

Perspectives on Social Work's Identity Challenge

Scattered IMAGE

By Rick Skwiot

IN THE PUBLIC'S PERCEPTION, the term "social worker" often means a caseworker from the public aid office. And when the Bureau of Labor statistics asks that caseworker to self-identify her profession, she often says "social worker." But many who actually hold master of social work (MSW) degrees often do not acknowledge it and in fact hold jobs — such as corporate managers or consultants — far from the profession's social justice roots. Further, one leading university's school of social work recently removed "social work" from its name altogether.

Most inside the social work profession agree that it has an image problem, which affects recruitment, pay, status, funding, and social influence. But they often disagree on who is a social worker, what the term "social work" means, whether to re-brand or scrap the term, who ought to do it, and what the image problem really is. Whatever it may be, it causes at least one social work school dean to worry "a lot" and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to launch a multiyear campaign to change the image.

To try to see what comprises that image problem and how it might be addressed, *Social Impact* talked with five social work professionals in and beyond academia. Excerpts from those conversations follow, indicating that finding common ground in the debate may require significant further discussion and consensus building.



Richard J. Gelles

On Defining the Image Problem:

"I don't have an MSW and spent 25 years as a sociologist, bowing down to the great god of three prestigious journals. So I was happy to come where people were doing social good despite knowing about the image problem. ... I believe it is multifold: a poor job of branding itself and a poor job of establishing who are not social workers. In the public perception, the caseworker from public aid is a social worker. And there's no effort to correct the media stating that a bachelor degree caseworker is a social worker ...

"The breadth of the field is not branded right. There's the leftist, bleeding heart liberal out to help the poor, but the rest of the profession is vastly underrepresented. ... The image must establish the full range of the profession. ... It's an injustice and disservice to our students that they are viewed through a narrow prism, as a poor person's psychologist.

"There's also an inclusive/exclusive problem. Now we don't exclude those who don't hold a professional degree. As to whether to be inclusive or exclusive of the BSW [bachelor of social work] — I'll reserve judgment or comment on that battle for now ... But a terminal professional degree should be the union card to be a social worker."

On the Penn Name Change:

"We took 'social work' out of the name — an act that by some was considered disrespectful to



Richard J. Gelles
Dean, University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy & Practice.

An internationally known expert in domestic violence and child welfare, Gelles, who holds BA, MA, and PhD degrees in sociology, spearheaded Penn's School of Social Work name change to its present form in July 2005 after becoming its dean in 2003. He was influential in the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, and his influential book, *The Violent Home*, was the first systematic investigation to provide empirical data on domestic violence. Gelles is the Joanne and Raymond Welsh Chair of Child Welfare and Family Violence in the School of Social Policy & Practice, the director for the Center for Research on Youth & Social Policy, and co-director of the Field Center for Children's Policy Practice & Research.

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the clinical corps who pay their dues. We alienated a very small number of alums, who are still upset. But as a result we significantly upgraded the image of the school at the university and experienced a very significant up-tick in development. We hear from each of our donors, 'I didn't know you did that. I didn't know social workers did that. That's really interesting.' ... Other academics at Penn have said, 'That was really smart.' ... It's an experiment that has been pretty successful."

On Re-branding Social Work:

"We're going to have the same problem as Xerox, which was so well branded that all copy machines were called Xerox machines. But when they tried to diversify and sell computers, they failed because the name was so tightly branded ... Social work has a similar problem, which does a disservice to students and clientele. Once you move 15 feet away from the profession, you see it through the poor-client prism. We need a significant effort to re-brand 'social

worker' or repackage it and find a different brand for what we do ...

"It's a bigger uphill climb to re-brand the term 'social work.' We have to recognize that the public brand perception is so strong, that we have to come up with another term ... Remember that Xerox failed ...

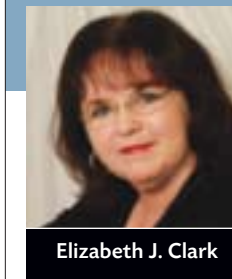
"Who should do it? I thought it should be the NASW (National Association of Social Workers). But I knew we were in trouble when they decided to take on the image problem with a new logo and a wrist band."

Elizabeth J. Clark

On the Image of Social Work:

"The profession is misunderstood. The focus groups we held prior to embarking on a campaign didn't understand social work as a profession. Education is needed. Many see social work as the helping profession but confuse social workers with caseworkers, who may not be properly trained. The media also often confuse social workers with caseworkers, usually in child welfare cases. Our media tools show that 80 to 85 percent of our hits in the media are positive ...

"Despite years of service and legal recognition, the profession still lacks a coherent and accurate public image and, at times, has had a somewhat negative image. Some of the difficulty in establishing an acceptable public image may be the result of the breadth of the profession and the diversity of the field. Another reason may be [that] we work with devalued populations — the elderly, recently released prisoners, the chronic mentally ill. In the public's mind there's a linkage to those populations, which affects our image. But we believe in our social justice mission. It's important for us to work with those populations and important for society to see the value of that work ...



Elizabeth J. Clark

Executive Director, National Association of Social Workers

Since 2001 Elizabeth Clark has led NASW, the nation's largest organization of professional social workers, with more than 150,000 members. She holds BSW, MSW, master of public health in health services administration, master of sociology, and doctorate in medical sociology degrees. She formerly served as director of Diagnostic and Therapeutic Services at Albany Medical Center and associate professor of medicine in the Division of Medical Oncology at Albany Medical College. The NASW's current public education campaign, "Help Starts Here," seeks to inform the public, media, policymakers, employers, and social workers about the profession's importance and to "help change perceptions about who benefits from social work services and encourage more people to find the help they need," according to the organization's Web site, socialworkers.org.

"Social workers are skilled advocates for the clients and families they serve. But they often forget to let others know how social work services lead to tangible, positive outcomes for communities. We find that often professionals don't even identify themselves as social workers ...

"Whenever people see someone with a social problem, I want them to say, 'Have you talked to a social worker about this?' ... But most people think they will never need a social worker."

On the "Help Starts Here" campaign:

"We try to show the breadth of social work, not just casework and therapeutic work — that large foundations are run by social workers, and that they possess many transferable skills.

"For now the campaign does focus on the micro practice of social work, but that will change. We're in the third year of the campaign with several more to go. In planning it we saw it as at least a five-year campaign. The macro is forthcoming. We're going to employers to talk about how social workers can help in a variety of ways, such as in how to structure benefits and to improve the workplace for social workers."

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“The next logical step then is to go to government agencies, to show them the importance of social workers. Part of that effort is a social worker reinvestment initiative, [with elements] such as student-loan forgiveness.”

The Effect of the Image on Recruitment and Retention:

“The NASW Center for Workforce Studies did the first national study of professional social workers, which predicts a significant shortage of social workers in the coming decade. There’s already a shortage in child welfare and aging. We’re now studying how students make decisions about going into social work.

“Our national study showed that salaries are higher than perceived. They are not as low as they once were. ... We need to retain and recruit social workers, and predict that many new recruits may come to the profession in second careers.”

Edward F. Lawlor

On the Image of Social Work:

“The field, for those who know it and know it well, has this long and powerful historic image of social justice, organizational leadership, and policy influence. But for the vast public, social work gets muddled together with personal care, care-giving, and various non-professional human services roles. In the broader public, social work does not have the identity and status necessary to motivate many of the best and the brightest to join our profession.

“The resulting problem is threefold: We want prospective students to have in their mind’s eye a modern idea of what someone with a social work degree can do, rather than an image confounded by old stereotypes or paraprofessional notions of social work. If students — the next generation of social work leadership — are to make an investment in rigorous professional education, they will need clear and exciting examples of the career options available.



Edward F. Lawlor

Dean and the William E. Gordon Professor, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis

A national Medicare expert, Edward Lawlor has published widely on access to health care, health care reform, policy analysis, and aging. Lawlor, who received his PhD from Brandeis University’s Florence Heller Graduate School for Advance Studies in Social Welfare, previously served as dean at the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration. He is the founding editor of the *Public Policy and Aging Report* and for 10 years he served as a member and secretary of the Chicago Board of Health. He teaches classes on health care policy and services and is the author of *Redesigning the Medicare Contract: Politics, Markets, and Agency*.

“Second, the ‘market’ will need to recognize and reward the expertise and skill of people with graduate social work degrees, as well as provide career ladders with progressively more challenging demands and rewards. I am concerned about how many graduates either never take positions that we would associate with the profession, or who wash out of the profession for other careers in short order. The marketplace needs to have a perception of the value of the degree.

“Third, the various stakeholders in the survival of the profession will need to forge a set of alliances that bring resources, new professional opportunities, and political support back to social work. So much of the energy of this profession is focused inward. So much time and emotional capital are gobbled up in process and organizational maintenance that we are leaving huge research, business, and advocacy opportunities on the table. At a time when arguably social work could be having its greatest external impact, the organized efforts of the profession are self-indulgent.”

On Changing Perceptions:

“In principle, I support the idea of a public campaign raising awareness about the profession, but

“Ownership and application of a knowledge base is one of the fundamental characteristics of professions that thrive.”

I believe it should be forward looking. Think of the influence and effectiveness that Teach for America has had in reaching some of the most talented and socially committed young people in the country — it is marketing genius.

“I suspect that there may be irreconcilable differences in the expectations made of the current NASW campaign [“Help Starts Here”]. My understanding is that this campaign is designed to help current practitioners gain professional visibility and generate referrals to social workers. This may be in some tension with the desire of some graduate schools to reach prospective students with images and examples of a wide-range of career paths that offer opportunities for social impact and upward leadership possibilities.

“From my perspective the campaign doesn’t convey that social workers have high level expertise in a particular field. Lots of people are ‘helpers.’ Instead we need to convey what is distinctive about the knowledge base, skills, and professional roles played someone with a professional social work degree.”

On the Future of Social Work

“We’re at a juncture ... This is something I worry about a lot. Many institutions have distanced themselves from the term ‘social work.’

“In the sociology of professions, one of the core notions is control of your knowledge base and training — something that doctors and lawyers certainly do. But many social work professionals say their practice is an art, or intuitive, or simply values-based. This is why the evidence-based agenda is ultimately so important in social work. Ownership and application of a knowledge base is one of the fundamental characteristics of professions that thrive.”



Marilyn S. Flynn

Dean, University of Southern California School of Social Work

Since her appointment as dean in 1997, Marilyn Flynn has helped boost the USC School of Social Work’s research funding some \$18 million and expanded the faculty to a historic high. Formerly director of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research and of the School of Social Work at Michigan State University, she has held several positions of national leadership in the Council on Social Work Education. Flynn’s research interests include application of computer and communications technology, cross-cultural perspectives on service delivery, social program design, and strategic planning. She holds MSW and PhD degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Marilyn S. Flynn

On the Image of Social Work:

“All professions have image problems — physicians, lawyers, journalists. Reverence for professions has been dwindling. For social work, there’s a large gap between perception and reality. ... It hurts recruiting in the sense that people are concerned about being negatively stereotyped. ... But underpaid and overworked represents a lot of professions ...”



On the Role of Social Work Education in Changing the Image:

"Most social workers don't work with the poor anymore, but with the mentally ill, in schools, hospitals, substance abuse, and aging. ... The majority of new social work schools are small, rural, or church-related, training foot soldiers. We need that, and I don't mind supporting that.

"But that's not how we prepare our students. We charge so much, we have to prepare them for something different and more broad. We have a special role as private universities. I'm interested in preparing our students for the exceptional. When we do place them in conventional roles, we train them to do exceptional things. ... But others are working at Ernst & Young, in management and consulting, in public policy ...

"Private universities have to do training for leadership. If we don't, we lose the rationale for a certain kind of existence. Once public universities took on the role of public service, private schools had to take on a different role ...

"We bring science into human services, the knowledge and capacity to issue best evidence on how people should receive help. That's what the field should aspire to ..."



"There's a trend toward privatization in all facets of human services. No sector remains without a large for-profit sector. We have to train social workers to be in those for-profit sectors, helping those sectors to be more humanitarian."

On Creating a New Image for Social Work:

"We bring science into human services, the knowledge and capacity to issue best evidence on how people should receive help. That's what the field should aspire to ...

"In all emerging economies, such as India and China, social work is emerging as a product of the free market. We have a chance to shape the image of social work in these economically emerging countries. Not to recreate what we have in Western society, but to invest social work as an integral part of society with a different set of perceptions. ... Social work is part of China's five-year plan, to produce a harmonious society ...

"We need to stop being so ethnocentric and think how we can shape the image elsewhere. That may help us here."



Wynne Sandra Korr

On Clarifying the Image of Social Work:

"Yes, there is a problem. It's an issue of clarifying what social workers do and public understanding of that, and addressing TV's portrayal of social workers as child snatchers. ... We're probably not getting a fair shake in the media. Initiatives from the NASW have helped. It's getting better, but it still needs help. ...

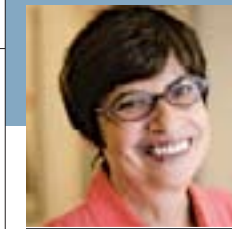
"The nursing profession has developed an effective campaign to define what they do — something we haven't been able to do. Although the National Association of Social Workers has taken huge steps to help. ... I like a lot of the NASW language on strengthening vulnerable families, working with the strengths of families in need, and connecting people in need to resources ...

"All of us need to do this image work. All of our organizations need to work together, to speak with one voice. We're working on it. The Council on Social Work Education has convened leadership, as has the NASW. And there are a number of follow-up activities. We're talking about unification that will give us much better national presence. Perhaps eventually we'll form one organization."

On Addressing the Image On-Campus:

"Our recruitment has not been impacted by general public perceptions. Our students have extensive experience in volunteering in the community. They know the needs of the people and are pretty well educated about the issues and how social work addresses needs ...

"I've worked hard on the image of the school in relation to the university. We've done well in communicating to the university how we fit into research and policy making, how



Wynne Sandra Korr

Dean, School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Wynne Korr earned her PhD in psychology from the State University of New York at Buffalo. From 1980 to 1993 she taught at the Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago, and then for eight years as a professor in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work. For the Council on Social Work Education, she has served on the Women's Commission and on the Commission on Publications and Media and is incoming chair of the Commission on Accreditation. She also serves as president of the St. Louis Group, the association of social work schools in major research universities. She is co-author of a recent book chapter, "Mental Health Policy and Social Justice."

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issues of social justice fit in. We conduct our research and teaching at the same high level as other schools and have done a good job in getting that across."

On the Changing Face of Social Work:

"We need to define the image of social workers more clearly in a world where government support is not increasing and we have for-profits in all sectors ...

"We're a public land grant university. As such our commitment to connecting to the community is well understood and highly valued — whether in social work, engineering, or agriculture. We have a very special role. ... In terms of numbers, yes, we have more students engaged on the micro side, particularly with our MSW specialization in mental health.

"But our MSW students are also more involved in policy and research, especially through our new macro specialization in social entrepreneurship. It's important for social workers directing programs and agencies to see how all the pieces fit together. Social workers need entrepreneurial skills as well as skills in addressing the needs of people ...

"We should take great pride in the work we do on the micro side — such as in mental health, where we have our largest numbers of social workers. But we should also take pride in the macro practice that affects policy and organizations." ☞