Editorial: Students Are *Not* Clients. Treating Students as Clients Is Unethical.

Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D., Editor, and Paul Dovyak, MSW, LISW-S

We are writing this editorial as the result of hearing and reading social workers who state that the client of the social work professor is the student. The social work professionals who make such a claim are locked into envisioning social work as a clinical function. Social work education is *far from* clinical social work. Social workers must stop using a clinical paradigm to conceptualize social work practice outside of clinical intervention. This is particularly true when addressing professors who teach social work. Their activities (like community organizers) simply **do not** fall into the realm of clinical intervention. In an opened Q&A meeting at the annual CSWE conference, a clinical social worker/educator asked the question, "Is community organization social work?" Paul Dovyak and I were shocked to hear the question, but that experience is part of the catalyst for writing this editorial. First, to understand the philosophical foundation of "students are not clients," an examination of social work history is in order.

History–The Generalist Model

The best manner to envision a professor's social work practice is the recognition that "education" is housed within the "generalist model." "Education" is an unambiguous task and is included *by definition* within the generalist model. Thus, the role of a professor *is by definition* social work practice. The generalist model is a theoretical framework that embraces all the specialties within social work practice. The problem with the generalist model is that it is woefully inadequate for addressing the complexities inherent in **all** specialty areas of social work practice. Yet, the strength of the generalist model is its power in describing the totality of the "knowledge, skills and values' (KSV) for all social work practice -- including KSV's under the purview of social work professors. Prior to the publication by Pincus and Minahan (1973), the conceptualization of social work could best be described as chaotic. Depending on where a social worker was educated, they came to envision social work as "casework, groupwork and community organization" with a highly fragmented and disorganized conceptualization of each of these elusive categories (Broadhurst, 1971). Pincus and Minahan (1973) brought order out of chaos and produced a major paradigm shift in our understanding of what, in fact, is "social work."

When it was first published, was the work of Pincus and Minahan (1973) easy to understand? Well, it is derived from the work of Talcott Parsons (1951) who is well-known as the foremost worst English-speaking writer/scholar in the history of the written word. In some pages (like Parsons' books), the writing of Pincus and Minahan appeared to be translated by Google from German to English. Yet, this assessment of Pincus and Minahan may be simply too harsh. Pincus and Minahan gave us a paradigm shift that required social workers to totally reconceptualize their vision of social work practice. As for me, I vividly recall shamefully lowering my head to the dean of the college of social work at The Ohio State University and admitting, "I had to read Pincus and Minahan twice to understand it." With my head lowered, I heard uncontrolled laughter. As I raised my head, the dean with measured giggling said, "I had to read it twice, too!!!"

Social workers were shifting the vision of the profession to an arena of greater clarity and coherence and moving out of the "functionalist" dominated educational system. Pincus and Minahan demanded greater clarity for all areas of social work practice. The fact is, the social work profession made a dramatic shift in the mid-1970s. The National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education became the catalyst for the paradigm shift. How do I know this? Once again, the answer lies in the work of Pincus and Minahan. At first publication, Pincus and Minahan (1973) was considered extremely cumbersome to read (for me and even very smart people like the dean of the college of social work). Currently, the basic concepts of Pincus and Minahan have become public domain.

The concepts first introduced by Pincus and Minahan are addressed in virtually every text adopted in the social work curriculum. If social work students read Pincus and Minahan (1973) today, their typical reaction would be, "So what? There is nothing new here." Pincus and Minahan gave us a major paradigm shift that has been accepted in a manner that is so incredibly profound, we witness a failure to acknowledge the authors' contribution. This is, without a doubt, the greatest compliment a scholar can be afforded. The work of Pincus and Minahan (1973) has become the fountainhead of contemporary social work thought. Today, the work of Pincus and Minahan is mostly forgotten, and as a result we are beginning to see a disconnect among the various social work specialties.

The History as Applied to Contemporary Educational Social Work Practice

Understanding the generalist model is like learning to play chess. In chess, a person learns the pieces and the definition of their actions. Within Pinus and Minahan's Generalist Model there are the four key definitions for understanding the basis for generalist practice. They are:

- *Change Agent System:* A social worker or other social entities that spearhead a planned change for the benefit of a client system.

- *Client System*: A social entity (micro, mezzo, or macro unit) that establishes a contract for a positive change with a change agent. The term "client" is often abbreviated from the term "client system" who becomes contractually (not necessarily a written contract) accepts the services of the change agent.

- *Target System*: A social entity (micro, mezzo, or macro unit) that is the focus of a change by a change agent and other social systems. Changing the target system is completed for the benefit of the client system.

- *Action System*: A social entity (micro, mezzo, or macro unit) that is recruited by or approaches the change agent to facilitate or instigate change within the client system and/or the target system.

By definition, social work students are *not* the professor's client system, but rather the primary client system includes the various agencies and communities who hire the social work graduates. The professor's primary and legal obligation is to the community and to the agencies who hire the graduates. Social work students are, by definition, *the target system*. Professors overtly and intentionally produce change within the student to become competent social workers for the community where they will practice their craft in a professional manner. Clearly, professors produce change within the target system (students) for the benefit of the client system (agencies and communities who hire them). Thus, the social work practice of the professor has more in common with the social work practice of the community organizer than the clinical social worker.

A university serves as an intermediary in the relationship between the student and community citizenry that negotiates for professional services. As it has evolved over the most recent century, that interaction is increasingly scrutinized by external groups interested in quality assurance, return on investment, and equity. Accreditation review and licensing boards, taxpayer funding shifts, social justice affirmative action, and workplace protection have all asserted an impact on assuring that professional education yield a well-prepared "target system." All of this effort is advocated on behalf of the "client system," the citizenry.

When a professor envisions a student as a target system, does this vision preclude the professor from acting in a manner that forgoes the basic protections afforded to a client as stipulated with the NASW Code of Ethics? NO!!! The [NASW Code of Ethics](#) includes a vast array of ethical obligations afforded to targets systems—like, social workers do not engage in sexual intimacy with target systems!!! This is made abundantly clear in standard 2.06—among others. For an undefined reason, some professional social workers find it ethically problematic to envision social work students as something other than clients. This conceptualization is absurd. As defined by Pincus and Minahan, students are *targets* for social work intervention and are *not* clients.

There are plenty of examples of normal accepted practice among social work professors that would be totally condemned and grounds for the removal of a clinical social work license in all U.S. states. For example, in everyday practice for a social work professor, grants are written. It is common and expected practice to enlist students to participate in the grant work. Such work is a fabulous educational experience for the student. Institutional Research Boards (IRBs) commonly allow students to collect data (which includes interviewing), analyze data, help write the report and **get paid**. This could never ethically happen in clinical practice. First, in clinical social work there is a problematic dual relationship. In the practice of social work education, a dual relationship exists. A social

worker has two distinctive roles in relationship to the student: the professor and the employer. If a clinical social worker was conducting research on their case files, he/she would lose their license by allowing one of their clients involved in assessing the case files for monetary compensation. Because social work professors are obligated to produce the best social work practitioners for the community, dual relationships that would *never* be tolerated in clinical practice are commonplace and expected in social work education. Why? Because students *are not clients*, they are target systems that professors change for the community.

Here is another example: If a clinical social worker has a client with emotional problems, is a member of the Klan who hates Jews and African Americans, and envisions women as nothing but sex objects, the clinician envisions the client as a challenge who must be afforded value-free clinical intervention. If a professor realizes that a candidate for a professional social work academic program hates Jews and African Americans and envisions women as nothing but sex objects, the professor is a gatekeeper and such a student is rejected from the program. No empathic understanding is expected from the professor. In fact, if a current social work student is found to hate Jews *or* African Americans *or* envisions women as nothing but sex objects, the student can easily be removed (or expelled) from any academic social work program. *This is case law,* and, therefore, social work academic programs are protected when expelling students whose value structure is contrary to basic social work values. Thus, *students are not clients*; they are target systems. The racist student can be legally rejected from receiving a professional social work degree in order to protect the "client system," which is the community or agencies who hire the graduates.

In clinical practice, client goals are established. Yet, what happens to the client who reaches the zenith of his capacity and fails to achieve the prescribed goals? Here, the clinician recognizes that the client is doing his best but has reached his maximum

effort. Typically, the clinician realigns the goals to be congruent with the client's capacity. If a professor of social work employed this model, he would be considered unethical and, when caught, he would be fired. A full professorship with tenure cannot save a faculty member from being sacked for lowering the outcome expectations for a student.

When it was discovered that student athletes received course credit and good grades for no work, the chancellor at one highly ranked university resigned before the board had a chance to fire her. It is simply not ethical to allow a poor-performing student to graduate. Standards can easily change for the client system, but the goals of the target system are based on the requirements or needs of the client system. By lowering the academic goal for an incompetent student to receive a passing grade, the professor is acting in an unethical manner within the context of the NASW Code of Ethics and the AAUP Code of Ethics. Professors must protect the community and agencies (the client system) from those students (the target system) who are assessed as being incompetent.

Within clinical social work, there are times in which the person receiving therapy in the office *is not* the client system. When a court orders a person to receive clinical intervention, the court becomes the client system, while the person receiving therapy is the target system. In such cases, the person receiving therapy has no right of confidential protection from the court. The court (the client system) deliberates on the basis of the clinician's assessment and decides a course of action for the person (the target system). This may be the only similarity that clinical social work has with social work practice in higher education.

As a professor emeritus and a professor who has been teaching for 40 years, we become annoyed with professional social workers who state that students are the functional equivalent to the client found in clinical social work. By definition, students are target systems and not client systems, and the professional interaction with these two different systems do not

share the same practice strategy approach. If you find yourself distressed with our analysis, express your opinion. Email me at smarson@nc.rr.com and your position will be published.

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