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THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF SOCIAL WORK*

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INTRODUCTION

As the demands for accountability in the human services continue to grow, new opportunities for the social work profession will also bring new risks (Kurzman 1995:1921). These risks will result directly in a higher demand for professional conduct which, in turn, confirms that accountability in the profession demands continual personal and professional development (Van Zyl & Botha 1997:33). This tendency is consistent with the growing public demand for accountability from all professionals, including social workers (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:361).

Since the mid-1970s there has been an increase in malpractice actions against social workers, who no longer enjoy the insulation from liability that existed previously (Sharwell in Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:361). This tendency is for various reasons also evident in South Africa. Besides the fact that social work needs to be more accountable, South Africans are also more informed about their rights than previously. What is, however, a matter of concern is the fact that social workers are either not aware of, or do not realise, the impact of these societal changes on their professional behaviour. This became more and more evident to me whilst being a member of the Disciplinary Tribunals of the South African Interim Council for Social Work and now the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP). It almost seems as if social workers, supervisors and organisations are not consciously aware of the implications of an ethical code as guideline for professional behaviour. The question arises whether social workers are deliberately and critically applying ethical thinking and decision making in practice. The conclusion that they are not was recently confirmed at a workshop on professional conduct attended by 34 social workers from a child and family welfare organisation. Participants' work experience ranged from 4 months to 28 years and they had been trained at various universities in South Africa. Only 6 of the 34 indicated that they had been exposed as students to Act 110 of 1978, which includes the Act that deals with unprofessional conduct. Furthermore, only 8 of the 34 social workers indicated that they have the Act available in their offices. This might certainly be a very small sample from which to generalise conclusions, but if it is taken into consideration that of the 34 social workers 18 have fewer than 10 years working experience and 8 more than 15 years, and that they received their training at various universities, it might be indicative of the fact that social workers have not realised in the past - and still do not realise - the importance of constantly being aware of ethical decision making in guiding social work practice. Cournoyer (1996:70) emphasises this relevancy: "Without such skill, you cannot legitimately claim professional status. Indeed, attempting to provide social work services without regard for the ethical principles would be, literally, unconscionable".

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Professional conduct or ethical behaviour needs to be viewed not only in a "disciplinary context", but in a "professional" one. A bold belief in social work as a profession will result in highly motivated professional behaviour from social workers. The professional status of social work is more than ever in question. A prerequisite for professional conduct is the belief that the profession has status. If social workers believe that the status of the profession is low, their performance will be below par. In this article the professional status of social work will be debated and a perspective provided on the direct link between the status of the profession and professional conduct.

The point of departure of the article is that social work is a full-fledged profession because it meets the criteria of being a profession. Secondly, any dynamic profession will develop and change according to the context it has to operate within. These changes might impact on the status of the profession at any given time, but need never lead to any doubt as to the professional status of social work. An understanding, however, of the context that contributes to the fluctuation of the profession will empower social workers to position themselves at all times and avoid being marginalised with regard to the unique and professional contribution they can make in the welfare sector.

SOCIAL WORK AS PROFESSION

The development of social work as a profession needs to be understood in the context of the historical debate on scientific inquiry into the meaning of the profession (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:351).

Like that of all professions, the status of social work developed through history from non-professional to semi-professional to that of full-fledged profession. In 1915 Flexner concluded in his paper "Is Social Work a Profession?" that the field did not count as a profession because it was not based on a body of scientific knowledge. A huge step towards achieving professional status was taken when Lindeman in 1947 affirmed the criteria by which social work could be deemed a full-fledged profession. In 1957, in "Attributes of a Profession", Lindeman noted that "although social work possesses all the attributes of a profession, it is at the lower rather than the higher end of the development continuum" (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:351-352).

Toren (echoing Carr-Saunders & Etzioni) confirmed this semi-professional status of social work in 1972 for reasons such as the length of training it requires and its failure to recognise privileged communication. In 1980 Gilbert, Miller and Specht confirmed the developing status of social work as a profession. They described the status of the profession "as middle range on the scale of key attributes of community sanction and authority" (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:351-352).

It was the Charity Organisation Society (COS) which facilitated both the professionalisation and bureaucratisation of social work by advancing the concept of scientific charity, or philanthropy. Philanthropists combined prudence with a dedication to helping and in this way fueled the reorganisation of COS. They worked to achieve professionalisation through the adoption of a systematic or organised approach to the identification and determination of needs, to case evaluation and to effective service delivery (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:352).

At the turn of the twentieth century social work was thus becoming more formalised, and within the next several decades emerged into a profession – a specialised, modern segment of the totality of social welfare (Thackeray, Farley & Skidmore 1994:4). According to these authors social work may be defined as an art, a science and a profession. Social work is an art since it requires great skill to understand people and to help them to help themselves. It is a fledgling

science because of its problem-solving method and its attempt to be objective in ascertaining facts and in developing the principles of a profession (Thackeray, Farley & Skidmore 1994:8).

Finally Spiro, Sherer, Korin-Langer and Weiss (1998:29) capture the current status of social work: "If in the 1950s social work was defined as a 'semi-profession' (Toren 1970), in 1997 it can lay claim to having achieved full-fledged professional status".

A profession can, however, continue to grow in maturity, something to which Spiro *et al.* (1998:29) refer as "growing professionalism". This implies that, although social work has positioned itself as a full-fledged profession, the exact status of the profession, like that of all other professions, can fluctuate at any given time. Having met the criteria of being a profession does not safeguard social work from a continuous reopening of the debate on its status position. There are various factors that contribute to the fact that social workers constantly question their professional status. According to Spiro *et al.* (1998:46) the status, public image and self-image of the social work profession are affected by a number of factors, including the legal standing of the profession and the control it exercises over its domain, the location of professionals in the bureaucracy, the composition of the profession in terms of gender, and the levels of education and income attained by professionals.

In reality it is the context of practice that shifts and within this shift questions regarding the interests, commitments and attitudes of social workers and the direction of the profession are increasingly surfacing (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:356). An understanding of this context is of vital importance, because if social workers are not aware of the context that shapes and develops social work as a profession, they may start to believe that social work is losing its status as a profession. This belief may contribute to a perception of social work as being marginalised, which in turn results in a low self-image of social workers and in marginalised performance, which again can result in unprofessional conduct.

CONTEXT IMPACTING ON THE STATUS OF THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

The Encyclopedia of Social Work (1987:354) emphasises a discussion of context as necessary to gain an understanding of the forces that impinge on the profession, since these forces set the tentative agenda for social welfare and social work at any given time.

Socio-political climate

It seems as if social work, more than any other profession, tends to be vulnerable to shifts in the social climate. Core reasons for this can be found in the following quotation from the Encyclopedia of Social Work (1987:353):

> Social work is a kind of human suspension bridge, sustained by its cables of respect for human dignity and the right to self-realisation of every individual. The profession is anchored on one side by service to and empowerment of those in acute need, and on the other by the dominant segments of society that control the resources and sharing of power essential to meeting that need. In its more expansive cycles, society tends to view social work as a mirror of its own openhandedness and optimism. However, in times of stasis, contrived shortage, or divisiveness, when self-aggrandisement, bias, and punitiveness are ascendant, the values and practitioners of social work become unwelcome reflections on societal priorities and injustices. At such times, the profession's members face difficult choices about the extent to which they serve as arms of the institutional structures or advocates of the excluded.

A pragmatic perspective on the concept of profession takes into account political influence, perceived class stratification and relationships with decisionmakers in the business and political-economic spheres. This approach relies more on power as a basis for analysis than on the listing of attributes by which occupational groups are measured to determine their professional ranking (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:352). This is certainly true in as far as people in power want to privilege one professional group at the expense of others.

However, the preoccupation with control of markets (clients and consumers) and autonomy skews the debate over the concept of profession toward power, which is only one point of analysis; another that is particularly significant to social work is its emphasis on service. Recognition of and commitment to this value is pivotal to any conception of social work as a profession (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:352).

Legal standing

According to Spiro *et al.* (1998:45) the law "protects and defines the domain of the profession and regulates its activities and provides for the appointment of a professional council".

The process of legalisation of social work as a profession in South Africa started in 1942 with an attempt to establish professional control in social work. Implementation of professional control started in 1970. It soon became evident that further development was essential to keep social work on a par with other professions, which gave rise to the Committee of Inquiry into Separate Legislation for the Social Work Profession (the Auret Committee) in 1975. The adoption of Act 110 of 1978 by the then parliament paved the way for a statutory Council for the profession of social work in 1980. Initially the Council was known as the Council for Social and Associated Workers. During 1989 the Act was amended and the Council's name changed to the South African Council for Social Work (Lombard, Manual Social Service Professions Act 1998:xiv, xiv).

It needs to be acknowledged that these Councils were not fully representative of social workers in South Africa. For this reason the SA Interim Council for Social Work was launched in 1996 with a brief to make recommendations to the Minister of Welfare and Population Development on the constitution of a new Council and the adaptation of the Act, in particular to place greater emphasis on professional practice, democracy, transparency, equity, accountability, and community need and involvement.

Recommendations led to the amendment of the Social Work Act, 1978 to become the Social Service Professions Act, and subsequently to the constitution of the first South African Council for Social Service Professions on 8 June 1999 as an umbrella body to coordinate and regulate social service professions, including social work. The Act makes provision for the establishment of Professional Boards for social work and the other social service professions as they achieve professional status. Regulation is an important step in clarifying the domain of social work in relation to the other emerging social services professions: "As legal regulation continues to gain prominence the push toward accountability will help to clarify the roles of diverse groups of human service professionals" (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:361).

While acknowledging, for this debate, the limitations of the legal processes in terms of constituting the social work profession, the commencement of the Social Work Act, 1978 (Act 110 of 1978) represented an important milestone in the development of social work as a profession. The Social Service Professions Act, 1978 made provision for the establishment of a council for social work that could, in the words of the President of the current Council,

"regulate education and training, ethical expectations of practitioners and be the body to whom appeals from the public can be directed in respect of professional conduct" (Louw 2000:5).

Professional location

A direct result of a country's socio-political climate is the development of relevant policies, such as the Policy for Social Welfare (1997). The adoption of the social development approach or paradigm for social welfare naturally led to a questioning of the status of the social work profession. This is not due to the fact that the social development paradigm, in the words of Gray (2000:100), "... led to the marginalisation of social workers in South Africa, a withdrawal of government support for social work, an undermining of the social work profession, and a questioning of social work's relevance". The questioning can rather be attributed to the fact that the professionalisation movement of social work was aided and accelerated by caseworkers who asserted that they had the "beginnings of a scientific knowledge base, as well as specialised skill, technique and function which differentiated them from the layman or volunteer" (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:353). When the socio-political context of society changes, a profession needs to adapt accordingly, which means finding appropriate approaches for a specific context. Ramasar (2000:6) supports this view: "There has been an appreciative shift from the so-called 'antiseptic' clinical work of a medical model to concerns of a more macro nature in which it is not always easy to maintain a well-groomed, well-manicured image. One concedes, of course, that casework cannot and should never be thrown out of the window, and at least this seems to be assured by the growing preference among social workers for private practice. Nevertheless, social work has to maintain its relevance in keeping with the demands of the South African community, and it no doubt has the wherewithal to do so".

Social workers who believe that their profession has been marginalised by a change in approach or paradigm certainly do not understand the context and theory of the new approach. Social work cannot be replaced by social development. It can merely adopt it as an approach or paradigm. Social development is an inclusive approach, which entails the opportunity to link human and economic development and at the same time allows for social work intervention on all possible intervention levels. Perhaps it is because social workers do not read scientific journals after graduation that they are vulnerable and fall prey to "informed" social workers who make them believe that social work is being marginalised, instead of challenged, by a new paradigm such as social development.

In terms of the professional status debate, the question is whether a move away from casework is in itself a deliberate attempt to become less professional. Phrased differently, does a social development approach to social work or developmental social work imply a lesser professional status for social workers or "de-professionalise" social work. If answered in the affirmative, would this mean that social work is becoming less of a profession, reverting back to a semi-profession? Once having achieved the status of a profession, there is no way a discipline can be allowed to become less than that, unless practitioners of that profession allow it to happen. This could perhaps happen if casework were "thrown out of the window", as Ramasar has indicated. The reality is that social work's unique characteristic of focusing on the interaction between people and their environment makes it such a diverse profession.

Brieland (in Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:360) confirms:

> The diversity in specialisation gives evidence of the profession's commitment and attempt to serve all population groups and to respond to all kinds of human need. At the same time, it explains the difficulties that have developed in regard to unifying the profession and exercising domain consensus. When social work functions alongside

> other disciplines in many of these special areas, its domain and the policies that govern its practice are more subject to influence from those outside the profession than they are when the profession functions alone in these areas.

In the process of attending to people's diverse needs, social work has increasingly become more specialised and in the process has been criticised for "professionalism".

How, then, do social social workers deal with this conflict of being faithful to its roots of servicing the poor, but at the same time contributing to the massive, specialised needs of society? Does this mean social work should remain on a lower level of professionalism and deliberately not grow into professionalism, rendering more specialised services? On the one hand, professionalism demands a body of knowledge, high standards, autonomy, self-regulation and other attributes, and as such reinforces the need for social work to achieve greater unity. At the same time, professionalism has tended to constrict the profession's broad but unique commitment to helping people. The observations made by the chair of the Physicians' Task Force on Hunger established by Harvard University indicate that professionalism pushes social work to "lower its sights and narrow its responsibilities". This perspective, which could also be found in other professions, is based on the belief that professionalism tends to produce a hierarchical gap as a consequence of which practitioners are less able to "stay on the same plane with the people they care about, remaining preoccupied with fitting people into the structure instead of challenging it" (Brown in Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:354). The assumption here is that specialisation or professionalism shifts social work away from its commitment to the poor. On the other hand, Borenzweig (in Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:356) is of the opinion that this tendency "demonstrates the responsiveness of social work to the prevailing social milieu standing".

What does this dichotomy imply for social work practice, for example when social workers who deal with the poorest of the poor require specialised knowledge, such as on AIDS and mental health? Being a social worker with a generalist training will provide minimum skills to deal with relevant societal issues, but if the client/community needs specialist inputs, they can either be referred to other professionals, or to social work professionals with specialised knowledge and skills. If specialised fields in social work are not recognised and practised, social workers will be responsible for their own marginalisation as a profession. Consequently a balance will need to be found between dealing with the poor and the disadvantaged on the one hand, but at the same time making provision for their specialised needs. Social services and programmes should be an inclusive, complementary process with regard to all target groups in need of such services.

It is thus the perspective on the role of the social worker that needs to change with regard to applying professionalism at all levels of service rendering. Empowerment should be applicable to all clients of social workers, ranging from the poorest to those who can afford to pay for their services. If the profession does not allow for this, social work will run the risk of dying, not in terms of its professional status, but because of a low or limited intake of students who wish to become social workers. This is evident in the growing attractiveness of private practice for an increasing number of social workers. However, from an over-professionalised or specialised perspective, the growing attractiveness of private practice is a cause for concern. The issue of class stratification and the potential strength of its effect on practice is a matter of concern to the profession because clients of private practitioners tend to be in the middle to upper classes, and clients who receive agency-based services are more likely to be of low socio-economic standing (Borenzweig in Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:356). This is a major concern because social workers should never forget their commitment to the plight of the disadvantaged and the poor – the origins and roots of the profession. On the other hand, it was argued above that specialist

knowledge could also be relevant for the poor and disadvantaged. This is not only due to the dire need to specialise, but also evident within the socio-political context of social work practice, influencing the status of the profession, i.e. job opportunities, salaries, the current crisis in welfare agencies that employ social workers (Ramasar 2000:6), as well as the settings of employment.

Sherer (in Spiro *et al.* 1998:47) indicates that the status and self-image of social workers are affected by the settings in which they are employed. In some organisations, such as adult and juvenile probation services, social work is the dominant profession and in other settings, such as general and mental health, social work is subordinate to other professions. These authors are of the opinion that social workers in secondary settings generally have a lower self-image than those employed in primary settings. In multi-disciplinary settings, there is evidence of a growing overlap. In this regard the Encyclopedia of Social Work (1987:352) mentions that the fact that social work is practised primarily within a formal organisation or bureaucracy has been seen a central issue in discussions about the profession's lack of autonomy. Social work has been described as an "organisational profession". This description reflects the social reality that, in general, effective services are organised and delivered within a bureaucracy or a formal organisation (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:352).

The question, however, is whether it is professionalism that causes a shift away from the poor or whether it is a matter of the social work profession not adapting to the realities of society to make provision for the rendering of services at all required levels. In the context of a "growing professionalism'" the high level of specialisation can either be categorised in terms of "over-professionalism" versus "de-professionalism" or "classification" versus "de-classification".

Classification-declassification

Classification-declassification originated from the recognition that the need for social workers would increase as society became more complex (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:358). This recognition, in the early 1970s, led to the National Association for Social Workers (NASW) adopting a six-level classification structure for the profession. The effort was undertaken in response to the growing need to staff the programmes that were initiated in the 1960s. These new programmes expanded the role of social workers, creating a need for different levels and ranges of expertise. It had become clear that social services would benefit from a more rational pattern of organisation and that social workers should be used more differentially. This structural change was necessitated by the increasing expansion and complexity of services, by improvements in methodology and techniques and by the demand for accountability (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:358).

If social work wants to continue growing as a profession, a classification–declassification solution needs to be found for not neglecting the poor, whilst at the same time attending to those who can afford services. It would, furthermore, be helpful with regard to clarifying social workers' roles in relation to the respective social services professions if compared to the USA experience.

In the USA the need for and value of professional training and formal credentialling mechanisms are recognised and considered important to the future of the profession since the majority of those delivering social services are not social workers in a technical sense. It is impossible to cite with any degree of precision the number of workers who are professionally trained, their distribution among fields of practice, or their practice function (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:356). Worse, in the USA there are approximately 200 000 people in the labour force who

have received a social work degree, yet there are 440 000 to 460 000 individuals who are called social workers, excluding aids and administrators (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:356).

The one advantage South Africa has over the USA is that the "welfare sector" is at least in one melting pot and regulated with reference to the SACSSP. It is neither the withdrawal of government support for social work nor the SACSSP that created the opportunity for the entry of "new professions and a diminished social work influence", as Gray (2000:101) has stated, that provided the opportunity for allied occupational groups to gain professional status and at the same time disempowered social work. The emergence of other professions is a response both to society's needs and the need there has always been for other untrained personnel in welfare (Thackeray, Farley & Skidmore 1994:4) that will eventually result in the emergence of a profession in view of facilitating career paths. The process leading to and the establishment of the SACSSP have been criticised by authors such as Gray. Was the writing, so to speak, not long ago on the wall that social work needed other category workers within welfare ranks? In South Africa the very first Council established in 1980 by Act 110 of 1978 referred to social and associated workers - but what has happened to the "associated workers"? If the previous Councils had been more responsive to the needs of people, the current dissent amongst welfare workers could have been attended to in a more inclusive manner within social work ranks. Perhaps they were very responsive to the plight of social work as profession, since social work has come a long way in order to be recognised by other professions, such as psychology. Although this battle for recognition is not completely over yet, the larger boundaries have been drawn and social work is on a more equal footing with these professions than in the past. With this battle less prominent, the focus has turned to the welfare sector itself. How then can social workers be marginalised if they actively participate from within the welfare sector? It is when social workers remain spectators from the outside that they risk marginalising themselves. By participating in the debate on determining and establishing boundaries for various social services occupational and emerging professional groups, the unique domain of social work can be protected, whilst at the same time other role players' contributions to the welfare sector are acknowledged.

Although the SACSSP has created space (Gray 2000:101) for the entry of new professions, this does not mean that they will automatically step into that space. Like all emerging professions, they will need to earn status by meeting the required criteria. Within one rank, like social auxiliary workers, they will have levels of operation ranging from the non-professional to the professional. The USA schema includes both pre-professional and professional levels of practice that are consistent with a continuum of education and experience. It was determined that some tasks performed by social workers do not require graduate education, but that others require not only graduate education but doctoral-level study. The classification structure includes two ratings on the pre-professional level: social work aide (high school diploma) and social service technician (associate of arts degree in a human services programme or a major in human services in a baccalaureate programme. There are four ratings on the professional level: social worker (accredited baccalaureate in social work), social worker (accredited master's degree in social work), certified social worker or ACSW (requiring at least 2 years of certified supervision after receipt of an MSW plus an examination), and social work fellow (advanced practice). Theoretically, each level should reflect certain responsibilities that presumably become more complex as one moves up the ladder. The Israel Council for Social Work (Spiro *et al.* 1998:46) also recognises different levels of competence: beginning, advanced and senior social workers. The requirements for the award of advanced, senior or expert status have been determined and a mechanism for the processing of applications set up.

In practice these levels are already emerging in South Africa. At the unprofessional level of the social work profession, the occupational group of social auxiliary workers has already existed since 1991. On a higher, specialised level, social workers practising adoption work are in a position to register a speciality in adoption work. This is soon going to be expanded since the categories of play therapy, occupational social work and social work in forensic fields have requested - in SACSSP Newsletter, Volume 19 (1) - a mandate to establish a field of speciality according to Sections 17C (4) and (5) of the Social Service Professions Act, 1978.

In the USA, although some individuals without a professional education have done demonstrably well in the profession and may even control major agencies or programmes, most supervisory and administrative positions require an MSW. Increasingly, doctoral education is required for teaching, as well as for administrative and research positions. These standards help clarify and differentiate the roles, responsibilities and functions of social workers. The schema includes both pre-professional and professional levels of practice that are consistent with a continuum of education and experience. It was determined that some tasks performed by social workers do not require graduate education and that others require not only graduate education but doctoral-level study. In the context of this article, the question is how these levels of practice will ensure continued service to the poor. A continuous flow of quality students will feed the lower levels of practice, while at the same time requirements for specialised training in specific fields "such as supervision and educators", could be regarded as professionally responsible. This movement will also be in line with the envisaged demonstration of continuous learning as a prerequisite to renewing registration with the SACSSP.

This USA model could be seen as over-regulation of the profession and attaching to it an "over-professionalism". However, on the other hand, it could also be perceived as building a career path for a social worker which will be in line with the NQF and, on the other hand, will ensure that all levels higher up have the experience of developmental social work (level 1). In practice, however, the lines of classification are not neatly drawn or clearly compartmentalised. The blurring of the classification structure prompted NASW to fight the erosion of standards and to reissue its definition and classification of social work practice (NASW 1981, in Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:360). These standards help clarify and differentiate the roles, responsibilities and functions of social workers. The establishment of Standard-Generating Bodies for social work and the other emerging professions provides an increased opportunity not only to clarify the roles of the respective social services professions, but also to be accountable as a profession.

There is, however, a counter-trend toward declassification that is currently highly relevant in the South African context. A combination of ongoing demands for labour and rapidly rising personnel costs and budget constraints has produced this counter-trend – a movement to downgrade requirements for social work positions. Under declassification, job qualifications and standards of performance are being reviewed, revised and rewritten with the recommendation that educational requirements be lowered and the length of professional training shortened (NASW 1981). The awareness that many of those delivering social services are not professionally trained social workers and, therefore, presumably supportive of declassification is cause for concern to the profession (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:358). There is a strong possibility that professionally trained social workers may eventually attain status as the majority within the social services arm of the labour force – assuming that schools of social work are able to recruit sufficient numbers of talented and capable individuals and that funds are available for professional training (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:358).

Social work will always be a leading profession: "To actively practice a profession is to believe that ... In the future, the need for social workers will grow". Populations at risks that require

social services – the aged and those living below the poverty line, the unemployed, AIDS sufferers, for example – are expanding (cf. Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:357).

Despite the fact that forces that impinge on the profession call for restrictions, and although social work must respond with a sense of social reality, it is imperative that the profession remember its ethos (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:354).

The degree to which a social worker is considered professional is judged not only by means of standards of expertise, but also by the way in which he/she acts in the execution of his/her tasks. For this reason there is a code of conduct, the written and unwritten rules valid for the profession and accepted by the individual members to such an extent that they have become second nature to them. This code, therefore, forms the ethos of the profession, "the unit of directional and regulating guidelines that directs personal conduct from within" (Lombard, Manual for Social Service Professions Act 1978: Preface).

In order to practise ethically, social workers must have a thorough understanding of both the fundamental social work values and the principles that guide social workers in making ethical decisions (Cournoyer 1996:62).

Every aspect of practice, every decision, every assessment, every intervention and virtually every action a social worker undertakes must be considered from the perspective of ethics and obligations. The values, ethics, and obligations of the profession are preeminent and should serve as a screen for all other information: "Ethical responsibilities take precedence over theoretical knowledge, research findings, practice wisdom, agency policies, and, of course, your own personal values, preferences, and beliefs" (Cournoyer 1996:53).

PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

The term "professional" encompasses the disciplined use of oneself (i.e. the use of valid knowledge, adequate insight and self-control regarding the use of one's emotions (Falck 1986:57). Cournoyer (1996:53) emphasises that the assumption of the role of professional social worker entails considerable personal sacrifice, enormous intellectual effort and extraordinary self-discipline. Because social workers affect, for better or worse, the lives of the people they serve and because they pledge to follow the ethical code of the social work profession, substantial responsibilities and obligations are assumed.

Cournoyer (1996:53) lists several dimensions of ethical decision making: understanding those legal duties that apply to all professional helpers; comprehension of the core social work values and the social work code of ethics; and identifying those ethical principles and legal duties that pertain to specific social work practice situations. Finally, when several competing obligations apply, a social worker must be able to determine which takes precedence, which is the most complex and challenging aspect of ethical decision making (Cournoyer 1996:54).

Legally determined obligations or duties of social workers include the duty to provide a reasonable standard of care in delivering social work services (including knowledge of assessment, diagnoses, treatment, intervention, being available and professional record keeping); the duty to respect people's privacy; the duty to maintain confidentiality; the duty to inform (on matters such as costs, length, probability of success, risks and alternate services that may be appropriate when services are discontinued); the duty to report (knowledge of certain criminal behaviour, including child abuse and neglect, child molestation and incest); the duty to warn (when client reveals an intent to harm another person) (Cournoyer 1996:58-60). These derive from common law, legislation, regulations and various court decisions. Some legal obligations coincide with the responsibilities suggested by social work values and the code of ethics; others

do not (Cournoyer 1996:53). With reference to values, Potgieter (1998:39) contextualises values as ways to view people, i.e. worth and dignity; diversity and uniqueness; capacity to grow and a drive for change, need to belong; responsibility towards self and fellow human beings; values as ways to deal with people, i.e. principles: individualisation; acceptance; controlled emotional involvement, non-judgmental attitude, self-determination and accountability; and values that are ideals for people, i.e. equity, democracy, and social justice.

Professional conduct, then, is behaviour as defined by the ethical principles or behaviour guidelines growing out of the value base of a profession. The professional base delineates the overall goals, objectives and mission; the ethical principles provide a prescription for professional conduct based on those values (Abbott 1995:1916). Values tend to provide an overview of the profession's focus and ethics translates those values into specific guidelines for professional conduct (Abbott 1988). These fundamental social work values serve as an extremely useful foundation for the process of ethical decision making. They are invaluable in helping social workers define a professional identity and establish a social work frame of reference. Such abstract concepts, however, are not sufficient for making ethically sound practice decisions. That function is served by codes of ethics, derived from the fundamental social work values but presented in more concrete and prescriptive terms. Reference to a social work code of ethics should help social workers make practice decisions that are ethical and congruent with the fundamental social work values.

In South Africa the Code of Ethics (course of conduct) of the SACSSP reflects the relationship between values and ethics and legal obligations, and includes ethics with regard to a general approach to practice, conduct that concerns the profession, the client, a colleague or another professional person, an employer, a social work institution and, lastly, conduct that concerns the community.

All regulations, however, are adapted from time to time according to the changing requirements of society and are therefore amended periodically. Sewpaul (2000:7) confirms: "Ethical codes are formulated against particular socio-political and historical contexts, and ethical considerations always occur within defined realities where social actors control resources and power. Codes of conduct provide us with frameworks within which we can explore the ambiguities and boundaries of practice". Spiro *et al.* (1998:44) attribute the need for a revision of the code of ethics to the result of experience with the code and developments such as the emergence of new social problems (e.g. care of AIDS patients), the entry of social workers into new activities (e.g. research) and new settings (e.g. the private sector). It is within this context that social workers were requested in the latest SACSSP's Newsletter to review the relevance of the Code of Ethics.

As clear or deliberate as guidelines may seem, practitioners are frequently confronted with ethical dilemmas or instances in which competing values require a personal interpretation or application of the underlying value scheme. For the most part, social workers confront such challenges, responding on the basis of professional integrity. In some instances they may stretch the limits of ethical integrity (Abbott 1995:1916). In rarer instances, social workers have conducted themselves in a fashion that appears to run truly counter to the value base and ethical framework. Their behaviour is such that clients, peers or co-workers question whether it conforms to the expectation of appropriate professional conduct (Abbott 1995:1916).

The protection of clients through assurance of competence is a principal rationale for legal regulation in social work and in other helping professions. Assurance of competence, however, also offers protection for social workers. Through professional councils a forum is provided

through which charges of malpractice and unethical conduct can be raised and addressed, thus responding to the demand that professionals be held accountable for their actions (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987:361).

Misconduct or malpractice

Barker (in Cournoyer 1996:54) defines malpractice as "wilful or negligent behaviour by a professional person that violates the relvant code of ethics and professional standards of care that proves harmful to the client". Malpractice by professional social workers is, in legal terminology, a form of tort (Cournoyer 1996:54).

Simply stated, malpractice is professional negligence or misconduct. The social worker typically is accused of failure to exercise the degree of care that a similar professional of ordinary prudence would demonstrate under the same circumstances (Kurzman 1995:1922).

A finding of professional negligence denotes that a wrongful action has been committed, either by omission or commission. Four elements must be present to reach this conclusion: (1) The social worker incurred a professional duty, (2) the social worker was remiss or derelict in performance of that duty, (3) measurable loss or harm occurred, and (4) proximate cause can be established on the basis of something the social worker did or did not do, triggering the damage (Prosser & Keeton 1984 in Kurzman 1995:1922).

Areas of liability

Section 27(1A) of the Social Service Professions Act (Act 110 of 1978) makes provision for the regulations 3-9 relating to the Course of Conduct. Certain forms of practice and certain settings constitute a greater risk for litigation against social workers. For example, because child welfare work often involves the provision of involuntary services, there is a greater likelihood of both civil and criminal legal action against social workers who work in such settings (Cournoyer 1996:57). This tendency is also found in South Africa, both in welfare organisations and in private practice.

It is not only social workers who are liable in a case of unprofessional conduct. Even if they never served the aggrieved client, supervisors, partners, field instructors and agency administrators often become co-defendants in these legal proceedings through the principle of "vicarious liability" (Kurzman 1995:1922). Based on their supervisory and managerial responsibility, social work colleagues may be viewed in the role of respondent superior, sharing in civil liability for wrongful acts committed solely by those under their supervision or in their employ (NASW; Watkins & Watkins in Kurzman 1995:1922). Generally, this is the price a social worker and a social agency must pay to become preferred providers in a managed care network (Kurzman 1995:1922).

For the purposes of this article two formal child and family welfare organisations, the NG Ministry of Caring and Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie (SAVF), identified possible risk areas with regard to unprofessional conduct within child and family organisations as perceived by social workers and supervisors. Both these organisations recently undertook workshops for social work practitioners and supervisors to create an awareness of professional conduct. According to these organisations, risks with regard to unprofessional conduct include the following:

- Refusal to work on a specific case or, especially in children's cases, only work with the mother and not the father or vice versa.
- Failure to refer the client to a colleague or negligence to attend to a case that has been referred for services.
- Unclear picture of treatment plan.
- Being in an intoxicated state at work.
- Taking bribes (money or favours) from clients. Misusing money allocated for projects (for example, job creation projects). Mismanaging/misusing organisation money.
- Failure to keep due dates in a report.
- Failure to keep appointments.
- Visiting friends during working hours.
- Failure to sign written reports.
- Neglecting to include telephonic conversations with clients in written reports.
- Failure to obtain consent from parents when it comes to dealing with administrative issues, especially with regard to child cases.
- Failure to make holiday arrangements with the supervisor in time for children placed in a place of safety and reformatory school or children's home.
- Holding another job not included in a job description, without permission from the employer/authorities.
- Failure to clarify with the client the content of a court report before case proceedings.
- Failure to be transparent and honest with the client, for example, to inform a child that he/she has been referred to a reformatory school.
- Using clients to sell products, for example, cosmetics, for social worker's profit.
- Imposing on the client and making decisions for the client.
- Being biased in cases of spouses.
- Discussing clients with colleagues without their consent.
- Taking over a colleague's client without proper arrangement/permission.
- Gossiping about colleagues.
- Having intimate/close and passionate relationship with a colleague's partner.
- Breaching the code of conduct spelt out by the organisation.
- Failure to register with the South African Social Service Professions Council.
- Failure to serve the community with respect and dignity, for example, undermining priority needs of dwellers.
- High work loads and accompanied high levels of stress – dealing only with crises and neglecting services. This could lead to piling up of administrative work and as a result neglecting proper record keeping. Work pressure contributes to superficial investigations. Social workers rely on hearsay witnesses as opposed to factual and verified information for reports.

- Poor resources for immediate safety of children or movement of children to more appropriate substitute care.
- Project Go not willing to take children with behaviour problems deeper into the care system. These children remain at risk in the community because no children's home wants to take them in. Project Go also requires placements of children back with their parents before parents are ready for the demands and responsibility to take care of their children.
- Poor cooperation from clients with regard to alternative social work interventions, other than casework, for example.
- Inexperienced court staff many times place a child back in risk circumstances whilst intensive supervision services are not possible.
- Due to crisis management (which should be viewed in the context of inability to plan), workload is poorly managed and supervision services, including services to foster care children, are neglected.
- High work loads contribute to lack of treatment plans; also due to lack of knowledge or haphazard contacts with clients, social workers only deal with the obvious points that clients bring into the discussion.

The above-mentioned perceptions of possible risk areas with regard to unprofessional conduct fit in with the core component of the SACSSP's Code of Ethics, that is conduct with regard to a general approach, conduct that concerns the profession, the client, colleagues, the employer, a social work institution and the community.

If these perceptions are compared with the complaints received by the Council, similarities become evident. When a complaint is laid with the Council, a specific procedure is followed. The first place where the complaint is investigated is at the preliminary inquiry level. The task of this committee is to determine whether a complaint of possible unprofessional or improper conduct should be subjected to a disciplinary inquiry. As Table 1 indicates, only limited complaints are eventually referred for disciplinary hearings. What is, however, alarming in this table is the annual increase in complaints, which correlates with the previous remarks that social workers are increasingly held more accountable for the social services they render. The statistics indicated in the following tables (1-3) reflect indicators for calendar years stretching from February to February of a particular year.

TABLE 1

AUDIT OF COMPLAINTS LODGED WITH COUNCIL: 1980-FEBRUARY 2000

Year	Preliminary inquiries	Referred for Disciplinary hearings
1999-2000	39	11
1998-1999	24	8
1997-1998	18	9
1980-1997	20	7

TABLE 2

COMPLAINTS ON WHICH SOCIAL WORKERS/STUDENTS WERE FOUND GUILTY

COMPLAINTS	1999	1998	1997	1980-1997
False statement/theft/fraud/dishonesty	1	2		**8**
Exhibited behaviour detrimental to position as social worker/profession	2	2	2	1
Negligently omitted to keep clear and accurate records	2			4
False statements and divulgence of confidential information	1			1
Performance of duties without experience in that particular field		2		1
Engaged in extramarital affair with a client	10			1
Execution of professional duties in a manner which does not comply with accepted standards of practice.			2	3
Taunting of clients				1
Total	14	6	4	20

What is not reflected in the above-mentioned table is the scrapping of social workers for non-payment of annual registration fees. These figures add up to a few hundred per year. Complaints can only be laid against social workers registered with the Council. If social workers practice without being registered, a civil charge can be laid against the social worker. It is also important to take note of the fact that not all the complaints referred for disciplinary hearings necessarily imply that the social worker/student has been found guilty of unprofessional conduct. Each referred case has to be investigated to determine whether any malpractice was occurring. Tables 2 and 3 respectively indicate the status to this effect of complaints.

TABLE 3

COMPLAINTS ON WHICH SOCIAL WORKERS WERE FOUND NOT GUILTY

COMPLAINTS	1999	1998	1997	1980-1997
False statement and association with deed of dishonesty	1			1
Divulgence of confidential information	1			1
Removal of a patient without the consent of the psychiatrist				2
Alleged illegal political activities				1
Relationship with a client				1
Found guilty of criminal charges, not guilty of unprofessional/improper conduct	3			1
Total	5	0	0	7

With regard to preliminary inquiries, it is important to note that many of these complaints should never have been laid with Council, since a complaint can be dealt with at the employer level, depending on whether it is either a labour or an organisational issue, such as breaching the employers' code of conduct. To this effect, Council is currently working on a policy guideline as to determine at which level a complaint should be dealt with.

The details of complaints lodged against social workers, as summarised in Tables 2 and 3 respectively, include the following examples.

COMPLAINTS LAID AGAINST SOCIAL WORKERS/STUDENTS

- Theft of organisation's and client's money.
- Charged fees for services rendered to clients, which in effect were never rendered.
- Misappropriated sums of money while administering single care grants.
- Tendered a falsified medical certificate and contravened rules for student discipline at a University.
- Misled Social Work Department and the Faculty Office of the University in order to secure a supplementary examination.
- Performance of duties without experience in that particular field, for example, adoption.
- Pretended to be accredited to do adoption work while this was not the case.
- Conducting adoption while not accredited to do so and then charged unrealistically high fees for services. No provision of receipts on rendering of services.
- Failed to adhere to the requirements of the adoption process. Not taking best interest of child into consideration.
- Practised as social worker while registered as a student social worker only. Has not completed studies – thus pretended to be a qualified social worker.
- As supervisor, failed to give constructive supervision to social workers under supervision.
- Failed to open Children's Court inquiry despite repeated requests. Failed to re-allocate urgent files. Entered false entries into file.
- Failed to honour appointments with supervisor. Failed to plan professional responsibilities; failed to execute duties or assignments; did not attend to case referrals; used unacceptable language towards supervisor; low productivity despite numerous warnings.
- Absconded from employment by giving 36 hours instead of one calendar month written notice.
- Failed to visit child after placement in foster home. Failed to monitor progress of child. Failed to carry out full terms of Court Order to regularly test drug use of biological mother. Failed to thoroughly investigate circumstances of biological mother.
- Social worker accused of amending psychologist's evaluation report on adoptive parents from "not recommended" to "recommended".
- Used foul language in conversation with client. Did not conduct a thorough investigation regarding placement of children.
- In alleged incest case, social worker failed to protect the complainant from her abusive family situation and to prepare her for court and comply with the prosecutor's request that a clinical psychologist see the complainant.
- Issued Form 4 to grandparents to remove child from custody of mother. Did not investigate circumstances of either grandparents or mother.

- Compiled a report and based evaluations of client on hearsay and unsubstantiated evidence without assessing client. Biased towards client, used information reflecting a positive picture of other party.
- Not objective in obtaining facts for report regarding custody of child. Did not conduct a professional interview to obtain facts and did not evaluate information sufficiently. Did not obtain permission to record interviews.
- Failed to adequately manage trust fund of client.
- Failed to keep records.
- Failed to extend Children's Court Order. Failed to include all cases for supervision. Organised that reports be typed outside the organisation because of court order date elapsed and requested a colleague, as opposed to the supervisor, to sign the report (fraud).
- Negligent performance of professional duties – had only one interview with client in a period of three years. Failed to respond to a request to refer client to a psychologist. Faxed information via an open line.
- Failed to compile report to children's court due to alcohol abuse.
- Charged unrealistically high fees for services rendered.
- Rendered social work services while not registered as social worker, due to non-payment of annual fees.
- Submitted a biased report regarding custody of child; evaluated father without investigating his circumstances or interviewing him.
- Insufficient supervision of family after children have been re-united with mother and stepfather.
- Engaged in an extra-marital affair with a client. Dishonestly, alternatively fraudulently, concealed affair from wife of client who at all applicable times was a client of the social worker, causing extreme mental harm.
- Entered into employment contract and failed to honour this contract.

When the above-mentioned complaints are compared with the list provided by the welfare organisations, there are many similarities. The above identified risks and complaints are also in line with my personal experience as a member of Disciplinary Tribunals. A malpractice charge is not something a social worker hopes will ever befall to him/her. There are specific preventative actions that social workers can take to lessen the risks of getting involved in unprofessional conduct. Kurzman (1995:1925) refers to indicators for risk management.

Indicators for risk management

Many hazards inherent in professional practice can be mitigated by sound risk management strategies (Kurzman 1995:1925). Strategies should not only manage risk factors, but also very specifically address the professional development of social work as a profession and the professional conduct of social workers. Consequently a few suggestions are offered with regard to how professional conduct can be deliberately promoted.

Intervention strategy or treatment plan. Incorrect diagnosis or treatment, according to Kurzman (1995:1925), is the most frequent area in which social work practitioners have been found at fault and accused of malpractice. This includes not referring clients to appropriate help.

An intervention strategy starts with an initial stage of assessment. According to Berlin and Marsh (1993:50), the central and interactive purpose of initial assessment is to learn enough about the client, his problem and his overall situation to inform early intervention efforts, and thus to establish a cooperative alliance situation to inform early intervention efforts.

An inherent part of an intervention or treatment plan is good **record keeping**. Many social workers cannot prove their intervention with clients due to poor record keeping. Although in case of litigation the best defence is undoubtedly ethical, competent, and well-documented social work practice, this does not guarantee freedom from legal action. What it does, however, is to provide sound evidence when a social worker needs to defend the quality of his/her professional practice. Berlin and Marsh (1993:14) are of the opinion that, although all practitioners rely heavily on data, some are better observers and make better use of observations than others. The difference lies in (1) knowing what to look for, (2) loosening up preconceptions in order to see the unexpected, (3) deriving useful inferences from what is observed, (4) keeping track of important configurations consistently and carefully so that small changes occurring over time can be discerned, and (5) having a system for organizing and remembering the emerging facts of a case. A great many practitioners observe the first three criteria. However, only a few enhance their observational capacity by routinely relying on systematic methods for recording and organizing information referred to in criteria (4) and (5) above. Practitioners should have a relatively explicit sense of what things to watch for and what these things mean, as well as the ability to adjust their thinking and actions on the basis of what they see (Berlin & Marsh 1993:14).

The format of record keeping should be combined with an intervention or treatment strategy. Berlin and Marsh's (1993:5) proposal for record keeping could be adapted to this effect: (1) indication of what needs to happen, which refers, to the immediate and evolving treatment plan (complete prior to session); (2) content and process of session (main focus, strategies, client presentation and response); (3) recurring content and process patterns and pattern changes; (4) tasks completed, tasks assigned; (5) problem level and (6) notes for the next interview.

Social work practitioners should get **legal counselling** and become knowledgeable with regard to the Social Service Professions Act and the accompanying rules and regulations. Kurzman (1995:1925) is of the opinion that all agency and independent practitioners should establish an ongoing consultative relationship with a legal counsel. This author adds that one should not wait until a crisis occurs and then attempt to select an appropriate attorney under pressure. The Council should help the practitioner to put preventive risk-management strategies in place to reduce exposure to a malpractice suit. In this regard the SACSSP serves as a resource. When difficult ethical decisions need to be made, the Council can link the practitioner with a legal adviser. The Council should not be seen as the prosecutor; it facilitates and promotes professional conduct through workshop presentations and by informing, at a minimum cost, social work practitioners and educators about the Social Service Professions Act.

Continuous professional development

If social workers develop themselves professionally, they will not only promote professional conduct but also the professional status of social work. In research done by Van Zyl and Botha (1997:25-33) a valuable contribution was made with regard to specific proposals for the professional development of social workers. These proposals include the following:

- By setting clear personal goals with regard to professional standing, social workers could be enabled to recognise career options, and the relevance of their actions and experiences could be better assessed.

- Social workers should not rely on the experience and support of their supervisors, but take the initiative to identify their developmental needs and plan their reading and studying and then turn to the supervisory help or other resources in the agency. Self-supervision is an approach that may be taught to supervisees for evaluating their performance toward achieving goals in each setting. The self-supervision model promotes professional autonomy, whereas peer-supervision stimulates and confirms professional growth and provides a good opportunity to discuss ethical issues. Group supervision provides opportunities for social workers to share their experiences of similar problems encountered in the work situation, and the possible solutions that each has formulated in response, while members also act as a source of emotional support.
- Consultation provides the experienced, mature social worker, who has reached a sufficient level of professional development, the opportunity to obtain an opinion from another social worker or professional with specialised knowledge in an area of practice. Consultants help reduce the common professional feeling that a social worker has to provide all the answers and should also help practitioners remain within the boundaries of their training (Kuzman 1995:1925).
- Student supervision and practice education provide opportunities to remain abreast of new approaches, techniques and methods in social work.
- Staff development is an important avenue for refreshing, updating and expanding the social worker's knowledge and skills. This is important for future registration with the SACSSP, since proof of continuous education will soon be requested. Kurzman (1995:1925) emphasises that independent practitioners should return for training and engage in continuing education to expand and update their expertise. Similarly, social work administrators should schedule risk-management sessions as an integral part of in-service training for staff. This approach is in line with the National Qualification Framework's (NQF) life-long learning.
- Building a professional library. To keep up to date on development's in their field of practice, social workers must attend relevant conferences and workshops and read professional books and journals. Intellectual stimulation can be an antidote for job burnout.
- Developing a journal club. A common complaint among professionals is that they do not have time to keep up with professional literature in their field of practice. In order to address this, Sheafor *et al.* (in Van Zyl & Botha 1997:31) suggest that a journal club be developed. A journal club is a small group of professionals from one or more agencies that agree to meet on a regular basis, weekly or monthly, to discuss professional literature.
- Membership of professional associations. Professional associations play an important role in continuous education and are a requirement for maintaining professional status. Attending meetings of professional associations is a means of remaining informed and keeping abreast of developments. This is very important for the unity of the profession and to act as one voice in society. In South Afric, social workers will have to become actively involved in the Interim Committee for Social Work Association (ICSWA) to unite and enhance the social work profession. One crucial issue that ICSWA could follow up is the income of social workers, since that has a direct impact on the status of the profession and, according to the Encyclopedia of Social Work (1987:359), is important to the future of social work. Spiro *et al.* (1998:47) confirm that the income of social workers has long been considered low, even when compared with other human services professionals and public sector employees.

- Publication and research. Publication is an excellent way of learning. It could also bring theory and practice closer. Social workers should be committed in practice to research and incorporate research findings into their practice.

Liability insurance

There is, according to Kurzman (1995:1925), no substitute for adequate insurance in risk-management planning. Liability insurance transfers financial risk from the social work provider, agency, or school of social work to an insurance carrier. Having liability insurance, however, does not protect social workers from being sued. However, if they are sued, the insurance will be greatly appreciated. It is the social worker's option to buy liability insurance (Royse *et al.*, 1993:101). The SACSSP reminds social workers to take out liability insurance during its annual registration announcement.

CONCLUSION

Social work, like most professional activities, has accepted the need for transformation (Ramasar 2000:6), something which is vital if it is to remain relevant as the socio-economic climate changes. As social work continues to grow as a profession, the demand for accountability will require high standards of professional conduct from social workers. Kurzman (1995:1926) indicate that social work practitioners and administrators can minimise their vulnerability by maintaining ethical professional relationships, following the canons of good practice, and practising always within the scope of their expertise.

Social workers should, as an inherent part of professional conduct, build risk management into their skill repertoire as a central, not an ancillary, function (Kurzman 1995:1926): "Social workers must view education in the professional liability arena as a core activity if their response to the problem is to prove as comprehensive as the need". Although the increasing frequency of litigation against social workers and other professional helpers is cause for concern, it should, according to Cournoyer (1996:53), not unduly frighten social workers. Adhering to an ethical code and high standards of practice needs to be motivated from a professional and not a disciplinary perspective.

Ramasar (2000:6) alerts the profession to the active recruitment of South African social workers by the British Social Services. Universities have started referring to the fact that they are training social workers for Britain. If the British regard South African social workers as competent and highly professional, they must receive the same professional status in South Africa. Professional bodies such as SACSSP and ICSW should take the initiative to develop the professional status of social work and, as Ramasar (2000:6) indicates, the Council "should do everything in its power to prevent any under-valuing of the profession and its practitioners for they are immensely valuable". Social work practitioners and educators should actively start recruiting social work students with high potential and jointly develop professional career paths for social workers that would allow for serving the poorest of the poor, but at the same time serve those with highly specialised needs.

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