



The Social Work Profession

WORKOUT 7 Understanding Social Work Regulation in Your State and the Nation

At the present time, regulation of the social work profession exists in every state in the United States. Usually, this regulation takes the form of a system of licensure. *Licensure* is officially defined as a process by which “an agency of government grants permission to an individual to engage in a given occupation, upon finding that the applicant has attained the minimal degree of competency required to ensure that the public health, safety, and welfare will be reasonably well protected” (Karls, 1992, p. 53).

In other words, having a system in place that requires social workers to meet minimal standards for practice ostensibly ensures the protection of the service consumer from incompetent practitioners. Licensing also clarifies the “scope of practice,” that is, what the social worker may lawfully do. For example, in Kansas, the social worker may diagnose mental disorders. However, in no state can a social worker prescribe medication (not included in “scope of practice”).

Given the pervasiveness of licensure in this country, it seems clear that such regulation is viewed as desirable. Both the profession and the public generally believe in the concept. However, not everyone agrees that the regulation of the profession is a good thing. Mathis (1992), for example, believes that licensing has a pernicious effect:

[It] narrows the scope and the nature of services delivered to people of color, . . . restricts job opportunities for [minorities] . . . by utilizing invalid and biased testing and formal, university-based education as the basic screening mechanisms for entering the profession, and screens out disproportionately . . . non-mainstream perspectives. (p. 59)

In other words, the institution of licensing is inherently racist and serves to maintain race- and class-based inequalities.

If the purpose of licensing is to protect the public from incompetence, you ought to know what its converse—competence—is. Regulation, coupled with the absence of such a definition, invites the criticism of “overregulation.” Here is an example: Some years ago, the state of Kansas compelled a teenager to cease and desist the practice of cosmetology without a license. The nature of her crime? She was earning money (albeit less than a licensed beautician) by braiding the hair of friends and acquaintances into “cornrows,” tiny braids all over the head that take a very long time to do. When a group of licensed, professional beauticians heard about the girl and her business, they brought her to the attention of the local authorities, and thus a controversy was born. Citizens in the community,

irritated that the young girl was being punished, in effect, for showing some entrepreneurial instinct, questioned the decision to shut her down. Local beauticians defended the decision, stating that they had gone to beauty school, had learned about the skeletal structure of the head and about many different kinds of hair preparations, and that practices such as this girl's were dangerous to the public. What do you think? Did the cease-and-desist order protect the public? Or did the system of licensing simply keep a competent person from exercising her ability to compete in the marketplace?

This is not a small matter, either in theory or in practice, for the terms of the argument speak directly to the ongoing conflict within the profession about how it can remain true to its historical, anti-elitist mission while striving for the trappings of elitism—high pay and high status—that licensing requirements may reflect.

For some of you, licensing issues will become salient before you graduate, because your state regulates entry-level practice. Others of you will not need to consider licensure unless or until you attain a graduate degree. The question of the levels at which your state licenses can best be answered by your instructor. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the terms and conditions of attaining a license and keeping it active in the state in which you intend to practice, as well as getting a general sense of the whole regulation enterprise.

WORKOUT 7 Instructions

Location

Inside and outside class

Purpose

1. To understand the professional social work regulatory system in your state.
2. To learn more about how social work regulates itself across the country.
3. To gain the knowledge and understanding necessary for developing a critical perspective on the issue of licensure.

Background

This workout is based on the presumption that you have decided to attain an education that will get you to your goal of being a social worker. When we make the decision about what occupation or profession to pursue, we rarely think about what is required beyond the formal education component.

Graduation, however, is usually but one (albeit usually the most difficult) step toward being sanctioned by the state to practice your profession.

Persons contemplating entering the social work profession would be well served by learning about licensure requirements in their state, as well as answers to many other questions. For example, some states have licensing reciprocity with other states, which means that if you meet the requirements for licensing in one state, then the other state accepts your qualifications. Does your state have reciprocity? Another question often asked has to do with whether a student who has committed certain crimes in the past can be summarily prevented from being licensed by the state. How does your state handle an applicant's criminal record?

More important, though, what you learn about licensing will help you develop your own perspective about the functions it serves in society. That is the primary purpose of this workout.

Directions

1. Your instructor may invite to class the credentialing specialist for your state board to discuss licensing issues in your state (if the location of your state board is too far away for this, the specialist may be able to have a teleconference in your classroom). You should prepare for this talk by developing a list of questions you would like answered. These questions should relate to the specific requirements for attaining a license at the various levels, the costs associated with attaining and maintaining a license, and whether exceptions or waivers are ever granted for either of those two things. You might also ask about the scope of practice. In other

words, what does having a license actually allow you to do? Query the credentialing specialist about reciprocity: Does your state have agreements with other states? On what grounds may a person be considered to be practicing social work without a license? What happens to social workers who behave unethically? What other helping professionals are licensed through this same state board? Are their requirements more, or less, stringent than those for social work? Take notes as part of this workout.

2. Your instructor then assigns each person in the class a state licensing board to write to, asking for specific information and answers to relevant questions. This part of the assignment can also be done in groups and takes almost no time using the web. For example, one person in your group finds out the location of the state board you have been assigned to write to (the Social Work Examination Service webpage has links to addresses of all state boards: <http://www.swes.net/licensing/boards.html>). Another person in your group may write a request, asking that information be sent to the third member, who then is responsible for sharing that information.
3. On a day appointed by your instructor, all groups share the information they have gathered. Based on that information, your instructor leads you in a discussion about licensing and what you have learned.

1. Based on what you have learned about licensure, what is your perspective?

2. Do you think the requirements set forth actually protect the public from the incompetent?

3. Do states make any exceptions to accommodate persons for whom licensing poses barriers to the ability to earn a living?

4. If not, do you think that such exceptions should be made, and if so, under what circumstances?

5. Should anyone who meets the minimum requirements be granted a license?

6. Are the sanctions for unethical behavior clear?

7. What should the future of licensing be?

WORKOUT 8 Using Social Media to Enhance Your Professional Effectiveness

Almost four decades ago, an article in *Social Work* heralded the beginning of the computer age in the social work profession (Hoshino & McDonald, 1975). The authors used a case study (based on the second author's efforts at his master's in social work field placement) to demonstrate how outcome research would be enhanced in the future through computerized recordkeeping. At this point, the World Wide Web had yet to be born and did not figure even remotely into the authors' contemplation about the use of computers in social work.

How far, and how fast, we have come! As you who have grown up in the age of web 2.0 know, the horizon upon which we can view new utilities for the computer is endless. Through the web, we are able to share information, collaborate with others on projects and products, and participate in communities of interest all over the world. These capabilities have changed not only the scope of our ability to learn new things about ourselves and the world, but our capacity to change those things when our profession, or our conscience, requires it. The following well-documented example is but one embodiment of this.

In June 2009, the Iranian government held its presidential election. Fraud was considered widespread, and many believed that the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, stole the election. People gathered in the streets to protest over a period of days, often directed to specific places in the city through social networking sites such as Twitter (for this reason, these protests are often called "the Twitter Revolution"). During one of the protests, a young woman, a university student named Neda Agha-Soltan, was murdered by the Iranian paramilitary loyal to Ahmadinejad. An unnamed bystander videotaped the murder on his or her cell phone, which was subsequently posted to Facebook, and then YouTube. From there, the footage went viral, appearing on news stations such as CNN. The fact that the incident was caught on tape and shown so widely made it difficult for the government to deny brutality toward its citizens, although they certainly tried (at first, the state-controlled media did not report the incident). Although Ahmadinejad remains in power to this day, a simple cell phone video recording, and a social networking site, have given the Iranian people and the world solid evidence that the government is a de facto repressive dictatorship. As a result of this, many believe that it is only a matter of time before the regime collapses under the weight of this evidence, as well as other material proof that inevitably will be exposed in our connected age (it should also be noted that the anonymous videographer was awarded a prestigious George Polk Award in Journalism).

Closer to home, the election of President Obama is an object lesson in the power of social networks to engender change. The literature is rife with stories of the then-candidate's creative use of the web to raise millions of dollars from ordinary citizens, in small amounts, on a scale never before seen in modern politics (for a riveting account of this effort, read David Plouffe's *The Audacity to Win*, 2009). Less remarked upon, however, is the fact that, without the Internet, those who supported then-candidate Obama would not have known of their numerical strength nor the intensity of their collective support, and he may well have become a historical footnote, rather than the president of the United States (the fact that President Obama himself was a community organizer probably allowed him to see the possibility of his own election—and the means for accomplishing it—before others did).

All of the foregoing points to an inescapable fact: Anyone with a computer can be an engine of social change. Anyone with a computer can make their voice heard by contributing money, designing posters or other materials, organizing meetings of those with similar interests, and so forth. You can also critically influence the discourse on topics of interest to you by blogging knowledgeably and attracting a critical mass of readers, or responding online to the work of others. And, of course, it goes without saying that you can absorb the expertise of others about topics of interest, expanding the practice skills and tools in your repertoire.

In my view, the best part about the breadth and depth of opportunities for social workers and others with a modicum of tech savvy is that you can be actively engaged in the work of your choice, regardless of most physical limitations, geographic limitations, wealth (or lack thereof!), or family obligations. No matter who or where in this country you are, you can access information on just about anything you are curious about, instantaneously. Think about it: You are in a position to make important discoveries in a way that previous generations of students could not.

What I offer you in the following workouts are two different sets of opportunities. Workout 8 allows you to very quickly access information to help you shape your practice with clients; a second workout (Workout 14) allows you to begin what I hope is a long career of contributing to our evidence base.

WORKOUT 8 Instructions

Location

Outside class

Purpose

1. To expand your knowledge of appropriate online resources for social workers.
2. To provide you with hands-on experience in accessing resources relevant to the beginning social worker.
3. To enhance your socialization to the profession by enabling you to become acquainted with issues of contemporary importance to members of our profession.

Background

Understanding the potential of the Internet and knowing how to access its resources for your professional use is an indispensable skill, regardless of where you live, your career aspirations, or anything else. As a professional social worker, you will one day encounter a client problem for which neither you nor your agency colleagues have the answer. Imagine then being able to pose your problem to an infinitely large group of colleagues in cyberspace, who have the capacity to respond immediately. Bound by a uniform value base but trained in a variety of different perspectives, these colleagues can enhance your practice tremendously, just as you can theirs. Until that day comes, however, you can use the web to help you contemplate your professional future.

Directions

1. For this exercise, you obviously need access to a computer with a web browser, such as Safari or Internet Explorer.
2. Now you are ready to proceed, following the steps in the workspace. Staple any online work to your workspace page when you turn it in.

WORKOUT 8 Workspace

Name _____

Date _____

1. In the space provided, in as specific terms as you can, write a paragraph about the reasons for your interest in social work. If you are interested in learning how to do a particular type of work (i.e., community organization, advocacy, family therapy, etc.), expand on this. Is there a population with whom you are most interested in working? Children, the elderly, persons with disabilities? Persons with addictions? Persons with a specific cultural or religious background? Are you interested in working in another country? If the reasons for your interest in social work are unclear to you, now is your opportunity to think more deeply about its appeal.

2. Read the following advice from Google about how you can make online searches more powerful: <http://www.google.com/support/websearch/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=136861>. Now, using these conventions, search for information on your field of interest, using keywords.

(a) Are there any sponsored sites that show up? If so, list and briefly describe them (no more than three).

(b) What are the top five nonsponsored sites? List and briefly describe.

(c) What are the differences between the sponsored and nonsponsored sites. For example, are the sponsored sites all for profit, whereas the others are not? If so, are there other differences?

- (d) Explore at least three of the sites that look the most interesting (you can certainly explore more beyond these three). What are some of the contemporary problems and issues in your area that have captured the attention of the profession, as evidenced by the information you found? Either write the URLs in the spaces below, or print out the first page from each of these three sites and turn them in with this assignment.

- (e) Many of the websites you came across were probably of questionable veracity. In other words, the information contained within some sites may have been opinion masquerading as fact, or information that is out of date or otherwise discredited. How should you, as a consumer of information using this technology, evaluate the relevance or truth of the information, or the rigorousness of the research presented?

- (f) Finally, in the space below, write down something new that you have learned through this exercise. This can be some new set of facts about the substantive area under investigation, a resource that you will likely use again, or something new about the search process itself.
