

LOOKING THROUGH THE PRISMS: A SYNTHESIS OF THE FUTURES OF SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract: *This article synthesizes the twenty-one articles in this special issue and discusses five common themes and three further issues to ponder. The articles reflect an optimistic but precarious outlook that will require new skills and missions, a strong leadership in a society transforming itself, and increasingly facing a multicultural and global context for effective delivery of services. Evidence-based practice (EBP) is growing into the new paradigm of practice but the profession needs to consider its boundaries. Multi-country comparisons are crucial in selecting new strategies to enhance skills and missions as we embrace an international scope of practice. Finally, the complex issue of how society is evolving is intensifying and, as society seems to be resisting change, the role of social workers as advocates is vital.*

Keywords: future, social work, synthesis

INTRODUCTION

With such an array of articles reflecting depth and breadth, I struggle with the best way to synthesize a view of the future. Each article stimulated me to want to delve deeper into each field. The articles as a whole reflect the complexity and diversity of social work and the larger context within which our profession lives.

Each author, as he or she writes about the future, recognizes the fragility of any predictive discussion. One significant change (i.e. the World Trade explosions, managed care, the ethnic restructuring in the United States) can transform a society. The most dramatic changes in the future may not be predicted by people on the "inside" (i.e. within the profession itself) but by outsiders who are not listened to by the insiders. Kuhn (1970) cogently argued that professions live within paradigms, and when the paradigm shifts the insiders are often blindsided. Leonard (2001) has asserted that discussing the future infers a "linear view of history" indicating an "ethnocentric arrogance" that leads to a profound inability to respond creatively to difference, and results in the suppression of the voices of the "Other" (p. 1). Thus, any special issue on the future of Social Work will struggle with the contrast of visions of the future and the likelihood of missing key trends. The social work leaders who have written the articles for this issue must struggle with not being too seduced by the established trends in order to see the potential new directions the future will produce while hopefully hearing the voices of the "Other". The reader and reactions to the issue will reflect how helpful the various visions of the future will be.

I acknowledge that writing about the future of Social Work is not new or novel. Many authors have sought to encapsulate a view of the future into a framework that could help us better adapt to the future our complex profession and the constantly changing societal context we work within (i.e. Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2005; Bamford, 1989; Hopps

& Morris, 2000; Sowers & Ellis, 2001; Walton, 1982). The National Association for Social Work (NASW) for the United States developed a Professional Futures Commission in 1978 (Beck, 1981) and in 2005 the Social Work Congress created "a vision statement for the next decade" (Clark, 2005, p.1). Some authors have focused on specialty areas of social work such as health or field (Pecukonis, Cornelius & Parrish, 2003; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000) while others have taken a broader stroke and discussed international or global social work (Johnson, 2004; Kadushin, 1999; Mary & Morris, 1994; Reisch, 1997). A thoughtful synthesis of the various authors' writings would be an article itself. The purpose of this article is to discuss the common links, themes, and areas to clarify presented by this issue's articles. I acknowledge the previous discussions and assert that this special issue joins the gestalt of how we see our profession. My hope is that this collection of different fields of perspective may be seen as a kaleidoscope of futuristic vision. Seeing many of the different fields of practice may increase our appreciation for the range and depth that is any future for Social Work.

COMMON LINKS BETWEEN THE ARTICLES

There are several themes or issues that seem to be repeated by several authors. These common links can highlight themes simultaneously occurring in several fields and worthy of discussion. The links include:

1. *Social work has an optimistic future.* Ginsberg clearly reflected that social work, a "mammoth profession" with a strong job growth ahead, will have an optimistic future. Demands for more social workers in macro settings (Netting), aging (Kroft & Adamek), health care (Ell & Vourleis), addictions (Dinetto), and criminal justice settings (Sarri & Shook) are discussed by the authors. The other authors acknowledge that, if social workers adapt and learn new skills, the needs for social workers can lead to tremendous job opportunities. A constant theme through all of the articles is that the client needs are increasing, especially as society and politics have not developed adequate service delivery systems. The work is needed if we can have the skills to compete.
2. *Social work is increasingly facing a multicultural and global context for effective delivery of services.* Watkins & Pierce cogently talk about "future relevant practice" and the importance of educators teaching skills that can be used in a "rapidly globalizing environment". Potocky-Tripodi & Tripodi demonstrate clearly that globally-focused social work is needed but the literature marginalizes the topic. Fong illuminates the growing multicultural client population with massive detailed changes in education and service delivery needed. Cournoyer advocates for the utility of evidence-based practice at an international level so that best practice choices are done attentive to the multicultural context. Canda emphasizes that spirituality must be understood in a multicultural and international context. The message from the authors is clear: we must prepare for and be attentive to knowledge building and application of multicultural and global services. Sadly, Fong laments that we have known about this trend for years but there still are a

combination of limited knowledge, insufficient resources, and inadequate curriculum. Whether we prepare or not, this issue is looming like a freight train. The real question is will we be ready or will another profession emerge to meet the need while our opportunities evaporate?

3. *Evidence-based practice (EBP) is growing into the new paradigm of practice.* Cournoyer captures the rapid growth of EBP, not just in social work but within many helping professions. Five other authors (McCroskey, Franklin, Ell & Vourlekis, Sullivan, DiNitto) advocated that EBP is a vital new practice approach crucial to the competitiveness and effectiveness of social workers. Ell & Vourlekis outline massive changes in health care looming and tomorrow's health care social worker using an entrepreneurial model to secure clients and EBP skills being a core element of practice. EBP seems to be emerging as a new paradigm, expanding beyond just a tool. EBP is described by Cournoyer as a growing framework where best practices can be selected, tailored to the specific client, and effectiveness then fed back into the framework as a synergistic process always striving for the best service. A large international collaboration will emerge where clinicians can enter client specifics and select the recommended protocol just like a soda vending machine: research-based, tailor-made interventions for the client. Such a framework may seem fanciful but actually the framework has already been developed for medical treatment of cancer patients. Protocol effectiveness is monitored and a growing pool of tailor-made drug therapies are available. The EBP framework for social workers just needs a serious international commitment to develop a collaborative sharing network of protocols.
4. *New missions and skills will be needed in the near future.* Many authors described urgent client need but social workers not invested or trained. Kroft & Adamek confront us that a rapidly aging population has indifferent social work programs and students who are not training to become gerontologically competent. Ell & Vourlekis alert us that the U.S. health care crisis is growing and a new collaborative and entrepreneurial model of social work intervention is vitally needed. DiNitto points out that addictions is a rapidly growing arena that social work could impact but special skills are needed. Sarri & Shook lament that criminal justice has grown obsessed with sentencing instead of community-based programs and social work needs to roar into the battle to reframe the value of alternatives and re-entry programs. Kayser asserts that the evolving family systems are misunderstood and not helped by traditional social work. Schools, mental health programs, child welfare services, disability services are all going through transforming changes that will dictate new missions and skills. Each author outlines how the profession can evolve to be more on-target and competitive. Authors such as Ell & Vourlekis, McCroskey, Sullivan, DiNitto warn that other professions are reframing their missions and skills. The windows of opportunities are time-limited and, if we do not adapt, we as a profession could wither and be outmoded. Watkins & Pierce, in particular, point out that schools of

social work are growing in number but enrollment nationwide is not growing, and that social work education has a precarious opportunity to connect with needed new skills or wither.

5. *We live in a transforming society that needs social work in all its fields.* Global social welfare is facing grim times (McNutt), a rapid rise in ethnic diversity is showing society unprepared (Fong), aging issues demand a transformative agenda in how we see positive aging (Kroft & Adamek), new family forms are misunderstood and underserved (Kayser), clients with disabilities are pushing for empowerment (Patchner), technology is reframing all aspects of society (Vernon), countervailing forces demanding cost control and access are tearing health care systems apart (Ell & Vourlekis), mental illness and addictions are pushing for needed care (Sullivan, DiNitto), and prisons instead of prevention or treatment is traumatizing a sizable portion of our growing ethnically diverse population (Sarri & Shook). Each issue demands social work leadership and creative solutions. This issue of *Advances* has painted a grim picture of a society confused, evolving, and fearful. The work to be done is clearly articulated by the authors. The profession must rally to the call for action!

SOME ISSUES TO PONDER

The five potent common issues described above give us much to ponder. The authors have, in essence, challenged the profession in all fields of interest to energize for action. I wanted to also include some issues that I felt were still unclear or were not emphasized. Think of them as missing pieces of the puzzle.

1. *How would a multi-country comparison reframe the issues?* I have one regret in my instructions to the authors: I did not ask for multi-country comparisons. Most of the authors focused on the United States in defining the issues and future. It could be because I did not ask for any international perspectives. I grant that covering the issues for the U.S. is complex. But, as I finished article after article, I kept thinking: what do other countries have to teach us about alternatives to where we are at? McNutt warns of the erosion of the occupational welfare system. How do other countries succeed in developing welfare systems not link to employment and what tips could we glean from them? Spirituality, technology, disabilities, aging, rural settings, family issues, child welfare, schools, health, mental illness, addictions, and criminal justice are all subjects that are framed very differently in other countries. What lessons can we learn from our colleagues in other countries?
2. *How will our society evolve?* It is clear from the issues previously discussed that we as a society are evolving involuntarily. Segments of our population are transforming without services or even acknowledgement of the change occurring. Aging, ethnic diversification, family structure, globalization eroding economic stability and health care coverage are just a few hidden cracks in our view of a stable society. The authors warn of the need for skills and advocacy in social workers. But the message also seems to say that we

must be advocates because client empowerment is being crushed by society in denial. Social work often is the pulse beat checker of society, even when society is furious at what we find. I suggest that a useful issue to ponder is what is our role in soothing or stimulating society as we ride the roller-coaster of change that is coming?

3. *What are the boundaries of the evidence-based practice paradigm?* EBP seems to be transforming from one of many tools used by a social worker to a dominant paradigm. Several articles emphasize EBP and Cournoyer paints a vivid picture of the potential of and energy generated by EBP. EBP has great promise and has much work left to become actualized. I am intrigued with how rapid and widespread EBP is becoming. Which prompts the question: what are its boundaries? I see little in the literature about dangers or limits of EBP. What is it replacing as a practice paradigm and what price will we pay? Sullivan hinted at some concerns in his article but no other authors seemed to have misgivings. With any given practice paradigm, there should be advocates of an alternative. Trained by Walter Hudson and Bruce Thyer in my doctoral studies in the 1980s, I have heard similar themes for a long time. Empirical social work and practice effectiveness advocates have pushed for EBP as a paradigm. They are now shifting from the outsiders to the insiders. I wonder who are now the outsiders? I do not have an answer. Just have an issue to ponder.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF EACH ARTICLE'S COMMON THEMES, UNIQUE THEMES, AND AREAS TO CLARIFY

Table 1 strives to briefly describe some common themes, unique themes, and areas to clarify for each article. The table is not intended to be a detailed outline or a complete listing of each article. Instead, this table allows the reader to get a flavor of the key points that I wanted to highlight as I developed this synthesizing article. I hope the reader will peruse the article, consider what I included in each category, and add others that they think of as common or unique themes and areas to clarify.

Table 1. Comparison of articles in special issue

AUTHOR	COMMON THEMES	UNIQUE THEMES	AREAS TO CLARIFY
Ginsberg	Optimistic future, multiculturalism is growing	Need to better capture profession's history, rapid job growth in direct service, political advocacy is vital	What different skills or mission will be needed in future?

AUTHOR	COMMON THEMES	UNIQUE THEMES	AREAS TO CLARIFY
Watkins & Pierce	Challenging future, "rapidly globalizing environment", multiculturalism	Dramatic growth in schools of social work but unchanging enrollment, need to ensure relevant, international education	"future relevant practice" is still not outlined though it is a priority, social work education has a precarious opportunity to connect or wither
Reamer	Maturing profession	Need to recalibrate values & ethics view, shifted from focus on morality to standards and risk management	How will back-to-basics shift link to future relevant practice?
Potocky-Tripodi & Tripodi	International perspective in a globalized society	International content and voice in social work is marginalized, unlikely to change though it needs to	Globally focused social work is advocated but what skills or education that best prepares?
Fong	Multicultural social work	Limited knowledge, insufficient resources, inadequate curriculum hampers growth; rise in ethnic diversity in US; intersectionality is useful tool	Recommended changes are massive. Will the future embrace or marginalize the suggestions?
Netting	Optimistic, versatility of profession is strength	Macro skills are important to all social workers to sustain, change, and advocate for quality of life	How will macro social work transform as we become more globally focused?
McNutt	Transforming society that will need social work	Global social welfare faces grim times; information economy, digital divide, erosion of occupational welfare system stir crisis	Very US focused, how have other countries faced similar issues? Is this transformation unique to US?

AUTHOR	COMMON THEMES	UNIQUE THEMES	AREAS TO CLARIFY
Cournoyer	International focus on EBP shows expanding influence	Evidence-based practice (EBP) is growing as a resource in selecting best practice	Seems to see EBP almost as a paradigm more than a tool of practice. What are its boundaries?
Rapp et al	SBSW has growing influence as a practice approach	Advocates bolstering strengths-based social work (SBSW); needs to refine definition and application standards	Very US focused, how have other countries developed SBSW? Is it generic or are there some situations where SBSW won't work?
Vernon	Technology is shaping practice	Case management systems and geographical information systems converging	Very US focused, how have other countries developed technology?
Canda	Recent rapid growth in focus on spirituality, especially at an international level; globalization is impacting everything	"inclusive approach to spiritual diversity founded in professional values & ethics"	Very broad stroke and visionary view. What skills or education best prepares? Will the initiatives merge into a paradigm?
Patchner	Living with disability (LD) is increasingly empowering with social work serving a key advocate role	Different care systems have been tried shifting from case management to consumer driven service	Very US focused paradigm, how would other countries with national health care evolve their LD empowerment?
Kroft & Adamek	Rapid aging population, slow social work response, need training and prioritization of aging issues	New paradigms of positive aging and a transformative agenda; wide range of skills needed	Very US focused discussion, how would other countries with different views of aging care and empowerment incorporate social work?
Murty	Community-based practice with generalist view is important for rural areas	Rural social work (RSW) moving in opposite direction of rest: needs generalist not specialist, centralized	More in-depth explanation of RSW effectiveness would help, how do other predominantly rural countries do it?

AUTHOR	COMMON THEMES	UNIQUE THEMES	AREAS TO CLARIFY
Kayser	New format of families misunderstood and not helped by social work	Social work family research needs to be strengthened	how would other countries with different views of family care and empowerment incorporate social work?
McCroskey	Focus on outcomes and EBP urgently needed in child welfare	Inadequate outcome measures, growing research on child effects in high risk settings, and need to integrate services	how would other countries with different views of child care and empowerment incorporate social work?
Franklin	Increased emphasis on EBP, credentialing, and community-based services	Technology and marketing skills need enhancing	how would other countries emphasize school social work?
Ell & Vourlekis	Massive health care reforms as context, EBP and gerontological competence are high priority,	Countervailing forces: cost control vs needs, collaboration, entrepreneurial model useful focused on "priority clients"	how would other countries emphasize health social work? Is the large educational content described feasible?
Sullivan	EBP focus, social entrepreneurship model useful	Collaborative and community-focused care needed	how would other countries emphasize mental health social work?
DiNitto	Optimistic need for social work , culturally relevant models, EBP	Rapid expansion of knowledge, shift from crime to treatment,	how would other countries emphasize addictions care?
Sarri & Shook	High need but reduced SW influence & workforce	Social work role in community-based programs, as trainers, in courts & re-entry transition	how would other countries emphasize criminal justice diversion?

CONCLUSION

My purpose in this article was to synthesize the articles into a discussion of commonalities and issues to ponder. Five common links were found that illuminate both social work's optimistic though precarious future and society's transformation. Clearly social workers in all fields should be hopeful but determined. There is a lot of development of new skills and reforming of our mission to do if we are to be helpful when a very confused society

goes into crisis. The authors of the articles in this issue give great advice about what skills and missions on which to focus. We must be committed to be leaders into the future. Our advocacy is vital to an increasingly underserved clientele and confused society.

I have also raised three issues to ponder. One of the common links was the growing global and multicultural society we are becoming. We as a profession need to embrace an international stance. Issues such as child welfare, physical or mental illness, or positive aging should be considered from a global stance. Successful strategies from different countries should be shared in a collaborative, best practice manner. Our society is evolving and we need all the ideas for successful transition we can get. Evidence-based practice shows great promise, energy, and may be a helpful way to foster international collaboration. But we should embrace EBP while still watching for costs or boundaries of its usefulness.

Our profession is complex and massive in its workforce and potential influence. The articles in this special issue help us define the work to do. Our challenge is to adapt and overcome.

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