Voices from the field: Exploring how social workers articulate their practice.

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Abstract

The research study explored how social workers articulate their social work practice. Using an exploratory qualitative design, three research questions were defined: 1) What values influence the social worker’s articulation of practice?; 2) What dimensions of reflective practice influence the social worker’s articulation of practice?, and, 3) What dimensions of practice wisdom influence the social worker’s articulation of practice?

Six social workers from Ontario were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide, consisting of 10 open-ended questions based on the conceptual framework. Responses were coded manually using a thematic analysis of the interview data.

Findings suggest social workers articulated their practice in relation to how they define their relationship with clients rather than in academic terms. Five out of six social workers were experienced practitioners; the findings suggested they have integrated their knowledge, elements of specific theories and their experience to such an extent they articulated their own practice models.
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CHAPTER 1 – VOICES FROM THE FIELD: EXPLORING HOW SOCIAL WORKERS ARTICULATE THEIR PRACTICE

The purpose of this study is to understand how social workers articulate their social work practice with respect to three dimensions: 1) social work values, 2) reflective practice, and, 3) practice wisdom. Furthermore, the study provides the opportunity to explore with social workers, 1) which values have framed their social work practice, 2) the processes that social workers rely on when employing reflective practice, and, 3) how they have constructed their knowledge base, including the role their social work education has played in the development of knowledge. Social work education and professional practice in Ontario provide the context for the study. Research on Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work (one year) programs across Ontario Schools of Social Work was conducted using the internet. Table 3.3 is a description of the information which includes: 1) philosophies of the Schools of Social Work, 2) admission requirements, and, 3) presence of field integration seminars (a reflective practice element). Only the (one year) MSW program was reviewed as it requires social workers to have a Bachelor of Social Work degree and this was consistent with the eligibility criteria for the study. Table 3.4 is a description of these programs across Ontario and includes: 1) practice approach; 2) admission criteria; 3) practice streams; and, 4) required courses which also included compulsory integration seminars. The evolution of the professional social work Code of Ethics in addition to relevant policy and legislation that has governed social work practice in Ontario has been summarized.

A conceptual framework has been developed from a comprehensive review of the literature that explored social work values through the Code of Ethics (2005), dimensions of reflective practice (MacMorris, 1996) and practice wisdom (Klein & Bloom, 1994;
Dybicz, 2003; O'Sullivan, 2005). The conceptual framework identifies professional social work values as the foundation for practice. Values are the filter through which the social worker makes decisions and takes action. Values stand alone as the first dimension of the conceptual framework but are also reflected in the dimensions of reflective practice. The dimensions of reflective practice include the process of making value judgments.

Research has also indicated that there is an essential difference between social work practice and other professional practice. This difference is found in the core values of the social work profession (Dybicz, 2004; Klein & Bloom, 1994).

One way to withstand threats to the profession is to have ongoing dialogue, reflection and analysis occurring among professional social workers. This dialogue ensures that social work practitioners, not outsiders, are defining how social work is practiced and what distinguishes social work from other professions. Gibelman (1999) states, “external forces have been influential in defining the boundaries of social work and shaping the nature of its practice than intra-professional forces and choices” (p.298).

Previous research has indicated that social workers are very good at describing their practice within the context of how they work with clients; however, they have difficulty articulating the transfer of academic knowledge to practice. They do not identify nor articulate specific social work theories; rather they describe their practice in terms of the client and the type of intervention that is taking place (Carew, 1979; Harrison, 1991; Osmond and O’Connor, 2004). This difficulty has been described, as a limitation within the social work profession because others interpret that social work knowledge is not well defined.

How social workers construct knowledge and what constitutes social work knowledge has been of significant concern to social work practitioner-researchers in the
United Kingdom (Gould & Taylor, 1996; Harrison, 1991; Parton & O’Byrne, 2000), and, Australia (Fook, 2001; Sheppard, Newstead, Di Caccavo and Ryan, 2000) who for some time have been studying questions, such as, 1) What constitutes social work knowledge? (Sheppard et al., 2000; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003), 2) How do social workers articulate their practice? (Harrison, 1991), and, 3) What are the differences between novice and expert social work practitioners? (Fook, Ryan, and Hawkins, 1994, 1997). Constant change and growth make it difficult to construct a knowledge base in social work that is representative of more scientific professions (e.g. law and nursing). Change and growth and adherence to some scientific methods characterizes social work. It is however, also dependent upon the creative responses of the people it serves. Goldstein’s (2001) claim that social work is both a science and an art reflects this duality in social work knowledge production.

Osmond and O’Connor (2004) have suggested that social workers may not describe theories when they discuss their practice. Instead they use language that is applied outside of academic settings. Studies of how social workers articulate their practice have not been encouraging about the integration of practice and theory. However, more recent research posits that it is not necessarily that theories are not being applied; rather, it is the language that is used to define the theories that is different (Osmond & O'Connors, 2004). Research seems to indicate that, as social workers gain more practice experience, they develop a language that is more suited to the practice arena (Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 1997).

This exploratory research study used constructivist methodology to explore how social workers articulated their social work practice. Data was collected through the implementation of a semi-structured interview (Appendix E) that consisted of 10 open-
ended questions grounded by the conceptual framework. Given the small sample size, the analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted manually. The process of manual data analysis provided the researcher with the opportunity to become intimate with the data resulting in a rich interpretation. Using the conceptual framework, the researcher organized the coded interviews for reoccurring words, concepts and phrases. Additional codes arose from the continuous analyzing of the data. Each coding category was reviewed for themes and the themes were clustered where there was a commonality. Once the data was exhausted for categories and themes, it was examined utilizing various frames of reference including: 1) the influence of social work education in Ontario; 2) whether the results were consistent or differed from the literature on reflective practice.

This study indicates that the social workers in this study were aware of and articulated the three dimensions within the conceptual framework: 1) social work values; 2) reflective practice; and, 3) practice wisdom. First, with respect to social work values, the findings illustrated that social workers describe their practice in relation to the principles associated with the core social work values. Their descriptions emphasized how they interact with clients. Second, the findings related to the dimensions of reflective practice acknowledge the processes that social workers go through in unique and challenging situations. All the social workers identified that they go through at least one or more of the dimensions of reflective practice in these types of situations. Most revealing was the practice of reviewing their thinking with other colleagues. The role of colleagues in helping to clarify thinking was a common theme throughout the descriptions of reflective practice.

Finally, the findings support the literature that discusses how practice wisdom is developed. The social workers consistently described the process of knowledge
construction specifically acknowledging the accumulation of practice wisdom over time. This finding may reflect that most of the social workers were long time practitioners. The discussion of practice theories was significant. The social workers did not address specific theories. Instead, they identified how they have integrated pieces of theory into their own practice models.

In terms of educational experience, the social workers found their field placements to be a rich source of knowledge. The knowledge that was passed on from field supervisors was integral to the development of these social workers. Field supervisors were identified as excellent practitioners and mentors. Also of note was the role of professional development. Professional development was suggested as the main mode of acquiring new knowledge. The findings acknowledged that social work practice changes and therefore social workers need to attend to emerging practice issues.

Purpose and Rationale for the study

Whereas once social work practitioners were trained to be specialists in a specific type of social work, most curricula in Schools of Social Work emphasizes a generalist/advanced generalist approach. Other approaches to education can be found in structural models of social work. Further, social work education has been strengthened with the emphasis on diversity. Evolution in social work practice is evident by the wide range of settings, numerous population groups and various methods and techniques that are now employed in social work. Social workers continue to evolve new theories of practice such as critical social work (Fook, 2001).

For some, research methods have shown the most growth. Whereas research once focused solely on quantitative methodologies (in attempting to define social work as a scientific profession), qualitative methodologies have, more recently, been adopted as an
alternative research approach. Mixed methodological (both quantitative and qualitative) approaches to research have become more prevalent in social work research (Holosko, 2005).

In addition to the evolution in education, practice and research, changes in professional accountability and competence have also occurred. Although professional associations, such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) have been in place for decades, social work practitioners saw the establishment of a professional college for the first time in Ontario in 2000. In Canada many of the provinces have chosen to combine the functions of the regulatory body with the promotion and coordination functions of the association. The Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) is one of three colleges, the other two being British Columbia and Prince Edward Island, that have a separate body from the professional association.

This study suggested that field education was a valuable learning experience for the social workers. Implications for social education may be that more attention needs to be paid to this component of the social work education experience. Further, linkages between theory and practice were critical. Finally, this study suggests that social work education does not prepare graduates for leadership or administrative roles and professional development opportunities became the primary vehicle to gain new knowledge for the respondents in this study.

It is critical that social workers reflect on their practice in order to enhance their effectiveness. There is a high level of awareness and integration of knowledge that occurs over time such that social workers ultimately articulate their own practice model by describing knowledge and defining practice wisdom.
Given this is an exploratory study; there are opportunities for a variety of future research. A future study could examine whether there are differences in the articulation of practice between: 1) social workers with BSW and MSW degrees and 2) social workers who have a MSW without a prior BSW degree. Another comparison study could examine the differences among novice social work and expert practitioners. It is clear from this study that there are differences in the way expert practitioners articulate their practice. Other studies could explore the role of reflective practice in understanding how social workers construct knowledge.
The conceptual framework developed for this research study on how social workers articulate their social work practice is comprised of three dimensions, 1) the Canadian Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics (2005), 2) the literature describing reflective practice, and, 3) the literature describing practice wisdom. The core values and operational guidelines of the Code of Ethics (2005) are utilized as the primary values framework defining the social work profession. A critical thinking model that integrates both empirical and reflective practice provides the primary framework for the dimensions of reflective practice (MacMorris, 1996).

For the purpose of this study, practice wisdom is defined as an outcome of reflective practice. As an outcome, practice wisdom represents the construction, accumulation and integration of different types of knowledge. The conceptual framework identifies these types of knowledge as dimensions of practice wisdom.

The conceptual framework (Table 2.1) includes the following three dimensions: 1) core social work values as outlined in the Code of Ethics; 2) dimensions of reflective practice; and, 3) dimensions of practice wisdom. The six core values are: 1) respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons; 2) pursuit of social justice; 3) service to humanity; 4) integrity in professional practice; 5) confidentiality in professional practice; and, 6) competence in professional practice. The dimensions of reflective practice are: 1) makes value judgments; 2) consider prior knowledge and experience; 3) evaluates own thinking; 4) considers client perceptions; and, 5) offers explanations for practice. The dimensions of practice wisdom are: 1) knowledge proven by research; 2) personal and professional values; 3) personal and professional bias; 4) grand and practice theories; 5)
practice experience; 6) feedback from colleagues; and, 7) prior knowledge and experience.
Table 2.1 - Conceptual Framework: How social workers articulate their practice

<table>
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<th>CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE</th>
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<th>DIMENSIONS OF PRACTICE WISDOM</th>
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<td>Provincial (Ontario):</td>
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<td>Value judgments</td>
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<td>• Policy and legislation governing social work practice</td>
<td>Social justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Social Work Code of Ethics</td>
<td>Service to humanity</td>
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<td>Stakeholders in the study:</td>
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<td>Client perceptions</td>
<td>Practice experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Social workers with a BSW and MSW;</td>
<td>Confidentiality in professional practice</td>
<td>Offers explanations for practice</td>
<td>Feedback from colleagues</td>
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<td>• Social workers that have practiced for a minimum of 5 years in Ontario</td>
<td>Competence in professional practice</td>
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<td>Prior knowledge and experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Social workers that have at minimum received their MSW education in Ontario</td>
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Social Work Values

Professional social work values are found in the Canadian Association of Social Workers, Code of Ethics (2005). In 2005, the CASW completed a review of the Code of Ethics (2005) and its associated document, Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005). The Code of Ethics is the primary professional values framework for all social workers, regardless of whether one is registered with a regulatory body or a member of a professional association. Both the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) and the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) have adopted the CASW Code of Ethics as their professional framework. The CASW Code of Ethics is a guide for social workers that have a personal commitment to ethical behavior. It does not guarantee such behavior and it also will not prevent value conflicts. The CASW acknowledges that a social worker integrates a variety of other factors in their judgment and decision-making and states, “Further, a social worker’s personal values, culture, religious beliefs, practices and/or other important distinctions, such as age, ability, gender or sexual orientation can affect his/her ethical choices” (2005, p.2). It is inevitable that social workers will experience value conflicts either between their personal and professional values or possibly between their professional values and agency policies. The CASW Code of Ethics (2005), in situations of value conflicts, reinforces the obligation of the social worker to resolve the situation in an ethical manner and within their professional framework and at times this may require consultation. In the most recent issue of the OCSWSSW newsletter entitled “Perspective” (October 2006), some examples are provided with respect to the type of support that is provided by the College in value conflict situations. Case studies are explicated such as: a social worker found themselves in a conflict with their supervisor (a non-social worker). The social worker
was able to call the College and obtain advice and clarifications regarding the social worker’s obligations under the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (Perspective, October 2006).

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) identifies six core values and within these core values specific principles are also defined. The six core values are: 1) respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons; 2) pursuit of social justice; 3) service to humanity; 4) integrity in professional practice; 5) confidentiality in professional practice; and, 6) competence in professional practice. The interpretation of each core value and its associated principles are summarized below:

*Respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons*

The value of “respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons” is a primary, encompassing value related to how social workers interact with their clients and colleagues. It reflects the commitment to acceptance of people and their uniqueness. It also requires social workers to be non-judgmental as they interact with people that have different lifestyles than their own. The concept of diversity is also incorporated in this value. A commitment to uphold human rights is also fundamental to the understanding of this value. “Social workers recognize and respect the diversity of Canadian society, taking into account the breadth of difference that exist among individuals, families, groups and communities” (2005, p.4). Promoting client self-determination is a concrete example of how social workers operationalize this value. Social workers ensure that clients have all the information they need to make informed decisions. However this value also provides guidance for the social worker in situations where the client’s decisions may invoke harm on themselves or others. In these situations, the social worker reports potential harmful
situations to the proper authorities. At the same time, the social worker is an advocate and works to create a violence-free society.

**Pursuit of social justice**

The value of “pursuit of social justice” speaks to the advocacy role of social workers in ensuring equal distribution of resources, services and opportunities. This value also highlights social workers’ commitment to promoting social justice for the most vulnerable in society. This commitment is necessary because marginalized populations are at risk. This value reiterates the commitment to protect people from harm. The value of social justice specifies that social workers must stand up against prejudice and discrimination. Social workers have a role in ensuring people can meet their basic needs and they can gain access to required public services.

**Service to humanity**

The value of “service to humanity” builds on the commitment of social workers to social justice and it integrates the element of balance between individual needs and the public good. An overriding principle in this value is that social workers put their own interests aside in the best interest of the individual or society. The social worker’s central goal is to meet the needs of others. A second element of this value is that social workers should be committed to use power and influence to address issues of social justice. In terms of a specific role for social workers this value highlights the obligation of social workers to use their knowledge and skills to address and manage conflict.

**Integrity in professional practice**

The value of “integrity in professional practice” shifts the emphasis from the social worker’s obligation to people and society to its obligation to the profession. This value provides guidance for social workers promoting the social work profession. More
specifically, social workers operate with integrity when they are honest, responsible and neutral, they do not impose their own values and preferences on clients. It is this value that creates ethical dilemmas or value conflicts for social workers. Social workers must seek out guidance to resolve the ethical conflict. Social workers are usually employed in organizations that have a mix of different professional training. This can lead to the potential for ethical conflicts. Integrity requires the social worker to communicate and promote their social work values and practice within the organization. At an individual level, this value encourages appropriate professional boundaries when working with clients.

Confidentiality in professional practice

The value of “confidentiality in professional practice” is described in the Code of Ethics as the “cornerstone” (2005, p.7) of the relationship between social worker and client. Clients share very personal feelings and information and they do so because they trust that the social worker will respect confidentiality principles. In situations where the client has provided consent for disclosure of information the principle of “need to know” is relevant to this value. The social worker uses their professional judgment to assess what information is required to achieve the client’s goals and discloses only the necessary information. It requires that social workers communicate to clients how the principle of confidentiality works. They need to explicate the specific situations in which the social worker will have to break confidentiality. In a situation where the client demonstrates they will harm themselves or others, the social worker is mandated to share this with proper authorities.
Competence in professional practice

The value of "competence in professional practice" encourages the principle of lifelong learning. Clients should expect competent social work practitioners. Social work is a dynamic profession because people and society are always changing and new needs or issues emerge. Therefore, the social worker is expected to seek out new knowledge and skills. However, the value of competence also requires self awareness in the social worker. Social workers need to know their abilities and competencies and not provide service in an area they are not qualified. The task of referral and consultation addresses this issue. Another principle of competence is the social worker's commitment to helping to develop the profession. Two examples of how social workers contribute to the profession are: 1) when they act as field instructors, and, 2) when they conduct research that creates new research and practice knowledge. The principles related to conducting social work research are: "1) minimizing risk to participants, 2) informed consent, 3) maintain confidentiality, and, 4) accurately report the results of their study" (CASW, 2005, p.8).

Dimensions of reflective practice

Reflective practice found its origins in educational and sociological research related to the learning process of students (Dewey, 1933; Habermas, 1971; Mezirow, 1990). Since that time, reflective practice has been employed in professional education to enhance the effectiveness of professional practice. This has occurred not only in social work but in other professions such as nursing (Benner, 1984). Early education theorists described reflective thought or practice as a method that increases student's self-awareness by challenging their beliefs and assumptions (Dewey, 1933; Habermas, 1971; Mezirow, 1990). They identified that students engage in a process where: 1) they examine
their beliefs and assumptions, 2) critically analyze available data, 3) test out and form hypotheses and 4) evaluate their own thinking. As early theorists developed their understanding of reflective practice, they also began to describe different types of knowledge that arose out of reflective practice. Habermas (1971) identified three types of learning knowledge as: 1) technical; 2) practical; and, 3) emancipatory. Technical knowledge is based not so much on reflection but on a step-by-step process. However, practice and emancipatory knowledge have varying levels of reflection. Practical knowledge arises when students use reflection to gain a better understanding of a situation. Emancipatory knowledge uses reflection to challenge thinking and to overcome barriers that prevent people from reaching their capacity (Habermas, 1971).

Schon (1983) is credited with applying reflective practice to professional development. He expressed frustration with arguments that suggested only empirical, technical knowledge was valid in solving problems in professional arenas. Schon (1987) recognized, for many of the professions, this approach was problematic because of the unique and often ambiguous problems confronting professions that are people-oriented. Professions such as teaching, nursing and social work fall into this category. Professionals will frame problems differently depending upon a variety of variables such as: 1) training; 2) history; 3) personal interests; and, 4) political/economic perspectives (Schon, 1987). Schon (1987) also describes types of knowledge that arose through the use of reflective practice and he called this knowledge, practice knowledge. The two types of practice knowledge are: 1) knowing-in-action, and, 2) reflecting-in-action. Knowing-in-action occurs when the professional encounters routine situations, that do not require new thinking and therefore employs their tacit knowledge. Reflecting-in-action conversely occurs when the problems presented are unique and the usual strategies will not result in a
solution. Reflecting-in-action is a multi-dimensional process that requires professionals to incorporate different knowledge bases, while simultaneously evaluating the situation and considering options (Schon, 1987). The ability to respond to "indeterminate zones of practice" or unique problems is increasingly being recognized as the "differentiation" in enhanced levels of professional practice (Schon, 1987). Studies in both nursing and social work identify that the integrated use of reflective practice is what separates novice and expert practitioners (Benner, 1994; Fook, Ryan and Hawkins, 1997).

Rogers (2001) conducted an extensive review of the literature and found four characteristics that defined reflective practice: "1) active engagement on the part of the individual; 2) triggered by an unusual or perplexing situation or experience; 3) examining one's responses, beliefs and premises in light of the situation at hand; and, 4) results as integration of new understanding into one's experience (p.41)."

Social workers carry out different processes or dimensions of reflective practice depending upon the situation. MacMorris (1996) developed a model that defined dimensions of both empirical and reflective practice. Dimensions of reflective practice for this study include: 1) considers values and makes value judgments; 2) considers prior knowledge and experience; 3) evaluates own thinking; 4) considers client perceptions; and, 5) offers explanations for practice (MacMorris, 1996).

**Considers values and makes value judgments**

This study has identified that in Ontario, the Code of Ethics (2005) is the primary decision-making framework for social workers. Therefore it is expected that social workers use reflective practice to "consider values and make value judgments". Research has indicated that there is an essential difference between social work practice and other professional practice. This difference is the core values of the social work profession.
(Dybcz, 2004; Klein & Bloom, 1994). The interpretation of the core values identifies: 1) the way social workers respect and interact with clients; and, 2) how they involve clients in the problem-solving process and their own professional decision-making (Code of Ethics, 1994). In MacMorris’ study (1996) making value judgments was not rated as a frequent construct of thinking in reflective practice. In this study there is an assumption that values are a primary “filter” by which social workers problem solve and make decisions.

Studies have identified that identifying values and challenging assumptions was critical to the process of effective student learning (Dewey, 1933; Habermas, 1971; Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow (1990) developed a seven stage model of reflection which separates “reflection” from “critical reflection”. In this model, reflection is a process of thinking about what actions could be taken. Critical reflection requires thinking but also challenges beliefs and leads to significant changes. The first four levels (reflectivity, affective reflectivity, discriminant reflectivity and judgment reflectivity) are the “reflection” levels. The last three levels (conceptual reality, psychic reality and theoretical reflectivity) represent critical reflection. The fourth stage, called judgmental reflectivity, is the process by which a person begins to make value judgments and to take some actions based on their perceptions (Mezirow, 1990).

Studies that address how social workers employed self-evaluation and perceptions of expertise showed that values are used to interpret experiences. When interpretations are applied to practice then social workers make changes to improve the effectiveness of their social work practice (Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 1997; Shaw and Shaw, 1997). In difficult and unique situations, there is a potential for value conflicts to arise between personal and professional values but these can be resolved through a process of critical
reflection (Schon, 1987). The Code of Ethics (2005) also recognizes that there is a
potential for value conflicts and they encourage social workers to seek out consultation.

Considers prior knowledge and experience

In their use of reflective practice, social workers also employ the process of
"considering their prior knowledge and experience" to assist them in sorting through a
particular situation. Rogers (2001) identified that the purpose of reflection is to "integrate
the understanding gained into one's experience in order to enable better choices or actions
in the future as well as to enhance one's overall effectiveness" (p.41). In MacMorris'
(1996) study the use of prior knowledge and experience was the most frequent dimension
articulated as part of reflective practice.

Prior knowledge initially is attained through education. Professional social work
education promotes integration of knowledge including values, theories, models and
pedagogical and experiential methods. When social work education is completed, the
professional social worker begins to practice. Knowledge development does not end
because ongoing professional development is a principle of the core value of
"competence". Knowledge also comes from: 1) the organizational context, 2) interacting
with colleagues and supervisors, 3) client feedback, and 4) continual process of self-
evaluation (Harrison, 1991; Ixer 1999; Scott, 1990, Shaw and Shaw, 1997).

Harrison's (1991) study of how social workers described examples of good
practice demonstrated that social workers use different levels of knowledge to evaluate
situations. First, in routine situations, they may compare the current situation with a
previous experience and use tacit knowledge to address the situation. Second, they often
develop a generic problem-solving approach that they apply to various situations,
including those that are unique and challenging. Finally social workers are confronted by
some situations that are so different and complex they must integrate previous knowledge and experience to understand and resolve the situation (Harrison, 1991). Sheppard and Ryan (2003) categorized knowledge into rules and they suggested that social workers formulate rules based on background information. They then used these rules and perceptions to interpret situations.

The extent to which a social worker considers prior knowledge and experience may also be dependent upon their level of experience. Research indicates that beginning social workers rely more on concrete knowledge and theories. This finding is supported by Kondrat (1992), who states that “linear applications of theory are the hallmark of the novice practitioner” (p.242). Further studies demonstrate that expert social worker practitioners infrequently articulated specific practice theories (Fook et.al, 1997). Expert practitioners have integrated knowledge and experience thus achieving a high level of practice wisdom. Over time, expert social work practitioners have had the opportunity to examine and employ several theories and have integrated pieces of these theories to the extent that they articulate their own practice theory. (Fook et al.,1997).

*Evaluates own thinking*

The dimension of evaluating one’s own thinking is captured in Schon’s (1987) definition of reflection-in-action where it is suggested that the professional makes a choice to evaluate their action while the action is taking place. Shaw and Shaw (1997) describe this element as “evaluating in action” (p.859). Social work practice is unique in that the situations that are presented often require an immediate response and therefore “thinking on your feet”. In some cases tacit knowledge is applied and the situation is addressed. In the midst of a complex situation, social workers must consider alternatives, weigh pros and cons and use trial and error to achieve a resolution (Schon, 1983).
DeRoos (1990) refers to this process as “continuously evaluating unexpected outcomes” (p.283).

Other authors have criticized this concept of reflection-in-action suggesting that when this occurs there is really a disruption in the action and thus the practitioner shifts to “reflection-on-action” (Bengtsson, 1995; Eraut, 1995; Van Manen, 1992) or “evaluating on practice” (Shaw & Shaw, 1997). In these situations, the practitioner intervenes to slow down the action, gains some control over their thinking and then returns to the situation with a better understanding (O’Sullivan, 2005). The argument that social workers engage more in reflection-on-action than reflection-in-action is valid given that social workers are often dealing with highly complex situations that require extensive processing once information is gathered.

Research by Shaw and Shaw asked social workers to define evaluation. Social workers then categorized their responses into formal evaluation and self-evaluation (1997). Formal evaluation they equated with determinations of quantity and justification for what is being done. Self-evaluation addressed quality issues. Self-evaluation was described as a highly personal and subjective process requiring the practitioner to consider whether their social work practice is good or bad (Shaw and Shaw, 1997). Fook et al. also demonstrated that social workers, as part of the process of developing expertise, are continually evaluating their own good and bad practice (1997). Fook et al. support the personal and subjective nature of self-evaluation as social workers assessed case vignettes in various ways dependent upon their own work experience and contexts (1997).

Ixer (1999) defines reflection as a socially constructed process where social workers evaluate their own thinking through social, historical and political lens. This view is consistent with Ixer’s criticism of the use of reflection with students. It is
suggested that students have not had sufficient time to attach meaning to their social work experiences and therefore create the multiple realities that are necessary to assess situations. Conversely, evaluating one’s own thinking or reflecting is highly developed in social workers that have expertise. Fook et al (1997) conclude that expertise is not about content, rather; expertise relates to the ability to respond flexibly in unpredictable, complex situations. Holyoak (1992) states, “an expert is someone capable of doing the right thing at the right time” (p.309). This higher level of practice can only be achieved through consistent and in-depth evaluation of one’s own thinking.

Considers client perceptions

Social workers employ reflective practice in considering client perceptions. The core value of “inherent dignity and worth of the person” provides direction regarding the importance of client perspective. The principle of “client self-determination” requires the social worker to consistently consider the client’s values, needs, and goals, as part of the social work process (Code of Ethics, 2005). In the process of engaging the client in the social work relationship, the worker involves the client in describing and assessing their situation. The social worker integrates the knowledge provided by the client, compares the information provided to similar situations and then matches the information to their own experience (Dybcz, 2004; Klein and Bloom, 1995). Promoting client determination encourages the client to provide their perspective and provides valuable information for the social worker to consider during problem resolution. Research demonstrates that social workers develop informal practice theories that incorporate client’s perspective and feedback in contrast to employing formal theories (Harrison, 1991).
Offers explanations for practice

The final process in reflective practice is the process of “offering explanations or rationales for practice”. MacMorris identifies the process as examining pros and cons and hypothesis making (1996). Social workers engage in self-evaluation or reflective practice and this is a process that results in good or bad social work practice (Shaw and Shaw, 1999). Furthermore social workers reflect on why a certain method worked in one situation and not the other. The literature describes this as “hypothesis-testing”.

Since social workers interact with people and circumstances they are continually confronted with complexity and uncertainty. Therefore, they are required to figure out or to test what might work in each unique situation (Klein & Bloom, 1995). Klein and Bloom (1995) identified that experienced practitioners continually evaluate “mini-hypotheses” (p. 801) that lead to interpretations of what does and doesn’t work. Furthermore, hypothesis testing was noted to be most effective when it incorporated both empirical and practice knowledge. It should be noted that hypothesis testing that occurs as part of the research process is different from the hypothesis testing that takes place when social workers reflect on interventions to determine whether practice has been effective. Sheppard et al. (2000) classified three types of hypotheses employed by social workers: 1) partial; 2) whole; and 3) speculative. First, the development of partial hypotheses occurred at early stages of exploring a case when the social worker is trying to make sense of what is occurring. Second, whole hypotheses developed at higher levels of thinking where the social worker is attempting to define the situation. Both partial and whole hypotheses assist the social worker to offer explanations and to begin to redefine the problem. Finally, speculative hypotheses are applied at even more sophisticated levels.
of thinking where the social worker is forecasting and considering alternatives that go beyond the presenting information.

Dimensions of practice wisdom

Much of the research regarding social work practice wisdom uses language and concepts that are similar to that of reflective practice; often practice wisdom has been described as a process (DeRoos, 1990; Klein and Bloom, 1995; Scott, 1990). Practice wisdom has also been used interchangeably with terms such as practice knowledge and tacit knowledge.

For these reasons it has been difficult to define and understand practice wisdom. The literature has described intuition as another form of knowledge. Intuition has also been equated with practice wisdom with sometimes negative connotations related to the lack of articulated knowledge. Scott (1990) calls intuition a “tacit form of practice knowledge” (p.565). Klein & Bloom (1995) also argue that intuition is more than a gut feeling they define it as, “well-earned insight based on accumulated practice experience in the context of accumulated scientific knowledge” (p.803).

The literature suggests that practice wisdom is an outcome of the processes used by social workers to construct their knowledge (Dybcz, 2004). It has also been called a bridge between empirical and reflective practice (Klein & Bloom, 1995). O’Sullivan (2005) suggests not all social workers develop practice wisdom. It appears to be influenced by: “1) the social worker’s abilities, 2) their professional education, and 3) the settings in which they have practiced (p. 239).” In addition, some authors focus on the role values play in developing a social worker’s practice wisdom (Dybcz, 2004; Klein & Bloom, 1995). Dybcz (2004), in a literature review, concluded that practice wisdom
could be defined as, “competency in the application of social work values and guidelines to the helping process in which the social worker and client engage” (p.200).

O’Sullivan (2005) describes practice wisdom as the “interaction between processes of framing, applying and learning; and stocks of knowledge, immediate practice situations and practitioners’ pictures of situations” (p.239). Klein & Bloom (1995) state that, “practice wisdom draws from empirical research, theory, direct practice experience and personal subjective views” (p.799). Social work knowledge is created when the social worker: 1) opens themselves up to critical analyses, and 2) challenges their values, assumptions, theories, prior knowledge and experience, evidence-based research and practice experience. The process by which these critical analyses occur is reflective practice (Fook et al., 1997). Practice wisdom results when the practitioner engages in a review of similarities and differences in the encountered unique situations (Klein and Bloom, 1995). The dimensions of practice wisdom selected for this study are: 1) knowledge proven by research; 2) personal and professional biases; 3) personal and professional bias; 4) grand and practice theories; 5) practice experience; 6) feedback from colleagues; and, 7) prior knowledge and experience.

**Knowledge proven by research**

Knowledge proven by research is considered synonymous with empirical or scientific knowledge. Klein and Bloom (1995) highlight the importance of this type of knowledge to social workers when they are confronted by new situations that require an ethical response. An ethical response can only be obtained when the worker combines empirical knowledge with their qualitative experience. Empirical practice may employ single system designs to demonstrate that there has been a change in behaviour. The ideal model of empirical practice is to demonstrate a cause-effect relationship between the
intervention and behaviour. Often standardized scale measures are employed to measure the problem and goals. Therefore, evidence-based practice rests within positivism and has the following characteristics: 1) problems can be measured usually by employing standardized scales, 2) goals are measurable, 3) effectiveness of interventions are demonstrated in the literature for a specific method or intervention, and 4) formal course information is employed (MacMorris, 1996).

**Personal and professional biases**

In general, biases cause people to be inclined to think or act in a certain way because they have formed preferences. Biases are assumptions that represent stereotypes or preconceived ideas about people that the social worker believes to be true and that affects their thoughts, behaviours and actions toward these groups. A personal bias is defined as preferential knowledge, either accurate or inaccurate, generally learned through family and other institutional structures. Professional bias is preferential knowledge that is attained through professional practice which leads to preferences about working with certain population groups. Although social workers like to believe that they are not prejudiced, this is not realistic (Payne, 1997).

**Grand and practice theories**

Grand and practice theories are also knowledge components that are part of practice wisdom. Grand theories are overarching philosophies that indicate social, economic and political orientations (Payne, 1997). They are derived from other disciplines (e.g. Marxist or Socialist theories). Practice theories are frameworks that guide how social workers may intervene in different situations and include an emphasis on specific values and methods. Payne (1997) states, “social work practice theories explain, describe or justify what social workers do” (p.3). There are a number
of practice theories available to social workers, Payne (1997) identifies some theoretical frameworks such as, 1) psychodynamic, 2) crisis intervention/task centred, 3) cognitive-behavioural, 4) systems and ecological, 5) social psychological and communication, 6) humanist and existential, 7) social and community development, 8) radical and Marxist, 9) anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive, and 10) empowerment and advocacy. Formal theories are those that are written and transmitted through education. Informal theories are a product constructed from practice experience (Payne, 1997).

Social workers have difficulties in articulating specific theories. Generally they describe their practice not theoretically, but in terms of how they work with clients (Carew, 1979; Harrison, 1991; Osmond and O’Connor, 2004). Osmond and O’Connor (2004) suggest that social workers use language other than academic language to describe their practice. Therefore, specific theories are not always articulated as the basis for practice. Finally, studies of novice and expert practitioners demonstrate differences in use of practice theories. While novice practitioners focus more on rules and theories attained through recent education, expert practitioners reconstruct theory until it becomes their own. In addition, expert practitioners sometimes describe their knowledge as intuition or knowing how to practice (Fook et al., 1997).

Practice experience

Practice experience is a type of knowledge obtained through social work practice experience. It is dependent upon the setting, population groups, and practice approaches available to the social worker. Fook (2001) proposes that practice experience needs to be valued by academics and researchers. Practice experience is a
filter that integrates other dimensions of practice wisdom. Klein and Bloom (1995) describe practice wisdom as, "a core feature in a practitioner's developed professional experience" (p.801). Experienced social workers then have the ability to interpret their practice experiences and add to the development of practice theory (Klein and Bloom, 1995).

*Feedback from Colleagues*

Feedback from colleagues is defined as the type of knowledge obtained as a result of interactions with social work colleagues this includes: 1) supervision, 2) field instruction, 3) consultation and 4) professional development opportunities. However, practice wisdom only becomes established when it is shared with other professionals (Klein and Bloom, 1995). Dolgoff and Skolnick (1996) suggest learning that occurs through experiences of supervisors and colleagues is a dimension of practice wisdom. In clinical social work, supervision is a formal process. This does not, however, discount the informal consultation that occurs through daily interactions and reflections with colleagues. Scott (1990) identifies that, in supervision, the supervisor creates a culture for reflection and acts as a sounding board. The social worker has the opportunity to test hypotheses with respect to the case being discussed. However, there can also be a *limitation* to this reflection opportunity. This occurs when the supervisor and supervisee hold the same values and assumptions. Not all social workers have the opportunity for formal supervision. At times, social workers may form a peer network that they rely on to consult on certain situations and cases. Professional development opportunities are a method for social workers to learn new knowledge and test out existing knowledge and reflection.
As a knowledge component of practice wisdom, prior knowledge and experience, is considered as part of the social work process of reflective practice. Prior knowledge and experience can be defined as the values, previous education, and life experience that are incorporated within the practitioner's framework of decision-making. Professional social work education introduces the student to fundamental social work knowledge components such as: 1) values, 2) theories, 3) methods 4) models, and 5) practice examples. Reflective practice techniques encourage social work students to filter this new knowledge in the context of prior knowledge and experience (Gould and Taylor, 1996). In some ways prior knowledge and experience is the anchor or starting point when practitioners are unsure of how to move forward on a case. The practitioner reflects on their prior knowledge and experience to assess similarities and differences and then begins the processes of assessing, making decisions regarding actions and choosing an intervention (Klein and Bloom, 1995).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social work values</td>
<td>Principles/core beliefs that are found in the Code of Ethics and guide social work education, practice and research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>The value that defines the obligation of social workers to put service for others above personal needs. This value is what defines social work as a helping profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>The value that defines the core function of social work which is to effect social change particularly for oppressed populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dignity and worth of the person</td>
<td>The value that defines the uniqueness of the social work profession in that social workers promote client self-determination. This value also reinforces the idea that since each person is unique, each practice situation is unique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>The value that respects the privacy of the information that is shared by clients and respects the client’s right to provide consent for disclosure of information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>The value that promotes honesty in all decisions and actions especially in situations where they may be an ethical conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>The value that promotes life-long learning and professional development for social work practitioners. This value supports the idea that social workers can always learn something from every interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>A process employed by social work practitioners to enhance their practice effectiveness and defines how the social worker constructs knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers values and makes value judgments</td>
<td>The process of assessing whether personal and professional values impact on practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers prior knowledge and experience</td>
<td>The process of acknowledging that prior knowledge and experience, mainly life experience and education, are considered in and have an impact on practice decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluates own thinking</td>
<td>The process of evaluating one's own thinking and challenging existing beliefs and assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers client perceptions</td>
<td>The process of considering client perceptions is what differentiates reflective practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers explanations for practice</td>
<td>The process of articulating why practice decisions and interventions occur in each unique situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice wisdom</td>
<td>The outcome of effective reflective practice over a period of time that incorporates a number of knowledge types.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge proven through research</td>
<td>The type of knowledge obtained through research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal bias</td>
<td>Preferential knowledge (can be accurate or inaccurate) generally learned through family and other institutional structures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional bias</td>
<td>Preferential knowledge that is attained through the professional social work practice, (e.g. a preference to work with a specific population group over another).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand theories</td>
<td>Overarching philosophies that indicate social, economic and political orientations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice theories</td>
<td>Frameworks that guide how social workers will intervene in different situations. The frameworks include an emphasis on specific values, models and methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice experience</td>
<td>The type of knowledge obtained through social work practice. It is dependent upon the setting, population groups and practice theories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback from colleagues</td>
<td>The type of knowledge obtained as a result of interactions with social work colleagues including supervision, field instruction, consultation and professional development opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior knowledge and experience</td>
<td>An umbrella term that describes knowledge that is obtained through life experience (values, bias etc.) in addition to knowledge obtained through education and previous practice situations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary the literature review provides the foundation for the conceptual framework and identifies the three dimensions to be explored including: 1) social work values; 2) dimensions of reflective practice; and, 3) dimensions of practice wisdom. The conceptual framework (Table 2.1) provides the concepts which are the foundation for the interview guide. The interview guide was designed to capture data on how social workers have constructed their knowledge base and how they have incorporated this into their practice.
CHAPTER 3 - THE SOCIAL WORK ENVIRONMENT IN ONTARIO

Social work is a profession that is significantly affected by changes in government policy and public attitudes. Gibelman (1999) states, “external forces have been more influential in defining the boundaries of social work and shaping the nature of its practice than intra-professional forces and choices” (p.298). The evolution of social work has not been without struggles, debates and growth in all aspects of the profession such as: 1) education, 2) practice, and 3) research. This chapter describes some of the major influences on social work practice and education beginning with an historical context that provides an explanation for understanding current social work practice.

The Evolution of Social Work in Ontario

Outside of those social workers in private practice, most social workers in Ontario are employed by organizations that are funded by the provincial government and operate within health, social service, and education sectors. Although social workers bring their professional Code of Ethics to employment settings they also must adhere to the policies and procedures of the respective organizations.

*Early developments in social work practice*

The roots of social work in Canada began in the 1800’s when private charities were developed. By 1894, there were 43 charity organizations in Toronto (Hick, 2006). Societal attitudes or values at the time were concerned with people becoming dependent on social services and the assumption was that the prevalence of charities would increase poverty rather than assist with poverty (Hick, 2006). Many of these charities were linked to religious organizations espousing one of two directions: 1) either serving those in poverty or 2) organizing disadvantaged groups, namely immigrants. The casework model was used within charitable relief organizations. The community work model was
formulated through the development of neighbourhood settlement houses. The settlement house movement started with volunteers who engaged in organizing and highlighting social issues (e.g. better housing and working conditions) (Hick, 2006).

The social reform movement (1891 – 1940) began and recognized the need for trained professional workers. The first university-based social work program was established in Toronto in 1914. The establishment of this program shifted training programs from voluntary organizations to the university signifying a more professional and scientific approach (Hick, 2006). Knowledge and skills that were identified for social workers at this time included: 1) understanding of human behaviour and social processes; 2) gathering of information (assessment); and, 3) problem identification and intervention (Hick, 2006).

In 1887, J.J. Kelso formed the Toronto Humane Society, the precursor to the first Children’s Aid in Ontario. At the time, there was no authority or legislation in Ontario in place to govern the care and welfare of neglected children. In 1888, Kelso was instrumental in obtaining legislation called “An Act for the Protection and Reformation of Neglected Children”. Three years later, in 1891, the Toronto Children’s Aid Society was established. In 1911, the first Social Services Commission was formed in Toronto. Many social workers became employed in the administration of government programs and in child welfare.

After the Great Depression (1930’s) society’s values turned to the unequal distribution of wealth and poor working conditions. Since many people were experiencing unemployment, people no longer blamed the individual for all their problems but saw that changes in the economy could affect a person/family’s ability to earn income (Guest, 2003). As a result of unemployment, the government set up other programs to meet the
needs of the population. In the 1940’s the Government of Canada introduced the Family Allowance, Old Age Pension and a benefit program for persons with disabilities.

Significant shifts in social work practice occurred in the 1960’s and the government became the primary employer of social workers. Until the 60’s, the predominant approach to social work with individuals and groups was based on the value that individuals caused their problems and that once the problem was identified, it could be solved. Some social workers began to challenge these values and believed that social problems arose out of inequities in institutions and social structures. They then sought new approaches that reflected this shift in values. The 60’s saw the emergence of new approaches to practice including, systems, generic-integrated, problem solving, behaviour modification and structural approaches (Hick, 2006).

In the 70’s, community colleges began to offer a social service worker certificate program to meet the needs of staff administering social assistance programs. The 80’s and 90’s began the erosion of social services, concerns regarding employment conditions and unionization moved into non-governmental organizations. Table 3.1 on the following page summarizes the early developments in social work practice.
Table 3.1: Summary of early developments in social work practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Some early developments in social work practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1800’s  | • Private charity system emerges; by the end of the 1800’s there were 43 charity organizations in Toronto  
        • In 1891, Toronto Children’s Aid Society established  
        • Volunteer training programs established in charity organizations |
| 1900’s  | • First settlement house established in Toronto (1902)  
        • First Social Services Commission established in Toronto (1911)  
        • First university-based social services program established in Toronto (1914) |
| 1940’s  | • Federal government establishes assistance programs including Family Allowance, Old Age Pension and disability benefits; new role emerges for social workers as administrators of these programs. |
| 1960’s  | • Social workers are primarily employed through government programs  
        • Unionization in the public sector begins  
        • Emergence of new social work approaches such as generic-integrated, problem solving, behavior modification and structural approaches |
| 1970’s  | • Development of “social service worker” programs at College level  
        • CASSW initiates accreditation of social work degree programs |
| 1980’s  | • Unionization of non-governmental organizations  
        • Cuts to advocacy programs |
| 1990’s  | • Continued cuts to social services  
        • Emphasis on health care spending; concerns regarding ability to sustain public health care |
Early developments in social work education

Volunteers in charitable organizations provided social support work and were trained through agency-based training programs (Hick, 2006). As government initiated the creation of social security programs, they also recognized the need for professional social work education. The casework and settlement movements in Toronto led to the creation of the first social work program in 1914 (Social Services Program, University of Toronto). Four years later, the School of Social Study and Training was formed at McGill University (Hick, 2006). In 1947, the University of Toronto offered the first professional social work degree (Master of Social Work). It is significant that, with the establishment of a professional education program, social work became recognized as a viable profession. It also began to operate within a framework of knowledge, values and skills. During this era, the Master of Social Work degree was the entry to the profession (Hick, 2006).

In 1948, Canada formed the National Committee of Schools of Social Work. A more prominent role in social work education was not evident until 1967 when the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) was created (Rondeau, 2001). The main role of the CASSW was to accredit Schools of Social Work and to promote relevant social work education. The establishment of the CASSW provided the catalyst for innovative social work education in Canada, and thus the creation of Bachelor of Social Work programs (Rondeau, 2001). The University of Toronto offered the first Bachelor of Social Work degree in 1964 received based on completing the first year of a two year Master of Social Work degree. It was the University of Windsor that offered the first 4 year Honours Bachelor of Social Work degree in 1966. When the prevalence of
Bachelor of Social Work programs increased and thus the number of graduates, the entry point to the profession shifted to the BSW (Hick, 2006).

Table 3.2: Summary of early developments in social work education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Early developments in social work education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>• First university-based social service program established at the University of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>• First Master of Social Work program developed at University of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>• National Committee of Schools of Social Work formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>• First Bachelor of Social Work degree offered at University of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>• First 4 year Honors Bachelor of Social Work degree offered at University of Windsor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>• Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) formed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Work Policy and Legislation

The framework for policy that guides the social work profession is found in the establishment of various professional associations and regulatory colleges that are linked from international to provincial levels. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is the national body that links the 10-provincial/territorial associations. The CASW was founded in 1926. Its three objectives were: 1) to advance social justice, 2) to strengthen and promote the social work profession, and 3) to support the regulatory and non-regulatory work of member organizations (June 2005). The CASW also has responsibility for assessing the qualifications and providing certification of foreign trained social workers. However, the main role of the CASW is its’ accountability for the Code of Ethics.
Code of Ethics

The CASW was established in 1926 and at that time adopted the Code of Ethics developed by the National Association of Social Workers in the United States. Most recently in 2005, the Code of Ethics was reviewed and in March 2005 the revised Code was adopted. The Code of Ethics outlines the values required for a high standard of professional practice. Six core values are described: 1) respect for inherent dignity and worth of persons; 2) pursuit of social justice; 3) service to humanity; 4) integrity of professional practice; 5) confidentiality in professional practice; and, 6) competence in professional practice. A companion document was developed to operationalize the core values in professional practice; this document is referred to as “guidelines for ethical practice”. The importance of the Code of Ethics goes beyond the articulation of values. Every social worker, even if not a member of a professional association or regulatory body, has the obligation to practice under the guidelines of the Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics (2005) is a decision-making tool for professional social work practice.

The Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) was established in 1964 and has approximately 3,400 members from within 15 branches. The OASW adheres to the Code of Ethics as established by the CASW. The OASW is a professional body that has as its primary functions: 1) advocacy, and, 2) public education. Advocacy occurs through the OASW’s response to government changes in policy that affect the people that are served by social workers. OASW also monitors trends in employment and changes in organizational policies that affect social workers. The function of public education focuses on communicating the value and roles of social workers. The OASW organizes activities for Social Work Week in the first week of March each year (retrieved from www.oasw.org on September 14, 2006).
Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998

Across Canada, there are regulatory bodies within 7 out of 10 provinces combining the roles of professional associations and regulation. Ontario is one of three provinces (British Columbia and Prince Edward Island are the other two) that have a separate regulatory body. In 1998, the Province of Ontario enacted the Social Work and Social Services Work Act (Bill 207, 1998). This Act established regulatory powers for the profession. Ontario set up a separate body called the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OSWSSW).

There is a significant difference between the OASW and the OSWSSW; under the OASW only university educated social workers can be members. The OSWSSW Act covers university-educated social workers. It also covers individuals who have a diploma from a community college and perform work under the title “social service worker”. Membership in either body is mutually exclusive therefore you are not required to be a member of one organization to be a member of the other; although both bodies encourage dual membership. There are advantages to registration with the OSWSSW, for example, Bill 207 provides protection for the use of the title “social worker”. Social workers who are not a member of the OSWSSW cannot legally use the title “social worker” to describe their practice. This is regulated by provincial legislation and therefore it is a provincial offence if someone uses the term “social worker” without being a member in good standing with the OSWSSW. Fines are applicable in the amount of $5000 for the first offence and $10,000 for each repeat offence. The Health Care Act and Substitute Decisions Act require that social workers be registered with the OCSWSSW to perform certain functions.
The organizational structure governing the OCSWSSW is a Board of Directors, comprised of social workers, social service workers and public members. Standing committees include 1) Executive, 2) Complaints, 3) Registration appeals, 4) Discipline, 5) Fitness to practice, 6) Standards of practice, 7) Nominating, 8) Elections, and, 9) Corporations. The OCSWSSW requires members to register each year and to pay annual membership dues. In its Annual Report (2004), the OCSWSSW reported a total membership of 10,980 with the following breakdown: 9951 social workers, 947 social service workers and 82 individuals registered as social workers/social service workers (retrieved from, www.oswssw.org on May 26, 2005).

The mission of the OCSWSSW highlights its core functions, 1) regulation of the practice of social workers and social service workers, and, 2) promoting excellence in practice. In order to accomplish the regulatory function, a public complaint and discipline process was established. From 2000 to 2004, there were 170 complaints that were reviewed. As a result of complaint investigations, 7 social workers appeared before the Complaints Committee and received a warning. During this same period there were 2 referrals to the Discipline Committee.

The OCSWSSW's function of promoting excellence in practice has been achieved through the development of standards of practice and through professional development. In addition to the above functions, that promote excellence, the OCSWSSW had plans to implement an entrance examination. However, this process has yet to be implemented.

Current Developments in Social Work in Ontario

Social Work Practice

Social work is a profession that is dependent on changes in demographics and policies of government. The best example of this phenomenon in the last decade was the
decision in 1995 to cut social assistance rates for people receiving Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support. In addition to cuts at an individual level, some funding was cut for organizations that provided supports and funding for neighbourhood programs. Stephenson et al.’s report entitled “The Sector Study (2000)”, identifies some of the pressures changing social work practice including: 1) social workers are doing more with less; 2) workloads have increased in demand and in complexity; 3) social workers, especially in the north and rural areas, are working in isolation; and, 4) social workers are not receiving supervision from a social worker.

Cuts to programs have also influenced the practice of social work including: 1) the loss of positions, 2) the reduction in continuing education budgets, 3) increased accountability for social workers (particularly child welfare), and 4) a shift in work to other disciplines traditionally performed by social workers (Stephenson et al, 2000). In the last decade many health organizations have developed multi-disciplinary approaches to intervention. Therefore, social workers find themselves on a team of varied professionals, mainly nurses and physicians.

Social Work Education

Across Canada there are 31 Bachelor of Social Work programs, 23 Master of Social Work and 8 Doctorate programs. In Ontario this includes, 9 BSW, 10 MSW and 2 PhD programs among the following Schools of Social Work, 1) Carleton University, 2) King’s University College/University of Western Ontario, 3) Lakehead University, 4) Laurentian University, 5) McMaster University, 6) Renison College/University of Waterloo, 7) Ryerson University, 8) University of Toronto, 9) Wilfred Laurier, 10) University of Windsor, and 11) York University.
A school’s philosophy or approach is the first opportunity the student has to begin to integrate a value system into their education and eventually their practice. The philosophy a School of Social Work identifies with is critical to this initial development of the student as social worker. The primary approach identified by Schools of Social Work in Ontario was the generalist/advanced generalist approach. Three schools shared an anti-oppressive approach; one school identified the structural approach. Social workers who operate under a generalist approach examine problems at three levels, micro, mezzo and macro. The central component of the generalist approach is that it employs a generic problem-solving model integrated within systems theory. The generalist approach encourages social workers to consider various perspectives in the assessment and intervention phases. The advanced generalist approach continues to promote the problem-solving model but at advanced practice levels including leadership/management, research and international social work.

An anti-oppressive approach has similarities to a structural approach, however, its’ emphasis is on egalitarian values. Clifford (1995) describes five principles of an anti-oppressive approach as: 1) social difference (the differences in power between dominant and dominated groups due to race, gender, class as examples), 2) linking personal and political, 3) power, 4) historical and geographical location and 5) reflexivity/mutual involvement. Within the reflexivity process, the social worker continually engages in the consideration of how their values and differences in power are impacting on the interactions with individuals, families and community (Clifford, 1995). The structural approach is consistent with the emphasis on social justice as it incorporates critical theory and socio-economic political analysis, into practice applications that focus on social
change. In the structural model, the individual’s problems are seen as a result of broader political, economic and social structures.

Reflective practice in education

Gould and Taylor (1996) describe reflective practice as a tool to enhance student learning. Within professional Schools of Social Work there are many dimensions of reflective practice that are incorporated in the curriculum and field programs. Instructional design elements such as: 1) integration seminars, 2) video-taping, 3) process-recording, 4) role-playing, 5) self-awareness training and 6) critical analysis promote the concept of reflection in student learning.

The field practicum, a unique component of social work education, provides the student with the opportunity to explore their values and social work practice. There is not a predominant design of field education; rather there is a mix between concurrent placements that occur alongside course work and the block style where the social worker enters the field once their courses are completed. One of the standards of accredited social work programs is that students must be supervised by a professional social worker. The field supervision process suits a reflective practice model where the student is constantly challenged to explore their values, assumptions and approaches as they immerse themselves in social work practice.

Integration seminars are the link for the student between theory and practice. Integration seminar requires students to reflect on and integrate theory and their practice experiences. The integration seminar also provides the opportunity for peer feedback. Thus, all Bachelor of Social Work programs provide the opportunity for integration of theory and practice. Most of the MSW programs offering an internship also have integration seminars.
Bachelor of Social Work Programs in Ontario

There are 9 Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs offered in Ontario where the BSW is recognized as the minimum degree in order to practice as a professional social worker. Table 3.3 summarizes the characteristics of these programs.

The generalist approach is the predominant orientation of universities offering a Bachelor of Social Work. This is consistent with the fact that the BSW is the current point of entry to the profession. Social work practice is defined in various ways including: 1) settings, 2) fields of practice areas, 3) social work roles, and 4) practice levels. The settings include: hospitals, schools, correctional facilities and not-for-profit organizations. Hick (2006) in his book, “Social Work in Canada: An introduction” identifies the accepted roles of social workers: 1) enabler; 2) broker; 3) advocate; 4) initiator; 5) mediator; 6) negotiator; 7) activist; 8) educator; 9) coordinator; 10) researcher; 11) group facilitator; and, 12) public speaker. These roles highlight the opportunity for generalist social workers to operate at either the micro, mezzo and macro practice levels. Generalist practice also acknowledges the range of interventions that include: 1) individual, 2) group, 3) families, 4) community, 5) organizations, and 6) society. The strength of the generalist practice is that the framework or process allows a social worker to assess, plan, intervene and evaluate any social work situation (Johnson and Yanca, 2001). The generalist practice model also promotes values, knowledge and skills that can be transferred to any social work situation. As such social workers at the BSW level do not specialize in a particular theory or practice rather they are equipped with a broad range of knowledge, values and skills that can be integrated in the assessment and intervention processes at all levels (Johnson and Yanca, 2001).
Table 3.3: Overview of Full-time Bachelor of Social Work Programs in Ontario

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Yr. Admitted to BSW program</th>
<th>Admission Requirements</th>
<th>Field program includes integration seminar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carleton</td>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>- OSSD with six Gr.12/OAC courses with a minimum high 60's average</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Preference is given to those with one year human service experience</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Application with Personal statement and analysis of social problem</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Two references, one education and one employment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kings University College</td>
<td>Generalist</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>- 10 full courses with 3 social work prerequisites</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- 70% required in two social work prerequisites; 60% for the research course,</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- 3 courses in Social Sciences and 1 Arts with a 70% average</td>
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<td>- Group interview</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Resume</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Two letters of reference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakehead</td>
<td>Integrated Generalist</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>- 8 courses with 4 from Social Sciences and Humanities, one compulsory Social work course</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Resume</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Personal statement admissions exam</td>
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<td>- Group interview</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- References</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>Yr. Admitted to BSW program</td>
<td>Admission Requirements</td>
<td>Field program includes integration seminar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laurentian</td>
<td>Generalist</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>• Grade score based on required courses calculated according to a formula (Worth 70%)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Personal statement (Worth 30%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMaster</td>
<td>Anti-oppressive</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>• Five courses (30 units) with prerequisite six units in Sociology or Social Work plus six additional units with a grade average of 67%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Renison College   | Generalist       | Completion of Bachelor of Arts required to enter | • Completion of undergraduate degree with a B average, 10 courses must be in Social Sciences  
• Personal statement  
• Three references, academic, helping professional and employer | Yes                                           |
| Ryerson           | Anti-oppressive  | First                        | • OSSD with six Gr. 12/OAC courses, one must be English with a minimum average of 70%  | Yes                                           |
|                   |                  |                              | • Resume  
• Two references of your choice  
• Admission essay |                                               |
| Windsor           | Generalist       | Third                        | • 20 courses  
• 70% average in social work courses and one course must be statistics/research methods  
• Application form that includes a personal statement | Integration is not offered as a separate course however is a component of all practice courses |

47
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Yr. Admitted to BSW program</th>
<th>Admission Requirements</th>
<th>Field program includes integration seminar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>Critical Anti-oppressive</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>• Three references, academic, employer reference, and volunteer/human services work reference</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• OSSD with six Gr12 U or M/OAC courses, one must be English with a 75% average</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Application form that includes a personal statement and problem statement</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Three references, academic, one professional/work-related and one of your choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Admission criteria differ across programs with the majority requiring students to apply for admission to the Bachelor of Social Work program in their third year. This requirement is similar to other professional schools (i.e. law) where the student has a general liberal arts introduction in the first two years of study. However, three schools admit to the Bachelor of Social Work program immediately in the first year and two schools have admissions that occur in the 2nd year. For Schools of Social Work that admit beyond year one, procedures consistently require a personal statement and references (both volunteer/employment and personal). In addition to the statement and references, some schools also use a group interview to assess the potential of students and one school requires students to complete the Social Work Admissions Test.

Master of Social Work Programs in Ontario

At one time in Canada the Master of Social Work degree was the entry to the profession. This trend shifted once Universities began offering Bachelor of Social Work degree programs. An increase in the number of BSW graduates in comparison to those with a Master of Social Work created a situation where many employers changed their employment requirements to a BSW. The first social work program of study was a Master of Social Work at the University of Toronto. In fact, Toronto remains one of two schools, the other being Wilfred Laurier, that offers only a Master of Social Work program. There are nine MSW programs offered throughout Ontario with most programs offering a one-year program for BSW graduates and a two-year program for students who do not have a BSW but do have a related degree. Table 3.4 provides a summary of the one year MSW programs that require a BSW degree.
Table 3.4: Summary of MSW programs for BSW graduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Practice Approach</th>
<th>Practice Streams</th>
<th>Required Courses</th>
<th>Admission requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carleton</td>
<td>Analytical and Critical</td>
<td>Individual, Families and Groups</td>
<td>Advanced theory for social work practice</td>
<td>B+ average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social Administration/Policy</td>
<td>Research and Evaluation</td>
<td>Research course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community Work/Social Development</td>
<td>Practicum/Thesis</td>
<td>Personal statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integration seminar</td>
<td>References: at minimum one academic and one work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Electives (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King's University College</td>
<td>Advanced Generalist</td>
<td>None listed</td>
<td>Advanced Practice 1</td>
<td>75% average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SW Practice Research</td>
<td>Research and statistics courses</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>SW Policy and Practice</td>
<td>Resume</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Advanced SW Practice 2</td>
<td>Study plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Two references from work/voluntary</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Program Development and Evaluation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced Practicum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Graduate Practice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Research Seminar (integration)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakehead</td>
<td>Advanced Generalist</td>
<td>Based on faculty interests</td>
<td>Research Methods</td>
<td>B average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They include but are not limited to: child welfare,</td>
<td>Policy and Northern</td>
<td>Research course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mental health, juvenile justice, gerontology,</td>
<td>Social Work Practice</td>
<td>At least two years paid social work experience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>employment/income security, school social work and</td>
<td>Theory and Northern</td>
<td>Resume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>women’s studies</td>
<td>Social Work Practice</td>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Field Practicum</td>
<td>Study plan</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s Project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurentian</td>
<td>Advanced Generalist</td>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Advanced Social Work Practice</td>
<td>Mid B average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Professional experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concentration on</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Advanced Social Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Practice Approach</td>
<td>Practice Streams</td>
<td>Required Courses</td>
<td>Admission requirements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>Northern Issues</td>
<td></td>
<td>Research 1: Methods&lt;br&gt;Research 2: Advanced&lt;br&gt;Practicum&lt;br&gt;Electives</td>
<td>Curriculum vitae&lt;br&gt;Essay&lt;br&gt;References with at least one academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMaster</td>
<td>Advanced Generalist and Anti-oppressive</td>
<td>Analysis of social work policy&lt;br&gt;Analysis of social work practice</td>
<td>Policy:&lt;br&gt;Poicy-making process&lt;br&gt;Social Welfare and Social Work&lt;br&gt;Community-based social policy&lt;br&gt;Critical Approaches to SW Knowledge&lt;br&gt;Research Methods for SW&lt;br&gt;Elective (1)&lt;br&gt;Practice:&lt;br&gt;Institutional Structuring Practices in SW&lt;br&gt;Critical Analysis of SW practice&lt;br&gt;SW practice and Social Justice&lt;br&gt;Critical Approaches to SW Knowledge&lt;br&gt;Research Methods for SW&lt;br&gt;Elective (1)</td>
<td>Policy:&lt;br&gt;B+ average&lt;br&gt;Research and statistics courses&lt;br&gt;2 senior policy courses&lt;br&gt;Practice:&lt;br&gt;B+ average&lt;br&gt;Research and statistics courses&lt;br&gt;2 years experience in social work preferably post BSW&lt;br&gt;Resume&lt;br&gt;Personal statement&lt;br&gt;Two references from academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Evidence-based practice</td>
<td>Children and families&lt;br&gt;Gerontology&lt;br&gt;Health/Mental Health&lt;br&gt;Diverse populations</td>
<td>Total of 9 half credit courses:&lt;br&gt;Four are based on area of specialization</td>
<td>Mid B average&lt;br&gt;3 courses in social sciences with a half course in research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Practice Approach</td>
<td>Practice Streams</td>
<td>Required Courses</td>
<td>Admission requirements</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individual, Family, Groups (IFG)</td>
<td>1 research</td>
<td>Experience in the social services and knowledge of critical social issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community policy, planning and organizations (CPPO)</td>
<td>2 practicum</td>
<td>Resume</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Electives (2)</td>
<td>Written essay</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Three references with one academic and one work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilfred Laurier</td>
<td>Person in environment</td>
<td>Individual, Family, Groups (IFG)</td>
<td>IFG: Assessment of SW Practice</td>
<td>73% average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concentration on equity and diversity</td>
<td>Community policy, planning and organizations (CPPO)</td>
<td>Differential Use of Self</td>
<td>4 full social science courses with one-half credit in research and in statistics</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Advanced Practice: Individuals</td>
<td>Evidence of paid/voluntary experience</td>
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<td>Practicum (2)</td>
<td>Resume</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Advanced Practice: Families</td>
<td>Personal statement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Clinical Research</td>
<td>Three references: one academic, helping professional and employer</td>
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<td>Advanced Practice: Groups</td>
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<td>Advanced Social Policy</td>
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<td>Electives (2)</td>
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<td>CPPO: Assessment of SW Practice</td>
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<td>Capacity Building</td>
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<td>Practicum(2)</td>
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<td>Advanced Social Policy</td>
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<td>Program Development</td>
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<td>Social Action or Managing Social Service</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Practice Approach</td>
<td>Practice Streams</td>
<td>Required Courses</td>
<td>Admission requirements</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>Critical social work</td>
<td>None listed</td>
<td>Critical Perspectives in SW, Graduate Research Seminar, Practicum, Practicum Research Seminar (Integration), Electives (2)</td>
<td>B average in last two years of BSW, Resume, Personal statement, References: one academic, one professional and your choice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although it is possible to enter a MSW program immediately following the completion of the BSW, many MSW programs encourage students to have practice experience. The expectation is that MSW students will integrate their practice experience with a higher level of learning to become advanced practitioners. There is an analytical level that is also expected within MSW programs. Rather the integration of practice and analytical thinking can be advanced through the use of reflective practice.

Those schools that identified a generalist BSW identified the advanced generalist approach at the MSW level. For three of these schools, an advanced generalist approach and specialization were identified. Lakehead University identifies five practice areas: 1) child and family welfare; 2) community development; 3) mental health; 4) corrections; and, 5) health care. At McMaster University, MSW students select from two streams: 1) analysis of social work practice, or 2) social policy. The University of Windsor offers three practice areas: 1) child welfare; 2) gerontology; and, 3) health care. Carleton University, which follows a structural approach, differentiates practice in three streams: 1) individual, family and group; 2) social administration and policy; and, 3) community work and social development. The two Schools, that only provide a MSW program, University of Toronto and Wilfred Laurier University, also concentrate on specializations. Toronto has four practice areas: 1) children and families; 2) gerontology; 3) health and mental health; and, 4) diverse populations. Wilfred Laurier focuses on either direct or indirect practice including: 1) individual, families and groups or 2) community, policy, planning and organizations. The remaining three schools do not identify any specific areas of practice.

Beyond the advanced curriculum that is provided, Master of Social Work programs also have another component designed to advance practice namely an advanced
practicum or thesis. Four programs provide the opportunity for an advanced practicum only. In connection with the practicum, they provide integration seminars. The other programs that offer a practicum do not include an integration component. One program provides only a thesis option.

In summary, there are 7 Schools of Social Work in Ontario that offer both Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work degrees. Most of these schools are based on the generalist/advanced generalist approach. These Schools are: 1) Carleton, 2) King’s University College, 3) Lakehead, 4) Laurentian, 5) McMaster, 6) Windsor, and, 7) York. Two Schools of Social Work, University of Renison and Ryerson, offer only a Bachelor of Social Work program and two Schools, University of Toronto and Wilfred Laurier, offer only a Master of Social Work degree. While most of the Bachelor of Social Work programs have a separate field integration seminar, one School has integrated field and classroom learning as a component of all practice courses. Most of the Master of Social Work programs, where an internship or practicum was offered, also included an integration seminar. The variety in Masters of Social Work programs provides excellent opportunities for social workers to advance their practice by choosing specific practice or population approaches. What becomes evident from this discussion and review of the evolution of social work practice and education in Canada is that each social worker’s experiences are unique. Social work practice has been influenced by: 1) the decade of their education, 2) the prevalent philosophy of the School of Social Work, and, 3) the practice models taught at that time.
CHAPTER 4: THE RESEARCH STUDY

This exploratory research study explored how social workers articulate their social work practice using a constructivist methodology. Constructivist research is appropriate given that the researcher and subjects will co-construct and interpret the multiple realities of social work practice. Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify that where there are multiple realities; there are opportunities for conflict. Therefore, it is the researcher’s role to make sense or meaning through interpretation and analysis of the data.

The research questions explored in this research study are:

1) What values influence the social worker’s articulation of practice?
2) What dimensions of reflective practice influence the social worker’s articulation of practice?
3) What dimensions of practice wisdom influence the social worker’s articulation of practice?

Design of the study

The study had the following characteristics consistent with constructive methodology, the study: 1) employed a purposive sampling process; 2) used qualitative interview methods; 3) emphasized the importance of the researcher’s subjectivity; 4) used questions to determine the social worker’s tacit knowledge; and, 5) followed a data analysis process that is interpretive (Rodwell, 1998). Most importantly, the purpose of the study was grounded in the philosophy of assisting social workers to understand: 1) “what they know”; and, 2) “what they do with their knowledge”, thereby contributing to the knowledge building process of the profession (Rodwell, 1998). Constructivist research methods are designed to capture multiple realities. Social work professionals employ...
reflective practice to identify knowledge that they incorporate into their repertoire. This allows them to continually learn and develop and to articulate models to develop practice theory. This study used qualitative interviews to explore how social worker’s perceived and articulated their social work practice on three levels: 1) their social work values; 2) dimensions of reflective practice, and, 3) dimensions of practice wisdom.

Context

The context of the study is framed within the development of social work in Ontario. The conceptual framework outlines the context for the study specifically, 1) policy and legislation governing social work practice, 2) social work education and field practice with a focus on reflective practice, and 3) the Social Work Code of Ethics. Research on Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work (one year) programs across Ontario Schools of Social Work was conducted using the internet. Table 3.3 is a description of the information, related to BSW programs, which includes: 1) philosophies of the Schools; 2) admission requirements; and, 3) presence of field integration seminars (a reflective practice element). Only the MSW (one year) program was reviewed as it requires social workers to have a Bachelor of Social Work degree and this was consistent with the eligibility criteria for the study. Table 3.4 is a description of these programs across Ontario and includes: 1) practice approach; 2) admission criteria; 3) practice streams; and, 4) compulsory courses which also included the requirement for integration seminars. With respect to admission criteria, the requirement for work experience was highlighted. Prior experience, which includes work, life and education, is a dimension of reflective practice and practice wisdom. Master of Social Work programs are a professional development opportunity and facilitate the development of advanced social work practice.
Population and sample

The initial population of interest for the study was social workers: 1) with a Bachelor of Social Work degree; 2) currently practicing in Ontario; 3) minimum of five years experience; and, 4) received their education from a School of Social Work in Ontario. However, after the first attempt to recruit the sample, there was limited contact by eligible participants specifically as it related to holding only a Bachelor of Social Work degree. Those social workers that indicated interest in participating held a Masters of Social Work degree. The Thesis Chair was approached for permission to change the criteria and subsequently the other members of the Committee were contacted for their approval. Permission was then requested and granted from the Research Ethics Board, University of Windsor to adjust the criteria for participation in the study to social workers who held Bachelor and Masters of Social Work degrees.

Consequently, the population of interest for the study became social workers with the following characteristics: 1) currently practicing social work in Ontario; 2) minimum of five years practice experience; 3) hold a Bachelor and Master of Social Work degrees; and, 4) received their Master’s education from a School of Social Work in Ontario. The rationale for placing five-year criteria on practice experience is to ensure the social worker has had the opportunity to establish a body of social work knowledge.

A purposive sample of nine (9) social workers from across Ontario was proposed. Given the existence of a provincial association, the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW), with 15 branches across Ontario, the sample was derived from this organization. An introductory letter (Appendix A) was distributed to each Branch President requesting that they disseminate the letter to their members. The letter asked possible participants to contact the researcher directly. Initially, there were three social
workers who contacted the researcher who had BSW and MSW degrees. It was at this point that the researcher requested approval to change the criterion to social workers who had both BSW and MSW degrees. Consistent with the snowball sampling procedure, these three social workers were asked to distribute the revised letter to colleagues. Also the revised letter was re-distributed to one branch president to see if it would generate any further interest. As a result 3 more social workers contacted the researcher and agreed to participate in the study. A total of 6 interviews were completed for the study. There were 5 female participants and 1 male participant with the majority of participants having extensive practice experience. The range of practice experience was from 5 years to 35 years.

Study Instruments

Participants contacted the researcher either by e-mail or by telephone. This contact confirmed the participants’ interest in being interviewed. Following this the research package was sent to the address they requested. The research package consisted of the following, 1) the Letter of Information (Appendix B); 2) Consent to Participate in the Research (Appendix C); 3) Participant Profile Form (Appendix D); 4) Interview Guide (Appendix E); and, 5) a self-addressed stamped envelope. Participants were requested to return the Participant Profile Form and the Consent to Participate in the Research using the self-addressed stamped envelope. Once the Participant Profile Form and Consent to Participate was received, the researcher separated the forms into separate files and contacted the participants for an appropriate interview time. The Participant Profile Form was used to capture descriptive characteristics such as: 1) gender; 2) special certifications and workshops; 3) years of social work practice experience; and, 4) type of social work experience.
The design of the study consisted of telephone interviews using a semi-structured interview guide that included a set of ten (10) open-ended questions, derived from the conceptual framework (Appendix E). The interview guide included questions that explored the three research questions: 1) social work values; 2) dimensions of reflective practice; and 3) dimensions of practice wisdom. Probes were used in the process when necessary to assist in the clarification of answers or to encourage further descriptions. Given the small sample that was achieved, it was not possible to pre-test the interview guide without reducing the overall sample size. In addition, since the participants are practicing social workers and would be very familiar with the terms used in the interview guide, it was felt the absence of a pre-test would not be a major limitation of the study.

Telephone interviews required the researcher to pay attention to developing an initial rapport with the interviewee. The methodology included procedures that ensured opportunities to develop a preliminary rapport prior to the interview. These procedures included: 1) an introductory letter to establish the importance of the study; 2) mailing of an interview package, interview guide and consent forms, to potential participants; and, 3) first phone call to confirm the participants, answer preliminary questions regarding the study, and determine the best time to conduct the actual interview.

Methodological Issues

Consistency and Dependability of Results

In order to achieve consistency and dependability the researcher had to assure the readers that as Merriam (2002) states, “given the data collected, the results make sense” (p.27). The researcher kept a field journal that recorded the research process and also identified any interpretations that the researcher reflected on while in the midst of the process. The researcher also attempted to maintain consistency in the length of time for
the interview which was approximately one hour. This consistency contributed to the
dependability of the results.

*Transparency*

Constructivist research methodology acknowledges that the researcher is the
primary instrument for data collection. As such, the researcher is required to reflect on
their bias toward the study topic and subsequent outcomes (Merriam, 2002). This level of
personal reflection is even more important in this study because of the insider dynamic
present as a result of the researcher also being a professional social worker. The
researcher chose this proposed study topic because of her strong commitment to the social
work profession and her personal interest in understanding what differentiates social work
from other helping professions. The researcher has had a variety of work experiences in
health and social service environments in addition to policy settings that have highlighted
how the role of social work can become blurred with other professionals. However, the
diverse work experience of the researcher has also demonstrated that professional values
distinguish social work from other professionals.

The researcher's choice to be a field instructor is also related to a commitment to
the profession and a sense of professional obligation to be involved in educating social
workers. However, in carrying out the role of field instruction and in engaging in dialogue
with social work students, the researcher has experienced frustration with the constant
struggle to integrate social work theory with practice.

Therefore, this research study assisted the researcher in her own professional
development to better understand how social workers interpret the different knowledge
sets that are part of their social work practice. Specifically, do they integrate theory with
practice? The researcher was attuned to any bias and paid particular attention to probing questions that could lead the subjects in a particular direction.

**Limitations of Methodology**

The recruitment process is purposive and was designed in such a way as to encourage a range of participants. However, the narrow eligibility criteria may have limited the recruitment. The original criteria called for social workers with a BSW only. Without having knowledge of the breakdown of the OASW membership, according to the degrees held, it could have been that the majority of members in OASW have a Master of Social Work degree. The use of this organization to recruit the sample may have been limiting based on the criteria of a Bachelor of Social Work degree only. Once the eligibility criterion was changed to social workers who had both a BSW and MSW, recruitment was still difficult. Social workers can attain a Master of Social Work without having a Bachelor of Social Work and the criteria excluded this group. Also the criterion of having five years of practice experience limited newer graduates. It was determined that five years of practice experience was necessary for the study. The assumption was that five years would provide adequate time for a social worker to develop a body of knowledge that contributes to their practice.

Qualitative methods may use face-to-face interviews. However the use of telephone interviews is acceptable (Rodwell, 1998). The telephone interview was necessary in this study given the potential geographic distance between the researcher and subjects. It also minimized costs of the study. It is also likely that the researcher would personally know some of the subjects and therefore the telephone interview data collection method created some distance between the researcher and participant. This distance could be of benefit especially if the social worker described current negative
experiences within their social work practice. There are two major disadvantages to employing a telephone interview data collection method: 1) the researcher is limited in their ability to interpret non-verbal cues; and, 2) it is more difficult to establish a relationship with the subject particularly those subjects that are strangers to the researcher (Rodwell, 1998).

Data collection

Given the small sample that was achieved, it was not possible to pre-test the interview guide without reducing the overall sample size. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in a private office on campus at the University of Windsor. Participants were interviewed at the location and time that was convenient for them. Although documentation suggested that the participants would be interviewed in their own home, all the participants chose to be interviewed at their place of employment. The length of the interview was estimated at 1.0 hour and outside of the first interview, the remaining five were approximately 1.0 hour long. The first interview provided the researcher with the opportunity to adjust the interviewing technique. This led to an increase in the amount of probing for the other interviews. Although the interviews were taped, the researcher also kept notes in the event that there was a problem with the tapes. The notes were stored in a separate file from the Consent to Participate and the Participant Profile Form. The notes used the same numerical code and did not have any names on them. The interview tapes were numbered and also stored separately in a locked cabinet. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher generally within 2-3 days of the interview. The transcriptions were numbered and stored in a separate file from the other documents.
Confidentiality

Different procedures were implemented to enhance confidentiality during the interview process. First, a third party, not associated with the study, was available to address any concerns regarding the research. Second, the option of contacting the subjects at their home was provided by the researcher. However all the subjects chose to be interviewed at their workplace. Third, the interview was audio-taped with consent. Written consent was provided for the audio-taping and the researcher also validated the consent for audio-taping before proceeding with the interview. Fourth, the consent included the option of contacting the participant to clarify any responses once the interview was completed. None of the research instruments, excluding the Consent Form, had names associated with them and the Consent Forms were separated from the data. Finally, the researcher transcribed the interviews in order to enhance confidentiality.

Data Analysis Process

The researcher attempted to maintain consistency in the length of time for the interview thereby creating dependability in the data. Each interview was approximately one hour. Attempts were made to transcribe the interviews within a 24 hour period and for the most part this was achieved. The maximum length of time between the interview and transcription was 2 – 3 days. Field notes were completed within 24 hours and they included the researcher’s immediate reflection of the interview including concerns and noticeable themes that occurred.

Since the sample size was small (6 participants), the researcher analyzed the data manually did not use a computer software program. The manual analysis also assisted the researcher to develop a level of intimacy with the data. Content analysis was used to explore the themes in the data. The researcher numbered the lines of the transcribed
interviews to facilitate the identification of recurring themes. The conceptual framework provided the first set of codes for the analysis thus the transcribed interviews were analyzed according to, 1) social work values, 2) dimensions of reflective practice, and 3) the dimensions of practice wisdom. As the data was analyzed, the researcher also identified emergent themes. These emergent themes were examined in the context of whether they fit with the existing codes or they required a separate code.

The transcribed interviews were also analyzed based on the conceptual framework which was the basis for the interview guide. For each interview question, a corresponding analytical question was developed. Data from questions #5, #6 and #10 which were broad and not as readily connected to the conceptual framework benefited from the development of the analytical question. For each theme or dimension, a definition was determined and the interviews were analyzed according to the frequency of the appearance of the concepts in the definition. Table 4.1 beginning on the next page represents the outcomes of the data analysis process.

Once the data was exhausted for categories and themes, it was examined utilizing various frames of reference including: 1) the context of the research study particularly the influence of social work education in Ontario; 2) how social workers articulate their practice; 3) why the results are important; 4) whether the results are consistent or differed from the review of literature; 5) the implications for social work practice and the profession; and, 6) exploration of future areas of research.
Table 4.1: Identification of concepts, themes, sub-themes by interview questions (#2-#10)

**Question 2: Social Work Values**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
<th>Characteristics of code-book definitions</th>
<th>Themes/Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>References to service above self, considering the best interests of others</td>
<td>Service Influence of faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Reference to social justice, affecting social change, concern for oppressed populations, diversity and inclusivity</td>
<td>Social Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dignity and Worth</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>References to client self-determination, acceptance, respect, non-judgmental attitude, free will, building relationships, trust, starting where the client is at, putting myself in the client’s shoes</td>
<td>Client self-determination Acceptance Building relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>References to confidentiality, mandatory reporting, and conflict of interest</td>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>References to integrity, honesty and ethical practice</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Frequency of Occurrence</td>
<td>Characteristics of code-book definitions</td>
<td>Themes/Sub-themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>References to life-long learning, personal growth, best practices, excellence and professional developments</td>
<td>Life-long learning Professional development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 3: Values Conflict**

**Interview Guide Question:** If you have had a situation where your personal values conflicted with your professional social work values, what were your reflections regarding this situation.

**Analytical Question:** What are the dimensions that were articulated in the examples of value conflicts?

**Concept:** Social Work Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
<th>Characteristics of code book definition</th>
<th>Themes/Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client self-determination</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>References to client self determination</td>
<td>Client self-determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith-based values</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>References to conflicts between what faith says and client behaviours</td>
<td>Faith-based values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational conflicts</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>References to conflicts that occurred at an organizational level</td>
<td>Organizational conflicts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 4: Dealing with unique and/or challenging practice situations**

**Interview Question:** When you are experiencing a situation that is unique and/or challenging, what process do you go through to understand the situation.

**Analytical Question:** Which dimensions of reflective practice were articulated as useful in unique and/or challenging practice situations?

**Concept:** Dimensions of reflective practice

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of Reflective Practice</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
<th>Characteristics of code book definitions</th>
<th>Theme/Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value judgments</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>References to consideration of values and personal bias in decision-making</td>
<td>Value judgments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior knowledge and experience</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>References to life experiences, family influence, education, field placement and validation of practice</td>
<td>Prior knowledge and experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought processes/offers explanations</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>References to reflection, thinking about decisions and explaining practice</td>
<td>Thinking about and explaining practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client perceptions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>References to client role in relationship, client feedback and participation</td>
<td>Client perceptions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 5: Example of ineffective social work practice

Interview Question: Can you describe a practice situation where you feel you were not as effective; how did this situation affect your social work practice?

Analytical Question: What were the characteristics of non-effective social work practice articulated by the social workers?

Concept: Dimensions of reflective practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Non-effective practice situations</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
<th>Characteristics of code book definitions</th>
<th>Theme/Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative outcomes for client</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>References to decisions or situations not working out the best</td>
<td>Negative outcomes for client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values conflict</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>References to conflict in values</td>
<td>Values conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of judgment errors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>References to making better decisions</td>
<td>Judgment errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of Non-effective practice situations</td>
<td>Frequency of Occurrence</td>
<td>Characteristics of code book definitions</td>
<td>Theme/Sub-theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Reflection</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>References to use of reflection, thinking about the practice situation</td>
<td>Use of reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>References to personal growth, things learned</td>
<td>Personal growth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 6: Example of effective social work practice**

**Interview Question:** Can you describe a practice situation where you feel you were effective; how did this situation affect your social work practice?

**Analytical Question:** What were the characteristics of effective social work practice articulated by the social workers?

**Concept: Dimensions of reflective practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Effective Social Work Practice</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
<th>Characteristics of code book definitions</th>
<th>Theme/Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive outcomes for clients</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>References to positive outcomes for clients, positive changes</td>
<td>Positive outcomes for clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation of practice</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>References to being affirmed, feeling good about the outcomes</td>
<td>Validation of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation of values</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>References to seeing values in action</td>
<td>Validation of values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>References to opportunities for personal growth and learnings from the positive practice situation</td>
<td>Personal growth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 7: Prior knowledge and experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question: Describe in what ways your prior knowledge and experience contributed to your social work practice.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analytical Question: How does prior knowledge and experience contribute to practice wisdom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept: Dimensions of practice wisdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior knowledge and experience</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
<th>Characteristics of code book definitions</th>
<th>Theme/Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life experience</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>References to life events, family influence, volunteer experiences</td>
<td>Life experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>References to work experiences that influenced practice</td>
<td>Employment experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>References to education and social work education</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field placement</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>References to field experience and supervision</td>
<td>Field placement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 8: Defining moment in education experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question: Describe a defining moment in your social work education experience that you feel contributed most to your social work practice?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analytical Question: How does education experience contribute to practice wisdom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept: Dimensions of practice wisdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education experience</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
<th>Characteristics of code book definitions</th>
<th>Theme/Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum experiences</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>References to specific classes, types of education</td>
<td>Curriculum experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field placement experiences</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>References to field placement and field supervision</td>
<td>Field placement experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 9: Social Work Knowledge

Interview Question: Describe the knowledge base that frames your practice and where you gained this knowledge?

Analytical Question: What are the types of knowledge that contribute to the dimensions of practice wisdom?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept: Dimensions of practice wisdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions of practice wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge proven through research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback from colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 10: General observations regarding social work practice

| Interview question: Are there any other observations about your social work practice that you feel is important for me to know? |
| Analytical question: What were the additional wisdom/reflections articulated by the social workers? |

Concept: Dimensions of practice wisdom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of practice wisdom</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
<th>Characteristics of code book definitions</th>
<th>Theme/Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Respect for profession</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>References to profession not respecting itself and not being respected by others</td>
<td>Respect for profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmation of practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>References to core values, confidence in practice, and importance of practice</td>
<td>Affirmation of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>References to education not doing enough to link theory to practice and to lack of management education</td>
<td>Limitations of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Reference to how technology is becoming part of social work practice</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
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Limitations in the Results

The conceptual framework provides the basis for the analysis of the results. In this regard there were elements within each of the three dimensions that were either not articulated or were articulated on a limited basis. For purposes of the study, the results and discussion focus on those elements where at least 50% of the participants identified the element and in sufficient detail to be discussed. Therefore, in the practice wisdom dimension of knowledge proven by research, some examples were identified such as journal articles. They were not discussed in any detail by the participants and therefore they were not included in the results or discussion.

The following dimensions were not part of the findings in the study. The core value of confidentiality will not be explored as it was only mentioned by a few participants. When the analysis was complete regarding the dimensions of reflective practice, “offers explanations for practice” was not identified within the interviews. Finally, within the dimensions of practice wisdom, two elements were not mentioned: 1) personal and professional bias and 2) grand theories.
CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the in-depth interviews including: 1) a profile of the participants; and, 2) interview results. The interview results are described according to the three dimensions in the conceptual framework: 1) social work values; 2) dimensions of reflective practice; and, 3) dimensions of practice wisdom.

Profile of the Participants

The Participant Profile Form (Appendix D) was used to gather information related to: 1) gender; 2) professional development; 3) years of practice; and, 4) types of social work practice. There were six participants in the study of which 5 were female and 1 was male. All participants had Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work degrees. All participants received their Masters education in Ontario while five of six participants also received their Bachelor of Social Work education in Ontario.

The length of time practicing social work ranged from 5 years: 10 months to 35 years: 1 month. Three of the participants in the study have been practicing for more than 30 years; one has been practicing for 29 years; one for 19 years: 6 months and the last social worker has been practicing for 5 years: 10 months.

Participants were requested to list their job titles and also to indicate the length of time in each position. The number of positions that the participants had practiced in varied from 1 to 6 positions; four out of six participants had practiced in more than four positions during their career. Private practice included those whose sole occupation was private practice and others who were in private practice in addition to their employment positions. The length of time in positions also varied; although one pattern was noticed. Four of the six participants have been in their current position for the majority of their career, exceeding over 10 years. A number of participants are in management positions.
Participants were asked if they had pursued any special certifications and professional development after their social work education. A few of the participants received a special certification including: 1) graduate diploma in social administration, 2) certified eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EDMR) specialist, and, 3) level 3 certification – Canadian Association for Child and Play Therapy. With respect to listing professional development workshops, a comprehensive list was not always provided. However, all participants described active participation in professional development through attendance at workshops and seminars. For the participants in management roles, much of their recent professional development focused on administrative areas such as financial management, fund-raising and human resources.

Findings of the In-depth Interviews

The interview guide was developed using the conceptual framework (Table 2.1) and questions were designed to obtain information related to the three previously identified dimensions: 1) social work values; 2) dimensions of reflective practice; and, 3) dimensions of practice wisdom.

Social work values

Social work values are described as core beliefs that are found in the Code of Ethics and guide social education, practice and research. There are six core values and these are: 1) respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons; 2) pursuit of social justice; 3) service to humanity; 4) integrity in professional practice; 5) confidentiality in professional practice; and, 6) competence in professional practice. However, social workers are people who have been influenced by their family, school, media and friends and also have a set of personal values. Therefore, when asked to describe values that guide their practice, participants had the opportunity to describe professional or personal
values that were most important to them. In the responses participants identified the Code of Ethics (2005) as a framework but often implied that the values they were expressing were their personal values. One participant stated

"Oh my goodness, I'm not sure you are asking me to go through the social work values but I am going to do it from a personal perspective".

The nature of the responses was that the participants were describing personal values although many identified the core values of the Code of Ethics. The six core values in the Code of Ethics were articulated consistently as the values that guided the practice of the participants in this study. Generally, each participant described one core value that took precedence for them and that value tended to be a reoccurring theme throughout the interview. For example, the central value was often articulated within the value conflict situations or as examples of effective and ineffective social work practice. The following results are described according to the six core values as outlined in the Code of Ethics (2005) and the conceptual framework (Table 2.1).

*Respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons*

Dignity and worth is the value that defines the uniqueness of the social work profession in that social workers promote client self-determination. This value also reinforces the idea that since each person is unique, each practice situation is unique. For example in promoting client self-determination the social worker positions the client as a partner in the relationship. Of all the values, this was the one that was described most frequently by the participants. There were several themes that were expressed by the participants that were consistent with the value of dignity and worth of persons including: 1) respect; 2) acceptance; 3) non-judgmental attitude; 4) free will; 5) client self determination; and, 6) importance of human relationships.
Four of the six study participants work directly with clients in one-to-one relationships therefore the expression of this value was central in their operationalization of social work practice. Many of the participants had also worked with clients who would not be accepted in society (e.g. sexual offenders). The extent to which they had integrated this value provided them the opportunity to be successful with this client population. The following quote highlights the high level of respect that occurs in these situations,

“They are at risk people, they are fringe people, they have special needs that don’t always express themselves well or know how to express themselves within a system nevertheless, it is my job to treat them with respect and to empower on the basis of who they are in this world”.

Client self-determination was readily expressed by most of the participants. The value was expressed in the descriptions of how participants interacted with their clients. It was also the value expressed most frequently within value conflict situations. The value conflict situations were examples where the participants had to support their client’s self-determination even though the client was making a bad decision and the overall outcome of the situation was not positive. In these situations participants were clear about the value of client self-determination and what it means to the interaction. Client self-determination is manifested in the following quote,

“The values that guide my practice is always looking at the client first, seeing where they, the client is at, acknowledging their self-determination, what are the client’s needs, where are their values at and how can I assist, so looking at what they identify and what they want to work on”.

Participants in this study had a high degree of self-awareness. This was reflected in their clear and immediate articulation of core values. The level of self-awareness is
indicated in the following quote related to the difficulties that can occur maintaining a non-judgmental attitude.

"Another is to be non-judgmental, I find that a huge struggle because I think I am a judgmental person. So I try to incorporate that in a very mindful way, everyday".

The importance of the value of inherent dignity and worth was also highlighted in the examples participants provided. They identified how important it is to show respect when building trusting relationships with clients. The concept of building a trusting relationship was the most frequent example provided in the descriptions of effective practice situations. The critical ingredient to having a positive outcome was the fact that the participant had a trusting respectful relationship in place with the client. In these situations, participants articulated the phrase, "starting where the client is at" to show the importance of having respect for the client and their situation. Other participants described the process of "putting myself in the other's shoes" as a method of operationalizing respect and the starting point for building a relationship with a client. One participant stated,

"And so it is like I am patient too, part of it is respecting who they are...but you just have to meet them where they are at".

The following quote summarizes the importance of building relationships,

"In that case what I learned from that is just treating someone with respect goes a long way and meeting them where they are at, in that case I walked the small steps with her to slowly get her connected, and you know encouraged her and praised her...".
Pursuit of social justice

The values of service and social justice are linked. Two concepts that are prevalent in the understanding of social justice are the global impact and the central function of social work which is to advocate for vulnerable population groups. Two of the participants described opportunities they had at the international level: 1) one working overseas and 2) another having participated in international conferences in Third World countries. The opportunity to experience the unjust conditions in some countries influenced the participant’s practice,

"Going there and hearing and seeing and literally being immersed in it, again, the head and heart knowledge, really impacted and brought a different level of understanding to my work”.

All the participants at one point in their careers were working with vulnerable population groups. For some of the participants, the groups would be considered extremely vulnerable or “fringe” participants in society such as sexual offenders and pedophiles. The value of diversity was expressed by some participants. This value is also consistent with advocating for social change.

Faith-based values were also influential in the articulation of social justice. One participant described a faith-based value as “repair the world” and likened it to the whole area of social justice. This example was also one that demonstrated the integration or fit between the participant’s personal and professional values.

Service to humanity

Although service was not explicitly stated within any of the six interviews, several themes that are consistent with the idea of service were articulated such as: 1) the role of faith in service; 2) value of working with people; and, 3) working in the best

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interests of clients. Four of the six participants described their faith as central to their practice as a social worker and stated that their faith provided guidance to them. One participant described how three core faith values were integrated into their professional social work values. The quote below illustrates the concept of service to humanity:

"Another value is one person taking care of another person, its just globally doing as much as you can to help to improve the quality of life of another human being".

The concept of being committed to taking care of other people was evident in descriptions of the value of the social work profession and the importance it plays in working with people. One participant states,

"When you are working with people their life is very important to you, so what you do is important".

Further another participant validated the importance of their social work practice in the following statement,

"The other thing is that there is the sincerity, sincerity around the interest in the client and the desire and the proof that the work we do means something in their life"

Finally, participants in the study discussed the concept of “best interests” of the client both in working on an individual level and at a macro level. For example, one participant describes an example of an ineffective practice situation as one where they had to weigh the interests of an individual client with the interests of others and the organization. The results were that the interests of the individual client were not met as well as the interests of the organization. However, that was the decision that was needed at the time. Another participant identified that sometimes it is necessary to examine the

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"greater vision, greater cause" while balancing what is in the best interests of everyone. The concept of best interest is consistent with service above self as described in the Code of Ethics (2005).

**Integrity in professional practice**

Integrity is the value that promotes honesty in all decisions and actions especially in situations where there may be an ethical conflict. The themes that were articulated in relation to this value included: 1) integrity; 2) honesty; and, 3) ethical practice. All these concepts were equally articulated within the interviews. Integrity and honesty were explicitly stated as values. One participant described a value conflict situation where a situation was not considered ethical. At the time, the participant did not address the conflict. This was a situation in the participant’s early years of practice. Although this respondent knew the situation was not ethical, reasons were identified why the situation was not addressed,

"I did find at that stage in my career, being a young social worker that that was a lot of responsibility and I didn't feel comfortable with that situation. At that time, was it my age, was it my own value system or what that was all about”.

A unique element of this value was the articulation of the boundaries that social worker’s are obligated to operate under in mandatory reporting situations. Therefore, one participant explained integrity in these situations in the following way,

"The only exception is when I have to report something but I don't do that behind their back”.

**Competence in professional practice**

This value promotes life-long learning and professional development for social work practitioners. It also supports the idea that social workers can always learn
something from every interaction. The interviews were reviewed for the following themes of competence: 1) personal growth; 2) best practices; 3) lifelong learning; 4) excellence; and, 5) professional development.

This was a value that was highly developed for many of the study participants as they were long time practitioners who acknowledged that it doesn’t matter how long you practice, you are always learning. As one participant stated,

"I don’t care how many years experience I or anyone else has I think there are always opportunities for growth and development, to learn from one another".

Also many of these participants had varied positions and had even moved into advanced practitioner roles such as administration. Professional development has always played a role for these participants in developing new knowledge or knowledge in emerging areas of social work practice. They also have highly developed professional networks and identified that they consulted on best practices and research within these professional networks.

"Another thing I find helpful is that I am able to find out what other communities go through because I am part of a national, international network...I am actually able to check out best practices that might work or not".

In addition to acknowledging how professional development contributes to lifelong learning, participants also reported that building on knowledge assists social workers to become better practitioners. It is through the accumulation of knowledge and experience, both elements of lifelong learning, that the social worker strives for excellence. The following statement summarizes this element,

"Each (experience) builds on the next step so that you are working toward this excellence in your profession and your practice".
Personal growth was best demonstrated by the reporting of the use of therapy as a tool for personal growth. This was common among the participants engaged in private practice.

**Dimensions of reflective practice**

Reflective practice is defined as a process employed by social work practitioners to enhance their practice effectiveness. It also defines how the social worker constructs knowledge. The dimensions of reflective practice detailed in this section are: 1) considers values and makes value judgments; 2) considers prior knowledge and experience; 3) evaluates own thinking; and, 4) considers client perceptions. In order to explore these elements, three questions were asked of the social workers: 1) when you are experiencing a situation that is unique and/or challenging, what process do you go through to understand the situation?; 2) Can you describe a practice situation where you feel you were not as effective; how did this situation affect your social work practice?; and, 3) Can you describe a practice situation where you were successful; how did this situation affect your social work practice? It was the first question, focusing on unique and/or challenging situations, that generated the most responses related to the use of reflective practice. Some participants were able to differentiate between: 1) reflecting on their practice in the midst of a challenging situation and 2) utilizing reflective practice as a way to self-evaluate the outcome of a practice situation. The results are organized according to the five dimensions of reflective practice selected for the study.

**Considers values and makes value judgments**

The core social work values are the first element of the conceptual framework for this study. As previously mentioned there is a high level of self-awareness demonstrated by the participants in this study. They were in tune with the importance of understanding
what is happening in a particular practice situation. The need to examine whether personal or professional values are influencing decisions and the outcome of situations was evident in different practice areas. The following quote highlights the importance of considering your own value system especially when it may conflict with the clients you are working with,

"Always realizing how I am coming across as a white middle class person versus different cultural backgrounds and different parenting backgrounds"

Other participants were very aware that they need to consider their personal bias when they are reflecting on their reactions to a certain situation. As one participant stated,

"There might be trying to sort out if I have a personal feeling or personal experience in my own life, could it be getting in the way"

Another participant described how important it is to know yourself. If you were not aware of your bias, it would interfere with the relationship with the client and affect outcomes in a practice situation.

"People read through you unless you are in touch with the differential use of self unless you know whom you are and where your biases are people will read through you".

**Considers prior knowledge and experience**

The dimension of prior knowledge and experience is a dimension of: 1) reflective practice and 2) practice wisdom. Indeed, it is also linked with the core value of competence and the theme of lifelong learning. Social workers, in the process of making decisions and examining practice situations, consider their prior knowledge and experience. Such considerations acknowledges that the creation of knowledge is a cumulative process that builds on previous experiences. The themes related to prior
knowledge and experience that were reviewed for this study include: 1) expressions of life experience; 2) expressions of the influence of family; 3) the influence of education; 4) validation of practice; 5) prior practice experience; and, 6) the influence of field experience.

Although the articulation of examples of life experience and family influence are suited more to the dimensions of practice wisdom, it was identified that the actions of family influenced one's ability to integrate the value of acceptance into practice. This situation had a profound effect on the social worker's ability to separate personal faith beliefs from social work practice. Others identified the use of systems theory as fundamental to their practice. They identified how being from a large family influenced the initial understanding of this theory.

"I think coming from a big family it just related...that each person was a cog in the wheel, each person had its own set of parts but each person was greater than that whole family system"

The role of education in formulating knowledge that is considered in practice situations was consistently expressed. The articulation of the influence of education also reflected how knowledge is accumulated over time. Some participants identified the influence of their pre-BSW courses in psychology and sociology as a solid foundation for understanding people.

"I would think a lot of my knowledge base came through our psychology and sociology classes in my undergrad that really built up a lot of the concepts and theories for me"

They also described the social work courses that emphasized how to integrate theory with practice as most valuable. As one participant stated, "Classes where they
were able to apply the theory to practice and show how to do that that was very helpful”. In addition they articulated the knowledge they gained from their MSW courses as contributing to their practice. All the participants in the study identified field practice as an essential element of their prior experience. Since field practice is the social worker’s first experience in social work practice, it was formative for the participants. They related the importance of being exposed to different population groups, solidifying their values framework and demonstrating the concepts learned in school. This initial exposure to social work practice and the accumulation of practice experience is best demonstrated in this quote.

“You can learn knowledge, read it in books but when I experienced it week after week, going in and seeing because I didn’t have that kind of life. I have had so many experiences that have opened my eyes, that impact who I am as a person and as a social worker”.

The participants who have been practicing for years also tended to articulate how the accumulation of experience has influenced their practice. These participants have the advantage of sifting through prior situations and patterns, incorporating the parts of their practice that have worked and discarding those that have not.

“Every experience builds on the next experience and it just makes you that much more effective and efficient when you have learned successfully from a previous experience.”

These participants are also very aware of the integration of all aspects of their prior knowledge and experience. The uniqueness of social work training compared to other helping professionals that social workers tend to encounter in their workplaces was identified.
“Our training helps us understand ourselves and I am pretty sure none of the other disciplines go close to that but most social workers will talk about their own learning, their own process, then apply that based on their own experience.”

**Evaluates own thinking**

In this study, there is evidence that social workers engage in a process of reviewing their thinking, especially in unique and challenging situations. An unexpected result was the extent to which the participants engage other social workers or professionals in the process of assisting them to review their thinking. As this participant states,

“When I want to talk over client issues or even to talk about OK this is what I am seeing help me know what I am seeing, I have her to do consultation with me which I find really a bonus”

This element is linked with the element of peer consultation noted as a component of practice wisdom. Almost all the participants emphasized how they used other colleagues to assist them in the reflective process. The process of evaluating one’s own thinking includes challenging existing beliefs and assumptions but also searching out explanations for why certain situations occurred.

For some of the participants, being in the midst of a challenging situation required them to establish some distance in order that they may evaluate their thinking.

“Well first of all one of the things I try not to do is to put myself in a corner where I have to answer something right away. If I feel I need time to think about it, then I set that up”.

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Other participants explicitly described the processes they go through to evaluate situations that do not feel right. They know they have to proceed through a process of examining their thoughts and assumptions.

"When I step back I go what am I feeling, you know because that is what helps me judge, my intuition does this feel right or does this feel like I have a ball of steel wool in my gut, what is going on here, what am I reacting to".

"I always come at it from what I am feeling, then what am I thinking and then what am I going to do differently or what am I going to do the same".

**Considers client perceptions**

In voluntary practice situations, the social worker and the client enter into a partnership that is based on an understanding that each contributes to the interaction. Fundamental to this partnership is that the social worker considers the client the expert as it relates to their situation and the social worker is an objective facilitator or guide. The client has a very active role in the social work process and this high level of involvement is what can differentiate the process of reflective practice for social work from other professional practice. The themes that were relevant to the results are: 1) considering client's values; 2) obtaining client input; and, 3) client participation. One participant articulated how they consider client's values in the process of engaging and building a relationship with the client.

"The value that guides my social work practice is always looking at the client needs...where are their values at and how can I assist. So looking at what they identify and what they want to work on".

Client involvement occurs at all levels of social work practice.
"I think another is what I would call civic engagement, the whole value around people participating in the decision-making and problem-solving, creating solutions for the organization in which I work".

The example provided below is indicative of the role that client's play when social workers are engaged in the evaluation of their practice. While in the midst of a challenging situation, the client's participation can be particularly helpful in clarifying the dynamics of the practice situation.

"Sometimes I just need to review it again, if it is a client I say, "tell this to me again" and sometimes through that process I hear something that helps to move within this framework of whatever the situation is".

Dimensions of practice wisdom

This study identifies practice wisdom as an outcome of the consistent use of reflective practice over time. Thus social workers develop practice wisdom by reflecting on their practice and constantly integrating various knowledge components into their practice repertoire. Practice wisdom is an integration of types of knowledge, including the knowledge that is gained through accumulated practice experience. The question that asked the participants to "describe the knowledge base that frames your practice and where you gained this knowledge?" was not an easy question for many of the participants. One participant stated,

"Well when I read this question I said how in the heck do you answer that and I don't know how to answer that. I think your knowledge base comes over time".

Another participant said,
“This is where I start running into problems. The knowledge base—very generic—not a type of model that you would use that you would put a name to—we weren’t given any of that”.

The conceptual framework includes the following dimensions of practice wisdom that are reflected in the findings below: 1) practice theories; 2) practice experience; 3) feedback from colleagues; and, 4) prior knowledge and experience.

**Practice theories**

This element included both grand and practice theories however grand theories defined in the key concepts as “overarching philosophies that indicate economic and political orientation” were not articulated in the responses to the knowledge questions. Practice theories and, more specifically, how theory is linked to practice was a frequent response to the questions related to dimensions of practice wisdom. Specific theories were usually mentioned as a response to probing. Systems theory was the predominant orientation of the participants and this is consistent with the generalist orientation of many of the Schools of Social Work in Ontario. However the more frequent responses were related to how theory is applied in practice. Theories were at the forefront for the one participant who had been practicing for just over five years. For example, the following quote affirms the role of education in transmitting theories,

“School looked at a lot of different theories and I can honestly say that 5 years now down the road I can kind of remember those theories and I know I can probably pull some of those theories out but I don’t practice it every day, so I think it was helpful in school to learn those theories and to use them in placement and I think that carries me through now to where I am”
Further in the interview this same participant struggles with the process of identifying the use of specific theories and describes her frustration in this quote,

"I still have trouble, I know certain theories but I still don't feel I have as good a grasp to say that when I was working with that client I was using this theory. I am not that efficient at that and I wish I would have gotten more of that in my education"

The participants that have been practicing for several years articulated a process of sifting and sorting pieces of theories and integrating them into their own practice approach. Therefore, they did not articulate specific theories as such. This participant describes this process,

"I like Turner's book where you have a nice little bit of every theory because I think if you are around long enough you read it, you say oh I do that, so over time you integrate a lot of everything".

Finally, another participant articulates in a visual way how, over time, they have integrated theory into practice,

"I think I rely on a little bit of everything, it is kind of like making stew. You take the learning from that, you take the learning from somewhere else and it all comes together".

Therefore, specific practice theories were articulated as a dimension of practice wisdom. However, more prominent, was the process of integrating pieces of theories into the participant’s personal practice approach was predominant.

Practice experience

The themes related to practice experience that were reflected include: 1) articulation of examples of learning gained through practice experience; 2) descriptions of
how the participants gained experience; and in one interview, 3) a reflection on the
difference between new and experienced social workers. The questions that asked the
participants to reflect on ineffective and effective practice situations generated the most
responses regarding this dimension. From these experiences the participants articulated
changes they made to their practice such as,

"I have learned how to hear disagreements. I've learned how to hear criticism
and still hold true to my convictions and not get and not feel deflated so I think
overall I have learned how to keep my self intact, developed clear boundaries and
I have been able to do that in my practice."

The use of reflection on their practice experiences can result in greater self
awareness as a practitioner. The participants were able to identify situations in which they
needed to take more care of their self and be respectful of their own boundaries.

"Being overworked you have so much on your plate and really what I needed to
do was empty the plate a little and I would have been in a better situation to deal
with the situation."

Positive experiences or effective practice situations had an exhilarating effect in
that they could energize the participant, validated their practice and encouraged them to
try new things.

"A lot of it is when you have good experiences and you feel you are making a
difference and the world tells you you are in some way. Then my energy level
increases, that kind of keeps me going."

Other participants responded that gaining experience is about building on previous
experiences in the same way that knowledge builds upon previous knowledge. It is an
ongoing process of integrating experiences and knowledge as one participant put it, "I
don’t think you know you are absorbing it as you read and work”. Another participant was clearer about the process of integrating experience over time and hypothesized regarding the difference between new and experienced workers.

"And that is maybe the difference between an experienced worker and a new worker. A new worker really has to learn from the experienced worker on how I do this, what is the best way to do this; I am in a position that I can rely on my own education, knowledge, skill sets and experience, although I can consult with other people in the field and look at best practices for sure, but a lot of what I do is intuitive, I know what to do because I have been doing this for a long time.

Feedback from colleagues

Three areas of feedback from colleagues are presented in the results including: 1) consultation with peers, 2) role of field supervisors, and, 3) professional development.

Consultation with colleagues. Consultation with colleagues was a consistent theme for the participants when they were dealing with unique and challenging situations. It was also more evident in the responses of the participants who have been practicing for several years. Participants identified a type of peer support network. This was either an individual or a group of colleagues that they relied on in difficult situations or to explore best practices and new approaches. The role of peer feedback in exploring unique and challenging situations is best summarized in the following quote,

"I believe in reflective practice, I believe in peer consultation. I don’t care how many years experience I or anyone else has I think there are always opportunities for growth and development, to learn from each other. To have someone say why did you do that instead of this or could you have done something different."

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Another participant describes the importance of having colleagues you can call on to help with the process of learning new knowledge.

"You have to be able to access a community resource that is able to assist you if you are challenged by it (new knowledge and skills), you have to be able to call someone."

For some participants, involved in administration, they described consultation with staff and Board volunteers as an additional element of consultation. In the process of analyzing the pros and cons of a unique situation, one participant highlighted the role of staff and volunteers, “and then I have the opportunity of going through that process with others, sometimes it is my staff or volunteer leadership”.

Role of field supervisors. When participants were asked to describe a defining moment in their education experience, they either described moments that occurred while in class (especially interactions with certain professors) or they described their field placement and the impact of their field supervisors on the formulation of their practice. Field supervisors were described as mentors and as first hand role models of excellent social work practice. The following quote illustrates,

"I worked with some exceptional practitioners, those field agencies that really contributed to a great deal. I had good mentors that helped define the experiences for me”.

Another participant described how both 3rd and 4th year field supervisors provided feedback on different strengths that have guided his/her understanding of self to this day.

"In my third year, I’ll never forget it, my supervisor just casually mentioned to me that I was a visual person and that I learn through sensory experience".
"In fourth year, my supervisor told me I am an idea person and when I am called upon to do something that is not one of my strengths and that is not a criticism, it is just, you are an idea person, that helped me immensely."

Professional development. Professional development played a key role in how participants described gaining knowledge and enhancing knowledge. More particularly, professional development contributed to gaining new knowledge and skills in response either to emerging issues or to new social work practice roles such as administration. The use of professional development in these contexts is consistent with the participant’s articulation of the principle of lifelong learning. Others have used professional development to pursue specialized certifications that have enhanced their social work practice skills and allowed them to move to an advanced level of practice. This participant articulates the need to pursue professional development as a result of moving into an administrative role where they felt the necessary skills were not gained through formal education.

"I definitely feel I should have a better background in management and sometimes I don’t feel like in social work you have that background as a manager. At this point in time I am thinking to do management courses at another University or through training programs."

Another participant also supports the utilization of professional development as a way to gain new skills when roles are changed,

"Today a lot of what I do is in the area of financial resource development. I do a lot more now in my current job in the area of fundraising and grantsmanship. I didn’t gain those skills in school but I gained them through seminars and workshops."
Reading of professional journals and books was also frequently identified as a way that participants gained new knowledge and explored new practice approaches. Interestingly, some participants made a point of identifying self-psychology books as more relevant to their work with clients than academic reading. This point highlights the schism between research and practice.

"Because a lot of books written now are very technical and so sometimes they don't really help you with the client so if you read what is on the shelf then the person who is the academic says it is not really there but at the same time that is what you give your client."

The last theme under professional development was the use of therapy as a tool for personal growth or development. Therapy as a tool was important to those participants who are in a private practice. It was also a critical tool in instances where there had been a traumatic practice situation. The following quote illustrates the role of therapy in personal growth,

"I needed to go and get some help for myself and I just happened to match up with someone that could help me and I realized that this is a life commitment to me so I continue on with that. I may need it for different things now, more personal growth or spiritual growth but it is a lifeline."

Prior knowledge and experience

Social workers are not blank slates. They come into their education and practice as people with personal knowledge and experience often transmitted by their families and society. The themes of prior knowledge and experience that are reflected in this section are: 1) general life experience; 2) family influence; 3) previous education; 4) validation of practice; and, 5) field placement. It was interesting to note that many of the participants
reflected on why they chose social work as a career. The choices arose out of experiences in their high school years usually because of volunteer or summer job opportunities. These participants had identified that they wanted to “help people” and therefore sought out opportunities that provided this type of experience for them. Previous education and work experiences were also described as valuable contributions.

Furthermore, others described having natural aptitudes and feeling that social work was a good fit. The following quote illustrates this sense,

“Natural aptitude which is just part of who I was as a person, I obviously made a good career choice because it just fed into a natural skill set.”

Other participants were in touch with life experiences that “imprinted” on them resulting in their choice of social work. One participant described experiences as a sick child and also being teased a lot in school as contributors.

“I think that really shaped who I am and how it shaped me to be a social worker”.

Family played a role in transmitting values of acceptance. In addition some respondents integrated the experience of being part of a large family to understand system theory. The experience of step children was brought forward as an example of how family influenced the choice of social work. Family also validated positive volunteer experiences and encouraging the pursuit of a career working with people.

“I think in my life things that I got praised for were things I kept doing and I had gotten a lot of praise and recognition for those kinds of things through my family or community.”

When participants were asked to “Describe a defining moment in their education experience” they often described either classroom or field experiences that had significant
contribution to their practice. These experiences assisted in defining who they are as social workers. The classroom experiences were often about validating their choice of social work as this quote illustrates,

“*He (professor) said you’re good, where did you come up with this stuff, and that’s where I learned there is such a thing as a natural healer and then putting what I learned in to practice made it so much better. That was an outstanding moment for me it was very much a validation.*”

Field placement is a valuable prior experience that affected the participant’s current practice. Generally field placement was a positive experience as illustrated in this quote,

“*You can learn knowledge, read it in the books but when I experienced it week after week, going in and seeing because I didn’t live that kind of life. I have had so many experiences that have opened my eyes, that impact who I am as a person and as a social worker*”.

Not all field placement experiences were positive. However, they still influenced the participant’s understanding of the importance of how social work can affect change. This participant was placed in a field placement where they felt they were somewhat over their head as a student because of the level of responsibility and the lack of supervision. From this experience though the role of social work was emphasized,

“*If some professional can come in and really help folks like this and they can keep going as a result of it then this is good work to be doing. It validated the choice; it validated the reason to have this profession and to be part of it.*”

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Summary of Results

Generally, when articulating any of the three components of the conceptual framework, social work values, dimensions of reflective practice or practice wisdom, the participant’s frame of reference with respect to describing their practice, was the relationship and interactions with clients. In this regard, the participants in this study were found not to use language consistent with academic descriptions of social work practice. Rather they articulated their practice in general terms, more often describing processes related to their interactions with clients. The participants also described how they view challenging situations and how they have constructed their knowledge framework. Client self-determination, acceptance and non-judgmental attitude were the predominant responses to describing values that guided their practice.

The findings related to the dimensions of reflective practice acknowledge the processes that social workers go through in unique and challenging situations. All the participants identified that they go through at least one or more of the dimensions of reflective practice in those types of situations. Participants in this study relied on assessing new situations against their prior experience. The findings related to reflective practice reveal that they review their thinking with other colleagues. The role of colleagues in clarifying thinking was a common theme throughout the descriptions of reflective practice.

The findings regarding the dimensions of practice wisdom support the literature that discusses how practice wisdom is developed. The participants consistently described the process of knowledge construction specifically acknowledging the accumulation of wisdom over time. The discussion of practice theories was significant as the participants
did not address specific theories. Rather they identified how they have integrated pieces of theory into their own practice models.

The finding that participants have created their own practice models is also consistent with a focus on the construction of knowledge. The other two dimensions of practice wisdom that were themes include: 1) feedback from colleagues, and, 2) prior knowledge and experience. The researcher categorized the findings related to feedback from colleagues into three clusters: 1) consultation, 2) field supervision, and, 3) professional development opportunities. Participants in the study relied on colleagues both social workers and non-social workers, to provide consultation in unique and challenging situations.

In terms of education experience, the findings in this study suggest that the participants found their field placement experiences to be a rich source of knowledge. The knowledge that was passed on from field supervisors was integral to the development of these participants and their field supervisors were identified as excellent practitioners and mentors.

Also of note in the findings was the role of professional development. Professional development was suggested as the main mode of acquiring new knowledge. The findings acknowledged that social work practice changes and therefore social workers need to attend to emerging practice issues. Professional development was the primary method to achieve these goals. Participants, who were in administrative positions, identified that their education experience did not provide the background for assuming management positions. In these situations, they reported that they sought out professional development.
CHAPTER 6 – DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

This chapter discusses the findings of how social workers articulate their social work practice. The data from the in-depth interviews with participants across Ontario is presented and integrated with the existing literature. The discussion will focus on the major themes arising from the three dimensions in the conceptual framework namely: 1) social work values; 2) dimensions of reflective practice; and, 3) dimensions of practice wisdom. The discussion regarding social work values will focus on: 1) the articulation of value principles as central to social work practice, and, 2) the extent to which the integration of personal and professional values was articulated in this study. The reflective practice discussion will focus on four of the dimensions of reflective practice, namely: 1) considers values and makes value judgments; 2) evaluating own thinking; and, 3) considers prior knowledge and experience, and, 4) considers client perspectives. The discussion of the dimensions of practice wisdom will address the following themes: 1) practice theories; 2) practice experience; 3) peer feedback; and, 4) prior knowledge and experience within the context of how social workers construct their knowledge.

Also included in this discussion are three emergent themes that arose from the data. These themes which were not included in the conceptual framework are: 1) novice and expert practitioners, 2) role of faith in social work practice, and, 3) gap in management skills training.

Finally, this chapter also addresses the implications for social work education, practice and areas of further research. Implications for curriculum design and field education are two of the major themes in social work education. How social workers integrate reflective practice and the support they receive from organizations is one of the
implications discussed regarding social work practice. Some areas for further research that will be discussed include: 1) a series of comparison studies based on characteristics of the population sample, 2) in-depth studies related to the influence of social work education on practice, and, 3) the relationship of practice experience to how social workers articulate their social work practice.

Social work values

The CASW’s Code of Ethics (2005) stresses that core values and the associated principles provide guidance for professional social workers. It also emphasizes that individual commitment to ethical behaviour and willingness to make sound judgments are hallmarks of professional social workers.

The participants in the study used case examples to describe how the core values have been integrated into their practice. They did not always explicitly state the six core values as defined in the Code of Ethics because the core values do not stand alone for them. The core values have been integrated, similar to their knowledge, and have become more apparent in their descriptions of how they work with clients. The importance of the core values for the participants in their study is how they have influenced their ability to establish positive relationships. Although the participants were requested to articulate their values and they did so, it was their passion for building relationships that resonated in their descriptions. Case examples were the method used to demonstrate how the core value has been integrated in their practice. It is suggested that an integration of personal and professional values has occurred to such an extent that the participants have created their own language to describe their core values.

However, another explanation for why the participants were more comfortable describing the underlying principles is the period in which they were educated. The
distinction between core values and principles is a more contemporary approach to illustrating the Code of Ethics. In earlier decades, social work education introduced the existence of a Code of Ethics. It also introduced values as principles for how to build a relationship with clients. Thus, when this author was educated in the mid 1980's, Biestek's (1957) principles were highlighted as the foundation for how to interact with clients. Biestek's principles include: 1) individualization, 2) purposeful expression of feelings, 3) controlled emotional involvement, 4) acceptance, 5) non-judgmental attitude, 6) client self-determination, and, 7) confidentiality. The language that was employed by the participants in the study is consistent with Biestek's seven principles. Specifically, the three principles of acceptance, non-judgmental attitude and client self-determination. These three principles were most readily expressed as part of the participant's values framework. The findings suggest that social work education has an important role in transmitting values to social workers. In addition, it suggests that as the Code of Ethics is revised, social workers should be engaged in discussions regarding how the changes reflect their values framework.

It is interesting that although the participants were not directly asked why they chose social work as a profession, they often reflected on their decision and the factors that contributed to their choice. A genuine desire to help people and make the world a better place was expressed and was also demonstrated through their faith. These were values passed on by families, volunteer work and summer employment opportunities. It is suggested that these choices are an expression of personal values. After many years of practice for the majority of participants, this strong desire is still present which suggests an integration of personal and professional values. There was a sense from the interviews that, over time, the participants did not distinguish between personal and professional
values because they had become so ingrained in who they were as a person. Therefore, it was evident that an integrated values framework guided not only their professional practice but also their everyday interactions with others.

**Dimensions of reflective practice**

The findings of the study suggest that all the participants engage in reflective practice to varying degrees and use different dimensions. There was also a sense, especially those currently involved in clinical social work or counseling that the opportunities for reflective practice had changed over time. Changes in social work practice environments and demands on resources and time were articulated as barriers to employing reflective practice on a more regular basis. The presence of formal mechanisms that support reflective practice such as individual and group supervision was not found. This could be why many of the participants had developed their own consultation mechanisms to replace the lack of formal supervision.

When participants found themselves in unique and challenging situations, they employed different dimensions of reflective practice depending upon the circumstances. Some situations require the participant to take a step back and evaluate their thinking. Other situations present similarity to prior experiences and therefore the participant incorporates this into their problem solving. The discussion regarding the dimensions of reflective practice will focus on the four dimensions that were prevalent in the results of the study: 1) considers values and makes value judgments; 2) evaluate own thinking; 3) considers prior knowledge and experience; and, 4) considers client perspectives.

**Considers values and makes value judgments**

This dimension of reflective practice was most often articulated in the examples of value conflicts. The essence of the descriptions of the value conflict situations was that
they reinforced for the participants the need to be aware of their own values. A commonality among the conflict situations were examples of extreme differences between the lifestyles and choices of the client in comparison to the participant. In these cases, the participant articulated the requirement of reviewing their own values and the need to be aware of not imposing their value system on the client. The conflicts were not viewed as negative situations but reinforced for the participants that they were able to establish professional boundaries and to employ their value system in these cases.

As the Code of Ethics (2005) acknowledges, the potential for value conflicts is high given that social workers are always interacting with people, with other professionals and often are working within a framework imposed by organizations. Some of the participants also expressed value conflict situations that occurred in field placement in the early stages of their career. In a study by Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (1994), novice practitioners identified discomfort in addressing value conflict situations while in field placement due to the power dynamics between the field supervisors and students. There were some examples of this type of conflict expressed in this study and although the conflict was identified, a resolution was not explored with the supervisor. The fact that these value conflicts were not explored supports Fook et al’s (1994) contention regarding power dynamics. The opportunity for reflection can be accommodated in social work education through the requirement of integration seminars.

In situations where value conflicts occur with other colleagues or with supervisors outside of the education arena, additional mechanisms must be in place to address these situations. The Code of Ethics suggests that consultation with regulatory bodies is preferred in these circumstances.
Ixer (1999) describes reflection as a socially constructed process; suggesting that social workers reflect through various lens including social, historical and political contexts. Sheppard et al. (2000) describes how social workers filter empirical knowledge along with practice and life experiences to create a foundation for how they evaluate practice situations. The findings of this study agree with the perspective of reflection as a socially constructed process. One of the themes in the study was how participants identified defining moments in their childhood, education and work experiences and had linked these defining moments to their current practice. In other cases, the participants described experiences with their families as support for why they chose the social work profession. A high degree of self awareness was present in order to link prior knowledge and experience to their current practice. It is suggested that these social workers have employed continuous reflection in order to attain such an intimate knowledge of self.

Schon (1983) describes how professionals develop different “practice exemplars” which they use as the basis to compare new experiences and then create new knowledge. In this study, the participants described the process of building on their prior knowledge and experience each time they were presented with unique situations. The participants stated they would draw on a reflection of similarities and difference between the presenting situation and past situations to look for a place to start in intervening with the client. It is for this reason that participants did not articulate specific knowledge such as theories or models. Rather they described how they extracted elements of a variety of theories and experiences that they applied to situations. The articulation of how they constructed their knowledge was a predominant theme in comparison to defining specific
sets of knowledge that they employed in their practice. The construction of knowledge is consistent with the development of a unique practice model as suggested by Schon (1983).

**Evaluates own thinking**

The literature has described two types of reflection that can occur when one is evaluating their thinking. The first is *reflecting-in-action* (Schon, 1987) where it is suggested that the professional makes a choice to evaluate their action while the action is taking place. The other is *reflecting-on-action* or *evaluating-on-practice* and this is where the professional reflects on the situation after it occurs (Shaw and Shaw, 1997). Eraut (1995), Bengsston (1995) and Van Manen (1992) suggest that there is no such thing as reflecting-in-action. They argue that a professional is not able to reflect-in-action because the very process of reflecting stops the action. In these situations, the professional creates the space to reflect on their thinking and then returns to the situation. Professionals demonstrate the ability to create a controlled environment in which they think about their thought processes and use this reflection to develop future thinking (Ixer, 1999).

The first theme in the study supports the claim that social workers employ reflecting after the situation especially with unique and challenging cases. In these situations the participants described their ability to establish appropriate boundaries and to not place themselves in a situation where they could not respond to the client. The ability to take control in these situations could be a result of having employed reflective practice to develop advanced intervention skills. The participants avoided having to reflect in the moment by suggesting to the client that they needed time to reflect on the information that was presented. Thus Ixer’s (1999) contention that professionals have

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developed the skills to control situations is supported by the study. It also suggests that this is a skill that may be attained with practice experience.

The second theme also supports why some participants in the study employed reflection after action. The second theme was the reliance on consultation with colleagues. The majority of these participants often sought out colleagues to assist them in the reflective practice process. Colleagues were valuable in providing a sounding board to: 1) express what they were thinking; 2) to clarify their thinking; 3) to explore their feelings; and 4) to challenge them on why they took a particular action. In the absence of formal mechanisms for reflective practice, such as individual or group supervision, social workers may turn more to their colleagues for guidance. It is understandable that social workers would build in this consultation especially in settings where they are the only social worker. However, there could be problems regarding confidentiality where the colleagues they choose are outside of the organization.

*Considers client perspectives*

Within reflective practice, one element that is integrated by social workers is the knowledge provided by clients (Dybcz, 2004; Klein and Bloom, 1995). The predominant theme with respect to this dimension was the different ways in which the client perspective was integrated. For example, when reflecting on value conflict situations, participants identified how important it was to be aware of differences between values and to consider the client’s values as part of building the relationship. Sometimes, in the midst of reflecting, clients were asked to assist in clarifying information. This suggests that the value placed on client perspective is what sets the profession of social work apart from other professions.
Dimensions of practice wisdom

The literature has suggested that social workers have difficulty articulating their knowledge. Ixer (1999) suggests because knowledge is often tacit or internal and based on personal experiences. It is difficult to describe to others. Osmond and O’Conner (2004) have stated two reasons that social workers do not articulate specifics related to their practice are: 1) they are not experienced in discussing what informs their practice, and, 2) the complexity of the practice. In this study the participants focused on the process of constructing their practice wisdom instead of identifying the elements that formed their knowledge base. There was also a certain amount of difficulty expressed when considering responses to the question related to knowledge. In some instances, there seemed to be a sense of “where do I start” because the knowledge was so extensive. In other cases, it was a matter of not being able to apply academic terminology to a practice model that has become second nature. What occurs through the process of integrating pieces of knowledge is that the formalized labels for specific theories are lost because the social worker has created their own practice model (Osmond and O’Conner, 2004). The fact that many of the participants did not identify specific theories is consistent with this explanation.

On another level the experiences were unique to each participant and often represented the array of experience with different populations, settings and theories. The complexity of practice exemplified in the descriptions of the participants suggest that Ixer (1999) is correct when he states that because describing practice is such an individual experience it is difficult to define it within these types of studies.

Only four dimensions of practice wisdom are discussed below: 1) practice theories; 2) practice experience; 3) feedback from colleagues; and, 4) prior knowledge.
and experience. The relevance of these four dimensions was the extent to which the participants described how the dimensions were integrated into their current practice.

**Practice theories**

The difficulty in articulating specific theories has been found in other studies where social workers were asked to describe their knowledge (Carew, 1979; Harrison; Fook, Ryan and Hawkins 1997; Osmond and O’Conner (2004). This study supports this research. Generally participants identified that they had learned theories through their social work education. They felt that the theories had provided a foundation for their practice but they did not go so far as to identify the specific theories. They emphasized that, over time, they conscientiously chose elements of various theories and integrated them into their current practice. These examples of the integration of theory into practice by the participants are consistent with Fook’s (2001) assertion that social workers develop their own theory based on their practice. This may be why there was a sense that the participants knew what they did and knew it worked but they were not necessarily able to articulate those dimensions.

Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (1994) describe a process by which theory gets modified according to settings, experience and the opportunity to have discussion and reflection. This was another theme in this study. Participants described how their use of specific theories had changed often providing the change in practice settings as an explanation. It was also suggested that organizations play a role in defining practice theories since they can promote a certain theory or approach. Since it was evident that the participants had many experiences with different population groups, in different settings and in some cases various intervention levels (micro, mezzo and macro), the result that they were unable to differentiate among theories was consistent with the literature.
Practice experience

When a social worker has developed their own practice model they have the ability to determine what is common and unique in new practice situations and then apply this learning (DeRoos, 1990, Klein and Bloom, 1995). Klein and Bloom (1995) noted that each new practice encounter brings the opportunity to test out "knowing what to do". Further new knowledge is created and used to interpret each practice situation.

The participants articulated that it was a result of their extensive practice experience that they often knew what to do in certain situations. They felt their practice experience provided the benefit of comparing similarities and differences in situations. Thus, in the participants’ opinion, it is practice experience that has created practice wisdom. It may also be that participants use of reflection on their practice experience has resulted in practice wisdom.

Feedback from colleagues

Osmond and O’Connor (2004) have criticized the lack of explaining our practice to others as a limitation with respect to defining social work knowledge. Similarly, Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (1994) identified that novice practitioners had not incorporated consultation or networking to the same extent as more experienced practitioners. Klein and Bloom (1995) contend that you can only have practice wisdom if it has been discussed in open communication with other professionals. The themes in the study related to the different types of feedback by colleagues support that one element of practice wisdom has been the level of communication that has consistently been a part of the respondent’s practice in this study.

The first theme highlights how important it was to the participants to have colleagues to consult with especially in challenging situations. Colleagues were not
always other social work professionals. As previously mentioned colleagues were valuable in providing a sounding board to: 1) express what they were thinking; 2) to clarify their thinking; 3) to explore their feelings; and 4) to challenge them on why they took a particular action. It is suggested that because the participants were consistently communicating with other professionals through their consultation mechanisms, they had developed a level of practice wisdom.

The second theme focuses on the feedback provided by field supervisors in the development of practice. Gould & Taylor (1996) suggests the role of field supervisors is that of a coach. Participants used terms such as mentor, role model and excellent practitioners to describe their field supervisors. Osmond and O'Connor (2004) suggest that to be effective, field educators must be able to articulate the knowledge that guides their practice and transmit this knowledge to the student. In general the participants described how the field practicum provided the opportunity to practice their skills, expand their thinking and to experience new environments. In some cases the participants also provided examples of how the feedback provided by field supervisors had influenced their practice. It can be assumed that some of the field supervisors were effective in transmitting knowledge to the participants.

The last theme relates to the role of professional development as the primary method for participants to learn new knowledge and skills. Participants identified that they pursued professional development to obtain special certifications, to obtain the skills needed to advance into different practice roles and to re-energize themselves. The examples of professional development are consistent with a commitment to the core value of competence.
Prior knowledge and experience

There are two themes related to prior knowledge and experience: 1) the influence of life experiences, and, 2) the role that social work education contributes to practice wisdom. Both themes contributed to validating the choice by the participants to become a social worker. For example, participants suggested that different life experiences within their family or through volunteer and work experiences solidified their decision to enter the social work profession.

Participants suggested that their social work education provided a foundation for their practice. They did not, however, articulate specific courses. In terms of classroom experiences, it was often the interaction between instructor and student that was noted. Instructors passed on some of their own practice wisdom. In addition, positive feedback regarding the skills of participants was considered validation that they had made the right choice in becoming a social worker. Some participants described their field experience as a defining moment in their education. For these participants, it was the exposure to real social work situations that reinforced their desire to be a social worker.

Emerging themes from the study

Three emerging themes arose from the unique characteristics of the sample: 1) expert and novice practitioners, 2) faith as a facilitator of personal values, and, 3) gap in social work education related to management skills. These were recurring themes in the data that were not part of the conceptual framework but could not be ignored. These emergent themes are presented because of their importance in the data. The emergent themes of novice and expert practitioner were interpreted through the Participant Profile data which explicated the numbers of year of practice experience of each participant.
Expert and novice practitioners

Since the majority of participants has practiced for more than 19 years and could be considered expert practitioners, this becomes a lens to interpret the data. First, the majority were educated in the late 1970's and this would be approximately 10 years after formal Bachelor of Social Work programs were instituted. Since this time the social work curriculum has undergone significant development and change. Schools of Social Work have explicated their philosophies and more practice models have been defined. In the 1970's, social work education was grounded in systems theory and problem solving. The participants’ description of their social work education experiences was consistent with these approaches. They described social work education in relation to the skills they learned regarding how to interact with clients.

The literature suggests that there are differences between novice and expert practitioners. Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (1997) suggest that experienced practitioners are more comfortable than novice practitioners in working with clients who are perceived to be more vulnerable or less powerful. This may be why these practitioners described their values more in terms of how they built relationships and intervened on behalf of clients.

Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (1997) also identified that experienced practitioners express a confidence in their professional identity and this is a result of the level of integration of personal and professional values. This finding is consistent with the fact that the participants in this study did not distinguish between personal and professional values.

Finally, Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (1994) describe a process by which theory gets modified according to settings, experience and the opportunity to have discussion and reflection. This is true for the experienced participants in this study. They consistently
articulated how they have incorporated various theories into their practice over time. Their use of theories has shifted given different workplaces, problems and population groups. It was evident that the experienced participants have used reflection to identify the pieces of theory that have worked and not worked. Then, they have sifted through this information to develop their own practice theory. For expert practitioners there is a high degree of integration of theories. Thus, experienced practitioners do not identify any one theory or theories that form the basis of their practice. Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (1997) suggests that the theory base from which experienced practitioners draw is so broad that it makes it difficult to identify particular theories.

However, practice experience does not guarantee practice wisdom (O’Sullivan, 2005). Experienced participants in this study suggested it was their extensive practice experience that had led to success in their practice. These participants demonstrated practice wisdom.

*Faith as a facilitator of values development*

The extent to which the majority of participants articulated their faith is an example of how personal and professional values can be integrated. This study did not provide the opportunity to explore this theme further but it is suggested as an important area for further research.

*Lack of education regarding management skills*

Initially, many social workers start in direct practice roles rather than advanced practice roles such as administration. Following a period of practice experience, the social worker may have the opportunity to move into an administrative role. This trend was validated as the participants described their initial practice roles in child welfare, mental health and vocational rehabilitation. Entering direct practice is consistent with the
generalist orientation of the majority of Schools of Social Work and the direct practice emphasis of most four year Bachelor of Social Work programs. It may further confirm the types of field practice settings of students.

Master of Social Work programs are designed to facilitate moving into advanced practice roles (e.g. administration). It is also for this reason that the majority of Schools of Social Work, either require or prefer a set number of years of practice experience before they admit students to their MSW program. The majority of participants in administrative positions expressed concerns regarding their education as it related to management skills. There are two MSW programs (Carleton and Wilfred Laurier) that have practice streams related to social administration. The required courses suggest that these programs may provide the knowledge and skills required for administrative roles in social work.

When the required courses are examined among the other MSW programs, one other program provides some required courses specific to practice in administration while one program provides a leadership course in organizational development that would most likely support some aspects of an advanced practice role in administration. The lack of ability to advance into administrative social work roles is illustrated by the lack of administrative courses within Master of Social Work programs across Ontario.

Implications for social work education

Several authors encourage an overall philosophy that integrates practice, theory and research (Fook, 2001; Parton & O’Byrne, 2000). In BSW programs, there needs to be a shift from knowledge building regarding the various practice theories to demonstrating to students how those theories transfer to practice. BSW programs should be encouraged to incorporate instructional techniques that focus on experiential learning so that students begin to experience reflective practice and also begin to develop the skills to integrate
theory with practice. Students need to be exposed to reflective practice while in the controlled environment of their education so that they will be comfortable continuing the practice once they are practitioners (Gould & Taylor, 1996).

There are also implications for the field education component of social work education. The power dynamics that are inherent in the student-field supervisor relationship suggest that the availability of a separate integration seminar is critical to enhance learning. The integration seminar provides the novice practitioner with the opportunity to critically reflect and possibly identify ethical dilemmas that they may not be comfortable doing with their supervisor. The integration seminar not only provides a buffer for the student in these situations but it also provides for third party facilitation with respect to integrating theory and practice. An objective viewpoint could be helpful when reflecting on unusual or challenging situations.

Finally, the field education component has been recognized by many authors as the primary site for practice learning and reflection in social work (Gould & Taylor, 1996; Papell and Skolnick, 1992). The adult experiential learning cycle posits that people learn more when they have the opportunity to apply what they have learned in life to their classroom learning. The learning that occurs in class is foundational and contributes to the learning that occurs in field education. This is the dynamic that occurs in field education. This does not mean that students do not learn through their courses. However, it is suggested that when students experience the field they are directly exposed to real social work situations. These hands-on situations provide the opportunity to take what has been learned in class integrate theory and practice and ultimately make a difference with clients. These experiences validate for the student that they have the skills to be an effective social worker.
The role of field supervisor is important as many of the participants articulated how their field supervisors were mentors and were critical to their development as practitioners. Osmond and O'Connor (2004) suggest that field educators need to develop their own capacity for articulating their knowledge so that this can be passed on to students. Therefore field educators need to demonstrate a high degree of reflective practice in order to be effective in transferring knowledge to practice for students. This suggests that Schools of Social Work should have a limit on the numbers of years of practice experience that is necessary before a social worker can be a field supervisor.

The findings of the study suggest that there is a gap in MSW education with respect to social workers who advance into administrative positions. A review of the current MSW curriculum in Schools of Social Work across Ontario generally supports this view. The implication for Schools of Social Work is how to address this gap within curriculum design. Should MSW programs, most which are adhering to advanced generalist approaches, be required to have an administrative stream to address the needs of a limited number of social workers who move into management positions? Or can the gap be addressed through the provision of joint degrees or post MSW certifications. A post MSW certification in social work administration may be the best method to address the gap because then only those social workers who intend to be in management would pursue this certification.

Field education is also a component of MSW programs. If MSW programs are designed to develop advanced practitioners then should their field supervisors have demonstrated significant practice experience at advanced levels before acting as a field supervisor?
Implications for social work practice

Reflective practice has been equated with professional development (Klein and Bloom, 1995). Social workers must develop a discipline for conducting self-evaluation and reflective practice (Shaw and Shaw, 1997). Although social workers work in demanding work environments with situations that are often complex and unique, the use of reflective practice can assist social workers to enhance their practice effectiveness in these situations.

The implications for social work practice are related to how ongoing reflective practice is facilitated from education to practice setting. Social workers have to conscientiously carve out opportunities for reflective practice as these opportunities will not always present themselves within the organization. Social workers must commit to the core value of competence and search out professional development that assists them in integrating reflective practice in their work. Professional development or continuing education in this regard could be a role for Schools of Social Work, professional associations and/or regulatory bodies.

Organizations in which social workers practice also have a responsibility to encourage reflective practice to improve practice effectiveness. With restraints on resources and the priority to provide services to clients, organizations may not consider reflective practice experiences such as peer consultation, a priority. Social workers have an obligation to advocate for the value of peer support from colleagues.

Some social workers may find themselves in settings where they are the only social worker. In this situation, employing reflective practice techniques is even more important. However, social workers in these circumstances need to develop a consultation mechanism with other social work colleagues. It is critical that social workers do not find
themselves isolated when they are dealing with challenging situations as they could find it more difficult to interpret and apply the Code of Ethics.

Fook et al. (1997) feel that contributing to the profession through field education is an obligation. Osmond and O'Connor (2004) highlighted the importance of field educators developing their language regarding their articulation of practice. It is only through the use of continuous reflective practice that the field supervisor will be able to define the components of their social work practice and transfer this knowledge to students. It is through the role modeling of the field supervisor that students will enhance their reflective practice techniques. The implication is that if social workers have not committed to or integrated reflective practice then it will become difficult to transfer their knowledge to students.

Areas for further research

In an exploratory study, the findings serve the purpose of suggesting other areas for future research. First, there are opportunities for further research based on characteristics of the population sample. The eligibility criteria of the study were focused on one group of social workers, those with a BSW and MSW. Further research could explore how social workers articulate their practice based on comparisons between population samples such as, 1) 4 year BSW and accelerated BSW, 2) Two year MSW and 1 year MSW, 3) differences in articulation between BSW, MSW, and PhD samples.

Another study might look at differences based upon the decade in which social workers were educated. This has the potential to highlight similarities and differences in social work education through the years. Another research study opportunity may be to explore how classroom learning and field education have directly contributed to the development of social work practice. An additional study could examine whether social
work practitioners have integrated the philosophy of their School of Social Work. It
would also be of interest to study how Schools of Social Work incorporate reflective
practice techniques in their curriculum design. Further, another study could examine what
reflective practice techniques are used by field supervisors to contribute to the learning
experiences of students. This study also did not address whether their social work
education led to a specific field of practice. Finally, it is suggested that there is a gap in
social work education as it relates to moving into management positions. Specifically
research should address how Schools of Social Work are addressing administrative
practice.

It would be interesting to find out if social workers have a core language
regardless of field of practice? Furthermore does length of practice experience affect how
a social worker articulates their practice? A study that includes a population sample with
varying degrees of practice experience would provide insight into this question. In
addition, do social workers articulate their practice differently if they have experienced
their whole career in one practice setting compared to others who have held numerous
social work positions?

Another emerging finding suggested that faith played a role in the development of
personal values for the participant’s in this study. However a study that sets out to
determine what role faith does play in values development could shed light on the
integration of personal and professional values. Does strong faith result in stronger values
identification among social workers?
Summary of the Research Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how social workers articulate their social work practice with respect to three dimensions: 1) social work values, 2) reflective practice, and, 3) practice wisdom. Furthermore the study provides the opportunity to explore with social workers, 1) which values have framed their social work practice, 2) the processes that social workers rely on when employing reflective practice, and, 3) how they have constructed their knowledge base, including the role their social work education has played in the development of knowledge.

The conceptual framework (Table 2.1) includes the following three dimensions: 1) core social work values as outlined in the Code of Ethics; 2) dimensions of reflective practice; and, 3) dimensions of practice wisdom. The six core values are: 1) respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons; 2) pursuit of social justice; 3) service to humanity; 4) integrity in professional practice; 5) confidentiality in professional practice; and, 6) competence in professional practice. The dimensions of reflective practice are: 1) makes value judgments; 2) considers prior knowledge and experience; 3) evaluates own thinking; 4) considers client perceptions; and, 5) offers explanations for practice. The dimensions of practice wisdom are: 1) knowledge proven by research; 2) personal and professional values; 3) personal and professional bias; 4) grand and practice theories; 5) practice experience; 6) peer feedback; and, 7) prior knowledge and experience.

The context of the study is framed within the developments of social work in Ontario. The conceptual framework outlines the context for the study specifically, 1) policy and legislation governing social work practice, 2) social work education and field practice with a focus on reflective practice, and 3) the Social Work Code of Ethics. What becomes evident from this discussion and review of the evolution of social work practice
and education in Canada is that each social worker's experiences are unique. Social work practice has been influenced by: 1) the decade of their education, 2) the prevalent philosophy of the School of Social Work, and, 3) the practice models taught at that time.

In summary, there are 7 Schools of Social Work in Ontario that offer both Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work degrees. Most of these schools are based on the generalist/advanced generalist approach. These Schools are: 1) Carleton, 2) King's University College, 3) Lakehead, 4) Laurentian, 5) McMaster, 6) Windsor, and, 7) York. Two Schools of Social Work, Renison College and Ryerson, offer only a Bachelor of Social Work program and two Schools, University of Toronto and Wilfred Laurier, offer only a Master of Social Work degree. While most of the Bachelor of Social Work programs have a separate field integration seminar, one School has integrated field and classroom learning as a component of all practice courses. Most of the Master of Social Work programs, where an internship or practicum was offered, also included an integration seminar. The variety in Masters of Social Work programs provides excellent opportunities for social workers to advance their practice by choosing specific practice or population approaches.

This exploratory research study used qualitative methodology to explore how social workers articulated their social work practice. Data was collected through the implementation of a semi-structured interview (Appendix E) that consisted of 10 open-ended questions grounded by the conceptual framework. Given the small sample size, the analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted manually. The process of manual data analysis provided the researcher with the opportunity to become intimate with the data resulting in richer interpretation. Using the conceptual framework, the researcher organized the coded interviews for reoccurring words, concepts and phrases. Additional
codes arose from the continuous analyzing of the data. Each coding category was reviewed for themes and the themes were clustered where there was a commonality. Once the data was exhausted for categories and themes, it was examined utilizing various frames of reference including: 1) the influence of social work education in Ontario; 2) whether the results were consistent or differed from the literature on reflective practice; and 3) the implications for social work practice and education in Ontario.

There were six participants in the study of which 5 were female and 1 was male. All participants had Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work degrees. All participants received their Masters education in Ontario while five of six participants also received their Bachelor of Social Work education in Ontario. The length of time practicing social work ranged from 5 years: 10 months to 35 years: 1 month. Three of the participants in the study have been practicing for more than 30 years; one has been practicing for 29 years; one for 19 years: 6 months and the last social worker has been practicing for 5 years: 10 months.

The findings were discussed according to the themes that arose from the conceptual framework in addition to three emerging themes that were identified as a result of specific characteristics of the population sample. Themes were chosen based on the fact that over 50% of the participants had identified the theme. Five of the six core values were consistently articulated and these were: 1) service to humanity, 2) social justice, 3) inherent dignity and worth of individuals, 4) integrity in professional practice, and, 5) competence in professional practice. The major theme related to the dimension of social work values was that the participants were more comfortable articulating the underlying dimensions that were associated with the value as defined by the Code of Ethics (2005). Furthermore, participants demonstrated that they have integrated their
personal and professionals values to such an extent that they do not differentiate between the two.

With respect to reflective practice, four of the dimensions were discussed including: 1) considers values and makes value judgments, 2) evaluates one's own thinking, 3) considers prior knowledge and experience, and, 4) considers client perspectives. Participants considered their own values in relation to client values especially when they were in value conflict situations. There was a high degree of awareness that their values often differed from the clients. The themes related to the dimension of evaluating one's own thinking emphasized that the participants were reflecting after action. They were controlling the situation and creating the opportunity to step back and evaluate their thinking. In these situations the participants relied on feedback from colleagues to assist them in the reflective practice process. The main theme connected to prior knowledge and experience was the influence of defining moments in childhood, families and education on the choice to enter into the social work profession. Another theme was how the participants described the process of building on their prior knowledge and experience each time they were presented with unique situations. The participants would draw on a reflection of similarities and differences between the presenting situation and past situations to look for a place to start in intervening with the client. Finally, in the process of reflection, the participants identified that clients can assist them in the process of clarifying information.

There were four dimensions of practice wisdom discussed and these include: 1) practice theories, 2) practice experience, 3) feedback from colleagues, and, 4) prior knowledge and experience. More importantly, was the theme of how participants integrated these dimensions of practice wisdom into their own practice model. The
themes also supported the difficulties that social workers have in articulating their social work practice.

There were three themes that emerged from the finding and these were: 1) novice and expert practitioners, 2) role of faith in the development of personal values, and, 3) gap in social work education in relation to management skills. The majority of participants were experienced practitioners having been educated in the 1970’s. It is suggested that their education influenced their articulation of their values and also the adherence to a more general problem-solving model of practice. Education could also have an affect on the difficulty describing specific theories. Furthermore, the experienced practitioners clearly articulated they have their own practice model that has resulted from the integration of knowledge and skills they have assimilated from different practice settings, experience and theories. Faith was not explored in detail although it was definitely a factor in the development of values for the participants in the study. Finally, the majority of participants identified how their social work education had not prepared them for management roles.

The implications for social work education are wide and include suggestions for strengthening admission criteria, the types of social work programs that are offered, inclusion of reflective practice techniques in curriculum and the strengthening of criteria to be a field supervisor. The implications for social work practice focus on the obligation of social workers and organizations to develop opportunities for reflective practice. In addition there is a requirement to pursue professional development opportunities.
In summary, this study supports the view that social workers practice within a values framework with little distinction between personal and professional values. However, this framework is consistent with the Social Work Code of Ethics. Social workers employ reflective process on a continual basis to enhance their practice effectiveness. Through the use of reflective practice, they integrate theories and experience to such an extent that they have formed their own best practice model.
References


Admissions and program information, Renison College (2006). Retrieved on May 5, 2006 from www.uwaterloo.ca/content/social_work


Dear Branch President:

I am writing to request your assistance with recruiting a sample of social workers for a research study entitled "Voices from the field: Exploring how social workers articulate their social work practice." I am a Master of Social Work candidate in the School of Social Work, University of Windsor, Windsor Ontario and this research study is part of my thesis requirement. The Thesis Supervisor is Dr. Judith Dunlop, School of Social Work, University of Windsor.

I am interested in recruiting social workers with the following characteristics, 1) possess both a Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work degree, 2) educated at a School of Social Work in Ontario, 3) working for a minimum of five years, and 4) currently employed in Ontario.

The study will employ a telephone interview, consisting of 10 open-ended questions that will take approximately 1.0 hours to complete. I would appreciate if you could distribute this letter to your members. Social workers who are willing to participate may contact me directly at mitchell@uwindsor.ca or by phone at my home (519) 250-5415.

Sincerely,

Colleen Mitchell, BSW, RSW
MSW Candidate
School of Social Work

Dr. Judith Dunlop, PhD
Assistant Professor
Thesis Supervisor
School of Social Work
LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Voices from the field: Exploring how social workers articulate their social work practice.

This research is being carried out by Colleen Mitchell, B.S.W., a graduate student to complete the requirements for the Masters of Social Work, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Colleen A. Mitchell at (519) 258-1203 or (519) 984-5339 (day) or the Faculty Supervisor, Dr. Judith Dunlop at 253-3000, ext. 3073. A third party, not connected to the research, is also available by calling Dr. Brent Angell at 253-3000, ext.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand how social workers articulate their social work practice.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Review research package and determine if you want to participate in study
- Complete consent documentation and return to researcher
- Participate in an initial phone conversation to review the study and answer any questions you might have regarding the study
- Participate in approximately a 1.5 hour telephone interview that will be audiotaped.
- Give permission for follow-up interview/contacts, if required for clarification.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There is no risk to your participation in the study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The study will provide you with a safe opportunity to engage in a dialogue to better understand your social work practice. Increased self-awareness has been shown to improve the effectiveness of one's social work practice.

The study results will provide individual social work practitioners (colleagues), Schools of Social Work, professional associations and organizations that employ social workers with information on how social workers articulate their social work practice. The results could contribute to changes in education, practice, professional development and research.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
There is no compensation for participation in the study

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

The researcher will transcribe the interviews to ensure confidentiality of the data. Written records and audiotapes will be stored in a secure cabinet. The transcribed data will be retained indefinitely by the researcher.

No names will appear in the presentation of the study results. Once the thesis is defended the audiotapes will be destroyed by the researcher.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw up until the time of the defence without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don’t want to answer and still remain in the study. However, should you decide not to respond to a majority of the interview questions, I would withdraw you from the study as the data will be incomplete.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE SUBJECTS

The study results will be posted on the Research Ethics Board website at www.uwindsor.ca/reb and you will be notified when the results are posted.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

This data will be used in subsequent studies.

The results of the study will be published as a Masters thesis and may be published in journal articles. The results of the study may also be presented at conferences.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4; telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3916; e-mail: lbunn@uwindsor.ca.

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

Signature of Investigator  Date
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Voices from the field: Exploring how social workers articulate their social work practice.

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Colleen A. Mitchell, BSW, from the University of Windsor, School of Social Work. The study results will be contributed to a MSW thesis.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Colleen A. Mitchell at (519) 258-1203 or (519) 984-5339 (day) or the Faculty Supervisor, Dr. Judith Dunlop at 253-3000, ext. 3073. A third party, not connected to the research, is also available by calling Dr. Brent Angell at 253-3000, ext.

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No names will appear in the presentation of the study results. Once the thesis is defended the audiotapes will be destroyed by the researcher.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time prior to the defense of the thesis without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. However, should you decide not to respond to a majority of the interview questions, I will withdraw you from the study as the data will be incomplete.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE SUBJECTS

The study results will be posted on the Research Ethics Board website at www.uwindsor.ca/reb and you will be notified when the results are posted.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

This data will be used in subsequent studies.

The results of the study will be published as a Masters thesis and may be published in journal articles. The results of the study may also be presented at conferences.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time up until the time of the defence and discontinue participation without penalty. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3916; e-mail: lbunn@uwindsor.ca.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study, Voices from the field: Exploring the social work practice of visible minority social workers, as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a letter of information that outlines the study.

Name of Subject

Signature of Subject Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

Signature of Investigator Date
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate and your consent to a taped interview about your social work practice. Before we begin, I would like to confirm with you that you are willing to have the interview taped given the confidentiality protection outlined in the consent statement.

SECTION 1 – PARTICIPANT PROFILE DATA SHEET

1. If you have not returned the form, I would like to gather your responses to the questions as shown on the Participant Profile Data Sheet.

SECTION 2 – QUESTIONS REGARDING VALUES

2. Describe the values that guide your social work practice.

3. If you have had a situation where your personal values conflicted with your professional social work values; what were your reflections regarding this situation?

SECTION 3 – QUESTIONS REGARDING DIMENSIONS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

4. When you are experiencing a situation that is unique and/or challenging, what process do you go through to understand the situation?

5. Can you describe a practice situation where you feel you were not as effective; how did this situation affect your social work practice?

6. Can you describe a practice situation where you were successful; how did this situation affect your social work practice?
SECTION 4 – QUESTIONS REGARDING PRACTICE WISDOM

7. Describe in what ways your prior knowledge and experience contributed to your social work practice.

8. Describe a defining moment in your education experience that you feel contributed most to your social work practice?

9. Describe the knowledge base that frames your practice and where you gained this knowledge?

10. Are there any other observations about your social work practice that you feel is important for me to know?

Thank you for participating in this interview and contributing to this study
VITA AUCTORIS

Colleen A. Mitchell was born in 1961 in Windsor, Ontario where she has been a life long resident. She graduated from F.J. Brennan High School in 1980. From there she attended the University of Windsor where she obtained a BSc. in Biology in 1986; followed by a Bachelor of Social Work in 1987. She is currently a candidate for the Master’s degree in Social Work at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in Winter 2007.