Becoming a Trustworthy Profession: Doing Better Than Doing Good

Karen Healy*

School of Social Work & Human Services, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Queensland, Australia

Abstract

Social work is a relationship-based profession. For this reason, social work professionals need to be perceived as trustworthy by those with whom we work. This address outlines the nature and importance of trustworthiness and the specific issues the social work profession faces in relation to the question of trustworthiness. I argue that scandals in human services and faith-based institutions as well as pressures associated with new public management create further challenges to achieving trustworthiness. The address discusses how the profession can enhance its trustworthiness through increasing our capacity to articulate professional purpose, committing to professional excellence and to being courageous in speaking out about abuses of power that impact on the lives of people who use our services.

Keywords: Social Work Practice; Trust; Institutional Abuse; Social Justice

The social work profession seeks to promote human good. Ours is a values-based profession focused on understanding and enhancing the interactions between people and their social environment. Our remit is broad and includes therapeutic practice aimed at helping people address challenges of daily life through to social activism focused on creating a more just and inclusive society. But as we know, in our profession as in any, good intentions are not enough. Since its inception in 1969, the Norma Parker Address has provided an important opportunity for our Association to reflect on the responsibilities and legacy of the social work profession in its contemporary contexts. This essay continues that conversation.

This Address begins with a discussion of the importance of trustworthiness for our profession. We then consider the challenges in becoming a trustworthy profession today. Several sources of crisis of trust in human service and faith-based institutions and in the professions that practise in them, are considered. This analysis of the crisis of trust and opportunities for addressing it will include some reflections on the role our professional Association can play in building trustworthiness of our profession, although the primary focus of this essay is our profession itself. The essay will

*Correspondence to: Professor Karen Healy, School of Social Work & Human Services, University of Queensland, Chamberlain Building, Campbell Road, St Lucia, QLD 4072, Australia. Email: k.healy@uq.edu.au

incorporate insights from the three analyses of the Norma Parker Addresses (1969–2008) by Swain (2015), Mendes (2015), and Taylor, Vreugdenhil, and Schneiders (2015) (the addresses themselves are available online at http://www.aasw.asn.au/practitioner-resources/social-work-profession). Each of these analyses point to continuing tensions that underpin how our profession expresses its mission, including its dual role in strengthening and representing the social work profession and in advocating for a more just and inclusive society.

The Question of Trustworthiness

This essay centres on the issue of trust and specifically the question: what is required for social work to become a trustworthy profession? Trust "is a judgment of confident reliance on another (a person, group, organization or system) based on positive expectations of future behaviour" (Hurley, Gillespie, Ferrin, & Dietz, 2013, p. 76). In part, our focus here is on whether our profession is perceived by stakeholders to be capable and willing (or not) of creating and maintaining trust with stakeholders.

The question of trustworthiness is important for two reasons. The first is longstanding and centres on the relationship-based nature of social work practice. This feature means that gaining and sustaining the trust of others is central to the work we do. Saez and Sanchez (2006) also noted that the fact social professionals, like social workers, "act as mediators, at a distance, between the state (system) and the citizens (individuals), is relevant in terms of the generation of trust" (p. 603). Importantly, the capacity to engender trust, although obviously important to direct practice, is also relevant to our relationship with other stakeholders, such as team members, governments, nongovernment community services, community members, other service funders, and collaborators in political activism (Groenewegen, 2006).

The second reason for the focus on trust is that our profession, like many human service professions, emerged and continues to practise in institutions that were sites of poor practices and, in some instances, the gross violations of human rights. Many questions have emerged, and more are likely still, about the complicity of health and welfare professions in the institutional abuses that are now the subject of intense scrutiny. In particular I refer to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Sexual Abuse, which commenced in Australia in 2013. This Commission carries a similar responsibility to other international investigations into human rights abuses in human services and faith-based institutions, such as the Irish Commission of Inquiry into Child Abuse that was conducted from 2000 to 2009. The remit of the Australian Royal Commission is to investigate and hold accountable those responsible for gross breaches of trust of our children and young people involved in a range of institutions that purported to offer care to them.

The Royal Commission is founded in the wake of extensive public inquiries conducted over the past 25 years into a range of failings of human service, health, and community support systems, particularly, but not only, in the child welfare field. These Inquiries have exposed a myriad of poor practices and human rights violations

in human service and faith-based institutions that have contributed to the devastating personal, social, and economic impact on people subject to them. These practices have included the forced removals of children, adoptions without consent, and the institutionalised abuse of children and young people.

The evidence before the Royal Commission reflects the findings of previous Inquiries, suggesting that institutional dynamics allowed abuses of vulnerable people to go unnamed and unaddressed, often over decades (Marr, 2013). Evidence submitted to previous Inquiries has suggested that human service professions, such as medicine, nursing, and social work, may have played a role in human rights violations such as the forced removal of children and the forced adoptions. However, the case against our social workers as direct perpetrators of these violations remains unclear, in part due to the fact that social work is a relatively late developing profession in Australia and still lacks title protection (Healy, 2012). The evidence is also contested because the professional Association is on record as having long opposed some of the practices, such as forced adoption, which were the subject of these Inquiries.

What the Royal Commission and various Inquiries *do* make clear is the failure of people, other than the direct perpetrators of the abuses, to effectively address wrongdoing. Indeed, in some instances it appears that professionals working in various human services and faith-based institutions failed even to recognise that abuses were occurring. This point is powerfully made by a former student of a Catholic School that was later found to be site the horrific sexual abuses of young boys by a boarding master who was also a Brother in a religious order. Reflecting on his experience in that school, Tim Green reported: "All the boys talked about what was going on. I was only 12-years-old and it was as plain as the nose on my face. How adults couldn't figure it out was beyond me" (cited in Marr, 2013, p. 19). Of course, some people who previously worked in these institutions also reported seeking to act against the abuses but being pushed aside by more powerful institutional actors. However, many survivors have reported that they were let down not only by the people who committed the abuses, but also by the ignorance and the impotence of adults within these institutions in identifying and acting to address abuses (Marr, 2013).

The problem of trust for human service professions and, more specifically, social workers, which we must address today is of a very specific nature. If the evidence before the Royal Commission and similar Inquiries is to be heeded, it would seem our profession may be responsible not for perpetrating human rights violations but rather of being bystanders to them. A bystander is a person who has the capacity to intervene in ways that name, prevent, or address an act of wrong-doing (Vetlesen, 2000). The very act of naming an abuse has the potential to delegitimise it, whereas silence or remaining neutral in the face of abuses has the reverse effect. The crux of the problem for us is the direct conflict between the evidence of these Inquiries and the value stance we champion. Is it any wonder that some people may today distrust

a profession that advocates social justice but which also practised in contexts where human rights violations were common?

It is important to note that social work and human service professions more generally are not alone in facing crises of trust. In the wake of the corporate collapses, such as the demise of Enron in the USA, a range of professions normally associated with the finance sector are also facing doubts about their trustworthiness. Indeed, a significant body of literature on trust is now developing in professions such as accounting and auditing and this literature has resonance with some of the challenges facing our profession today (see Hurley et al., 2013). Creating trust in the wake of evidence of trust violations is a challenge we share with many other professions which, like the social work profession, are entrusted to act with independence and with integrity. Social workers also face the extra responsibilities of being trustworthy in the context of practice with groups who may be highly vulnerable or institutionally powerless.

Who Are We Accountable To and for What?

Having established that social work as a profession is facing significant external challenges to perceptions of trustworthiness, let's turn to the challenges from within our profession related to confusion around questions about accountability. The questions of "to whom we are accountable?" and "what we are accountable for?" are longstanding points of tension in our profession. While these concerns about trustworthiness are not new, they are intensified by current developments within our practice environments and require urgent attention if we are to do better than doing good; that is, if we are to become a trustworthy profession.

Let us turn first to the question of "to whom are we accountable?" The question of professional accountability is a frequently present but often unspoken tension in our practice. Social work, like many other human service professions, is funded by third parties to whom some accountability is due and is usually expected (Groenewegen, 2006). In the context of the rise of "new public management", our profession faces increased demands from government to demonstrate outputs and outcomes; in other words, to demonstrate that we offer value for money (Healy, 2009; McDonald, 2006). Accountability to the people using our services, an ideal championed by social workers, is complicated as the people with whom we work often suffer from social exclusion and powerlessness. The issue of accountability is even more difficult when, as is often the case, the people with whom we work have different perspectives and needs in relation to the one concern. For example, when working with families the interests and perspectives of one parent may differ from the other, while the interests of the child may differ still (Healy, 1998).

This combination of third-party funding, institutionalised powerlessness of the people with whom we work, and the complexities of interests and needs among those with whom we work create unique challenges to professional accountability and thus of the formation of trusting relationships. Indeed, the challenge of this complexity has

been recognised since the first Norma Parker Address, yet remains unresolved. As Shurlee Swain (2015) in her historical analyses of these Addresses pointed out: "Social workers had long claimed to stand alongside their clients but, in the first Address, Lawrence was already questioning just what this claim meant in the context of the rise of consumer groups…" (p. 5). It seems important, a matter of trust, that we become more transparent about the nature of our accountabilities and develop structures and processes that ensure our accountability to those with whom we work, separate from those who fund our services. This is challenging because of the fact that institutional powerbrokers, whether it be the hierarchy of the religious order in faith-based institutions or bureaucrats responsible for the provision of funding, creates a dynamic of power in which the needs of the people with whom we practise are overshadowed by these more powerful interests.

We need to address a second question, namely, what are we accountable for? Social work is a diverse occupation and at a minimum social workers need to be competent in the diverse practice contexts. In addition, our profession aspires to demonstrate the values of respect for persons, social justice, and professional integrity. The value base of our profession is a site of guidance but, it needs to be acknowledged also potentially of distrust.

All three reviews of the Norma Parker Addresses in this issue raise concerns about the dissonance between the value statements and reported practices of our profession; though each seem to propose different ways of resolving this tension. Swain (2015) observed that a fundamental tension characterising many of the Norma Parker Addresses, namely that "while social work was a profession committed to social change, too many of its practices were focused on social maintenance, placing practitioners in a situation where they were complicit in perpetuating the very inequalities they were committed to overcoming" (p. 5). Swain suggested that a dissonance exists between our stated values, which require a social change focus, and our practice, which in her analysis concentrate on social justice. The implication of Swain's argument is that social workers must change their practices to better reflect an interpretation of social justice as involving social and structural change.

Mendes (2015) shared Swain's (2015) concern about the apparent failure of our profession to realise our social change ideals. Focusing particularly on the professional association, Mendes (2003, cited in 2015) stated: "the AASW historically had a strong commitment (at least in principle) to social action, but that in practice the branch had often failed to meet its stated objectives" (p. 2). Mendes questioned whether the AASW can ever gain the political leverage needed given the decline in membership following the separation of the professional Association and union functions in 1976. One interpretation of Mendes' argument could be greater caution in the aspirations of the profession given the resource constraints and the changed environment in which our profession operates.

The concerns about the gap between the espoused values of our profession and the reported practices are central to the issue of trust and can be interpreted as a form of bad faith. The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre defined the term "bad faith" as a kind of

moral blindness fostered by aspiring to values that one does not realise in action. For Sartre there was an important difference between a lie, which is a deliberate falsehood, and a lie which is perpetrated by a person because of a lack of consciousness of who or what they are in the world; in this latter case, the misrepresentation of oneself is an act of bad faith. At its core the concept of bad faith is:

> a lie to oneself. To be sure, the one who practises bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. (Sartre, 1957, p. 49)

Sartre's central concern was that individuals should take responsibility for themselves and that in particular to critically examine one's responsibilities and actions in the light of the demands of a given context. He was critical of the potential for appeals to abstract values to prevent us from being accountable for our actions; one must not aim to "be just" but rather to act justly.

The concept of bad faith demands critical scrutiny in relation to the claims we make about our profession. How do we resolve the perceived dissonance between the values that we claim and which, as so many have pointed out, we have often failed to achieve? One possibility is to try to reconcile through furthering our efforts to realise these ideals; that is, strive to more clearly define and achieve social justice values in our practice (see Taylor et al., 2015). By contrast, for Sartre such an approach is questionable because we can never fully reconcile an abstract set of values with our specific practices. For Sartre the solution lies in greater circumspection and caution in our aspirations but also greater accountability to them. In the context of the current consideration of the breaches of trust that have occurred in human service institutions and the social workers' possible roles as bystanders to these abuses, the question is one of how we will ensure greater congruence between our values and our actions? To put it differently, how do we become a profession that acts in good faith, particularly in terms of achieving enhanced congruence between how we represent our values and our practices?

On Being Trustworthy

Trustworthiness is an important yet troubling concept for the social work profession. A range of influences from scandals in human service and faith-based institutions through to neo-liberal transformations of our practice environment mean that claims to trustworthiness may be viewed with scepticism by employers, the people with whom we work, and the general public. Sartre's commentary on bad faith is helpful for understanding that trust for professions, as for individuals, must be earned not through who we say we are, but rather through demonstrations of what we actually do. Actions rather than intentions are what counts in building trustworthiness (Lawler & Ashman, 2012). And perhaps that is not a bad thing.

Our shared professional values can, and indeed must, form a basis for our quest to be a trustworthy profession but it is clear that we must be more accountable to the expression of these values in our practice. To be trustworthy, we cannot afford to promote values without reference to the diverse realities of our practices and the people with whom we work. In this consideration, the Sartrean concept of authenticity is especially helpful. For Sartre, authenticity means "we are accountable for our own moral choices and not subservient to an (abstract, universal) code of ethics or… appeals to righteousness" (Lawler & Ashman, 2012, p. 329). So how do we achieve enhanced congruence between what we claim to be and who are? And specifically, how might we become, in the present and future, a profession that can be relied on to stand up and act effectively to ensure that the people with whom we work are responded to ways that are respectful, just, and which promote social inclusion.

We need to be clear and transparent about our professional purpose. This is more difficult than it might sound. One of the challenges to clarity about professional purpose is the extreme diversity of our practice environments. Few professions practise across such a broad range of fields and sectors. We can work towards enhancing the congruence between our values and our practices by critically reflecting on and articulating how these values are achieved within specific practice contexts and in this, the meaning of the values may also change. We can become more transparent about our purpose by understanding the broad range of institutional contexts of practice and helping those with whom we work to identify the often multiple roles and accountabilities we bear. We particularly need to challenge the tendency within our profession to see social work practice in binary terms. As Taylor et al. (2015) critically observed, debates about our profession are "posited in binary terms…care versus control; macro versus micro practice; casework or clinical versus radical social work; and, individualised versus community-oriented practice" (p. 4). As a systems-orientated profession, we need to respect the breadth of our professional authority and responsibility that we carry and the diverse methods by which we achieve our professional purpose, which at its core is about enhancing the dynamic interactions between the society and individuals and communities with whom we work.

We need to be a profession that strives for professional excellence. When one considers the evidence from various Inquiries into human service and faith-based institutions, it is evident that at least some of the people present were not competent in identifying abusive practices or signs of abuse and neglect. To strive for practice excellence, we need first to achieve basic standards of professional competence. At a minimum, this means that all practitioners have the requisite educational foundations on which to build advanced practice capacities. These educational foundations must foster the development of the knowledge and skills required to work alongside people for change at multiple systems levels, including, importantly, challenging institutio-nalised practices that breach our legal and moral obligations to the people with whom we practise. Our graduates must be equipped to use and build best evidence for

practice and to be able to synthesise knowledge, theory, and skills in a way that creates solutions with the people with whom we practice.

We must also create opportunities and motivations for practitioners to be more than competent. We need to encourage professional and organisational cultures that enable learning from practice, including from mistakes, and, in particular, to forge the institutional conditions that make practice excellence possible and likely. Just as Taylor et al. (2015) urged us to reject false binaries in relation to our conceptualisations of practice, so too we must reject false oppositions between scientific and other forms of knowledge development. In reflecting on the future of psychiatry, Professor Gin Malhi (2008) observed that "embrace frontier science whilst at the same time nourish its phenomenological roots" (p. 256); a similar need exists in social work to value the science and art of knowledge use in practice.

We need to be a courageous profession. We must improve our capacity to name and act against institutionalised wrong-doing, particularly the abuses of power. As the evidence before the current and previous Inquiries into institutional abuses suggests, the problem is not necessarily that professionals such as teachers and social workers were direct perpetrators of institutionalised abuses, but rather that many people working within or alongside these institutions were bystanders to the abuse. Being a bystander is not an innocent position. Indeed, the presence of bystanders can facilitate perpetration of abuse by at the very least legitimising the behaviour if not passively supporting it (Vetlesen, 2000; Vollardt & Bilewicz, 2013).

Yet we also need to acknowledge the institutional dynamics that can prevent people from acting to address abuses. How might we ensure that we have the capacity both to identify and to intervene in situations of abuse of power in the institutional contexts of practice today? Studies into bystander behaviour suggest that certain conditions need to be present for people to act in the face of abuse being done to others and these include: noticing the troubling situation; assuming personal responsibility for addressing the situation; and identifying and implementing a course of action (Casey & Ohler, 2011).

Drawing on research about the dynamics of abuse, there appear to be three main dimensions in which we, as a profession, need to strengthen our knowledge base if we are to address institutional abuses. The first is in continually improving our understanding of the dynamics of abuse, particularly abuses of power. As a profession, we have expertise in recognising abuses in interpersonal relationships among those we work with, but the evidence of Inquiries into institutional abuses suggests that we can perhaps do better at identifying and intervening in abuses in the institutions where we practise.

The second dimension for our profession to address is the need for us all to assume personal responsibility for doing something about abuse that happens in the environments where we practise. As a profession that speaks against abuse, we must hold ourselves accountable for intervening in abuses in the contexts where we practise.

Third, we need to develop our capacities individually and collectively to intervene to disrupt the dynamics of abuse. The perpetuation of abuses of power depends on people remaining ignorant of the abuses and silent in the face of them. The provision of institutional support for practitioners to name and intervene in abuses is an important role of the collective structures, such as professional associations and unions. Accountability to speaking out in relation to our values is both a responsibility and a privilege for our profession.

Conclusion

As social workers, we rely on others to trust us. As practitioners, we also carry an onerous responsibility to identify and act against abuses in the families, communities, and organisations with which we work. Today, we are being confronted with the historical legacy of institutional abuse involving abuses of power by individuals in authority against people to whom their care was entrusted. Our claims to being a values-led profession are shaken by those who see us as having been impotent in the face of abuses that were plainly evident in the institutions where our profession emerged and has grown (see Marr, 2013). Our trustworthiness depends on us showing our capacity to learn from the past and to being able to integrate these new understandings into our professional practices. We need to strive to achieve social work practices that are characterised by competence, creativity, and courage. Only then might we be able to demonstrate our trustworthiness, particularly to those who are most vulnerable and socially excluded. It is for them that our capacity to be trustworthy matters most.

References

Casey, E. A., & Ohler, K. (2011). Being a positive bystander: Male antiviolence allies' experiences of "stepping up". *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27(1), 62–83. doi:10.1177/0886260511416479

Groenewegen, P. P. (2006). Trust and the sociology of the professions. *European Journal of Public Health*, 16(1), 3–4. doi:10.1093/eurpub/ckl003

Healy, K. (1998). Participation and child protection: The importance of context. *British Journal of Social Work*, 28, 897–914. doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a011407

Healy, K. (2009). A case of mistaken identity: The social welfare professions and new public management. *Journal of Sociology*, 45, 401–418. doi:10.1177/1440783309346476

Healy, K. (2012). Remembering, apologies and truth: Challenges for social work today. *Australian Social Work*, 65, 288–294. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2012.705308

Hurley, R., Gillespie, N., Ferrin, D., & Dietz, G. (2013). Designing trustworthy organizations. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 54(4), 75–82.

Lawler, J., & Ashman, I. (2012). Theorizing leadership authenticity: A Sartrean perspective. *Leadership*, 8, 327–344. doi:10.1177/1742715012444685

Malhi, G. S. (2008). Professionalizing psychiatry: From 'amateur' psychiatry to 'a mature' profession. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 118, 255–258. doi:10.1111/j.1600-0447.2008.01249.x

Marr, D. (2013). *The prince: Faith, abuse and George Pell (Quarterly Essay, 51)*. Melbourne, VIC: Black.

McDonald, C. (2006). *Challenging social work: The institutional context of practice*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Mendes, P. (2015). The social policy context of the Norma Parker Addresses. *Australian Social Work, Special Online Issue. The Norma Parker Addresses*.

Saez, J., & Sanchez, M. (2006). Trust and professionalism in social professions: The case of social education. *Current Sociology, 54*, 595–606. doi:10.1177/0011392106065091

Sartre, J.-P. (1957). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*. London: Methuen and Co Ltd.

Swain, S. (2015). Reflections on the state of the profession: A review of the Norma Parker Addresses 1969–2008. *Australian Social Work, Special Online Issue. The Norma Parker Addresses*.

Taylor, S., Vreugdenhil, A., & Schneiders, M. (2015). Social justice as concept and practice in Australian social work: An analysis of Norma Parker Addresses, 1969–2008. *Australian Social Work, Special Online Issue: The Norma Parker Addresses*.

Vetlesen, A. J. (2000). Genocide: A case for the responsibility of the bystander. *Journal of Peace Research, 37*, 519–532. doi:10.1177/0022343300037004007

Vollardt, J., & Bilewicz, M. (2013). After the genocide: Psychological perspectives on victim, bystander and perpetrator groups. *Journal of Social Issues, 69*(1), 1–15.