



Ontario College of
Social Workers and
Social Service Workers

L'Ordre des travailleurs
sociaux et des techniciens
en travail social de l'Ontario

POSITION PAPER ON SCOPES OF PRACTICE

*PUBLISHED BY THE ONTARIO COLLEGE OF
SOCIAL WORKERS
AND SOCIAL SERVICE WORKERS*

OCTOBER 2008

Review Note: *This resource was updated in January 2023 solely to reflect the College's shift in terminology, from "member" to "registrant".*

Terminology Update: *Throughout the OCSWSSW's website and documents, the term "member" and "registrant" are used interchangeably and synonymously as equivalent to the term "member" as used in the Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998, and the Regulations.*

Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers Position Paper on Scopes of Practice

Introduction:

Articulating a scope of practice for a profession is a critical regulatory function. Typically a scope of practice is a description of a profession's activities, including the boundaries of these activities, especially in relation to other professions where similar activities may be performed.

The objectives of this paper are to assist registrants and employers in understanding the purpose of a scope of practice statement, the scopes of practice of the two professions, the distinctions between them and the relationship between the scope of practice statements developed by the College and job descriptions developed by employers for College registrants.

There can be confusion around the purpose of a scope of practice statement. Some incorrectly believe it can be used to give exclusive license to a profession to carry out particular tasks. Others are not clear on how it can relate to their job - that is, whether they may perform a task outside their scope of practice or how their scope of practice can inform their job description. Additionally, there is perplexity regarding the scope of practice statements for each of the two professions regulated by the College, specifically regarding the perceived lack of distinction between the scope of practice statement for social work and the scope of practice statement for social service work.

Background to the College's Scope of Practice Statements

The College's transitional Council provided the Policy Rationale for the Scope of Practice to the Ministry of Community and Social Services in connection with the Registration Regulation made under the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998*, which defines the "role of a social worker" and the "role of a social service worker".¹ The transitional Council also developed the scope of practice statements for both professions.

The scope of practice for the profession of social work was supported by the former voluntary regulatory body of the social work profession in Ontario (the Ontario College of Certified Social Workers) in the legislative process leading up to the enactment of the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act*, as an accurate description of the practice of social work. It is also consistent with the legislation of other provinces which define either the practice of social work or the term "social work".

The scope of practice for the profession of social service work was supported by the vocational learning outcomes for social service workers published by the College Standards and Accreditation Council (CSAC) with respect to the CSAC Program Standards for Social Service Worker Programs. The CSAC was given the mandate to express the vocational and

¹ Please refer to the Appendix of this document for the definitions of "role of a social worker" and "role of a social service worker".

generic skills components of the program standard for social service worker programs delivered by the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology.

The Purpose of a Scope of Practice Statement:

The College's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice sets out the scope of practice statement for social work and the scope of practice statement for social service work. **The scope of practice statement for each profession is a general statement describing, but not exclusively limiting, the performance of the activities for each profession.** Such statements provide three types of information – what the profession does, the methods the profession uses and the purpose for which the profession does it. It is acknowledged that there is overlap between the scope of practice statement for social work and the scope of practice statement for social service work.² However, the two scope of practice statements differ from each other in three critical areas:

- 1) **What the profession does:** the scope of practice statement for social work includes the activity of social work **diagnosis**; the scope of practice statement for social service work does not.
- 2) **The methods the profession uses:** the scope of practice statement for social work uses **social work** knowledge, skills, intervention and strategies; the scope of practice statement for social service work uses **social service work** knowledge, skills, intervention and strategies.
- 3) **The purpose for which the profession does an activity:** the scope of practice statement for social work includes as a purpose for social work activity the **achievement of optimum psychosocial functioning**; the scope of practice statement for social service work does not include this purpose.

Bodies of Knowledge:

The scope of practice statement for social work uses social work knowledge, skills, intervention and strategies; the scope of practice statement for social service work uses social service work knowledge, skills, intervention and strategies. As with all human service professions, there is not a precise line that clearly demarcates the bodies of knowledge between the two professions. There is however, a distinction based on formal levels of training and education that distinguishes the intensity, breadth, depth, comprehensiveness and theoretical richness of the relevant bodies of knowledge for each profession.

Social Service Work Formal Training

The formal training for a social service worker is a post secondary diploma from a social service worker program offered at a College of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT). This program is two years in length. The social service worker programs adhere to standards set by

²To review the Scopes of Practice Statements for social work and social service work in their entirety, please refer to the OCSWSSW Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, pages 1 -2. <http://www.ocswssw.org/professional-practice/code-of-ethics/>

the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). The social service worker program “provides students with practical, integrated learning experiences and a body of knowledge related to the promotion of human well being and the affirmation of strengths and capacities of people in their environments.”³

In accordance with the 2007 MTCU standards, all graduates of social service worker programs of instruction must have achieved the 9 vocational learning outcomes in addition to achieving the essential employability skills learning outcomes and meeting the general education requirement. The Vocational Learning Outcomes ensure the graduate has reliably demonstrated the ability to:

- develop and maintain professional relationships which adhere to professional, legal and ethical standards aligned to social service work
- identify strengths, resources and challenges of individuals, families, groups and communities and assist them in achieving their goals
- recognize diverse needs and experiences of individuals, groups, families and communities to promote accessible and responsive programs and services
- identify current social policy, relevant legislation, and political, cultural and/or economic systems and their impacts on service delivery
- advocate for appropriate access to resources to assist individuals, families, groups and communities
- develop and maintain positive working relationships with colleagues, supervisors and community partners
- develop strategies and plans that lead to the promotion of self-care, improved job performance and enhanced work relationships
- integrate social group work and group facilitation skills across a wide range of environments, supporting growth and development of individuals, families and communities
- work in communities to advocate for change strategies that promote social and economic justice and challenge patterns of oppression and discrimination.

Students’ classroom learning is complemented by supervised field experience. Individual Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology determine the specific program structure and curriculum and therefore hours of field experience are not uniform across programs. However, typically students in a social service worker program will spend between 500 and 600 hours in field placement throughout their program.

³ Social Service Worker Program Standard, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, March 2007

Social Work Formal Training

Social work programs are recognized as distinct professional programs within the university system and are subject to external accreditation requirements developed and evaluated by the national professional education association. In Canada this body is the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) and in the United States, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE).

The first university level degree for a social worker is the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree, the norm being a 4-year honours degree, obtained in a university social work program, accredited by the CASWE or equivalent. Two years of general study are followed by two years of social work study. The second level university degree is a Master of Social Work (MSW), a graduate degree, post-baccalaureate of a further one to two years, also obtained from an accredited university social work program. While some social workers possess a BSW or MSW, many hold both degrees. Still others will also have obtained a doctoral degree.

In accordance with CASWE Standards for Accreditation, the curriculum at the Bachelor of Social Work level “will ensure that graduates will be broadly educated and prepared for general practice and have sufficient competence for an entry level social work position. Competence is evidenced by an ability to arrive at professional judgements and practice actions, based on integration of theory and practice within the context of professional values and the relevant social work code of ethics.”⁴ The curriculum ensures that students have:

- Knowledge base related to human development and behaviour in the social environment.
- Critical analysis of Canadian social work, social welfare history and social policy and their implication for social work practice with diverse populations, including racial minorities.
- Beginning level analysis and practice skills pertaining to the origins and manifestations of social injustices in Canada, and the multiple and intersecting bases of oppression, domination and exploitation.
- Practice methods and professional skills required for generalist practice (i.e. analysis of situations, establishing accountable relationships, intervening appropriately and evaluating one's own social work interventions) at a beginning level of competence.
- Understanding of social work's origins, purposes and practices.
- Understanding of and ability to apply social work values and ethics in order to make professional judgements consistent with a commitment to address inequality and the eradication of oppressive social conditions.
- Awareness of self in terms of values, beliefs and experiences as these impact upon social work practice.

⁴ CASWE Accreditation Manual, June 2007, SB 5.3

- Ability to undertake systematic inquiry and critical evaluation related to social work knowledge and practice.
- Knowledge of multiple theoretical and conceptual bases of social work knowledge and practice including the social construction of theory and practices that may reflect injustices.
- Knowledge of other related occupations and professions sufficient to facilitate interprofessional collaboration and team work.
- An understanding of oppressions and healing of Aboriginal peoples and implications for social policy and social work practice with Aboriginal peoples in the Canadian context.
- Opportunities to develop an appreciation of social work purposes and ethics and to develop her/his social work values and professional judgement.
- Preparation to practice in a range of geographical regions and with diverse ethnic, cultural and racial populations.

In addition to course work, field education is an integral component of the curriculum. Students are required to complete a minimum of 700 practice hours at the BSW level.⁵

In accordance with the CASWE standards for accreditation, curriculum at the MSW level “will prepare students to have sufficient competence for advanced, specialized or supervisory social work roles.” Graduates from MSW programs “shall have demonstrated ability to critically analyze, synthesize, use, evaluate and develop theory in relation to complex practice problems in the context of social work values and ethics.”⁶ MSW programs will normally provide a minimum of 450 practicum hours in one year degree programs plus an additional 450 practicum hours and/or a thesis in two year degree programs.⁷

Although the objectives and curriculum for BSW and MSW programs differ, the scope of practice statement is the same for all social workers, regardless of level of education.

Differences between social work knowledge and social service work knowledge.

Although there is overlap in the curricula of college social service work programs and university based social work programs, four differences have been identified between the bodies of knowledge of the two professions:⁸

- 1) **Intensity:** As demonstrated in the review of the curricula for the two professions, the complexity and comprehensiveness of the university BSW program requires that the understanding of the body of knowledge is at a much more intense level than would be possible in a two year college program. In addition to knowledge and application of

⁵ CASWE Accreditation Manual, June 2007, SB 6.5

⁶ Ibid, SM 5.2, 5.2.2

⁷ Ibid, SM 6.5

⁸ Excerpt from the Policy Rationale for the Scope of Practice, adopted by the Transitional Council of OCSWSSW and provided to the Ministry of Community and Social Services in connection with the Registration Regulation made under the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998*.

multiple theoretical and conceptual bases, the BSW program stresses systematic inquiry, critical evaluation and analysis and making professional judgements. The social service work program stresses identifying strengths, resources and challenges, social and political issues that impact service delivery and advocating for appropriate resources. Practicum requirements within a BSW program are generally more stringent than the field placements in a CAAT program. By design, all of the courses in a social work program are not social work courses but are required of the student to develop an understanding and ability in the process of knowledge building including knowledge of the sources and content of the body of wisdom that underpins the profession.

- 2) **Breadth:** The two additional years of university study before a BSW student takes a social work course build a broad general knowledge base which permits and facilitates the ability of students to study the distinctive social work courses in greater breadth. The broader perspective of areas of study in a university program develops in the students the ability to understand the interconnection of bodies of knowledge and the need to understand presenting situations in a holistic manner.
- 3) **Theory:** The common goal of all university teaching is to teach students to think critically in an analytic manner. That is, not only to learn what is, but of greater importance, to know how to assess knowledge, critique it, consider alternatives and to understand the strengths and limitations of various components of knowledge. The social service worker will have been taught some theory but would not be expected to have the breadth of knowledge of individual theories, or the skills to assess and test the validity of individual theories. The social service worker would not be expected to have the range of theoretical perspectives required in the practice of contemporary social work.
- 4) **Research:** It is a requirement in all university social work programs that students understand how knowledge is evaluated, critiqued and developed. All Faculties of Social Work require both statistical and research courses of social work students to equip them with the ability to assess their knowledge, to test current knowledge in the profession and to contribute to new approaches to practice or new knowledge for the profession.

In summary, there is not a clear dichotomy between the two professions' bodies of knowledge. Indeed, some university social work programs grant advanced standing to individuals with social service work diplomas. However, these bodies of knowledge are not interchangeable. The differences, though subtle, are critical. These differences relate to general knowledge, depth of perception, ability to analyze, ability to critique, ability to test and to seek new knowledge.

Social Work Diagnosis:

As previously mentioned, the scope of practice statement for social work includes “diagnosis”, while the scope of practice statement for social service work does not. The College defines social work diagnosis as “that series of judgements made by a social

worker based on social work knowledge and skills in regard to individuals, couples, families and groups. These judgements:

- a) serve as the basis of actions to be taken or not taken in a case for which the social worker has assumed professional responsibility; and
- b) are based on the Social Work Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

Such judgements and the procedures and actions leading from them are matters for which the social worker expects to be accountable.”⁹

While diagnosis can also be made in regard to couples, families and groups, when working with an individual, the expectations of a social worker are to individually understand the personality structure of the client as well as understand the societal realities in which the client functions. This analysis is referred to as “person in environment” and focuses on the need to make an accurate formulation of “who is the client”, “what is their reality” and “how do the two interface”. This process is called the formulation of a social diagnosis and is the essence of social work practice.¹⁰

This activity requires that a social worker make an ongoing series of judgements as to the nature of the presenting situation and based on these judgements formulate the actions to be taken or not taken, actions for which the social worker must be prepared to be held accountable. In order to act in the client’s best interest and in the public interest, it is essential that social workers ensure that diagnosis is an essential component of the statement to the public as to the nature and dimensions of social work practice.

The activity of social work “diagnosis” has been excluded from the scope of practice statement for social service work because the two year time frame for the completion of a social service work program limits the depth and breadth of the interpersonal and social theory taught to social service workers. Based on the theoretical and practical knowledge acquired in the social service work programs at a College of Applied Arts and Technology, the social service worker will understand that “diagnosis” is the summary of judgements on which professional action is taken. The social service worker may follow a suggested course of action based on a diagnosis that was identified by another professional, but will not be the person who will have arrived at such a judgement.

⁹ OCSWSSW Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008

¹⁰ The concept of “social diagnosis” was introduced by Mary Richmond, nearly four decades ago. Social diagnosis, based on the gathering of “social evidence” was in her view, critical for developing a social treatment plan. [Richmond, M. (1917). *Social diagnosis*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.] This early work was built on by Florence Hollis who wrote about the importance of a “psychosocial study”, as a basis for developing an effective treatment plan. [Hollis, F. (1972) *Casework: a psychosocial therapy*. (2nd ed.). New York: Random House] More recently, the term “diagnosis” has been revisited in the social work literature by Francis J. Turner, who views diagnosis as an essential component of social work practice. [Turner, F. J. (2002) The Nature and Function of Diagnosis. In *Social Work Practice, A Canadian Perspective* (2nd. Ed.) Prentice Hall: Toronto, Chapter 13, 155 – 164.]

Achievement of Optimal Psychosocial Functioning:

As previously stated, the scope of practice for social work includes achieving “optimum psychosocial functioning”, while the scope of practice for social service work does not. As noted, an essential component of all definitions or descriptions of the social work profession include the concept of “person in environment”. Over the decades it has been replaced by the more technical phrase “psychosocial”.

The essential thrust of this concept is that to fully understand and effectively intervene in the lives of clients, it is imperative that the range of social systems that are part of their realities, as well as the persons themselves, are taken into account in the diagnostic and intervention processes. Implied in this term is the ability by the practitioner to not only assess the nature and functioning of the personality of the client(s) including the broad range of cultural, historic, values, strengths, potentials and areas of stress but as well how such a unique profile interfaces with the broad spectrum of complex and interfacing societal systems with which a client interacts. Thus, one of the outcomes of social work interventions and strategies is to achieve optimum functioning at both the emotional, interpersonal and social systemic level.

Based on the vocational learning outcomes referred to above, it is apparent that the term “psychosocial” is not an aspect that is expected to be mastered within a social service worker program. Although social service workers will understand that the social and psyche of the person are interrelated, they will not have obtained the depth and breadth of knowledge required to bring about changes in the psychosocial functioning of the individual.

Not all practice situations will require changes in psychosocial functioning of an individual. However, a client’s psychosocial issues may create barriers to their making use of services or treatment, and in these more complex situations, a resolution of these issues and hence a change in psychosocial functioning may be critical.

Activities permitted in law:

There are specific activities that are permitted by legislation to be performed by social workers and/or social service workers. While this is not an exhaustive list, it highlights some of the activities permitted by legislation that are frequently encountered by social workers and/or social service workers.

- 1) *Ontario Vital Statistics Act*: Social work and social service work College registrants may serve as a guarantor on an application for an Ontario birth certificate. In accordance with the regulation made under the *Ontario Vital Statistics Act*, the registrant must be in good standing with the College. In addition, the guarantor must be a Canadian citizen who has known the applicant personally for at least two years and is confident that the statements made by the applicant are true.
- 2) *Ontario Disability Support Program Act*: Social work College registrants may complete the Activities of Daily Living Index in the Disability Determination Package. The Disability Determination Package is used to determine whether or not the applicant is a person with a disability as defined by the *Ontario Disability Support Program Act*.

- 3) *Health Care Consent Act*: Social work College registrants may act as evaluators for the purpose of determining whether a person is capable with respect to their admission to a care facility and for the purpose of determining whether a person is capable with respect to a personal assistance service.
- 4) *Substitute Decisions Act*: Social work College registrants, who have successfully completed a training course for assessors, given or approved by the Attorney General, and are covered by professional liability insurance of not less than \$1,000,000 are qualified to do assessments of capacity.
- 5) *Psychotherapy Act*: Bill 171, the *Health System Improvements Act* amends a number of acts including the *Regulated Health Professions Act* and includes the new *Psychotherapy Act*. By virtue of an amendment to the RHPA, registrants of the OCSWSSW are authorized to perform the controlled act of “treating by means of psychotherapy technique”. When the controlled act is proclaimed, registrants of the OCSWSSW will be authorized to perform the controlled act. The College is in the process of determining the competencies required of its registrants to practise psychotherapy.

NOTE:

This article was published in October 2008. On December 30, 2017, the following provisions related to the controlled act of psychotherapy were proclaimed into force:

- *in the Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991 (the “RHPA”) setting out the controlled act of psychotherapy and authorizing OCSWSSW registrants to perform it in compliance with the Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998 (the “SWSSWA”), its regulations and bylaws.*
- *in the SWSSWA permitting OCSWSSW registrants who are authorized to perform the controlled act of psychotherapy to use the title “psychotherapist”, in compliance with certain conditions.*

Scopes of Practice and Job Descriptions:

It is important to note that the College has no oversight over employers and has no authority to direct or advise an employer regarding whether to hire social workers or social service workers to perform specific jobs within an organization.

In addition, a scope of practice statement differs from a job description, in which an employer defines the parameters of the various roles and duties to be performed by the social workers and social service workers they hire. An employer is not obligated to allow a social worker or social service worker to perform all of the activities described in the scope of practice statement. Additionally, an employer may require a social worker or social service worker to perform activities that are not described in their scope of practice provided that the College registrant is permitted by law to perform those activities and is competent to do so.

That being said, employers may find it helpful to utilize the scopes of practice for the professions when making a determination respecting the requirements for a position within their organization. If the requirements for a position include one or more of the functions of
Published by the OCSWSSW – October 2008

diagnosis, social work knowledge, achieving optimum psychosocial outcomes or the activities permitted in law for a social work College registrant, it would be logical for the incumbent to be a social work College registrant.

If the requirements for a position include social service work knowledge, skill and judgement and activities permitted in law for a social service work College registrant, it would follow that the incumbent be a social service work College registrant.

In making a determination requiring the use of social work knowledge or social service work knowledge for a position, it would be useful for an employer to consider the intensity and breadth of knowledge, skill and judgement required by the clients and the program(s) the position will serve. Also important will be the consideration of the need for the application of a variety of theoretical concepts and the need for research skills.

As an example, it is expected that a social service worker would be able to apply crisis intervention skills in circumstances where the goal of service is to provide support and link the client to other helping resources. The social worker, however, based on their advanced level of therapeutic knowledge and skill would also be able to assist the client in dealing with issues that result from past trauma.

Conclusion:

This paper aims to clarify:

- The purpose of a scope of practice statement
- The differences between the scope of practice statements for social work and social service work
- The rationale for these differences
- The relationship between a scope of practice statement and a job description

It is hoped that this paper will be useful to registrants and employers in understanding the differences in scopes of practice and applying this information to job descriptions and hiring practices.

For more information, please refer to the article "Scope of Practice – Demystified" found in Perspective, Fall/Winter 2004/05, Volume 3, Number 1.

<http://www.ocswssw.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/PerspectiveFall2004-E.pdf>

Appendix

“Role of a Social Worker” and “Role of a Social Service Worker” as defined by Ontario Regulation 383/00 (Registration) made under the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998*.

Ontario Regulation 383/00, s. 9 (1).

"role of a social worker" means the role of a person who assesses, diagnoses, treats and evaluates individual, interpersonal and societal problems through the use of social work knowledge, skills, interventions and strategies, to assist individuals, dyads, families, groups, organizations and communities to achieve optimum psychosocial and social functioning.”

Ontario Regulation 383/00, s. 10 (1).

"role of a social service worker" means the role of a person who assesses, treats and evaluates individual, interpersonal and societal problems through the use of social service work knowledge, skills, interventions and strategies, to assist individuals, dyads, families, groups, organizations and communities to achieve optimum social functioning.”