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ABSTRACT

Social workers write under many and varied pressures. A study examined the writing tasks and challenges facing social workers. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to 16 social workers in the Boston area--half were clinicians, and half were administrators/clinicians. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: a description of writing tasks, a description of writing practices, and a description of the education and/or training that prepared the participants for these writing tasks. Results revealed that social workers view writing as essential to their profession, yet many have difficulty meeting their professional writing demands. One major concern for this sample was balancing three challenges: working with confidential material, producing under tight time constraints, and writing for multiple audiences. Findings suggest that social workers not only desire but would also benefit immensely from ongoing writing instruction geared specifically to their profession. As the profession places increasing importance on effective writing in the future, it is imperative that social workers become strong, competent, and confident writers. To achieve this goal, writing instructors and social workers can join forces in both the academic and professional realms. (Author/NKA)

EFFICACY IN SOCIAL WORK WRITING

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ABSTRACT:

Social workers write under many and varied pressures, This study examined the writing tasks and challenges facing social workers. We administered an open-ended questionnaire to sixteen social workers; half were clinicians, and half were administrators/clinicians. This questionnaire was divided into three sections: a description of writing tasks, a description of writing practices, and a description of the education and/or training that prepared participants for these writing tasks. We found that social workers view writing as essential to their profession, yet many have difficulty meeting their professional writing demands. One major concern for this sample was balancing three challenges: working with confidential material, producing under tight time constraints, and writing for multiple audiences. Our study suggests that social workers not only desire but would also benefit immensely from on-going writing instruction aimed specifically to their profession. Suggestions for implementation of this instruction are discussed.

Background

Without question, writing is an essential and important part of the social work profession. A clinician's writing becomes the record of all aspects of a client's life. It often assesses others at the most vulnerable and crucial times of their lives and has serious, tangible consequences; it helps determine whether someone receives special medical or psychological aid, keeps or loses a child, or serves a shorter prison sentence. Besides being the main mode of communication between clinicians and other clinicians, service agencies, and medical personnel, writing plays an increasingly greater role in the negotiation of third party payments and in matters of litigation.

Reynolds, Mair and Fischer (1992) assert that "much is at stake" when mental health workers write. The authors note that "as modes of treatment become more numerous, diverse, and effective...both diagnoses and written records have become more important" (p. 91). Given these circumstances, they add, all mental health professionals need to approach writing with the greatest possible caution and care. In short, effective writing is increasingly integral to effective social work.

Yet despite its crucial function in the profession, there is little literature on writing in the social work field and a veritable paucity of literature on teaching it. In their description of innovative writing instruction in three social

work programs, Simon and Soven (1989) allude to the lack of preparation that social workers bring to their professional writing tasks. They note, "observations of social work administrators and supervisors hiring new graduates of social work schools suggest that our profession suffers from as severe a shortage of competent writers as do other professions and the nation at large" (p. 48).

Like writers in other professions, social workers need to produce effective prose; that is to say, their writing must be clear, logical, precise and compelling. However, social workers face unique challenges in that they need to have "the fullest possible awareness of the complexities and political realities of rhetorical situation(s). [They] need the greatest possible understanding of the tensions and complications that result when almost everything they write will have multiple audiences, purposes, and uses" (Reynolds et al., p. xvi). Unlike many scholarly fields, social work writing is not targeted at like-minded colleagues, but instead professionals from different disciplines, each with its own and sometimes conflicting demands.

To meet the complex writing demands of the social work profession, both clinicians and rhetoricians have called for a two-pronged approach. Olson (1983) as well as Simon and Soven (1989) have advocated curricular reforms that incorporate more and different writing instruction into undergraduate and graduate social work programs. Reynolds et al. (1992) propose

on-going writing instruction in a variety of forms for mental health professionals, including social workers, so that they can become more fully aware of rhetorical situations and navigate their inherent complexities.

Purpose of the Study

As writing instructors in a graduate social work program, we are always mindful of our role in preparing students not only for the writing challenges they will face as graduate students but also for the writing tasks they will face as professionals. Thus, in this qualitative study, we investigated the professional writing tasks and challenges facing professional social workers. Specifically, we asked clinicians and administrators to identify both their most difficult and their easiest writing tasks, articulate the importance they attach to their writing, describe their writing practices, and discuss the writing support that was/is available to them as students and as professionals.

By soliciting this information, we hoped to develop a better understanding of the specific writing needs of professional social workers and provide them with strategies for becoming more effective, efficient writers in a field that is so dependent upon a variety of forms of written communication. Given the importance of writing in the field and the amount of writing required, we believe our findings suggest ways to improve the

quality of writing produced by students, clinicians and administrators.

Methodology

Sample

Our sample consisted of sixteen social workers, 12 women and 4 men. Approximately half of our sample combined high-level administrative positions with clinical practices. Specifically, they were chiefs of social work and social work training at major Boston teaching hospitals or administrators at smaller, private, non-urban and non-research agencies. The other half of our sample worked exclusively as clinicians either in hospitals, small agencies, or private practices. The number of years our sample worked in the profession ranged from one to 22 years. All had attained at least an MSW; three had DSW degrees as well.

The sample was derived using the "snowball" method. The response rate was 100%. All participants completed a three-part questionnaire about their professional writing tasks, their writing practices, and the education and/or training that prepared them for these writing tasks.

Findings

Writing Skills and Tasks

Our sample reported that they spent between 15 and 20 percent of their time on writing tasks that varied by professional settings and positions within those settings. When asked to identify what part of writing was most difficult for them, they revealed concerns primarily with grammar and mechanics, vocabulary and word choice, organization, and paragraphing. Additionally, more than half indicated they were reluctant to begin most writing tasks.

Writing tasks identified as being easiest were those that were short, formulaic, descriptive, objective and/or written to a single, known audience. These included progress and case notes, intake summaries, the background sections of assessments, discharge summaries and diagnoses. Participants found these tasks easier because they usually involved reporting facts, actions and behavior sequences in a straightforward, formulaic way. This writing is often part of a standardized short form requiring succinct and brief analysis and allowing for little or no elaboration.

Most of our sample identified assessments, letters, and evaluations as their most difficult tasks. In completing these, they need to balance three major challenges: writing about the

extremely confidential aspects of clients' lives, producing under tight time constraints, and writing to audiences which are varied, and at times unknown or less than understanding of the subject or writer.

For example, one participant working in a hospital setting stated that assessments are the most difficult because they are time-consuming and she has an unclear sense of her audience. When writing assessments, she is "dealing with delicate issues but must find ways to write about them without revealing too much about the client while getting the client what he or she needs." Another social worker, an administrator at a major Boston hospital who described herself as being "the keeper of her client's issues and secrets," noted that, when writing assessments, she "always has to remember what's in the best interest of the client." She added that she "struggles all the time with determining this."

Letter writing also poses a problem for some of our participants because, although these documents must be written to advocate for the client, they can easily upset the therapeutic relationship should the client read them and find some of the situations revealed and opinions expressed upsetting. In addition to concerns with confidentiality and multiple audience issues, several participants doubt their abilities to strike the delicate balance necessary between advocating effectively for the client while not breaching confidentiality or including

information potentially harmful to the client.

Additionally, much of our sample expressed concerns about writing evaluations of their clients. One participant described her frustration with having to write a psychosocial evaluation that concerned a whole life, after having only one or two contacts with that client. Another noted that she struggles with finding the language to convey the subtle nuances of her client's character and the complexities of that client's life.

The following case reveals several problems inherent in social work writing. A clinician who worked with children described the difficulty she was having determining whether or not to include in a child's record the fact that the boy had made a successful adjustment to his mother's lesbian companion. The clinician's concern was that the boy's father - who had access to his son's records - could use this information should a custody battle ensue. (At the time of our interview, she had not yet reached a solution.)

Importance of Writing

We conducted our research on the assumption that writing was important for social workers. To clarify the nature of that importance, we asked our participants to identify what effect they thought their writing had on their clients, their colleagues and their profession.

Clients.

According to our sample, writing is the major mode of communication about a client. As one hospital administrator said, "If it isn't written down, it doesn't exist." Clinicians read each other's records when clients are transferred or terminated. Insurance companies need detailed records and assessments for authorization and continuation of treatment. Courts and government agencies often use social workers' writing when making major decisions about clients' or their families' lives.

In all these settings, our participants reported that their writing can be subject to misinterpretation not only if it is unclear or ambiguous, but also if the information is used for purposes never intended. In addition, poorly written records can hurt a client when the therapist who wrote them is no longer available to interpret those records.

One participant sums up the critical nature of writing about clients in the following statement: "Writing is extremely important because it stays in the client's record for life."

Colleagues.

Although communicating information to each other about

clients is clearly the most important function of writing between colleagues, our sample also feels their writing keeps them informed of inter-office and inter-agency developments and programs.

Professional.

Many of our participants, particularly those working in hospital settings, believe writing is of the utmost importance because it can elevate the field through publication and dissemination of their research and clinical challenges, techniques and successes. One participant noted, "We've done wonderful things, but we haven't written them down, partly because our work is hard to translate."

These hospital social workers especially sought to use writing to increase their visibility and justify their presence. One director in a hospital explained that social workers are guests of the institution. Again, she stressed that clinical research and writing will increase and maintain the status of the field.

Writing Practices

It is second nature to us, as writing instructors, to encourage students to view writing as a process, producing

multiple drafts before arriving at a final product. Additionally, we suggest that writers seek different forms of feedback on their writing at various stages of the draft process.

Process.

When we asked our sample to describe their writing process, half of them stated that they used drafting as a regular part of their writing process for some of their projects. Often time - or the lack of it - was the only determinant of whether or not they could do different drafts of projects. A number of our sample either didn't know about drafting or felt that it was not a method that they felt comfortable using in writing.

Assessment.

When asked if they shared their writing, our sample split down the middle. Interestingly, many of those who shared at least some of their writing with colleagues were supervisors who were conscious of the complexity of their writing tasks. Most of our clinician sample expressed the desire to share their work with colleagues and supervisors but also noted that there was little opportunity or encouragement to do so.

Those clinicians who didn't share their work often explained their resistance in personal terms. One said, "writing is so

inextricably bound to who I am that I feel that if it is 'judged' or criticized then it is I who am being judged or criticized." Another noted what he took to be lack of interest on the part of his colleagues: "They're not interested, they don't have time."

All of our sample, whether they shared their work or not, expressed concern over whether such sharing would breach client confidentiality.

Educational and Professional Training in Writing

When asked what in their educational and professional training prepared them for writing in the social work field, many of our sample over the age of forty referred to the solid writing training - grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary development, and organizational techniques - that they received in their elementary, secondary and undergraduate educations. Several of those who expressed the most confidence about their writing had undergraduate English degrees.

A few participants who had recently graduated from MSW programs where individual writing counseling and instruction was a part of the curriculum stated that this instruction aided them greatly in their professional work. Also helpful in learning the conventions of mental health writing, our participants noted, was seeing models of strong and appropriate writing and/or having a mentor in the field - usually a supervisor - who could personally

instruct them and give them feedback on their written records.

Discussion

Our small but significant sample not only acknowledged that writing plays a paramount role in the social work field, but also described the difficulties they face when meeting their various writing challenges. Interestingly, however, we found that little attention is paid to discussing and evaluating writing after social workers have finished their professional training, even though many articulated to us their desire for continuing training and regular feedback on their written work.

Like many other professionals, social workers sometimes struggle with mastering fundamental skills such as grammar, sentence structure and organization. At the same time, our sample discussed the unique difficulties they face when attempting to meet the writing tasks of their profession, tasks which are complicated by working with confidential material, producing under tight time constraints, and writing to multiple audiences.

To be sure, some of these difficulties are not purely writing issues; they stem from the present structure and function of social work and cannot be remedied by continued writing instruction. We refer again to the clinician who expressed frustration with having to write a psychosocial evaluation after

meeting with her client only a few times. (Even Nobel Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison might struggle to capture the essence of this individual after such brief encounters.)

These inherent difficulties are not the only reason social workers are challenged by their writing. Rather, we believe that social workers are also inadequately prepared to write in their field. Even though effective writing is so essential to the field, the literature confirms that writing instruction does not occupy a prominent place in the undergraduate and graduate social work curriculums. This must change. In order to prepare adequately social work writers, Simon and Soven (1989) state that "social work educators in the 1990s could draw upon the expertise of those composition teachers who have devised approaches to the teaching of writing that take into account the special demands of a given profession or discipline" (p. 47).

For example, the authors suggest that instructors specify purpose and audience for assignments in order to make students more aware of "the social context of their messages" (p. 61). Another approach is the assignment of double-entry journals in which students record both observations and interpretations of those observations. Such journals help students learn that writing can actually clarify their thinking.

What Simon and Soven propose is a good start. However, we must also recognize that significant numbers of social workers have long left the academic setting. Therefore, we contend that

writing instruction must be ongoing in the professional realm and not necessarily conducted by those traditionally designated as writing instructors.

In our work and through our research, we also have come to know that strong writers are in better positions to navigate the complexities of their discourse worlds. As noted, our participants who felt most confident about their writing had been English majors or had received substantial writing training and practice in other fields. Miriam Meltzer Olson (1983) notes, "ways of handling such problems are intimately connected with writing skills; professionals who have skill and confidence in their ability to communicate in writing will be better able to present useful information to others that serves the purpose it's designed to serve and that minimizes the unintended and negative consequences reports can have" (p. 119).

If their undergraduate and graduate training has not prepared social workers for the writing they must produce, we contend that there is still opportunity. There are no writers who cannot become better writers - provided there are writing resources available to them.

These resources can take several forms outside of traditional academic settings. They could include in-service writing workshops taught by professional writing instructors who are well-versed in the social work world. These workshops could address important issues such as overcoming writing anxiety,

developing effective writing processes, and editing for bias and jargon as well as precision and clarity. Individual writing assessments and counseling could also be useful in assessing individuals' patterns, strengths, and weaknesses.

One administrator in our sample is already taking advantage of such resources. In response to staff interest she has not only hired a writing consultant to teach workshops - something that a number of our respondents expressed a desire to take part in - but has also implemented a writing competition. Her reason is clear. "Many of us in social work have not grown up with the understanding that we will be writers," she said, noting that these programs "helped establish that writing is important and valued."

Because most supervisors understand the important role of writing in their field, we believe they could play an important role in supporting their staffs' writing. Again and again, our respondents told us that getting feedback from their supervisors about their writing, having access to models of different writing tasks, and reviewing and discussing writing with their colleagues were invaluable in developing their professional writing skills. The availability of such feedback enabled our respondents not only to organize but also to present complicated and confidential material to varied audiences.

Just as training is necessary for social work writers who seek to improve their writing, so is training for supervisors who

want to respond to their staffs' writing more effectively. Therefore, supervisors would also benefit from workshops in which they learn the same techniques and practices that writing instructors use in diagnosing, responding to, and suggesting revision strategies for students' writing. And, as an added benefit, from their own experience, supervisors know the dilemmas inherent in working with confidential material, and thus they are a trusted audience for their staffs' concerns.

In the future, as the profession places increasing importance on effective writing, it is imperative that social workers become strong, competent, and confident writers. To achieve this goal, writing instructors and social workers can join forces in both the academic and professional realms. We have much to teach each other.

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