

Flexner's Thesis Was Prescient: Ethical Practices for Social Workers "In the Trenches" Requires Forensic Knowledge

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Abstract

In a speech in 1915, Abraham Flexner, M.D. described his taxonomy for defining a profession and concluded that social work may be an "amateur occupation." Social work scholars have challenged his criteria for decades. Flexner, however, foreshadowed a tension inherent in social work's approach to delivering social justice in the various "trenches" where vulnerable populations work and live. The capacity to critically analyze and apply various forms of knowledge and science to social and individual problems requires more than good intentions and vigorous advocacy. In modern terms, this means that social work should teach and train its profession to critically formulate and evaluate multiple hypotheses, to employ multiple sources of data beyond just what a client expresses, and to critically apply and transform evidence-informed research from other disciplines to environments in which social welfare policy shapes outcomes for clients. The eventual implementation of a code of ethics for social work filled a significant gap in terms of providing a formal mechanism for decision making at the organizational, political, and clinical levels. I argue, however, that Flexner was correct in his assertion that social work may lose its way if it becomes so enamored with the righteousness of its causes that it loses the rigor required to sustain social justice. In response, I propose that social work pedagogy should adapt specialized forensic models as a method for teaching conceptual frameworks,

observational strategies, hypothesis-testing, and effective transmission of data to host environments to minimize unguided guesswork or reflexive decision making.

Keywords: Forensics, social work ethics, expertise, Abraham Flexner, pedagogy

Introduction

In the United States, social work has historically been defined by the identity and role of case managers, advocates, and clinicians acting for clients who often live in the shadows of host environments: prisons, schools, courts, and hospitals (Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocur, 2004; Karger & Stoesz, 2013; Prescott, 2013). This article derives from my experience of 35 years in these environments and particularly the courts. As a trial lawyer, I have witnessed the stress an adversarial system places on professionals to maintain ethical decision making and practices. For licensed social workers, in particular, the power and privilege to label and diagnose carries with it the authority to influence the rights of vulnerable persons by offering expert opinion to courts or other host environments such as prisons, hospitals, and schools. These expert opinions may concern parental termination and child custody, competency and criminal responsibility, clinical and medical treatment services, elder safety and protection, and a range of other powerful gatekeeping roles played by social workers.

As a trial lawyer for many years and a social worker with advanced degrees, I have spent significant time as a graduate student and an instructor in MSW and PhD programs. In those roles, I have witnessed the struggle to teach social workers the means to critically assess ethical risks and liability. I have also witnessed the impact of legitimately accepting the client's truth for purposes of clinical treatment but then translating that truth, without looking for or examining other alternative data, to adversarial systems and institutional authorities. Training in MSW programs offers many positive pedagogical and rigorous opportunities. The knowledge gap, however, is in the transfer of those skills to actions within host environments that may critically test rather than accept the well-intended opinions of a social worker.

In such policy and practice environments, social workers may be held to a standard of competent and ethical practice that requires much more than clinical instincts or a personal feeling about right and wrong (Reamer, 2013). These environments require social workers who can engage in the independent review of multiple sources of data and hypotheses, as well as explanations for how one knows what they claim to know. From such a framework, the social worker may acquire a particular way of knowing that is supported by intellectual and technical rigor, emotional insight, and, ultimately, expert opinions drawn from a transparent analysis of observational and assessment data (Goldblatt, 2004; Grimwood, 2015). These skills may be found in the specialty of forensic pedagogy, methodology, and ethics.

In this article, I argue that becoming a social worker ought to mean "being forensic." By this term, as I will further describe, I mean the praxis that flows from the mindset and academic influence that connects pedagogy and theory to *being forensic*. Being forensic is the act of rigorously applying methods of data gathering, hypothesis testing, research analysis, and clinical observation to individuals living in organic and adaptive organizational or institutional systems (Barker & Branson, 2014; Bartol & Bartol, 2017). It is this transfer of skills and knowledge from the academic

realm to a core competency in practice that suggests the need to develop critical consciousness and skill-based competencies for social work as a profession (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

The foundation for this argument may be traced to the often cited and criticized speech by Abraham Flexner, a physician and the Assistant Secretary to the General Education Board of New York City at the turn of the 20th century, who understood that social work had the potential to be unique among all other professions. In 1915, however, Flexner questioned social work's identity as a profession as he defined other professions, such as medicine and law. Much literature has been expended responding to this speech of more than a century ago. More recent interpretations have made the argument that its strange influence on the development of social work was disproportionate to its argument or a misreading of his thesis (Morris, 2008).

As discussed in this article, Flexner foreshadowed the struggle by social workers to pass on their core set of methodologies and conceptual frameworks. The active, real-time delivery of social justice within communities and host environments where people daily survive was well known to Flexner. In fact, as I argue here, because social workers were in the trenches from the inception, the profession's role and identity were shaped by much more than a clinical duty to understand one person's story or struggles. Instead, social workers sought to apply the best science of that day to better understand and alter the biological, political, and social forces that shaped individual outcomes (Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 1997). As Reamer (1998) summarized on the hundred-year anniversary of social work's founding, during late 20th century "many social workers were more concerned about cultivating perspectives and methods that would be indigenous to social work, partly in an effort to distinguish social work's approach to helping from those of allied professions, such as psychology and psychiatry" (p. 489).

The historical duty of social workers is to advocate for clients by embracing the concomitant

ethical duty to function with integrity and with evidence-informed competence within the client's host environment. As the social work profession shifted to a more formal pedagogy and academic structure offered within the university, the balance between academic rigor through classroom learning and the role of field placement has been the source of ongoing study and refinement (Lay & McGuire, 2010; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). The underlying struggle is how to transfer academic and practice skills to the active capacity to make reflective and rational ethical judgments (i.e., competently and with integrity) within the client's environment. If intellectual and emotional skill sets are limited to what they perceive as "right" or "wrong" social workers might reflexively align with a client or agency without regard to alternative hypotheses or accepted models for ethical decision making (Lovat & Gray, 2007).

Clients are at risk when a social worker does not perceive the limits of knowledge or data or the influences of bias and institutional pressures in order to actively apply those factors in practice (Mattison, 2000). The evolution of the social worker from graduate school to practice has the potential to boomerang when the social worker lacks critical analytic skills. Throughout the past century, social work has become a profession with its own systematic methodologies, practice conceptualizations, and ethical code. Yet the trade-off of moving to a clinical emphasis and state licensure may have added an unforeseen consequence: the education and training of the profession may be too narrow in terms of what social workers must confront in the complex universe of clients and institutions.

This article begins with an exploration of what it means for social workers to be forensic as a social work competency. This means becoming an expert with the ability to objectively organize and transmit complex information to a host environment, such as the criminal or civil justice systems or the hospitals, prisons, and schools, that clients must navigate. The capacity to be forensic, rightly understood, should be embraced and promoted in the pedagogy of teaching ethical practice for the social work profession. This

is not a rejection of values in the role and identity of social work, rather, it is a recognition that individual thoughts about how something "should be" is not the same as what is feasible or possible or supported by a careful balancing of evidence and research (Webb, 2001). If that is so, the operative question then becomes whether graduate programs and training in social work should adopt models that impose the ethical duty and rigor of becoming a forensic expert on all social workers as a core function of their duty to client and community.

The Value of Becoming Forensic

Generally, values can be defined as what religious, moral, cultural, ideological, or social beliefs are "worthy or valuable" to an individual or group (Banks, 2012, p. 7). Ethics is an organized code of conduct that concerns professional relationships and against which a violation might result in sanctions by a government agency or professional organization (Banks, 2012; Reamer, 2013). It is true that social work education has a macro component that is part of foundation policy courses, and this suggests that social work educators intend to extend the field's knowledge to an understanding of how groups act and think about other groups. Furthermore, that macro component informs the role and duty of social workers—armed with the power to label and diagnose—to advocate for clients within host environments and not simply from the armchair in an office. Yet, even in those instances when social work education serves to explain the differences between values and ethical codes, Flexner's concern that social work could become so self-absorbed in its good works as to lose its way is still present today.

It is not novel to recognize that teaching specialization in forensics is a "sprawling thicket," which is to say a dense and somewhat unruly endeavor (Green, Thorpe, & Traupmann, 2005; Randall & Kindiak, 2008; Roberts & Brownell, 1999). Yet this realm is the very heritage of the profession's core value of delivering social justice in the trenches, as Flexner (1915) implied. The underlying challenge, therefore, flows from the deeper meaning

of his speech. The professional discipline of being forensic has a more precise role identification and correlative duty than what social workers are taught in graduate school: to convey with competence and integrity relevant opinions that ethically and rationally inform decision making about a person (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012; Edwards, 2010; National Organization of Forensic Social Workers [NOSFW], 2012; National Research Council of the National Academies, 2009).

As Maschi and Killian (2011) summarize, "Effective forensic social work requires an integrated yet two-pronged approach that addresses well-being (psychosocial) and justice (law and policy) to help individuals, families, and communities" (p. 13). The two-pronged strategy is important, because transmuting conceptual frameworks, theories, or hypotheses with observations from testing and interviews as a predictive funnel is predicated on assisting judges to minimize errors from unguided guesswork or intuitive or reflexive decision making (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2014). After all, there is always the potential for implicit and explicit bias, even for trained professionals and those who have the power to judge others, when life experience and heuristics trump intelligent and reflective observation and insight (Edmond, Tangen, Searston, & Dror, 2015; Kassir, Dror, & Kukucka, 2013).

Even a partial list of being forensic for social workers includes identifying, assessing, and labeling diagnoses, competency, criminal responsibility, child protection and termination, child custody, psychological evaluations, disability, sentencing mitigation, elder guardianships, hospitalization, suicide risk, and other matters that profoundly influence everything from punishment to loss of rights to treatment interventions (Lewis, 2013; Maschi & Leibowitz, 2017). Social workers routinely transfer and transform various forms of data and knowledge from an array of scientific disciplines. The act of expressing agency to an authority about another person or group is, by definition and practice and licensure, acting in a forensic role (Barker & Branson, 2014; Maschi & Killian, 2011).

Flexner (1915) conceived the social worker in such a role, "not so much as the agent grappling with this or that situation, but rather as controlling the keyboard that summons, cooperates with and coordinates various professional specialists" such that "this breadth of attainment is very far from being a matter for reproach" (pp. 17-18). The power of this role should not be conferred on anyone who prefers to see work with a client as only a self-organized and isolated event rather than part of a system that could implement policy and practice through force or authority. In these capacities, anyone entering the portal to be a social worker will exercise the forensic power and privilege that Flexner characterized more gently as "professional spirit" (1915, p. 24). This spirit has been the core identity of social work from its inception. The core values of social work are meant to assure that voices are constructively heard in ways that too many people cannot articulate for themselves.

Teaching Forensics as a Core Competency

Two decades ago, Reamer (1998) identified the challenge in social work's development, as twofold. The profession must "intensify its efforts to educate students and practitioners about ethical issues and standards and ways to address them" and "social work education programs should implement ambitious agendas to offer in-depth and comprehensive instruction and research on ethical dilemmas and standards, ethical decision-making strategies, risk management, and ethical misconduct" (p. 489). As he aptly concluded, "social workers can no longer afford to have only a vague understanding of prevailing ethical standards" (p. 489). In this regard, students may study social work ethics in a separate course or in every course, but commentary and limited research suggests that students learn ethical behavior through observing their teachers (Bryan, 2006; Congress, 2000; Sanders & Hoffman, 2010). The specialty guidelines and skills that relate to forensic practice should be similarly integrated into the teaching of social work as a profession, because resolving ethical dilemmas

and advocating for clients is coextensive with such specialty knowledge and skills.

Social work educators must not only know the NASW *Code of Ethics*, but consciously link and integrate ethical practices to practice and educational experiences in the classroom (Barsky, 2009). That linkage extends to thoughtful insights about privilege and oppression as organic and adaptive forces imposed by institutions and government on clients as well as the social worker. The challenge thereby becomes more about what faculty understand and value as knowledge and skills for students than what students, with little experience in the field, believe relevant to becoming a professional social worker. If professional educators acknowledge that social workers must, as Flexner (1915) recognized, advocate for clients in all forms of environments, by extension such a form of pedagogy requires attention in curricula and classrooms. This objective is not a radical change in teaching social work, but more the strengthening of the intellectual and ethical rigor required for self-protection and for the specific skills of core concepts.

Since the 1980s, the forensic role has had a specific meaning in specialty ethics codes for mental health professionals (APA, 2012; APA, 2016; NOSFW, 2012). The following is a common definition:

For the purposes of these Guidelines, forensic psychology refers to professional practice by any psychologist working within any sub-discipline of psychology (e.g., clinical, developmental, social, cognitive) when applying the scientific, technical, or specialized knowledge of psychology to the law to assist in addressing legal, contractual, and administrative matters. Application of the Guidelines does not depend on the practitioner's typical areas of practice or expertise, but rather on the service provided in the case at hand. (APA, 2012 Introduction)

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* (2017) does not specifically define forensic social work as a specialization, nor has the NASW adopted, like the APA, specialty guidelines. However, the NASW code does provide guidance in section 1.04(c): When "generally recognized standards do not exist with respect to an emerging area of practice, social workers should exercise careful judgment and take responsible steps (including appropriate education, research, training, consultation, and supervision) to ensure the competence of their work and to protect clients from harm." (p. 9)

From section 1.04(c) two premises can be derived. First, the reality is that most social workers, working with vulnerable populations in practice and organizations, will find themselves in a forensic role for clients. This should seem obvious, given that the people who find themselves at clinicians' offices are intertwined with one or more host environments, often for many years. Second, the ethical duty to offer competent and evidence-informed opinions within the scope of their knowledge and experience is, itself, an ethical obligation of social workers to truthful and transparent expert opinion (Garber & Simon, 2018; Reamer, 2013). Both these pre-conditions require constant attention to reduce the impact of explicit or implicit biases. The exercise of expert opinion is the force of power and authority that can impact access to children, mental health services, loss of freedom in prison, fitness to adopt, competence and criminal responsibility, and many other rights.

On a concurrent path, the nine core competencies, called the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAs) generated by the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) (2017) for accreditation, provide that generalist and specialized knowledge integrate the knowledge, values, and practical skills required to help others in an ethical manner. Thus, social work curricula and competencies for decades have been undergirded with the premise that social work is the development and delivery of social justice in conjunction with, or in opposition to, powerful government entities,

institutions, and organizations acting in concert. In such a manner, social work education and training may have inadvertently turned the pyramid of social work knowledge upside down. The argument that teaching forensic practices to social workers as part of the education of the profession is not novel, but it still requires thoughtful implementation (Payne, 2006; Robbins, Vaughan-Eden, & Maschi, 2014).

In addition to the NASW and CSWE's codifications of ethical principles, there continues to be a need to find complementary means to teach and transform ethical knowledge into a deeper and reflective strategy for social workers. Webb (2001), for example, described this need in the context of teaching a rational actor model for evidence-based social workers. Arguing for a more "sweeping critique of the evidence-based models" for social work, he recognized that social workers, as "agents of change" require a deeper understanding for the process of deliberations and choice when making decisions (p. 67). As he succinctly noted, "Notoriously, social workers make decisions not only because of the ways things are but because of the way they would like things to be" (p. 67). Developing an ethically-framed pedagogy requires an explicit model for social workers, who are always acting as agents within open and adaptive systems in which there are consequences to both clients and social workers from reactive or value-laden decisions (Prescott, 2007).

In this sense, the original base of the social work pyramid was founded on reform of public health and safety, as recognized by Flexner in 1915, while advocating for access to justice through social and political remedies. A pedagogy for teaching social work that incorporates forensics as a function of being a social worker is influenced by the unfortunate reality that "theory and research evidence is taught on social work training courses, in which the link between theory and practice, or knowledge and its implementation, is not always made explicit or left for students and practitioners to unravel" (Trevithick, 2008, p. 1217). Flexner (1915) recognized that a profession required more than a feeling about doing right for others; though

he accepted that social value. Moreover, the failure to explicitly educate modern social workers about ethical duties leaves social workers vulnerable to imprudent and emotional alignments, confirmation bias, and various other forms of misconduct or liability (Hodgson & Watts, 2017; Lacasse & Gomory, 2003). The point of a professional pyramid may, however, be sharpened by compelling students to accept, at the opening passage to any environment, that they enter realms requiring intellectual rigor, knowledge of scientific methodologies, and political sophistication.

Flexner's Pyramid Turned Back on its Point

Social work, as a profession, has evolved for more than a century from an intersection of frameworks: generalist, community, individual needs, human rights, and social justice (Kam, 2014; Press, 2009). These frameworks ever adapt, shift, and merge, and then re-emerge with new obligations and new theories, along with new evidence-based practices. In laying out a specific taxonomy for professions like law and medicine and characterizing social work otherwise, Flexner's speech created an odd defensiveness among social workers. His very title, "Is Social Work a Profession?", seemed to cast an aspersion. This sense of injury, however, was misplaced. Flexner (1915) prefaced his speech by stating that he had not been asked to "decide whether social work is a full-time or part-time occupation, whether, in a word, it is a professional or an amateur occupation" (pp. 2-3). In the vernacular of what was called rhetoric in that era, this was, of course, precisely what he was addressing throughout the remainder of the speech.

Even scholars who argue for a kind of radical nature of social work reconcile the history and values of social work as representing the very core of the profession when waging these battles (Reisch & Andrews, 2014). Indeed, Flexner (1915) insightfully argued that, "the battles that social work wages will not be won by phrases which too often serve as a substitute for experience and knowledge, but by trench warfare carried on by

men and women who have learned every inch of the ground over which they must fight" (p. 22). This insight, social workers advocating for forgotten or marginalized populations, honors the core of social work values. Flexner recognized that this role was not a shortcoming but was the fundamental identity of social work, even if he found it lacking relative to his self-defined definition.

A good deal of what is called social work might be accounted for on grounds that other recognized professions have developed too slowly on the social side. Suppose, for example as Flexner argued, that medicine was fully socialized: medical practitioners, institutions, and organizations would look after certain interests that the social worker might currently care for given the shortcomings of medical practice. As viewed by Flexner (1915) in that context, social work is, in part at least, not so much a separate profession "as an endeavor to supplement certain existing professions pending their completed development. It pieces out existing professions, breathes a new spirit into them, and binds them together in the endeavor to deal with a given situation from a new point of view" (p. 18).

The reaction among some social workers, however, has been to focus on Flexner's bullet-point taxonomy for defining a profession and his remark that social work was an "amateur occupation." This hemming and hawing about what is social work or, correlatively, what is the profession of social work, has been puzzled over for decades (Eaton, 1956, p. 11). The notion that a profession, by definition, requires compartmentalized learning and specialization is, ironically, the bane of much science today, with serious consequences to research, practice, and the public good (Sovacool, 2008). Such compartmentalizing, however, is not the reverse of the argument for consilience among all sciences so much in vogue with physical sciences (Thielke, 2004; Wilson, 1999). Both segmented specialization and consilience should be anathema to social work, because social work is a bridge, as Flexner suggested, between ethical and evidence-informed knowledge derived from many professions.

What Flexner foreshadowed was that the teaching and training of social workers would require academic and intellectual rigor as a function of their being public intellectuals. Karger and Hernández (2004) suggest that, "social work's adoption of micro practice and hyper-professionalism led to a form of anti-intellectualism, which manifested itself in several ways, including a partial withdrawal from its earlier social justice mission" (p. 55). Maschi and Leibowitz (2017) support the edge of that proposition by arguing that forensic social work has "affected the social work profession with a call to fulfill its long-forgotten mission to respond and advocate for justice reform and health and public safety" (p. xv).

By the end of his speech, Flexner (1915) had explicated the role of social work as the binding between professions, as long as social workers both understood and avoided the arrogance of other professions that had begun to confuse good acts with self-righteousness. What if the reaction of the social work profession decades ago had been to support the identity and role as Flexner envisioned: by piecing together existing professions, breathing into them a new spirit of social justice that alleviated harm to vulnerable populations, and binding them together in a shared endeavor to deal with and improve a given situation from new points of view? What if to achieve such a goal, every social worker was required to understand and employ the ethical paradigm of forensics as a matter of competence and integrity? And what if social work meant that advocacy did not end at the door of the office, regardless of the preference of the social worker to avoid host environments, because ethical duties under the NASW code requires protection of the client's right to self-determination and autonomy in any environment?

Being Forensic: Praxis, Power, and Privilege

Vulnerable and oppressed populations must frequently intersect with one or more host environments over a life span. The frequency and

severity of those interactions might differ depending on race, culture, immigration status, socioeconomic status, gender, or other variables. From field placements to clinical practice, social workers often find themselves supplying documentation, records, and expert opinion based on knowledge and data acquired from and about clients who have little practical right to autonomy or self-determination (Grimwood, 2015). Understanding the implications of this is essential to educating social workers "in a meaningful and practical way" (Maschi & Leibowitz, 2017, p. xvii).

The hazards of not training social workers to recognize their power and wield it judiciously and ethically was captured by the title of Specht and Courtney's book *Unfaithful Angels* (1995). There is much about the book that warrants fair criticism, including the notion that social work had an "imagined and glorious golden age where we all worked together in communitarian bliss to ameliorate poverty and fight the good fight" (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012, p. 500). In this article, I am not proffering blame or retrospective longing for social work's purported purer past.

Instead, I would argue that social work is unique to all other mental health and social science professions in that social workers are intrinsically and unavoidably forensic because the core values of social work always recognized that social workers undertake and employ macro-knowledge at all levels of service (Eaton, 1956; Meinert, Pardeck, & Kreuger, 2000). This pertains to the competency of pursuing social justice to ensure the dignity and worth of people and relationships in the most vulnerable populations. In actuality, the power and authority and privilege of being a social worker requires each of them to engage the power and privilege of their expert opinions as observers and advocates within various host environments, political systems, and government institutions.

A social worker's engagement, however, is not the benign (even if well-intentioned) transfer of information about a person or group to a government authority with the power to sanction

or reward. Rather, this forensic social work role is an intentional act of agency between a vulnerable individual, or groups of such individuals, from whom information is transferred and transformed, to an authority with the power to render judgment. Longhofer and Floersch (2012) made this argument clearly in an examination of social work research:

As social work practitioners move throughout the day, even moment-to-moment, they strive to competently act, interact, and understand the meanings of their actions and interactions in open systems. And social work has over the years used many practical techniques to accomplish this: field-based training and supervision, licensure and continuing education, consultation, and by paying close attention to the nature and quality of helping relationships. Some have called the process by which these skills or theories are used or realized *praxis*; found in both Greek and Latin, it is understood as doing, acting, action, and practice. (p. 506)

This praxis is much more than reflexive in the clinical sense of acting as a social worker (Payne, 1998). This praxis means, in the very deepest ethical and moral sense, that *becoming* a competent social worker who practices with integrity requires explicitly engaging and accepting the forensic role as a prerequisite to *being* a social worker. Given the global dimensions of privilege and power today, the historical oppression of minorities and vulnerable populations, and the historically-situated identity of modern social work and its core values, the need to require social workers to understand the role of being an expert is especially acute (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Gray & Lovat, 2007; McBeath & Webb, 2002). As such, the privilege to enter graduate school and obtain a degree and licensure comes with accountability for understanding the nature of

power, as well as the ethical code and legal duty to competently serve and protect the client in the host environments when called upon.

Forensics as Pedagogy for Social Work

Cole (2012) argued that Flexner himself may have provided the impetus for social work to eventually develop a code of ethics and its six core values: Social Justice, Service, Dignity and Worth of the Person, Importance of Human Relationships, Integrity, and Competence. These core values took many decades to evolve into a single text from which the profession, through its adoption by the NASW in 1978, could seek guidance and aspiration (Reamer, 2013). What evolved was a more subtle and incremental transformation of social work from its community roots to a clinical preference. The shift invited students to join the profession with an implied promise that the messy world of policy, politics, and government institutions would not intrude on helping clients engage in positive change. The thorny problem was that clients exist in adaptive but organic relationships to institutional surveillance and force and cannot be easily separated from that reality of oppression and consequence (Gilbert & Powell, 2010).

Others have suggested the need for more specialized education and post-degree training in forensics or other fields to protect vulnerable populations (Sheehan, 2016). These moral and legal concepts are grounded in the very core of the ethical duty to possess the integrity and competence required to exercise power thoughtfully and with cultural sensitivity and intellectual depth. This question of identity and role and its relationship to being forensic, however, is only in play because of a predicate question: How did this identity get lost among the foundation courses, electives, and specialization now found in social work programs? Finding the answers might require travel back to Baltimore in 1915 to consider anew Flexner's analysis.

As previously noted, Flexner's speech had an odd influence on social work education and

practice even as it suggested the need for a cohesive and articulated ethical paradigm for social work education and practice (Bisman, 2004; Gibelman, 1999; Mumm & Kersting, 1997). Within the profession's academic and research platforms, the identity and role of the social worker as a forensic expert has been considered, but not in a way that has entered mainstream education and practice (Barker & Branson, 2014; Gothard, 1989; Maschi, & Killian, 2011; Rome, 2013).

A social worker cannot avoid the world of the client by choice or preference. Becoming and being forensic means that social workers accept responsibility for clients living within diverse organizations and social environments. As such, Maschi and Leibowitz (2017) make the following salient point about forensic social work skills:

[They] target the important and emerging practice specialization of forensic social work, a practice specialization that speaks to the heart, head, and hands (i.e., knowledge, values, and skills) of social work using a human rights and social justice approach integrated with a forensic lens. (p. xv)

Perhaps this argument will fall by its own lack of merit. Advocacy, after all, "is very different from usual activities of social workers, and advocacy skills are very different than the usual social work skills" (Saltzman & Furman, 1999, p. 496). Rome (2013) expressly recognized that social workers might serve both roles but need to understand carefully the distinction when social workers "undertake some forensic activities as part of their day-to-day practice, including testifying in court as fact witnesses" (p. 63). Intellectual rigor is a core function of acting within a professional role and preserving professional identity. These are intentionally (not accidentally) acquired traits that require iterations of testing and re-testing by the professional through reflective action and praxis. This means that social workers must employ thinking and reasoning intentionally as causally

related to exercising their professional judgment and transforming that knowledge to host environments for clients.

For Flexner (1915), service in these trenches was the very definition of social work's core mission. In that manner, voluntarily entering social work's portal and accepting education and state-sponsored licensure should have always meant accepting the duties that flowed from the profession's core values. Clients should be protected by the promise of social work's core values with the assurance that the social worker is sufficiently educated and competent in all manner of host environments, as fitted to serve the particular needs of the client (see, for example, Colvin, Nelson, & Cronin, 2011; Lens, Katz, & Suarez, 2016). Flexner was critical of social work in his time, but he was also hopeful that social work could serve to bridge and bind the egoisms, strengths, and weaknesses of the other professions he described as fitting his taxonomy.

What concerned Flexner (1915), therefore, was the risk that social work would become a "vast army of reaction" with the "occasionally reckless" confidence of the reformer (p. 21). The irony is that the strength he perceived as the very being of social workers in the trenches is what might have been lost with the passage of time. Bridging the past to the present through forensics is not new to social work, as other professions such as nursing, medicine, psychology and psychiatry long ago recognized the special tools and skills required to perform those duties (Roberts & Brownell, 1999). The future of social work might entail critically challenging students at the onset of their training. Other professions have the option to choose forensics as a specialty. The difference with the other professions is that the very praxis of social work is the social worker's duty to apply theory in the trenches amid the adaptive and crucial intersection of all aspects of clients' lives with host environments.

Possessing forensic knowledge and competencies by education and training should be the culmination of an intentional effort to help assure the competency and integrity required by the NASW *Code of Ethics*. The spirit of the social

work profession, so recognized by Flexner (1915), implicates the core value of social justice, which thereby demands of social workers rigor, civic knowledge, and willingness to engage in the active marketplace of host environments in which clients must live. The process by which these skills are used or realized occurs within the various forms of action and agency that should be required within the profession of social work. The rigor and specialty codes for forensic practices are a means to design and guide a more precise pedagogy for graduate schools of social work and post-licensure trainings.

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