Response to Greene 2001, Redefining Social Work

Tara R. Earl

ABSTRACT. This article is in response to the article titled Redefining Social Work for the New Millennium: Setting a Context, by Dr. Roberta Greene. I have come to view social work as a profession that seeks to enable others not just the poor and undeserved, the opportunity to better understand and navigate any situation that causes them stress or presents some type of barrier to their health and well-being. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Definition of social work, redefining social work, social work

I have been in social work education for over ten years and I am still not certain of how to answer the “what is social work” question. When I came to social work, I do not believe I was taught a specific definition. For the most part, I was told that it was a broad and diverse profession. Therefore, I used that description to define the profession in whichever way suited my needs and professional goals.

Reflecting back, I realize that developing one sentence to define social work is very difficult. It was certainly not the type of question I had
on any test or exam. Based on my education and work experiences, I have come to view social work as a profession that seeks to enable others, not just the poor and underserved, the opportunity to better understand and navigate any situation that causes them stress or presents some type of barrier to their health and well-being. As a way of checking to see if my definition is similar to others, I pulled definitions and descriptions from the three institutions that taught me about being a social worker and from the National Association of Social Workers, which serves as a national anchor for the profession.

**Undergraduate Program—Virginia Commonwealth University**

“Social workers are professionals who address personal and social problems; formulate, implement and evaluate policies and programs; engage in knowledge development for the profession; and influence community decision making. Social workers work with individuals, families, and communities who experience vulnerability because of the lack of personal, social, and/or institutional resources to meet their emotional, health and economic needs” (http://www.vcu.edu/slwweb/academicprograms/preparing.html, retrieved: 3/16/04).

**Graduate Program—The University of Pennsylvania**

The University of Pennsylvania exclusively teaches the “Penn Approach,” which is a philosophy that calls for social work practice that

- empowers the client
- establishes a working relationship of mutual respect
- provides intensive services that are time-limited
- uses agency mandates as its context
- advocates for planned change at local, regional, and national levels
- links social resources to areas of greatest need
- addresses issues that adversely affect the larger population represented by the client
- fosters a climate of inquiry essential to the development of the knowledge base in theory and practice.

Penn further explains that “social work is a profession of hope, committed to the belief that people, including communities and institutions, can be helped to help themselves and that social work is also a profession for the times, responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable in our
diverse and changing society. Social work is a profession of advocacy for a humane society grounded in social justice and a commitment to serve society, create ways to inform, influence, and identify new trends in service delivery to meet the changing needs of all clients” (http://www.ssw.upenn.edu/home/programs/intro.html, retrieved 3/16/04).

Doctoral Program–The University of Texas at Austin

There does not seem to be a definition of social work available on the web site. There is a lot of information about standards and criteria for the different educational levels such as the BSW programs and MSW programs, but no definition of social work. Ironically, this is the program that has formally taught me the most about being a social worker. The program has also shown me a variety of ways to operationalize and critique several aspects of the profession. For example, I had never heard of the positivist, post-positivist, and post-modern perspectives in relation to social work before coming to this program and no other program ever talked about the connection between research, effective practice, and outcomes. Those were terms that I learned from other disciplines like public health and psychiatry, definitely not from a school of social work.

NASW

“Social work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups, or communities enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and creating societal conditions favorable to this goal. Social work practice consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends: Helping people obtain tangible services; providing counseling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, or groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in relevant legislative processes” (personal communication with Lahne Mattas-Curry, Sr. Communications Associate, NASW, 3/16/04).

Redefining Social Work?

Redefining social work? What does that really mean? Is there really one definition to which all individuals, academic institutions, and organizations adhere? Even though the four definitions above have similar components, each differs to a certain degree. So, how will it be possible
to redefine social work if there does not seem to be one guiding definition? Greene (2001) begins by examining the profession’s primary mission, purpose, and central focus and concludes by proposing a definition for social work that she believes will attempt to “unify social work’s professional purpose and dual mission” (p. 16). Her proposed definition is as follows:

a. Social workers strive to enhance person-environment fit by fostering the well-being of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. They facilitate organizational and societal change in the interest of social and economic justice.

b. Social workers carry out their client-centered, reflective activities in various settings with diverse constituencies across multiple systems. Social workers who are guided by their professional code of ethics attempt to determine the efficacy of their interventions.

Greene makes an excellent point when she states that, “social work’s historical path to professionalization provides insight into the difficulty of articulating a common purpose” (p. 3). I also agree with Flexner’s comment that “a true profession must develop a systematized body of knowledge that can be taught to aspiring professionals” (p. 3). Greene offers a list of questions that should be addressed before social work can develop a new working definition. While the questions all seem crucial and noteworthy, I would propose that most of the basis of the questions relate to the resistance within the profession about moving from a more hands on/“in the client’s face” (micro) perspective to a more indirect (macro) perspective.

If you re-read Greene’s questions, common macro-type phrases are mentioned: working with different size systems; scientific knowledge base; research; and effective practice. All of which move the profession into a direction that is vastly different from its roots in protecting children and delivering services to the poor and underserved. In order to address Greene’s questions, the profession would have to face and embrace the fact that social workers are no longer only working face to face with their clients. Many of us are working on behalf or for our clients.

For many years the direct practitioner has dominated the face of the profession and the few who decided to focus on policy, research, and any other indirect type of work (except for community organizing and grassroots efforts) were often disdained or de-valued. Thus, I would say
that the role of the macro social worker is finally getting its just due. Although it has not been said specifically, the current climate in social work is primarily geared towards identifying the importance of the macro social worker. Some feel that the profession is losing its foundation and uniqueness; whereas the macro social worker is trying to move the profession to a point where it will be able to:

- Define best practices
- Become more accountable for services delivered
- Better understand and integrate the ever-changing complex systems
- Establish a scientific knowledge base and embrace research

Being a direct practitioner is crucial, but very time consuming. When working in the public arena the caseloads are often large and demanding and yield very little time to focus on measuring the effectiveness of service delivery. To this day, schools of social work encourage master level clinicians to employ single-subject designs as a way of measuring their service delivery. Unfortunately, that idea is more the exception than the rule. According to some researchers, graduates are reporting that they either do not have the time or the comfort with their degree of skill to add research to their laundry list of responsibilities (Briar & Blythe, 1985; Gingerich, 1991; Olsen, 1990; Robinson, Bronson, & Blythe, 1988).

So, how will the micro clinician juggle expectations to see several clients, address their needs, figure out if their work is effective, complete required paperwork, remain competent and sane, while moving from theory to practice “on-the-spot?” Easily, the profession continues to carve out a place for the macro social worker. This person will focus on paving the way for the new and improved “reflective practitioner.” For the purposes of this discussion a clear distinction is made between the micro and macro clinician with the assumption that they function on parallel planes. In reality, that is not necessarily true. In fact, this person is oftentimes one in the same.

In her paper, Greene talks about the expansive nature of the person-environment approach, “the person-environment perspective is problematic as it has made the profession so broad in scope that its centrality of purpose may be obscured” (p. 10). She uses two examples from Goldstein (1980) and Meyer (1982) to illustrate the fact that there is a limit to what one person can be expected to know and practice in the course of a working day.
Who Has Time to Be a Reflective Practitioner?

The term “reflective practitioner” seems to be a new phenomenon for social work. Greene defines this practitioner as someone “who is able to move from theory to practice ‘on-the-spot’ . . . they will need to think critically, practice with cultural competence, respect and work in diverse communities, and master new technological developments and apply them to the field of social work” (p. 15). While this appears to be a very timely definition, it seems very similar to the person-environment perspective with the addition of more modern terms like cultural competence and technological developments. Aside from that, this is not much different from what social workers should have been taught in school.

If schools of social work spent more time covering the basics of the profession, like defining social work, incorporating a component where students are trained to be more culturally competent and reflective, and integrating a true link between research and practice, the next generation of social workers will be much better prepared to address Greene’s questions and embrace the diversity of perspectives within the profession. Consequently, the thrust of the problem for social work is that it’s overwhelmed with knowledge and approaches. Instead of mastering and embracing each new direction, the field has metaphorically reverted back to its infancy, which is why we are constantly re-playing the same song (but different tune) over and over.

Articles like Greene’s are great ways to bring forth the major struggles within the profession, but the most effective way to address the issues is to re-design and re-structure the way in which social workers are educated and trained. Therefore, the take home message from this discussion is that social work has a lot of homework to complete before it is able to move forward. As part of satisfying the requirements to move forward social work needs to consider the following:

- Teach and confirm that students know the definition of social work
- Focus less on producing omniscient graduates and more on making sure students thoroughly know the basics and the various ways in which the field could take them—not necessarily something that can be accomplished in a multiple-choice exam.
- Incorporate therapeutic labs similar to psychology where students begin to practice ways to bracket out their personal feelings. This, too, cannot be accomplished via sparse meetings with a field in-
structor and a few perfunctory process recordings that have no real value to the student.

- **TEACH RESEARCH, TEACH RESEARCH, TEACH RESEARCH:** If introduced earlier in the educational process (BSW or MSW programs), it might not seem such a daunting skill to learn. It is not unlikely to encounter anxiety about a topic that you have not been asked to study since your early college years.

**REFERENCES**


