



SOCIAL WORK IN THE NEW CENTURY

FINDING YOUR WAY *through* FIELD WORK

A Social Work Student's Guide



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Chapter 4

Developing Social Work Competencies

INTRODUCTION

Once accepted by an agency, you will undoubtedly start thinking about what you will be learning to do and what your outcomes will be by the end of foundation field work as a senior-year bachelor in social work (BSW) student or first-year master in social work (MSW) student. You may construct scenarios and what-ifs, trying to predict something about the year ahead. If excessive, these attempts can increase your anxiety while you believe these scenarios are having the opposite effect. You hope to gain control of a situation that is primarily not in your control. Starting field work is anxiety producing. You do not know what to expect of others, nor of yourself. Yet you want to do a good job. Try to keep your judgments about the placement to a minimum. Focus on your positive anticipation by envisioning who might need your help at this setting and what can be learned as a result.

This chapter provides you with two types of direction. The first very brief direction is designed to help you start off on the right foot by calming your anxieties and unproductive preoccupations. The second direction outlines social work competencies you are expected to develop by year's end to facilitate your understanding of where you are heading.

GETTING STARTED ON THE RIGHT FOOT AT FIELD PLACEMENT

You should get off to a good start when you show up at the agency on your first day and make a positive impression. This involves avoiding the hazards of making

an unproductive entrance. You want to begin by greeting everyone with a simple hello. Report to where you have been told, and do not get sidetracked along the way. Let agency staff do their jobs. They will be focused on assigning a place for your belongings, showing you your desk, formally entering you into their system, and having you fill out their forms. Contain your anxiety. More often than you realize, your early questions will be about trying to understand the complexities of a situation that is not yet within your scope of knowledge. Learning about the agency takes place in a process.

Be aware that the agency is responsible for handling a student's entry. Your part is to follow their directives by going to the agency at the assigned day and time and doing what you are supposed to do when you get there. They will sign you in, set up an e-mail account and computer access, and provide any necessary trainings and orientations you will need. Once field work begins, you will have to stay focused on seeing clients as your most important priority, arranging field instruction, and quietly learning to develop mechanisms for survival. Questions about what you are going to learn will be met with answers about trusting in the process—usually because a full explanation of an occurrence not yet experienced is by its nature incomplete. The extent of your confusion will vary with your background. Just know that being puzzled is part of the process.

Soon you will begin the work of developing social work competencies through the integration of classroom learning and the field work experience.

FIELD EDUCATION AS THE “SIGNATURE PEDAGOGY” OF SOCIAL WORK

The recognition of the centrality of field work to the attainment of competency led to a policy declaration of great consequence to social work education. Read on, for further understanding.

In 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE; 2015) first adopted as policy that field education is the signature pedagogy of social work.

What is *signature pedagogy*? The concept of signature pedagogy comes from the field of philosophy and philosophies of education, which relate to all professions and how they meet their obligations to society (Shulman, 2005). Scholars at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Gardner & Shulman, 2005), have endeavored to understand the nature of professional training in various fields. A crucial structure relevant to all professions is that of “signature pedagogy” as the means through which a profession socializes its students to its competencies, knowledge, and values (Shulman, 2005). For you, field education is the medium being used to involve you in developing the competencies, knowledge, and values of social work.

So, when starting to think “why am I being asked to do x, y, and z in my placement,” the student has to bear in mind that the field education structures he or she is participating in have been developed and fine-tuned since Jane Addams and John Dewey. A field placement allows the student to work with assigned clients in an agency with a function and purpose. By way of field instruction (which is different from staff supervision), the student learns to enact the professional role, developing skill upon skill upon self-awareness and feedback.

There are three components of social work practice that students must learn. The first component, *performing*, involves action. The second component, *knowing*, refers to the body of scientific knowledge and research that informs professional action. The third component pertains to *integrating the professional values* that inform action (Shulman, 2005).

Performing

The CSWE (2015) has identified nine competencies of social work and the practice behaviors contained in these competencies. Schools have to evaluate students' competency attainment. All competencies are developed in the field experience to varying degrees and in a relationship between the field experience and the classroom. Students primarily develop these competencies by applying knowledge values and self-awareness by engaging with clients and participating in the reflective relationship with a field instructor. The performance of professional skills occurs by integrating self-reflection on a student's role with clients with active involvement in field instruction and the classroom.

To attain competency, a student will utilize the feedback loop with a field instructor, classroom learning, process recordings, and the Johari Window.

Knowledge for Practice

Knowledge gleaned from professional literature and research should always guide the student's performing role and the development of competency. Most relevant knowledge comes from the curriculum that is constructed by faculty and meets accrediting standards. The full BSW curriculum and first-year MSW standards require learning social work's foundation areas and principles, focusing on practice, human behavior, research, social welfare organization, and cultural competence. Second-year MSW standards are focused on each school's curriculum that faculty design for specific areas of specialization.

Further knowledge for practice is acquired from the agency's practice domain. For example, a placement serving people with mental illness exposes a student to knowledge about that psychosocial problem, practice perspectives, policy implications, and current research. The student will also have to consider how that

knowledge is universally applicable to all of social work practice at the foundation level or the advanced second-year specialization.

Professional Values for Practice

Students learn the values and ethics of the profession in order to practice. The liberal arts foundation should provide the knowledge base for understanding values that underlie the practice of the social work profession. All professions are guided by values and ethics, as in medicine, law, accounting, and museum curatorship.

Thus, students in field work with clients must consider the ethical principles that guide their work and the values these ethical principles are based on. While client self-determination, for example, can be learned and its components studied in the classroom, its application becomes more complicated in actual practice with a client. Client self-determination requires the practitioner to facilitate a process fostering the client's independence, autonomy, and self-actualization. Yet, when facing real client situations with children or when a client's judgment is impaired and when self-determination infringes on others, you recognize that ethical decisions are highly nuanced. Another ethical dictum requires a nonjudgmental approach to clients, in order to provide fair and equitable services. To practice ethically, you must try to recognize your biases toward individual clients, which may or may not impair your practice.

SOCIAL WORK COMPETENCIES AND PRACTICE BEHAVIORS

The social work competencies you will be developing are comprised of practice behaviors and have as their foundation professional knowledge and values.

The nine competencies identified by the social work profession have to be developed by students during the course of professional education (CSWE, 2015). By the end of the foundation year, senior-year BSW and first-year MSW students should have developed these competencies to demonstrate competency attainment. Included are 29 suggested practice behaviors that reflect the competencies. Schools may develop their own unique practice behaviors that reflect competencies. By the end of the second advanced MSW year, students should have developed the competencies in further depth. Each school outlines practice behaviors specific to second-year concentrations; they identify the specifics of competencies through their curricula and evaluate students' attainment of them.

The nine competencies are provided for you to review to familiarize yourself with the path you are on and the goals you will have to meet. Competency attainment will be reviewed in depth in other chapters. For now, study them to gain an overview of where you are heading. These competencies may be amended in the next 10 to 30 years of your professional practice. That does not mean that the current competencies will be outdated. Rather, they may be revised as practices

evolve, as social workers learn more about what is humanistic, and as they improve upon the implementation of professional values.

Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior

The following practice behaviors demonstrate the attainment of competency. Social workers do the following:

- Make ethical decisions by applying the standards of the NASW (National Association of Social Workers) *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008), relevant laws and regulations, models for ethical decision making, ethical conduct of research, and additional codes of ethics as appropriate to context.
- Use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations.
- Demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communication.
- Use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes.
- Use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior.

Competency 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice

The following practice behaviors demonstrate the attainment of competency. Social workers do the following:

- Apply and communicate understanding of the importance of diversity and difference in shaping life experiences in practice at the micro and macro levels.
- Present themselves as learners and engage clients and constituencies as experts of their own experiences.
- Apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies.

Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice

The following practice behaviors demonstrate the attainment of competency. Social workers do the following:

- Apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels.
- Engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice.

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Competency 4: Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice

The following practice behaviors demonstrate the attainment of competency. Social workers do the following:

- Use practice experience and theory to inform scientific inquiry and research.
- Engage in critical analysis of quantitative and qualitative research methods and research findings.
- Use and translate research findings to inform and improve practice, policy, and service delivery.

Competency 5: Engage in Policy Practice

The following practice behaviors demonstrate the attainment of competency. Social workers do the following:

- Assess how social welfare and economic policies impact the delivery of and access to social services.
- Critically analyze and promote policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice.

Competency 6: Engage With Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

The following practice behaviors demonstrate the attainment of competency. Social workers do the following:

- Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment and practice context to engage with clients and constituencies.
- Use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills to effectively engage diverse clients and constituencies.

Competency 7: Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

The following practice behaviors demonstrate the attainment of competency. Social workers do the following:

- Collect, organize, and critically analyze and interpret information from clients and constituencies.

- Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the analysis of assessment data from clients and constituencies.
- Develop mutually agreed-on intervention goals and objectives based on the critical assessment of strengths, needs, and challenges within clients and constituencies.
- Select appropriate intervention strategies based on the assessment, research knowledge, and values and preferences of clients and constituencies.

Competency 8: Intervene With Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

The following practice behaviors demonstrate the attainment of competency. Social workers do the following:

- Implement interventions to achieve practice goals and enhance capacities of clients and constituencies.
- Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in interventions with clients and constituencies.
- Use interprofessional collaboration as appropriate to achieve beneficial practice outcomes.
- Negotiate, mediate, and advocate with and on behalf of clients and constituencies.
- Facilitate effective transitions and endings that advance mutually agreed-on goals.

Competency 9: Evaluate Practice With Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

The following practice behaviors demonstrate the attainment of competency. Social workers do the following:

- Select and use appropriate methods for evaluation of outcomes.
- Critically analyze, monitor, and evaluate intervention and program processes and outcomes.
- Apply evaluation findings to improve practice effectiveness at the micro and macro levels.

Now that you have a basic picture of where you are going, consider that while competencies are generic to all of social work, they may translate uniquely within each school's curriculum and field manuals. Review your school's curriculum for further clarification as you proceed through field work.

SOCIAL WORK COMPETENCIES AND YOUR SCHOOL'S CURRICULUM: FOUNDATION FIELD WORK

You should be able to locate a list of competencies within your field curriculum. Look at your school's field work manual or its field work curriculum for its interpretation of the competencies and practice behaviors; it may also be found in a course outline for field work. Another place where you will immediately locate the measures of competence is in your school's field work evaluation. All expectations outlined by your school have been approved by the CSWE's accreditation process.

Interpretations of competencies will differ by level. First-year MSW students and senior-year BSW students are expected to develop the same competencies by the end of their field work. The competencies remain the same for second-year students, but the depth and focus will change.

To illustrate how schools may develop their own way of evaluating your competency attainment, some examples are included from several schools' foundation curricula.

CASE ILLUSTRATION 4.1

COMPETENCY 6: ENGAGE WITH INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES, GROUPS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND COMMUNITIES

Practice Skills of Pre-Engagement (Wurzweiler School of Social Work [WSSW], 2014, p. 34)

“By the end of the first year, a graduate student should be able to: seek out and utilize appropriate sources of data in order to gain access to information about the client, change agent or target system” (WSSW, 2014, p. 34).

Included is the ability to “Integrate relevant data in ways that provide focus to initial understanding and exploration or concerns of client, change agent or target system” (WSSW, 2014, p. 34).

Practice Skills of Engagement and Exploration (WSSW, 2014, p. 37)

“By the end of first year, the student should be able to utilize a range of open ended questions which facilitate involvement and presentation of issues by members of client, client action, target, and action systems. . . .”

“Present oneself as a non-judgmental, professional individual. . . .”

“Demonstrate curiosity about the client as it originates from the presentation of the present situation and concern . . .” (WSSW, 2014, p. 37).

“Reach for indirect cues presented by client in individual or family sessions” (WSSW, 2014, p. 38).

CASE ILLUSTRATION 4.2

COMPETENCY 7: ASSESS INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES, GROUPS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND COMMUNITIES

Practice Skills of Assessment (WSSW, 2014, p. 42)

With regard to assessment skills with individuals, “By the end of the first year the student should be able to begin a differential application of theory to guide and enable the formulation of a systematic assessment” (WSSW, 2014, p. 42).

With regard to assessment skills with groups, “By the end of the first year the student should be able to recognize that making an assessment of a group requires first an understanding of group rather than individual dynamics” (WSSW, 2014, p. 43).

CASE ILLUSTRATION 4.3

COMPETENCY 8: INTERVENE WITH INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES, GROUPS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND COMMUNITIES

Practice Skills of Intervention With Individuals and Families (WSSW, 2014, p. 51)

“By the end of the first year the student should be able to use a range of skill with individuals and families to enable goal achievement. These include . . . Reframing

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problems for individuals and families; utilizing universalizing and generalizing skills” (WSSW, 2014, p. 51).

Practice Skills of Intervention With Groups (WSSW, 2014, p. 52)

“By the end of the first year the student should be able to use support and sustainment skills to strengthen bonds, communication and supportive mechanisms. This includes eliciting from members reactions to other members’ presentations” (WSSW, 2014, p. 52).

SOCIAL WORK COMPETENCIES AND YOUR SCHOOL’S CURRICULUM: SECOND-YEAR FIELD WORK

Competencies for second-year MSW students remain the same as in first-year field work. However, second-year performance is related to developing depth in competency attainment that is reflected in practice behaviors from the student’s second-year concentration. These practice behaviors are designated by your school. Therefore, you should examine the practice behaviors of your chosen second-year concentration.

To give you a brief overview of where you may be heading, an illustration will be utilized from one school’s evaluation of student performance in the second year.

CASE ILLUSTRATION 4.4

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE NORTHEAST (2015)

This school of social work provides a list of social work’s nine competencies that students are expected to attain. The school’s first-year evaluation employs a Likert-type rating scale for field instructors to use in evaluating students’ attainment of each practice behavior.

For second year, schools develop their own specializations. The same competencies apply with further depth and specificity. This school of social work provides a list of practice behaviors in the second year evaluation related to competencies students are expected to attain. The second year evaluation focusing on the specialization in

clinical practice with individuals employs a Likert-type rating scale for field instructors to use in evaluating students' attainment of important practice behaviors.

For example, under ASSESSMENT, the evaluation states, "Develops a diagnostic impression utilizing relevant guidelines (agency or DSM IV)." (NYU Silver School of Social Work, 2015, p. 5).

Similarly, under INTERVENTION SKILLS for the same specialization, the evaluation states, "Differentiates between the range of normal development and behaviors and pathological adaptation." (NYU Silver School of Social Work, 2015, p. 6).

Further detailed discussion of competency attainment will be found in Chapters 9 and 10.

SUMMARY

Nine social work competencies identified by the social work profession have been provided to prepare you for the goals that you will have to meet. There are 29 practice behaviors that accompany these competencies, which must be fulfilled during a student's foundation year. In your second year, you will gain depth in the competencies by completing practice behaviors designed specifically for your concentration. This framework has been provided to put you on the path and create awareness of where you are heading in your foundation year and beyond.

Chapter 5 focuses on the educational relationship between student and field instructor.