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What Social Workers Do: Implications for the Reclassification Debate

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The reclassification trend is one of the most formidable issues facing American social work today. Social work's vulnerability stemming from a general ambiguity about its distinct role and boundaries, competition from emerging helping occupations, and its debated professionalism is a major contributing factor. Often ignored in recent efforts to address reclassification is empirical evidence of social work's distinct performance in the human services versus other occupational groups. In this article comparative research findings supporting social work's unique performance are presented and their relevance for reclassification discussed.

The field of social work in the 1980s faces a number of competing demands that threaten its continued growth and development. There are demands for licensing and reclassification, increased specialization and broadbanding,¹ an improved status among the established professions, and for social work to become a more radicalized voice for social change, to name a few. Of these reclassification² is probably the most threatening. Reclassification questions the relevance of social work credentials as a requirement for social service positions at state and private social service agencies. Alternate job credentials for these positions have included extensive social service work experience and related social work degrees.

Reclassification has been justified on two principal grounds: first, the demand for public and private agencies to comply more strictly with equal employment guidelines by eliminating unnecessary entrance requirements and credentials; and second, that such action would help reduce states' soaring operating costs by forcing the creation of a more competitive labor market for social service positions (NASW, 1982, p. 1-6; Pecora and

Austin, 1983, p. 421–426). Underlying reclassification however is the view by some legislators, human service managers, and the general public that social work does not have a unique role in the human services as its activities are shared with many other helping occupations including community psychologists, psychiatric and public health nurses, home health attendants, and a wide range of counselors. This same view is reflected in the writings of some of the leading social work critics and human service analysts (Wilensky, 1964, pp. 141–150; Briar, 1973; Richan and Mendelshon, 1973, pp. 12–20; Epstein and Conrad, 1978; Burnfordd and Chenault, 1978, p. 6).

While the need to establish empirical validity of a social work degree for job entry and to a lesser degree job effectiveness has commanded the profession's greatest attention in stemming reclassification, the fundamental matter of demonstrating social work's uniqueness has been trivialized. But more recent studies by (Clearfield, 1977, pp. 23–30; O'Connor and Waring, 1981, pp. 4–6; Meyer, 1983; Rosenfeld, 1983, pp. 186–191) and others suggest otherwise. They exhort the need for increased clarity about social work's domain in the human services in order to demystify the profession to the public and further legitimize its position in the helping arena. Ironically, their calls appear to echo earlier calls by (Bartlett, 1958, pp. 5–7; Kadushin, 1958, pp. 37–43; Bailey, 1959, pp. 60–66) and others in the 1950s for social work to develop a clearer conceptualization of self and to establish its domain. Concomitantly, conferences and professional forums around these same concerns have proliferated. In New York City for example, the local chapter of the National Association of Social Workers featured social work scholar and former NASW President, Nancy Humphreys at its annual meeting (Humphreys, 1986). The theme centered on the crucial linkage between need for building a stronger profession and the need for an improved public understanding about social work.

This article makes no sweeping claims about resolving the reclassification issue but seeks instead to contribute to the ongoing discussion. It recognizes the fact of public ambiguity about social work as inextricable from the reclassification issue and offers a set of empirical data which demonstrate social work's unique role in the human services.

Social Work's Response

In an effort to stem the movement toward reclassification by validating the requirement of a social work degree for social service jobs, the NASW Classification Validation Project was launched (NASW, 1982). It builds on earlier research which applied functional job analysis to the identification of tasks performed by social workers (Fine and Wiley, 1971; Austin and Smith, 1975; Teare, 1979) and employs a content validation methodology including job analysis and curriculum analysis that seeks to link training and practice. While these studies represent major efforts to define empirically the nature of social work practice and to validate education, they have not systematically compared social workers with non-social workers who are presumed to overlap into their service boundaries. Thus, the prospects for improving public understanding of the profession are minimized.

Methodology

Data

The data base for this study consists of the responses to a questionnaire and task sort administered in person to 1,444 human service workers and supervisors at 122 agencies within four of New Jersey's twenty-one counties to assess their training needs and activities. Questionnaires were mailed to workers at 1,500 agencies in the remaining seventeen counties. All of the agencies in the study were funded under Title XX of the Social Security Act. Workers in the four counties (Atlantic, Bergen, Hudson, Middlesex) were chosen for the in person task sort because they represented the broadest range of direct service occupations including: social workers, physicians, clerical workers, psychologists, counselors, visiting public health nurses, nutrition specialists, legal aides, teachers, educational specialists, and homemakers home health aides.

The study was conducted by the Human Service Manpower Project of The Rutgers University Graduate School of Social Work for the New Jersey Department of Human Services to determine training needs of employees at the state's Title XX funded agencies (Lagay, Simpson, and Tappper, 1977). The task sort consisted of eighty-seven general human service activities developed

in part by the Rutgers team of investigators³ which any human service worker could be expected to engage in. These centered around basic verbal, interventive, counseling, home health, client management, and general agency management areas. Each respondent stated whether he/she performed each task. For each task performed, the respondent was asked whether he/she required further training in the task. Respondents also indicated their job title, their job description, and their education level.

Subjects

Two hundred and ninety-four direct service workers from the original Rutgers sample identified themselves by job title as social workers. Two hundred and twenty-six of these were employed at four traditionally regarded social work settings, i.e., family service, mental health, public assistance, and child welfare settings⁴ with the remainder dispersed across many other types of settings. They were: family agency social workers (N=21), mental health social workers (N=29), county welfare board social workers (N=78), and child welfare social workers (N=98). Ninety percent of the mental health and family agency social workers held MSWs while 85% of the welfare board social workers and child welfare social workers held bachelor degrees. The concentration of social workers in these traditional settings underscored the importance of their selection as the social work sample in this investigation.

The remaining workers identified themselves by job title as non-social workers. Of these, 139 workers representing four occupational titles were selected for comparison with the social workers. These groups were presumed to overlap closely with social workers in at least two ways. The first of these was the degree to which they performed concrete versus non-concrete tasks. Concrete tasks (e.g. client budgeting, arranging services, information gathering) require no advanced academic preparation. Non-concrete tasks (e.g. developing treatment plans, conducting diagnostic sessions) would suggest further academic preparation and training. The second area was the degree to which their clients' problems (e.g. mental and physical health, economic dependency) overlapped. These four non-social work titles were: public health nurses (N=39), family planning coun-

selors (N=21), substance abuse counselors (N=42), and homemaker/health aides (N=37). Fifty-three percent of the substance abuse counselors and 64% of the family planning counselors held bachelor degrees (some with masters); 48% of the nurses held bachelor of science degrees in nursing; and 76% of the homemakers were high school graduates.

Public health nurses were selected because in providing health care they are often required to carry out interventive and supportive counseling as well as concrete services that overlap with social workers. In fact, many public health nurses feel that they now carry out a social work function. Family planning counselors were selected because they deliver concrete and non-concrete services that often overlap with the health and social services areas usually provided by social workers. Substance abuse counselors (alcohol and drug) were selected because of their reliance, at least in part, on verbal behavior changing therapies that have been traditionally associated with social workers. Finally, homemakers/health aides were selected because they deliver a set of concrete services that resemble the welfare services delivered by social workers such as budget counseling and client management.

Limitations

A key limitation of this study is that performance is measured simply as a dichotomous variable, that is to say, whether or not occupational group members performed or engaged in a certain task. Regretably, in the original Rutgers Project sample, the question of job performance did not probe frequency or intensity. A second drawback is the reliance on self-defined occupational titles, inherent to the original data set, as it assumes accuracy on the part of respondents though this may not be so as in the case of persons carrying out social work functions but calling themselves something else or vice versa. The only guard against this potential methodological flaw was an appeal to the respondents for their honest reporting and to agency administrators for their assistance in this regard. Finally, psychologists, whose activities have been closely compared with social workers are not included as they were significantly under-represented in the original data set.

Analysis and Findings

In the original study respondents were asked whether or not they performed eighty-seven human service tasks (measured as dichotomous variables). Each of these was believed to fall, a priori, into one of five general areas of activity. These areas were: basic therapeutic tasks, middle management agency tasks, specialized intervention tasks, generalized client management tasks, and budgeting tasks. As a check on this classification scheme, a Principal Component Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation was conducted.⁵ Variables with loadings of .50 or greater were considered to belong to that task domain. For each significant factor produced, (i.e., eigen values over 1.0) factor scores were generated for all respondents. The factor analysis revealed that there were indeed five significant factors that were readily interpretable and coincided with the a priori classification scheme. These factors with their respective loadings are presented in Table 1. A total of sixteen variables loaded on Factor One, *Basic Therapeutic Tasks* including some of the most basic and essential therapeutic/interventive activities that direct human service workers might expectedly engage in. Ten variables loaded on Factor Two, *Middle Management* which included agency administrative activities. Eleven variables loaded on Factor Three, *Special Client Management* which included certain practical yet technical activities for clients such as, chore services, first-aid, special health and home care activities. Four variables loaded on Factor Four, *General Case Management* including basic client management and service coordination activities. Three variables loaded on Factor Five, *Budgeting* including activities pertaining to client fiscal planning.

T-tests were then conducted to find out if the mean scores were significantly different between the social workers and non-social workers. Table 2 presents the results of the T-tests. Significant mean differences were observed between them on four factors. As a further step, social workers were divided into: mental health social workers, family agency social workers, welfare board social workers, and child welfare social workers. The non-social work group was divided into: public health nurses, homemakers/home health aides, family planning counselors, and substance abuse counselors. A One-Way Analysis of Variance

Table 1

Factor Analysis of Key Variable Loadings (Varimax Rotation)

	Factors				
	1 Basic Thera- peutic	2 Middle Mgmt.	3 Special Client	4 General Case Mgmt.	5 Budgeting
Develop treatment plans	.67	.08	-.04	.04	-.01
Use confrontation	.67	.06	-.14	.01	.08
Setting limits for clients	.66	-.04	.05	.00	.03
Behavior modification	.66	.10	.06	-.07	.03
Counseling	.66	.04	-.11	.10	-.01
Conduct diagnoses	.62	.07	-.01	-.02	.05
Sensitivity training	.61	.08	-.07	.11	-.04
Dictation	.60	-.04	-.23	.19	-.03
Observation skills	.59	.08	.09	.04	.00
Give advice/guidance	.57	-.06	-.14	.18	-.11
Give support/reassurance	.57	-.03	-.01	.03	.03
Establish relationship with other professionals	.54	.08	-.21	-.24	-.08
Determining inabilities	.53	.06	.02	.11	.11
Establish order between clients	.52	.13	.03	-.08	.13
Minimize stress	.51	.03	.15	-.05	.05
Listening/understanding	.51	.01	-.16	.12	-.21
Evaluate subordinate's performance	.05	.70	.07	.04	-.04
Discuss subordinate's job performance	-.02	.66	.16	.02	-.08
Plan training program	.05	.62	-.12	-.01	.33
Plan new admin. unit	.06	.60	-.10	.13	.26
Inspect case records	.00	.59	-.01	.12	-.20
Staffing arrangements	.02	.56	-.06	-.08	.20
In-service training	-.02	.55	.13	.20	-.01
On-the-job training	-.03	.55	.08	.31	-.05
Agency operations	.16	.52	.02	.10	.06
Caseload management	.10	.52	.12	.13	-.20
Housekeeping tasks	-.36	.05	.75	-.09	.04
Home health care	-.16	-.01	.74	.05	-.05
Preparing meals	-.40	.00	.71	-.15	.13

Table 1—Continued

Factor Analysis of Key Variable Loadings (Varimax Rotation)

	Factors				
	1 Basic Thera- peutic	2 Middle Mgmt.	3 Special Client	4 General Case Mgmt.	5 Budgeting
Minor first aid	-.05	.14	.71	.15	-.24
Homemaking	.01	-.02	.69	.29	.08
Distrib/check medication	-.20	.17	.68	-.03	-.28
Supervise client's work	.15	.08	.63	.17	.03
Chore services	-.24	-.10	.60	-.03	.35
Teach hygiene	.08	.01	.59	.23	-.09
Leisure activities	.10	.13	.56	-.08	.22
Meal delivery	-.26	.07	.52	.01	.23
Plan client services	.00	.23	.06	.53	.05
Identify new clients	.03	.13	.07	.50	.20
Verify eligibility	.12	-.05	.07	.50	-.09
Follow-up after service	.06	-.10	-.13	.50	.35
Prepare program budget	-.11	-.03	.01	.09	.56
Determine program cost	-.08	.44	.09	-.06	.52
Client budget mgmt.	.22	-.18	.11	.17	.51

(ANOVA) was performed for each significant factor across all eight occupation groups. When an ANOVA proved significant a Multiple Comparison of Means Test was performed to determine which of the pairwise comparisons was statistically significant. The results of this analysis appear in Table 3. The first chart in Table 3, the *Basic Therapeutic Tasks*, identifies this factor as falling within the domain of social work. The scores of all the social work groups with the exception of the county welfare board group are visibly different from the scores of each of the non-social work groups. As a group, the non-social workers dominate the second chart, *Middle Management*. However, family agency social workers and mental health social workers show the highest scores with the other social workers significantly underengaged. The third chart, *Special Client Management* falls within the domain of the non-social work group with the four

Table 2

Mean Differences in Factor Scores Between Social Workers and Non-Social Workers

	Social Workers (N=226)	Others (N=139)
Factor 1 (Basic Therapy)	0.2792	-0.4539*
Factor 2 (Middle Mgmt.)	-0.1578	0.2565*
Factor 3 (Special client)	-0.4576	0.7440*
Factor 4 (General case Mgmt.)	0.0052	-0.0084 NS
Factor 5 (Budgeting)	0.2024	-0.3291*

*t-test for differences between means (two-tailed) $P < .001$

social work groups distinguishing themselves by their under-engagement. Social workers with the exception of the welfare board group, significantly underengage in the fourth chart, *General Case Management*. The highest scores are indicated by two non-social work group members, family planning counselors and public health nurses. In the fifth chart, *Budgeting*, welfare board social workers alongside homemakers home health aides are the highest scorers.

While differences are observed among the social work titles across the five factors, they are fewer than the observed differences between social workers and the others. This fact points to the cohering tendency of social work. This comparison is illustrated in Table 4 where the actual number of significant mean differences within social work was counted and compared with the actual number of significant mean differences between social workers and the other titles. A total of eleven was counted within social work while a total of forty-eight was counted between social work and the other human service groups.

Discussion and Implications

This study was premised on the view that in order to effectively argue social work's case against reclassification a preliminary assessment of social work's uniqueness in the human services was essential. Social workers were compared with select non-social workers based on their engagement and under-engagement in eighty seven of the most basic human service activities. The findings revealed a distinctive behavioral pattern and service boundary for social work. The fact that social work and non-social work titles converged around a number of these tasks is neither surprising nor denies their distinctiveness. Since social functioning has physical as well as psychological dimensions to it, it is understood that at some point human service workers need to relate to some if not all of these in helping others. Kerlinger (1973, p. 462) makes reference to this in his discussion of valid construct measures by noting that discriminant validity implies evidence of convergent or overlapping patterns as well.

Table 4

Significant Mean Differences Within Social Work and Between Social Work and Other Titles on Five Factors

<i>Within Social Work</i>		<i>Between Social Work</i>	
F.1	2	F.1	8
F.2	4	F.2	9
F.3	0	F.3	12
F.4	3	F.4	9
F.5	2	F.5	10
Total:	11	Total:	48

As a group, the social workers studied here significantly engaged in a set of basic therapeutic/interventive activities. They were under represented in those areas requiring technical or specialized skills such as home care, health care, and chore services. When intra social work patterns were examined, behavioral differences became clearer. Welfare board social workers distinguished themselves from the others along three factors. This was indicated by their high mean scores on General Case

Management and Budgeting Factors and low mean score on the Basic Therapeutic Task Factor. Child welfare social workers are drawn closer to the welfare board social workers by their similar low scores on the Middle Management Factor. The duo of mental health and family agency social workers is consistent along three factors: Basic Therapeutic and Middle Management (where they fully engage) and General Case Management (where they underengage). While all social work groups significantly underengage in the Special Client Management Factor, the particularly low scores of the mental health and family agency social workers is instructive.

Although the data did not examine educational differences, this pattern among the social workers appears to support the profession's claim that functional differences exist between social workers at differential educational levels. Mental health and family agency social workers it will be recalled reported their highest education level at the MSW while the others held mainly bachelor degrees. It is not surprising then to observe mental health and family agency social workers versus county welfare board and child welfare social workers interlocked on the Middle Management Factor and the Basic Therapeutic Factor. Many of the tasks found along these factors imply preparation beyond the bachelor level.

O'Connor and Waring (1981, pp. 4–6) have advanced that in light of increased competition among the human service providers, interdisciplinary ventures in practice and education should abound. Social work they contend can enhance its position in this interdisciplinary effort by identifying its set of unique qualities that contribute toward such a joint enterprise. Consistent with their proposal and these study findings, the preparation of bachelor level social workers for county welfare departments and child welfare agencies should consider improved and creative methods for enhancing and maximizing their delivery of certain case management and budgeting activities. This could be carried out at the expense of those activities which they currently underengage. Similarly, the preparation of graduate social workers for mental health and family service agencies should vigorously concentrate on bold new approaches for securing and promoting their roles as key providers of certain

therapeutic services and middle-management services over those areas which they show only limited involvement.

Conclusion

Social work's identification and emphasis of the basic task areas carried out by its variously trained members will not sufficiently satisfy its critics and impact the reclassification trend. This will necessitate the establishment of social work's effectiveness over other human service workers who also carry out many of these same activities. Contrary to the belief of some, demonstrating effectiveness in the helping process is not a simple procedure. Furthermore, it is not clear that this is the direction in which social work education is currently moving or for that matter, that this is the immediate objective for graduates of other human service disciplines and programs. That notwithstanding, this article focused upon the urgency for public clarity about social work's activities and the real threat to the profession's survival resulting from the waning of public clarity and support. Empirical evidence of social work's particular contribution to the human services vis à vis related human service groups was presented as essential in order for social work to reclaim public support.

The challenge now facing social work is one of linkage. That is, linking research on its domain and role performance in the human services with existing research on educational validation and task effectiveness and availing the findings to the public. Ultimately, such a strategy will not only help strengthen social work's response to states' reclassification policy initiatives but surely help improve its status in the human services.

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Footnotes

1. Broadbanding was introduced in the 1970s by the New York City government to help reduce the operation costs of the municipal work force. It

- sought to consolidate job functions and titles of various occupational groups for example, sanitation workers, social workers, clericals. (See the N.Y.C. Dept. of Personnel Reports for 1976).
2. According to NASW, reclassification is more appropriate than the commonly used term, declassification, since a modification rather than a removal of educational requirements is usually the case.
 3. The final Rutgers task sort incorporated items from the Florida Human Service Task Bank developed by Michael Austin and P. L. Smith (1975) at The State University of Florida.
 4. That these practice fields are the traditional domain of social work is discussed by Roy Lubove (1980). See also, Gerald O'Connor and Mary Waring (1981).
 5. Factor analysis on dichotomous variables can be justified if the researcher's aim is to cluster these and a potentially continuous underlying character of the variables exist. See for example: J. Kim and W. Mueller (1978). See also, J. Kim, H. Nie, and S. Verba (1977, pp. 39-42).

