significant practice experience and thus a commensurate reduction in the exposure of MSW students (and thus future clinical social workers and field instructors) to knowledge, skills, and values accrued in the 100 plus years of our profession.
- Community-based organizations and social service agencies, historically the agents of the mission and values of our profession, buffeted by economic, political and social forces at odds with these values and resulting in conditions affecting the well-being of clients, clinicians, and administrators alike.

Given the rising frequency and urgency of these concerns, we hoped to bring together leading voices of our field to contextualize the present state of clinical social work practice, particularly as we mark the centenary of Flexner's response to the question of social work's status as a profession. We have experienced 100 years of change, development and maturation in our knowledge base and skills, while adhering to core values that, in our view, clearly mark social work as a profession and, most importantly, provide guidance as to what we should do as we look to the future.

Where are We Headed? Recommendations for the Future of Clinical Social Work Practice

Our contributors offer important recommendations arising from today's challenges that underscore our rich clinical social work history and provide a compass for the future. Drs. Berzoff and Drisko remind us of the critical role social workers play in the provision of mental health and psychosocial services. Rather than tolerate the continued degradation of clinical training and services we must rally CSWE and national social work organizations to strengthen conditions for learning and practicing clinical social work for the benefit of social workers and clients alike.

Drs. Grady and Drisko strongly advocate for the effective adoption of evidence-based practice in clinical social work treatment and processes. They contend that, as a decision-making process that incorporates clients' preferences and biopsychosocial experiences, evidence-based practice is designed to improve treatment outcomes and promote effective clinical care across fields of practice and diverse client populations, thus supporting core social work

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values. They propose that clinicians educate social agency administrators and funders about what evidence-based practice truly is—and they ought to document practice instances in which social agency managers and funders obligate them to take professional actions that are not consistent with the principles and components of evidence-based practice in clinical social work. This combination of education and pressure can redress the distorted view of evidence-based practice as simply evidence-based treatments applied without full consideration of the client's needs, choice, and complex experience, or the clinician's expertise.

The call to advocate and agitate is also present in Drs. Abramovitz' and Zelnick's recommendations to social workers for managing and mediating the impact of the forces of privatization on human services organizations. Moving from *case* to *cause* advocacy and rendering "private troubles" truly "public issues" are required when privatization forces compromise agency missions and social work values.

Another contemporary reality of clinical social work practice is that at least 15 % of social workers, almost certainly a significantly smaller-than-actual figure, engage in either full- or part-time private practice. Dr. Brauner embraces this reality as a natural developmental process for social workers to grow professionally and argues that the field and its institutions of higher learning should support private practice as a valid, valued trajectory for practitioners with significant agency-based experience who are ready to expand their horizon via independent work and consultation, and seek some freedom from the impingements of privatization on social services.

Many of the key issues facing clinical social work practice are crystalized in debates occurring in the academy. Dr. Anastas' paper summarized these, such as the enhancement of research in doctoral programs to the detriment of practice and the focus on evidence-based practice in the absence of infrastructure to truly implement it, leading to negative practitioner attitudes. There are also countervailing forces: the birth of practice doctorates and a growing movement to embrace the scientific basis of clinical social work practice. Dr. Anastas posits that a harmonious coming together of practitioners and scholars will be necessary to effectively integrate the artistic and scientific domains of our discipline. While recognizing the complexity and possible conflictual dynamics of this union, Dr. Anastas is optimistic that practice and science can coexist and be synthesized through the value base and mission of the profession. Lastly, she recommends strong organizational leadership at the professional level and the creation of a knowledge broker service for agency leaders and practitioners across all practice settings and fields of practice. Similar to the first National Association of Social

Workers (NASW) Task Force on Clinical Social Work (Ewalt 1980), NASW should create a forum aimed at identifying, defining and synthesizing the scientific base of clinical social work practice.

Illustrating the kind of openness and flexibility that we hope this special issue will spark, a former self-defined skeptic, Bruce Thyer, comes to heartily support the reemergence of the practice doctorate as a vehicle for promoting and enhancing the highest level of clinical knowledge, values, and skills and ensure their transmission to the next generation of social workers. In Dr. Thyer's view, reaffirmation of the DSW degree by the profession and schools of social work will serve to solidify and sustain the scientific base of clinical social work, and will help guarantee that future social work students will be taught by scholar-practitioners who are able to integrate clinical expertise with empirical knowledge.

No exploration of clinical social work in the academy can be complete without examining the state of field education. As the *signature pedagogy* (Council on Social Work Education 2008) of the profession, field education must remain central to the training and academic preparation of future clinical social work practitioners. Professor Bogo recommends structural changes in how field education is conceptualized and implemented by schools of social work collaborating with human service organizations. She advocates for a shared response by undergraduate and graduate programs and human service organizations that will yield out-of-the-box models for field learning and teaching. University-community partnerships must be studied systematically by social work scholars as a means of ensuring school-agency affiliations that are capable of supporting differential models of field education. Moreover, Professor Bogo supports bringing together social work educators and organizational leaders to delineate challenges in contemporary field instruction while identifying a range of innovative solutions.

The observations and lived experience of novice clinical practitioners are vital for understanding the past, present and future of clinical practice. Mr. Golia, a recent clinical MSW graduate, shares his experience as a student. He found instructors with direct practice experience the most compelling teachers as he prepared for a career as a clinical social worker both because of the immediacy of the content conveyed and these instructors' capacity to serve as role models. Mr. Golia notes that many of these instructors are adjuncts, and while recognizing their invaluable contributions, suggests that full-time faculty are in a stronger structural position to safeguard clinical learning and promote practice-based research. This brings us back full-circle to recommendations made by the other contributors for maintaining a clinical social work practice voice in academic, research, and organizational settings.

End Note

Bertha Capen Reynolds observed that “practice is always shaped by the needs of the times, the problems they present, the fears they generate, the solutions that appeal, and the knowledge and skill available” (Ehrenreich 1985, p. 13). Our history is marked by this change and adaptation, while we have retained the continuity of core principles of multideterminism, the bio-psycho-social approach to clinical treatment, the person-in-environment and ecosystems perspectives, and a central focus on social justice (Dorfman 2013; Northen 1996; Reisch 2002; Swenson 1998; Woods and Hollis 2000). As we face the problems for clinical social work practice present in these times, let’s allow for frank, full conversations and exchanges that both honor core knowledge, values, and skills, and make room for innovative solutions.

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