

Response to “Licensing Social Work Faculty: An Issue of Ethics?”

Dr. Stephen Marson, senior editor of the *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, in a recent editorial comment stated that he was puzzled by the question, “Should social workers who are faculty be required to be state licensed/certified in their jurisdictions?” He argues that faculty who are members of other professions such as law and medicine are overwhelmingly licensed and that we as social workers should be, as well. He also suggests that some social work faculty may not have actually practiced their profession for many years and consequently may be out of touch with current practices. He further suggests that if we attend to our ethical guidelines related to professional competence, we should become licensed in order to demonstrate our competence, and states that if we don’t become licensed or certified we potentially become “an embarrassment to the entire profession.”

There are several interesting issues related to whether or not the licensing of social work faculty is truly an ethical issue. The first of those is that Dr. Marson does not seem to differentiate between social work faculty who are teaching direct practice (or “micro”) classes related to social work with individuals, families, and groups and faculty who are primarily teaching human behavior in the social environment, practice with organizations and communities, social policy, and/or research. If one argues that social work faculty should be licensed, does that apply to faculty teaching across all areas or only to those who are teaching direct practice classes?

The second issue is whether or not licensure is a valid measure of competence. More than a decade ago, I was a member of a statewide (California) NASW “Practice Committee” that spent a year grappling with whether or not there should be a non-clinical license in addition to the clinical license available in California, or whether there should simply be one license that included all post-MSW social workers, even those in non- “clinical” areas of practice, or alternatively multi-level licensure that would also include BSW level workers. As of this date there is only one social work license in California, and it is still called a “clinical” license. Much of this committee’s discussion revolved around the purpose of licensure and whether or not passing a license examination demonstrated competence or was simply a way of potentially limiting harm to the public and providing a method for dealing with those professionals who did harm the public (i.e., revoking licenses). California recently eliminated the oral interview component of its licensing exam

because of concerns with examiner (all licensed social workers) subjectivity and inter-rater reliability issues. So, at this time the state of California licenses clinical social workers who depend heavily on the tools of listening and talking without an assessment of listening and talking. I believe the evidence is still out on whether or not a license really measures competence.

Dr. Marson also comments on social work faculty who have limited practice experience and/or fail to keep up with current trends in social work practice. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires that social work faculty have two years of post-MSW practice experience before they teach direct practice courses in accredited programs. As I get very close to 30 years post-MSW experience, the two years of experience required for teaching direct practice or independent (“private”) social work practice in many states seems like only a brief introduction into professional practice and I wonder how much I would have had to offer MSW students after only two years of practice experience. One very well-regarded professor in the MSW program I attended told a group of us as we neared graduation that she thought it took about five years of post-MSW practice to become a “good social worker.” Many of us thought that it wouldn’t take us five years to become “good,” but we might have different views of that assessment now. How much post-MSW practice experience should a faculty member have before teaching direct practice classes?

Is two years of practice in one agency and in one community nearly enough direct experience to draw on as one begins what may be a 20-year career in teaching practice classes? If two years is too little, then how many years of direct practice experience should be required? Is there a relationship between the number of years of practice experience and the effective teaching of social work practice? As I ponder these questions, I am struck by a comment made a year or two ago by a local social service agency staffer who was sitting next to me in a meeting as we jointly planned a case management conference for our community. As names for potential workshop leaders were suggested, she heard several faculty members mentioned and said to the group, “Let’s be careful not to get too many faculty members as presenters because these workshops need to be useful to the people who attend.”

In a fascinating debate on the general issue of potentially requiring the licensure of social work faculty who teach direct practice, Professor Fredrick Seidl says, “what we have in social work today is a dialogue between two cultures: the academic culture and the professional culture,” and I could not agree more (Thyer & Seidl, 2000). As a faculty member who is going “up for

tenure” this year, it has become increasingly apparent to me that there is a process of re-professionalization that is supposed to occur in which a doctoral level professional social worker hired by a university as a faculty member in a tenure track position is supposed to evolve into something called an “academic.” As one becomes an academic, one apparently needs to leave the direct practice world behind, according to Professor Seidl, because faculty who are too close to direct practice risk having their teaching become “particularistic, isomorphic, and ideographic and bound in the here-and- now.” In fact, according to Seidl, among practice teachers there is a “deplorable lack of scholarship” and “practice teachers who can survive a tenure muster are rare and cherished” (Thyer & Seidl, 2000, p. 187). It does not seem to occur to Professor Seidl that the “tenure muster” model itself may be a major part of the problem of recruiting and retaining direct practice faculty, because tenure requirements may be incongruent in some important ways with the professional identities, values, and opportunities of faculty who see themselves first as social work practitioners and secondly or even concurrently as academics.

In his editorial comment, Dr. Marson identified a narrow question of ethics related to whether social work faculty should be licensed or credentialed, but the real question is a broader one of values. Do social work schools place sufficient value on the years and substance of pre-teaching practice experience, ongoing practice experience while teaching, familiarity with current and developing practice models, professional interaction with the direct practice community, and licenses and certifications to the extent they value more traditional academic measures of productivity and competence such as research and publication in scholarly journals? Simply requiring practice faculty to have a license or obtain a license will not guarantee competence in matters related to practice, although it might be a good beginning standard. Licensed faculty members teaching direct practice classes can still fail to keep “current,” and the unevenness across the country in continuing education standards makes it very difficult to claim that simply accumulating required numbers of continuing education units is a measure of keeping “current” or staying competent. The real issue is professional identity and culture. Professor Seidl says that a regulation requiring direct practice faculty to have or obtain licenses would simply “provide a bit more job security for people with otherwise thin academic qualifications” (Thyer & Seidl, 2000, p. 187). Of course, the counter point to Professor Seidl’s argument is that not requiring licensure for direct practice faculty provides more job security for people with otherwise thin practice qualifications.

The debate on requiring licensure for social work faculty is not as much a question of ethics as it is a question of values and a clash between what two sometimes very different cultures are. Rather than simply requiring licensure for faculty who teach direct practice social work classes, it may be more important to develop a culture within schools and departments of social work that truly values the experiences and contributions of direct practitioners who find their way into the academy and to develop a professional community that values the perspectives and contributions of academics who find themselves at times out of the ivory tower and on the ground or in the trenches.

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References

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