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Ways of Seeing: On Knowledge, Practice, and
Professional Vision in Students of Social Work

By

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Abstract

The profession of social work has long been troubled by a relative lack of a stable knowledge base. In light of this, much has been written on the relationship between knowledge and practice and how this “gap” informs notions of expertise in social work. In an ethnography of social work students and in dialogue with both the social work literature on expertise and the anthropology of professions, this paper investigates and gestures toward a characterization of professional vision (Goodwin 1994) among social work students. The paper’s findings indicate that the study’s participants understood themselves to be deploying “common sense” in their field placements rather than formalized knowledge in the form of science or theory. Their statements reflect long-standing conceptual and ethical commitments in social work, such as systems thinking and sensitivity to suffering’s complexity, while also pointing to a divergence from more recent trends in the field, such as the move toward evidence-based practice. The paper introduces professional vision as an important analytic for studying social work and contributes to a clarification of the nature of social work expertise.

I. Introduction

I have arrived early to a psychodynamic practice course taught at the Morrison School of Social Work Practice and Policy, a preeminent school of social work in the US-American Midwest.¹ I am here as an observer. As students trickle in, Angela, an international student² in her mid-twenties, sits down next to me. We begin to converse. I learn that Angela is an aspiring psychoanalytic therapist with the aim of working in an NGO upon graduating from her Master's of Social Work (MSW). We discuss the rise and fall of psychoanalysis's popularity—which Angela laments—and as our conversation progresses, I sense a politely though thinly veiled disdain for behavioral therapies. Our conversation ends as the class begins, but I am struck by Angela's desire to scale up psychoanalysis into an NGO context. This interaction invoked a central question that was already guiding my research into social work students: How can one characterize the epistemic commitments that social work students bring to and develop during their professional training?

The gulf between knowledge and everyday professional experience is of great concern to social work pedagogy (Barak 2019) and can be understood as a “phenomenological practice gap,” which refers to the “different ways of understanding how theory and practice are always and necessarily in a creative tension” (Langhofer & Floersch 2004, 483). Scholars have described or proposed the forms of knowledge congruent to social work as tacit knowledge (Imre 1985), practice wisdom (Samsen 2015; Tsang 2014; O'Sullivan 2005), common sense (Smith 2017b), and expertise (Fook et al. 1996, 1997). Using ethnographic methods on both “expert” social workers and students, Fook et al.'s (1996, 1997) work in particular attempts to

¹ I have used pseudonyms for the names of all places and participants in this study.

² For reasons of anonymity, I omit the names of my international participants' countries of origin.

characterize social work expertise. This thesis responds to this literature by deploying Charles Goodwin's (1994) concept of professional vision to in an ethnographic study of social work students, so as to construct a phenomenological account of social work students' understanding of their own expertise. The paper accepts E. Summerson Carr's notion that expertise is produced relationally through (discursive) enactment (Carr 2010). Indeed, professional expertise is not "intellectual product" but rather "always an interactional process" (Carr 2023, 209). Thus, students of social work are situated learners (Lave & Wenger 1991) who are entangled in this interactional process in their relationships with professors and other mentors who have achieved expert status. To my knowledge, little to no research, empirical or theoretical, has been conducted that integrates Goodwin's concept into a qualification of social work students' conceptual bridging of knowledge and practice.

Professional vision refers to the ways in which various professionals, from archaeologists to lawyers, discursively produce objects of professional knowledge—and, hence, action. In other words, it describes the process whereby professionals, in speaking about objects or processes in the world in particular ways, instantiate socially sanctioned modes of interacting with these objects. The concept also encompasses the modes of seeing that professionals develop and enact (Carr 2010) in the course of their work. If professions act as formal carriers of knowledge (Freidson 1986) and institutionalize expertise (Abbott 1988, 323), then professionals project this knowledge through a particular mode of envisioning objects, and this process of envisioning constitutes, at least in part, expert enactments. This thesis aims to engage the following questions: How do social work students understand the relationship between knowledge, theory, and practice? How is the connection between theory and practice conveyed in a specific pedagogical setting? How do students formulate their own theoretical outlooks and, in turn,

transduce these outlooks into modes of practicing? In other words, how do social work students develop and characterize their own “professional vision”? By engaging these questions, the paper will in part attempt to tie the often-nebulous concept of expertise with Goodwin’s notion of professional vision. I argue that students of social work envision their practice in social interstices, conceptualize problems with scalar thinking, and view the cultivation of a particular presence as an essential component of becoming a social worker.

I begin by sketching some of the ways in which social work knowledge has been characterized and offer a historical overview of the profession’s development in the US-American context. The work of sociologist Andrew Abbott (1988, 1995) informs my historical analysis of the conceptual problems that have underlain social work practice since the profession’s emergence. To theoretically ground my findings, I will engage conceptual and ethnographic literature from the sociology and anthropology of professions, medical anthropology, and Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Latour & Woolgar 1986). I draw especially on E. Summerson Carr’s ethnography of motivational interviewing (MI) practitioners (2021, 2023). In my analysis, I elaborate three themes that emerged from my transcripts and fieldnotes: interstitiality, scale, and sensibility. In articulating these themes, the paper intervenes in the professional literature on social work expertise in a conceptually comprehensive and innovative way. Professional vision emerges as a useful analytic for this practice–theory gap precisely because of expertise’s constitution through modes of speaking and seeing. Such an intervention is relevant for social work pedagogy because it lends insight into the use that students make of theory and knowledge, as well as for anthropological accounts of professional knowledge (re)production.

II. Literature Review

II.1 The Knowledge That Social Work Controls

Social work has been beset by epistemic and conceptual problems since its earliest attempts at professionalization. Social workers frequently struggle to define what it is that they *know* that distinguishes their knowledge from that of other professions (Bartlett 1964; Singh & Cowden 2009). Professional literature in social work has focused on the fraught relationship between knowledge, theory (understood as pragmatic formalizations of knowledge [see Greenwood 1957 and Bartlett 1964]), and practice (Bartlett 1964; Carew 1979; Imre 1984; Ryan et al. 1995; Fook et al. 1996, 1997). This relation is fraught, in part, because of social work's long-standing commitment to the concept of person-in-environment and concomitant lack of knowledge that could generate "action principles" for interventions into environments (Germain 1979, 3). Social work is committed, in other words, to a social model of healing practice but has often struggled to form a proper "knowledge base" to inform this practice (Goldstein 1990). The standardization of social work education, moreover, invokes these questions of the empirical foundations of practice, the transmissibility of social work knowledge and values, and the selection of theories and knowledge bases *proper* to social work (Wodarski 1979). In short, there is an intimate link between the reproduction of a social worker professional identity (Holter 2018) and the transmission of knowledge that is *distinct* to social work.

In the US-American context, social work emerged from two epistemically contradictory strands: the charity organization societies (COS) headed by Mary Richmond and the settlement houses epitomized by Jane Addams's Chicago-based Hull House (Lubove 1965). These two movements were both dedicated to the alleviation of poverty but held discordant understandings of poverty's genesis. For the so-called "friendly visitors" who volunteered in the COS, poverty's

etiology lay squarely in the defective moral character of the poor person (Trattner 1974). The Settlement House workers, on the other hand, located social ills in rapidly industrialized urban environments; remediation of suffering lay hence in environmental interventions (Benson 2020). These two strands, respectively, would come to exemplify the two primary nodes of social work practice: namely, policy reform and direct practice. The early precursors of social work struggled to reconcile the more person-oriented work of Richmond with the more sociologically informed, reform-inclined Settlement Houses. In a speech that would come to signpost these conundra, Abraham Flexner (1915) declared that social work cannot claim professional status due to the lack of “specificity” of its professional object and the status of social workers as “mediating” functionaries connecting other professional activities together. For Flexner, the profession lacked a centralizing technique buttressed by a reasonably stable knowledge base.³

Flexner’s opprobrium came in the midst of social work’s budding attempts at professionalization.⁴ Indeed, in response to Flexner’s criticisms of social work, Richmond published her seminal text *Social Diagnosis* (1917), which formally laid out the concept of person-in-environment—the notion that a person’s suffering cannot be apprehended without accounting for the environmental context in which the person is situated. Richmond theorized person-in-environment as a mode of bridging her more person-centered approach to social services with Jane Addams’s prioritization of society-wide, research-informed social reform (Cornell 2006). Social casework, the technique that person-in-environment informs, began to

³ The social historian Roy Lubove (1965, 106), in discussing this claim, calls us to question Flexner’s presumption that the “ability to mobilize the many specialized services of a community on behalf of a single individual” did not constitute in itself “professional” activity. I also note that Flexner’s speech on social work was preceded by the notorious Flexner Report (1910), which came replete with racist devaluations of the era’s all-Black medical schools (Laws 2021).

⁴ I follow Andrew Abbott’s understanding of professions as a particular mode of organizing knowledge and “institutionalizing expertise in industrialized countries” (1988, 323).

comprise social work's jurisdictional (Abbott 1988) terrain in the early decades of the twentieth century (Lubove 1965; Ehrenreich 1985).

Social work turned to psychiatry and psychoanalysis in the 1920s and 1930s in part because these two interrelated disciplines offered both a body of knowledge deemed scientifically rigorous enough to be professionally viable and a technique that transduced this knowledge into practice (Goldstein 1990). Though the profession briefly turned away from psychoanalysis during the Great Depression, analytic thinking made a comeback after World War II and into the 1950s with the rise of ego psychology (Goldstein 1984). Ego psychology appealed to social workers and psychoanalysts alike because it theorized the person positively and figured the environment in the pathogenesis of psychic disturbance, which ego psychologists framed as disturbances in a patient's ego development (Goldstein 1984).

The "ecological perspective" in social casework practice emerged in the 1970s and sought to recenter the profession's focus on the environment's role in social suffering (Germain 1973). Beginning in the 1970s and consolidating itself through the 1980s, this strand of social work thought and practice operationalized concepts from ecology and evolutionary biology to reorient practitioner interventions away from clients' individual mental health pathologies and toward the client's "goodness-of-fit" with their environment (Germain & Gitterman 1980). Indeed, ecological thinking rejected the notion that a client's problems were associated with personality-related psychopathology altogether, and the focus of ecologically-informed caseworkers shifted to the web of transactional relations in which their clients were embedded (Mattaini 2001). In the 1980s, practitioners developed ecosystems theory, which enfolded general systems theory and ecological theory and aspired to inform all areas of social work practice (Kemp et al. 1997).

As Goldstein (1990) notes, the adoption of systems theory and ecological theories allowed the profession to return to its original purpose of environment-centered helping, while still failing to provide actionable modes of intervention. In his words, the importation of such variegated practice models and social-scientific and medical theories has not led to a coherent “knowledge base” but rather to “something resembling a variety-store warehouse” (Goldstein 1990, 37). It was in this context that, beginning in the late 1990s and flourishing into the 2000s, social work researchers and theorists began to prescribe so-called “evidence-based practice” (EBP) as the holy grail of social work intervention. EBP emerged in part as a response to a crisis of effectiveness emerging within the profession in the latter half of the twentieth century (Okpych & Yu 2014). This makes sense for, as Abbott notes, professions must continually generate new actionable knowledge to maintain the strength of their jurisdictions (1988, 57–58). Proponents of EBP called for social workers to eschew authoritative conceptual schemas, such as, for instance, psychoanalysis or ecological systems theory, for interventions whose effectiveness is empirically grounded (Okpych & Yu 2014). Some scholars have been critical of the turn to EBP, arguing that such trends can lead the profession to stray from its historical human-centeredness (Weick 1993) or elide the limitlessly variegated ways in which individuals see their worlds (Laird 1993). “Practice wisdom” has been advanced to characterize a notion of expertise congruent to the complex realities of social work practice rather than purely to science-based evidence (Samson 2015).

Thus, in the historical trajectory of social work we perceive a continuous struggle to formulate a knowledge base congruent to the complex exigencies of social work practice. Social workers have strived for some time to enlist scientific disciplines in the provision of this knowledge base. EBP serves, in part, as merely the most recent example of the profession seeking “to enhance

[its] status by ever more closely allying [itself] with a scientific-technical worldview” (Weick 1993, 17). This skeletal epistemic history cannot account for how on-the-ground social workers develop a sense of expertise in the context of an unstable knowledge base (see Longhofer & Floersch 2019). Ethnographic scholarship can fill this gap (Floersch et al. 2014).

II.2 Ethnographic Literature in Social Work: Identity and Expertise

Ethnography has generated insights into the nature of knowledge and its figuration in notions of expertise within the profession. Carew (1979) found, in an interview study of social work practitioners, that most social workers reported little direct application of theory to their practice. Loseke and Cahill (1986), in a study of soon-to-graduate undergraduate students of social work, note that, in comparison to student doctors, student social workers struggle to conceptualize a professional identity due in part to social work’s lack of an exclusive epistemic jurisdiction. Their ethnographic data reveal that students learn a particular “image of the authentic social worker as a recognizable character type” from their social work education and in turn come to inhabit a performative embodiment of this social worker identity (Loseke & Cahill 1986, 252).

These studies do not examine social work expertise as a concept, however. Jan Fook and colleagues (1996, 1997; see also Ryan et al. 1995), citing a lack of research that examines, or at the very least defines, expertise in social work, conducted longitudinal ethnographic studies of “expert” social workers and students of social work in Melbourne, Australia. They aimed to build an empirical case toward a theory of social work expertise (Fook et al. 1996, 1997). Their findings suggest that more experienced, or “expert,” social workers incorporate the proliferated complexity of practice situations into their understanding of applying theory. Ryan et al. (1995), however, found that students of social work are more adamant about applying theory learned in coursework directly to practice scenarios. Jerry’s Floersch’s (2002) ethnography of strengths-

based case management in Kansas combines ethnography and historical sociology to illuminate the formulation of a “social field” within community mental health networks in Kansas. More recent ethnographic research has emphasized the role of professional identity in generating preferred modes of action (Watkins-Hayes 2009) and local knowledge (Smith 2017a), or “situated knowledge” (see Haraway 1988), which must be attended to when attempting to theorize or conceptualize the constitution of social work expertise. Based on data from mental health workers in a residential treatment center for children, Yvonne Smith actually advocates for supplanting of notions of “practitioner expertise” with the concept of “local knowledge” precisely because such knowledge is demonstrably transmissible (2017b, 231). She argues further that practice expertise emerges from a conjuncture of abstract theories locally acquired knowledge, i.e., knowledge acquired through practice. Finally, Adi Barak’s (2019) ethnographic work with Israeli social work students’ perceptions of Critical Social Work showed that personal adherence to particular theoretical frameworks can sometimes be superseded by a situation’s pragmatic necessities. Thus, aside from Ryan et al.’s (1995) findings, ethnographic literature finds that social workers and students alike approach practice phronetically (see Langhofer & Floersch 2019; Andersen 2022), rather than drawing explicitly from theory to inform their practice decisions.

Because I set out to elucidate how students of social work construct their own professional vision, I came to situate my own findings in this line of research that foregrounds the relationship between ontology and epistemology in social work—the phenomenological practice gap (Langhofer & Floersch 2004). Indeed, over the course of my interviews, I came to orient my line of questioning toward the conceptual link that my interlocutors establish between their theoretical and practical training. However, in distinction from Fook and her colleagues

(1996, 1997), I understand expertise less as a stable object that is “out there,” waiting to be elucidated. Rather, I conceptualize expertise as an interactional, iterative social reality: as *enactment* (Carr 2010, 2021). In understanding knowledge as a naturalized “repertoire of seeing and interacting” (Carr 2023, 31), I contribute critically to the social work literature on knowledge and expertise through the deployment of concepts from the sociology and anthropology of professions.

II.3 Sociology and Anthropology of Professions: From Jurisdiction to Enactment

Abbott (1988) theorizes a profession’s jurisdiction as the link between a profession and the work it performs. However, professions and their tasks are not stable entities. Studies of expertise must attend to the ways in which they are “yoked” together through performative processes of enactment (Eyal 2013).

Anthropologists, particularly in the subfield of medical and linguistic anthropology, have explored the construction of objects of expertise in the helping professions. These ethnographies bring an understanding of expertise as interactional (Carr 2010) into their analyses. In his ethnography of an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) service provider in the US-American Midwest, the medical anthropologist Paul Brodwin (2013) illuminates how the biopsychiatric model that provides the theoretical scaffolding for the center rarely makes its appearance in the day-to-day work of the social welfare practitioners he studies. Indeed, these practitioners cobble together “assemblages” of disciplinary tools and theories to enforce social “compliance” among their clients, which reflects the material exigencies of deinstitutionalization and community mental health clinics (Brodwin 2010).

Kate Schechter (2014), moreover, in her ethnography of psychoanalysts at the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute, writes that practitioners of psychoanalysis (many of whom are trained

as social workers) come to view themselves as psychoanalysts despite the ontological instability of their professional technique and object of expertise—psychoanalysis itself. As the popularity of psychoanalysis has waned and as the political economy of mental health treatment has become increasingly neoliberal, she concludes, her interlocutors supplant Freudian transference with the “personal relationship” in order to retain their erstwhile disciplinary jurisdiction. Tanya Luhrmann (2000) illuminates how psychiatric residents differentially construe presentations of mental illness depending on whether they subscribe to a biomedical or psychodynamic epistemology of psychopathology. Carr’s (2023) work with MI trainees emphasizes the complementary roles of spirit, science, and pragmatism in the dissemination of MI expertise. These ethnographies offer, in part, phenomenological accounts of professional knowledge production, and hence are useful for my study. As in social work literature, a throughline running through much anthropology of professions is the disjuncture between science-based professional knowledge and the quotidian realities of practice.

III. Methodological Note

Morrison houses a two-year full-time MSW program (three years part-time) and a PhD program, in addition to a combined MSW/PhD, several MA programs in nonprofit management and social leadership, an advanced-standing MSW, a certificate in nonprofit management, an undergraduate minor, as well as some post-MSW programs.⁵ I recruited from MSW students alone. MSW students choose one of two pedagogical tracks: clinical or social administration. I conducted N=17 semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with current MSW students from March–May 2024. I coordinated recruitment through posters, the school’s weekly newsletter,

⁵ For the sake of field site anonymity, I have refrained from including the specific names of these programs.

and snowball sampling; hence, my sample is a convenience sample. My interlocutors gave their consent to be interviewed via a verbal consent form. Consent was recorded via email and audio-recorded at the beginning of each interview. I have pseudonymized all participants' names and places of work. One of the seventeen interlocutors identified as a man; the rest identified as either women or gender-nonconforming (see table 1 for a basic overview of my participants). Inclusion criteria were a) current MSW student status and b) past or present field placements involving direct practice with clients. I initially intended to restrict my participants to students in the clinical track; however, I ultimately decided to recruit interviewees from both tracks in an effort to collect an array of perspectives while still focusing on direct-practicing students.

The structured questions elicited student's chosen course of study (such as elective coursework and degree track), their field placements, their preferred modalities (if any), and their educational and professional experiences prior to enrolling at Morrison. The more open-ended segments of the interviews concerned the students' perceptions of their field placements, their understanding of their role in the social work profession at large, and how they feel they link their preferred theories and modalities with their concrete practice realities (see Carew 1979). In other words, I asked my interlocutors to assess the degree to which theory (or particular theories) informs their practice and to identify disjunctures in this theory–practice relationship. I sought to address how my interlocutors perceived the phenomenological practice gap described earlier (Longhofer & Floersch 2004). Because they were semi-structured, the interviews ranged in length and content.

Once my interviews were transcribed and de-identified, I undertook thematic coding of the transcripts with an aim toward thematic content analysis (Floersch 2004). In this vein, through sustained engagement with my fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I have organized my

participants' responses into three categorical themes: scale, interstitiality, and sensibility. Though similar language has been used in both theoretical and empirical research to describe the conceptual structures that social workers use (e.g., Abbott 1995 [interstitiality], Goldstein 1990 [macro–micro and scale]; Smith 2017b [“sensitivity”]), I use these terms to gesture toward a more holistic understanding of social work students' conceptual worlds as they navigate their training, particularly in the field.

In addition to the interviews, I conducted ethnographic participant observation (Spradley 1980; Emerson et al. 2011) of a psychodynamic methods course in Morrison from March–May 2024. I attended seven of the course's nine sessions and produced ethnographic fieldnotes from my observational activity. The course was particularly apt for this project for several reasons. One, as already noted, US-American social work has a long-standing relationship with psychoanalytic thought, which contributed substantially to the profession's knowledge base in the early to mid-twentieth century (Lubove 1965). Two, the course was explicitly designed to link psychoanalytic theory with the participating students' field placement practice. I was thus able to gain insight into a broad swath of students' practice experiences through the seminar-style discussions. The course thus offered a source of intertextual ethnographic data, which can provide essential context to the interview materials (Carr 2011). My participant-observation work provides, in part, this crucial context. It also helped me to refine and complement the themes that I analyzed from my interview data. Finally, to my knowledge, little to no research has incorporated participant observation of social work practice courses alone or in addition to qualitative interviews with social work students.

IV. Results

I have mentioned the thematic scaffolding that I've developed in the analysis of my data: the themes of scale, sensibility, and interstitiality. Interstitiality denotes where my interlocutors situate the proper activity of social work, i.e., in the interstices between the boundaries of social systems (see Abbott 1995). My interlocutors also viewed their activity as radically scalable (Carr & Lempert 2016), which allowed them to articulate what distinguishes their practice from other, similar professions (in mental health or policy realms). Finally, sensibility refers to the significance of personal identity or ethos in my interlocutors' construction of their expertise. I also include one sub-theme, which I term "showing up," under the theme of sensibility. I will elaborate the significance of these themes to social work students' professional vision after presenting my interview data and ethnographic findings.⁶

IV.1 Interstitiality: Between Systemic Boundaries

"We have no public resources in this country—that's not true, but you know what I mean—no social programs, and [we] hav[e] to vie for those tiny little pots of resources to serve the people that we want to serve and be the weird *mediators* and sometimes *gatekeepers* of that."

With marked ambivalence, this is how Cally, a part-time, second-year clinical student, described their future role as a social worker and the societal position of social work more broadly. Like Cally, my interlocutors often described the core of social work as intervening in the interfaces between their clients and the multifaceted systems in which they were entangled (see Kirmayer 2015). They characterized their practice as not only *occurring* within but actually

⁶ All material enclosed within quotation marks in this chapter are directly quoted from observations or transcripts. Transcripts have been edited for clarity. I have paraphrased those conversations observed during the psychodynamic practice course that I was unable to record verbatim. All emphases in quoted text are mine. Em dashes (—) in quoted texts indicate abrupt interruptions of a person's speech.

working *with* social interstices. Indeed, my participants described their professional activity as decidedly interstitial (see Abbott 1995), working *between* social systems rather than encompassing or inhabiting a system of its own.

When asked to define the foundations of their professional roles or activities, my interlocutors often self-identified as mediators between different communities or different systems. Abigail, a first-year social administration student, echoing Cally's sentiment, described the role of social work in this way: "I think the purpose of social work is to fill in the gaps of services that our government does not prioritize." This reference to gap-filling evokes an interstitial orientation through reference to missing resources. Angela, a first-year clinical student and aspiring therapist, also reflected Abigail's point. She situated her work in a social dimension and discussed the importance of "acknowledging the sort of missing resources that impact people's situations and being able to connect them to those resources, [and] not just focusing on what's going on intrapsychically." In this excerpt, Angela was responding to a question about what she believes distinguishes psychotherapy performed by social workers and that performed by counselors or clinical psychologists. This mediative, connective idea of social work was echoed succinctly by Alina, a second-year, part-time clinical student who previously worked as an art teacher. She described social work "as a profession that connects a lot of things," before continuing:

As a social worker you work with—for example, you do casework and you meet a judge, you meet people doing community organizing, you meet the clients themselves, who have their own professions, you make an impact on them, you meet with educators. So yeah, you have a lot of connections with all those. I guess like some professions would have a little less [connection]—like, as a teacher, I think you really are making an

amazing impact on the students, but you're less likely to engage as much with, say, a lawyer on a daily basis or, say, a judge, right? You're in the school. So I think, it doesn't mean teachers are less impactful or meaningful, but it's just, I think, that social workers are positioned to engage systemically with a lot of systems.

Rena, a second-year social administration student, echoed this emphasis on systems and said of the purpose of social work that "it's really hard to say specifically, but, ideally, it's to be a resource to people who need us and to help others demystify these systems that people find themselves in. . . . I think that your duty is to really make life easier." Rena understood her professional role as a "resource" that "demystifies" the "systems" in which people find themselves, which she linked to making life "easier."

The theme of mediation was also taken up by another interlocutor, Zach, a first-year clinical student. The following interaction in my interview with him stands as another example of how my interlocutors view their professional activity as mediative:

JM: You said misery is the business of social work. I feel like I know what you mean by that, but I'm wondering if you could just expand on that a little bit. What do you think the social worker's role is in misery?

Zach: Gatekeeping resources. I think there's a lot of gatekeeping resources. There's a lot of, "We might have given you all these great techniques to self-soothe, to de-stress, and to view your life differently, but at the end of the day, you still have this Walmart job." How do we make their lives better through actual economic, social change? That might be asking a lot of our own profession, but oftentimes it feels more like we're just helping them patch wounds and carry on and not doing anything more than that.

Though my question aimed toward probing Zach's opinion on how social workers *alleviate* social misery, Zach explained how he thinks they *engender* it. He here touches upon the potential pitfalls that he sees in social work's mediative activity, exemplified in the notion of "gatekeeping resources." We see in his comment a more negative appraisal of the kind of nodal (i.e., interstitial) function of social workers than in Abigail's, Angela's, Alina's, or Rena's accounts. His invocation of gatekeeping also mirrors Cally's comments.

My interlocutors linked mediative activity to a notion of community. Patty, a second-year clinical student, mentioned in an aside that the private practice in which they were then interning and that had offered them a job was "very much in the community." I later returned to this comment, asking Patty whether they considered their one-on-one psychotherapeutic work to contain any elements of "community work," to which they replied:

I think it's not like community in the sense that there are groups that we offer or events where people with a shared experience, or something, can come together. I think what does feel nice about it is—the university is a very obtrusive presence [in the city in which it is situated] and I think, in choosing even to go to school here, and similar to why I stayed in [the city in which Patty had completed their undergraduate degree] and worked there when I graduated is, I don't want to go into a space, like a physical space, and just take what I need from it, and then leave. And I am looking forward to being able to continue working with people who have grown up in the Wellington Grove [neighborhood in which the university is located] community.

They then cited "references that I also live [in Wellington Grove]" as being useful in the therapeutic encounter. The role of community in psychotherapy was echoed by Lisa, a psychoanalytically inclined second-year clinical student:

If we want to talk in the language of power, sure: social work, being embedded in people's communities, it's colonizing, it's white supremacy, it's white-supremacist ideals about healing and who has access to healing, blah, blah, blah. But being involved in people's communities, it's a sign [that] there's potential for reciprocity there, that healing can be democratic, it can be next door to you.

Lisa locates “healing” not just in the one-on-one clinical encounter, but in a somewhat unqualified notion of community involvement. (We will see in the following section, in a similar vein, that my interlocutors conceptualize psychotherapy as a scalar technique of social work.) Chase, a second-year clinical student, equated “community work” with their vision of social work more broadly:

I absolutely love doing community work. . . . My main end goal is going to be creating something that fits my idea of what I want social work to be in the long run, but there are only so many places and a lot of them feel very restrictive in what they do, and I really want to be able to start a place that feels a little bit more inclusive to a bunch of different people and serves a bunch of different needs.

Chase's description of the kind of community center they would want to create encapsulates the mediative themes I have adumbrated in this section. They aspire to create a space in which the fulfillment of a plethora of “needs” could be served.

IV.2 Scale and Assemblage

“And I remember one of my peers, in the fall, had said something in our direct practice class about how social workers are actually creatives because we get to imagine—we get to reimagine society, basically.” This is how Abigail elaborated her dual understanding of social workers as social scientists. We were both engaged in a conversation about what she feels she is

gaining in terms of expertise while a student at Morrison. Her comment points to a thread running through many of my interviews and ethnographic observations: the use of scalar “leaps” (Carr & Lempert 2016) to qualify social work activity. The notion that social work’s remit can be scaled from the condensed complexity of a person to the wider society is a historical throughline of the profession. I include scale as a theme, though, to emphasize its role as a phenomenological component of my participants’ understandings of their own expertise—and, by proxy, of their professional vision. Indeed, the intellectual labor of social work, per my interlocutors, consists in part of conceptualizing and operationalizing scalarity, which they achieve in part through appeals to the concept of person-in-environment. Though many of my participants reported a disconnect between theory and practice, person-in-environment allowed them to assess their cases in an “assembled” way. Social work students, in turn, operationalized this scalarity when conceptualizing their clients’ problems, allowing them to craft approaches to their clients’ “needs” through assemblages (Brodwin 2010; Schechter 2014) of practical modalities and theoretical commitments (see Goldstein 1990 for the “variety-store” metaphor of social work’s knowledge base).

Person-in-environment allowed my interlocutors to deploy scale conceptually while retaining a distinctly “social work” orientation to their reporting of client problems. This is especially apparent when my participants discuss the social work approach to clinical encounters. Take the words of Abigail when she describes her opinions of her work in a shelter for women experiencing domestic violence and homelessness:

But I really just couldn’t imagine myself continuing in a career where I had to sit with people who had been so harmed. I’ve really just wanted to work out—I think also because I have a background in global health, prevention means so much to me, and I

think the highest level of prevention is policy change. So when I was sitting with these women all I could keep thinking was, if the system were different, this wouldn't be a conversation. And so I would love to live in a world where there's no homelessness, no food insecurity, no babies being stripped from their families, no domestic violence. I would love that. And I would love to work on that. So yeah, it was just more of a real interest to delve into the policies that affected the women I was living with.

She provided this vignette to describe the "hard choice" she had to make to pursue a social-administrative, policy-oriented career rather than becoming a therapist. Danielle, a first-year clinical-track student, shared a similar sentiment in describing her rationale for being "aware" of many different psychotherapeutic modalities: "I think there's an individual component and then there's that component of family and community, and then there's the larger, sort of systemic, structural component of what's going on for somebody, and the relationships that impact their wellness and like their mental health." I followed up on this statement:

JM: And what do you think the social work approach to [psychotherapy] is, in distinction from other professionals?

Danielle: As opposed to counseling?

JM: As opposed to, yeah, an LCPC [Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor], for instance.

Danielle: I think that the LCPC view is probably a more narrow view. I think that's why I ultimately decided on social work, because I want to have this view of, Even though you're operating with an individual or group in the room, you can bring in these ideas of like structural racism or structural sexism or, like, spirituality or politics that are also having impact on that individual. . . . I think that social work does the *beyond* stuff way

more explicitly. It thinks about that stuff. It offers the possibility to bring that into the room more than just a counseling degree would.

Person-in-environment and systems thinking are central to Danielle's thinking about her work *as a social worker*. Moreover, she draws from the concept's scalar affordances to distinguish her work from that of a psychological counselor. Rena echoed her sentiment: "I would say that what distinguishes social work as a service, maybe, or helping service profession, from things like psychiatry or psychology is that we think really hard about the environment that the individual is in." Similarly, Lisa underscored the scalar relationship she sees between her psychoanalytic work and the policy field: "It's helpful to think, Oh, our work actually does take place within the context of policy structures and failures. The fact that we can't see patients long term at an agency setting is a policy failure. So it's useful to think about how our work is in dialogue with policy, even if we're doing more direct practice in front of clients." All of these examples show how students with differing professional aspirations—social scientist, hospital social worker, policymaker, and psychoanalyst, respectively—deploy scale to make sense of their work *as social workers*. It is a mode of professional self-distinction and self-identification.

The scalar conceptual work exemplified in these responses also came up in the psychodynamic practice course. During a class discussion on how a clinician should react to a client who is behaving accusatorily or aggressively, one student, Diana, noted that it is important to keep in mind that the patient's "attack" on the therapist is "more about the person's larger experience" than it is about the attack itself, to which multiple students nodded their assent. In another session, Alexandra noted that it is important to keep one's "positionality" in mind when one is working with "structurally oppressed" clients, another reference to scaled-up social systems. Another student, Melissa—again in the same session—professed to be

psychoanalytically inclined, and wondered whether offering interpretations to the client too avidly might not “rob” them of their ability to develop self-sufficiency skills. She noted that “society” often deprives clients of the time necessary to achieve “acceptance” of their “negative traits.” Thus, she tied in social realities to the necessarily individualistic work of one-on-one psychotherapy. In the subsequent week’s session, in a discussion about the Marxist psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, Phil, the course’s instructor and a clinical social worker, pointed out that early Freudian psychoanalysts neglected to account for environmental and sociocultural determinants of psychic health. He also laid out Fromm’s claim that individuals who are well adjusted to modern societies are the true neurotics. This led to the session’s opening discussion on the role of psychoanalysis in more macro-level work. One student, Evelyn, brought up Fromm’s intransigent pessimism and wondered whether his thought had contributed positively to “community work.” Her emphasis on the applicability of psychoanalytic thought to broader levels of social life is another example of scalar reasoning among my interlocutors.

My interlocutors reported bringing what I term “assemblages” of theoretical commitments to their practice. The instructor, Phil, also emphasized the importance of theoretical pragmatism. He often would end lectures with a reminding injunction: “Pragmatism!” In another session, the class was engaged in a discussion about the degree to which a clinician should engage in active interpretation of their client’s symptoms. At one point in the discussion, Phil cautioned against adhering too strictly to a particular theoretical strand of psychoanalytic thought. He specifically intoned, “Don’t limit yourself just because something is not psychoanalytic,” before continuing that it is crucial to attend to the client’s ideas of their own suffering while weaving in theory “when I need it.” Fiona, a first-year clinical student, expressed a similar sentiment when she described how she intends to bring the skills she had learned at

Morrison to her post-MSW life: “Yeah, definitely everything modality wise is huge. Like, learning different modalities, how to apply them. That’s huge. I think also, like, organizationally understanding different—I do feel like I’ve gotten a good understanding of both policy and clinical work.” Debbie, a second-year clinical student, stated that she uses “psychodynamic theory,” “play therapy,” “trauma-informed approaches,” and “definitely systems theory, that’s super policy-related. . . . To me, looking at how I can create trauma informed systems is a part of the job.” Chase described their “experience at Morrison” as a “hodgepodge of stuff” but foregrounded the “relational” and “psychodynamic” elements of their approach, before later noting that “social work is a hodgepodge of a bunch of other fields. And I think that’s what makes it great.” Victoria stated that “you cannot do clinical work without understanding policy, advocacy, and intervention, human rights, because again, like this, the approach to healing in different contexts differs.” Here, Victoria understands “healing” as approachable through an assemblage of acquired knowledge whose objects operate at vastly differing scales.

Scalar reasoning allowed some of my participants to view their work as intervening in political life. In the final two sessions of the psychodynamic practice course, the political valences of psychotherapy emerged in seminar discussions as an object of dispute. One classmate, Natasha, in the penultimate session, argued passionately against “imposing” political interpretations of clients’ symptoms or beliefs in the consulting room. Another student, Alexandra, whom I also interviewed, pushed back against this claim by invoking the social work “code of ethics” that, in her view, any social work clinician should adhere to, including psychotherapists.⁷ She asserted that “we’re not an apolitical profession, we intervene in *systems*.” She argued that not only could neutrality toward views that could “perpetuate violence”

⁷ She was referencing, I believe, the “Code of Ethics” of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the institutional body that accredits social work degrees and sets national professional standards of social work practice.

undermine the role of social work in the therapy room, it could also prevent victims of marginalization from understanding their psychic experience as coextensive with structural, systemic oppression, in turn propping up a “neoliberal” (Alexandra’s term), individualized understanding of psychological distress (see Rose 1996). Similarly, Lisa understood her psychoanalytic work as allowing people with immense “trauma” to gain more access to their “interiority.” She offered a scaled-up vision of psychoanalysis:

When I was asking for career guidance, they [Lisa’s mentors] were like, Freud did therapy on horseback, but he at least knew what he was doing, so you can do work this way in any sort of setting with any sort of person, you just have to really understand the psychoanalytic technique. And I think that psychoanalysis gets talked about in this very reifying way that assumes that it’s only this person who this kind of therapy would benefit. But everyone has an inner life. Everyone has interiority. I just wonder if sometimes the magnitude of suffering that people are exposed to in this sort of work, the extent of people's trauma, it’s too much for people to bear and you don’t want to do that kind of depth-oriented work. I think that’s a failure on the part of society that we are, live in structures that produce such really terrible forms of suffering, but I don't think the, that psychoanalytic technique necessarily is to blame here.

Psychoanalysis, for Lisa, has a place in the alleviation of system-induced suffering. Her statement echoes Abigail’s previously quoted point about the engenderment of forms of suffering, such as homelessness, through systems.

IV.3 Sensibility, Spirit, and Self

Many of my interlocutors often hesitated to define the object of social work practice concretely, opting instead to qualify their identity as a social-worker-in-training with appeals to

sensibility or ethos—indeed, to *spirit* (see Carr 2023). For my interlocutors, theory and knowledge do not solely inform social work practice. They described what I call a *sensibility* that they have cultivated at Morrison and bring into their field placements. It is, perhaps, to be expected that trainees of a given profession carry a particular sensibility or “spirit” (see Carr 2023) to their practice. As I will argue in the discussion section, though, this sensibility is, in part, constitutive of my interlocutors’ conceptions of their expertise. It emerged from their personal identities and interests, as well as from an accumulation of practice experience.

This sensibility was articulated in the psychodynamic methods course in part through appeals to personal anecdote. In one session, Phil dedicated time in his weekly lecture to emphasize the importance of “bringing yourself” into the consulting room. Following an assigned text by the psychologist Nancy McWilliams, he framed the “self” as a psychotherapeutic instrument per se. This led to a general discussion in that session about the degree to which a psychodynamically oriented social work clinician should instrumentalize their own personalities in the clinical encounter. Sensibility also became central when Phil and other students in the course drew from personal anecdotes to illustrate theoretical principles. Phil, for instance, cited a conflict with an old roommate to illustrate the cathartic function of expressing anger. In another discussion on the role of birth order in personality development, Michael admitted that he often felt as if he didn’t measure up to the achievements of his older sibling. Another student, Beck, cited the unexpected suicide of a close friend to contribute to a discussion about how students could identify and address suicidality in their clients. Though external literature was sometimes mentioned in class—Alexandra, for instance, noted in that same seminar that “research shows that asking about suicidal ideation doesn’t increase suicidality”—the use of personal anecdote is noteworthy.

Some of my study participants identified the salience of personal belief or personal fit in guiding their choice of modality. For instance, Maya told me: “I feel like, for me, it’s more of seeing what within each theory I resonate with more or feel more comfortable with, and then implementing that in my practice rather than being very strict on one theory.” Angela echoed this sentiment: “Yeah, I just think that, to practice a modality, it has to make sense for yourself first. And I think psychodynamic is the one.” Referring to cognitive-behavioral therapies, Debbie said, “I don’t think it’s where I naturally gravitate toward.” Lisa said that: “I think psychoanalysis is the best tool for me to live out and practice my identity as a social worker when I’m in front of a client.” These participants understand their choice of modality as linked to a personal “sense” that it was the correct modality for them.

My interlocutors often referred to their background, positionality, or identity when describing the knowledge they bring to their social work roles. Cassandra noted that childhood experiences of domestic adversity directly motivated how and why she wanted to become a social worker:

A big reason why I was interested in social work is because I grew up in a situation where my mom struggled with substance abuse and she was in a number of abusive relationships, and just growing up in that family situation made me really interested in stuff like this. . . . [My mom] I think, just consistently had really bad social workers. . . . And so I had this perception that social workers were unhelpful and social workers don’t do much for you, and if you’re in a situation like that, you’re just fucked. And I think going to social work school and being at Morrison, where I am surrounded by a lot of people who are really amazing and really motivated to actually do good for people, has made me have a more positive view of social work as a profession. So, I think it’s

looking at the people around me and being like, these people are going to be fantastic practitioners, that has been more inspiring.

In describing his motivation to go into social work, Zach mentioned his prior work as a phone operator for psychotherapy intake: “I would say maybe 50 percent of the calls were in Spanish, and then there would be, like, a 50-minute fucking waitlist, you know, because there’s just no therapist who speaks Spanish, who are not trauma-informed and everything. And I think that I’m in a good position to practice that way.” Alexandra also noted her decision to go to social work school as stemming from both her family’s history of trauma and her home country’s history of military dictatorship:

I was really convinced that these were byproducts of generational trauma, and byproducts of the dictatorship, and, before the dictatorship, European colonialism. And so for me, it was like, it’s time. I’ve been organizing in community settings for a while, believe in restorative justice and transformative justice work. But I felt like I couldn’t yet see a pathway that I could bring that to my family. And so I was like, Let me go to school, get these skillsets.

Shania, a social administration student, cited her own experiences of gender discrimination as motivating her choice to become a social worker:

I have a lot of guy friends. And they grew up in a very traditional, conservative atmosphere in [home country], and every time they say something without realizing their own privilege, I could be very, I don’t know, intrusive? I can be very aggressive. And I was like, Do you know what you're talking about? But, I am trying to put it in a light way, and trying to put it in a way that everyone can accept it, and it’s a way of letting them know how problematic that is and why that is problematic and why that raises

concerns for other females sitting on the same table with you. So that's the point that I start to get to know more about social work.

Her sentiment was echoed by Fiona, who cited her experience with learning disabilities as motivating both her decision to join a helping profession and the kind of practice she wants to undertake as a social worker:

When I was in high school I realized I wanted to be in a helping career just because of my own experiences, specifically with having a disability in education, and that made me realize how few people exist in the mental health world who—in my case I'm, again, really into disability. That's my whole thing—how few people who had a disability were actually in mental health roles. So that was my whole thing, where I wanted to be what I couldn't have when I was younger.

Cally mentioned her family's experience with the prison system as part of their motivation for attending to the “structural” determinants of social suffering:

I was really critical of clinical social work at the time [of my application to Morrison]. So I guess I thought it would be more critical if there was more theory, like a macro-focused program, if that makes sense. Also my parents had both been in prison when I was growing up and like my sibling had been in prison and I was thinking a lot about abolition. And this is in the wake of 2020, and I was just upset about everything, and so that's what I wrote about in my [application] essay, that I wanted to do kind of justice stuff.

These interlocutors' words point to the formative role of experience in furnishing them with a particular orientation toward social work practice.

Interestingly, many of my interlocutors disavowed applying research findings to practice (though not all of them used the term “evidence-based practice”). Chase attributed social work’s pivot toward EBP—specifically in the context of Morrison’s pedagogical culture—to “capitalism”: “Social work and a lot of therapeutic mental health type of stuff in the past fifty to sixty years has really slowly started leaning into things that are quicker, evidence-based, something that has a quicker turnaround. And it’s not that it’s a problem. But I think it just more so speaks to the power of capitalism and trying to cycle through people more.” Shania, a first-year social-administrative track student, reported that “the classes I took last semester were too abstract. . . . It’s definitely based on social work, but it’s just research stuff. You can feel there’s a gap between applying all those results from the research paper you read to the real work situation.” In describing how she consciously incorporates theory into daily practice situations, Cassandra noted: “Theory is important and great, but when you’re working with a real person who is struggling for whatever reason, whether it’s a situation they’re in or their material conditions, a lot of that theory kind of flies out the window.” She later noted that she does not feel “confident working with a real client at this point.” Cassandra points toward a feeling of inutility with regard to applying theory to practice.

Some interlocutors reported substituting theoretical commitments with accumulations of experience. Regarding her theoretical commitments in her psychotherapeutic practice, Danielle regarded “psychodynamic” theory as the “wider umbrella” under which she practiced.

Referencing her pre-MSW background in economics and creative writing, she continued:

Then there’s an even wider umbrella, which is very complicated. It’s the economics. It’s the writing. It’s all the things, a combination of everything I’ve been through, everything I’ve learned, and what I’ve kept with me. That’s going to continue to inform me. But I

would say, if I had to choose how I'm going to practice, it's going to be psychodynamically.

Here, Danielle furnishes a choice of modality because I have requested it of her. But she also takes care to remind me that her practice approach is non-restrictive and informed more by a generalized notion of life experience than by a particular theory or modality. Abigail echoed this sentiment, stating:

I don't believe in wearing hats. A lot of people, especially social workers, are like, "Let me put on my mom hat. Let me put on my leader hat. Let me put on my social worker [hat]." All of these hats, if you want to think about it that way, are a culmination of your experiences that you've dedicated a lot of your time and energy to. And I don't think you have to take one off in order to be your full self in another. And so when I show up [to my sessions with students], it's not necessarily a theory—maybe it would come from the womanist theory that we learned about—but in a lot of my cases I do take the time to talk to students about what they think that they faced, and if they have the correct resources for it.

Abigail here appears critical of the notion that acting a social worker should be confined to particular practice scenarios, understanding a practitioner's various "hats" to be a "culmination of your experiences." Chase articulated how their education at Morrison had fundamentally shifted their orientation to the world (and to "systems"):

But I do think I didn't come into the program . . . understanding how much it would become who I am. Because I think I came in and I was like, Oh, it's a degree. Like I have a political science degree, and that didn't make me—that didn't become part of my identity. But I think coming to a school like this, because of how relationally focused my

degree, is and like the work I've done and just how emotionally tied it is. Even just my orientation to life, I feel, has changed. I always thought, postgraduation, it was gonna be like, I have a degree, now I have a job. And now I feel like, yes, I'm gonna have a degree, yes, I'm gonna have a job in social work, but now I feel like, My entire life has shifted. The way I interact with systems has shifted. The way I critically think about a lot of things has shifted. . . . I feel like this degree is something that has altered my worldview and will continue to shape the way that I interact for the rest of my life.

Chase was responding to a question about how their perception of post-MSW life had shifted over the course of their degree program. They framed the outcome of their education at Morrison as a characterological shift that is implicated in the way they intend to practice.

IV.3.1 "Showing Up"

Practice wisdom can be understood as a particular form of social work expertise involving the capacity for "wise judgment in uncertain situations" (O'Sullivan 2005, 222). Some of my interlocutors invoked the centrality of the concept of practice wisdom to their practical aspirations through the use of the idiom "showing up." Though not all of my participants used the term, I want to foreground it for its centrality to the notion of "sensibility" that I am here deploying.

Chase, a second-year clinical-track student whom I interviewed, often expressed preoccupations around inadvertently harming their clients. When I asked them which courses have most informed their practice, they said:

Relational psychodynamic theory and reflective practice. It was a psychodynamically oriented class on reflective practice, and in that class we learned a lot of, like, hands-on skills of how, if you're being a clinician and you're working with people, to ensure that

you're reflecting on the ways that's impacting you so that you don't show up in a harmful way.

Here, Chase deploys an intransitive notion of "showing up" to foreground the significance of their *presence* in the worker–client situation. When I mentioned to Patty my preliminary observation that students in the psychodynamic methods course used personal anecdote in a professionalizing way, Patty noted that

it's not a hard line between personal and professional. Something that they do express to us a lot is that our humaneness impacts how we show up in the space. It is really important to reflect on what our client is saying, how it is influencing us, or how that self-awareness and self-reflection will allow us to show up better.

Alexandra also expressed the belief that "how we show up is based on the interactions of the environment." Later in our conversation, while discussing an adolescent client of hers, she noted that "there's a lot of pressure from the parents for me to show up in a specific way." Debbie deployed "showing up" in a similar way when they described their recent experience of giving advice to their brother about a personal matter, noting that social work education has changed the way they "show up" in interpersonal situations:

And I don't think that I was doing therapy on my brother because I wouldn't do that, but I was using some of those skills. And I don't know if he noticed a difference. I think he just thought of it as me being me, in his response, and I think it helped. I know it helped, but I see how I've changed a little bit and like how I show up.

Similarly, Victoria noted, referring to all the "stakeholders of the court systems," among which she included social workers, that "these are people with their own unique experiences, their own unique understanding of the world, which in a way has shaped how they do their work or show

up within the spaces.” These examples of “showing up” point to an embodied understanding of social work sensibility, and the utility that this sensibility can serve in difficult or uncertain situations.

V. Discussion

These themes endeavor to describe my interlocutors’ vision of their professional activity. My analysis also responds to the initial attempts by Fook et al. (1996, 1997) to undertake empirical study of social work “expertise.” These initial studies into the nature of social work expertise repeatedly came up against a foundational epistemic problem: the difficulty in defining what “expertise” even is. Fook et al. (1996) note bluntly that “to try to define and study the concept of ‘expert’ is in and of itself controversial and problematic. . . . *Because there were no pre-existing definitions of social work experts or expertise, we decided to keep our definitions as open as possible*” (18; my emphasis). Their attempts to understand social work expertise from the perspective of “experts” thus fell into a somewhat tautological loop, as the authors were pushed to define the experts whose modes of practice they then attributed to expertise. Characterizing how social work students *see* the proper aims and loci of practice can contribute to a more dynamic, fluid conceptualization of how social workers themselves negotiate and define expertise.

V.1 Interstitiality: Boundaries as Objects

I operationalize interstitiality with its straightforward definition: the state of existing between boundaries. The term captures how my interlocutors see their role in the world as social workers, though I am not the first to deploy this term. Lotte C. Andersen has discussed the notion of “interstitial work,” which describes a “particular context-sensitive practice” of intervening in a

case when clients are made to endure temporal “interstices” between different agencies’ service provisions (2022, 1041). For Andersen, interstitial work is a concrete modality that aims to fill in the gaps of social service provision (much like Abigail’s understanding of social work as a whole). Rather than focusing on a particular practice modality, however, I deploy “interstitiality” to describe how my interlocutors characterize the proper locus of their practice. In other words, they characterize their professional jurisdiction (Abbott 1988) as occurring in interstices. Interstitiality is not a purely abstract concept. It refers to concrete areas of social worlds in which my interlocutors intervene. It is the framework through which they organize their professional vision of professional practice.

Social work has long been considered a sort of “boundary profession” (Abbott 1995). This view has also been taken up by some of the field’s own practitioners (see Deegan [1986] for an analysis of the life and work of Jessie Taft, who viewed social work as occurring within the “interstices of the personal and the social” [41]). Abbott (1995) has also termed social work a profession of “interstitiality,” which occupies itself with the spaces existing between professions, systems, and the people who populate them; my interlocutors also reflect such an understanding. Given social work’s long-standing anxieties around this interstitial quality, which would appear to undercut its aspirations toward professionalization, it bears noting that my interlocutors integrate an interstitial understanding of practice into their vision of social work as such. None of my interlocutors interpreted social work’s status as a “boundary profession” as somehow detrimental to its epistemic or practical legitimacy. Indeed, as I’ve noted, many of my participants viewed this element of social work as one of its strengths, as Alina’s statement on “connection” shows.

Interstice, for my interlocutors, did not consist solely of a place in which to intervene. I suggest that it also constitutes an emergent object of professional intervention. When Alina, for instance, described the intersystemic place of social workers, she did so precisely to distinguish her own professional from that of a teacher, even though social workers may work in schools and serve teacher-like functions. To reference another example from my findings, Angela viewed her psychotherapeutic work as a node or conduit through which the activity of connecting marginalized clients to resources can be enacted. Like Patty and Lisa, she sees psychotherapeutic work as situated in a community and eschews the notion that psychotherapy serves only to individualize clients' problems (see Courtney & Specht 1994, 132–51). Her framing of social work psychotherapy as fulfilling a connector role locates social work's object of expertise within a social interstice; Lisa's appeal to psychoanalysis's potential role in communities signals a similar understanding of where social work takes place. Their views mirror sociologist Celeste Watkins-Hayes's case manager interlocutors, who envision themselves as “sounding boards, community resource brokers, and even motivational coaches for their clients” (2009, 59).

Social workers in the United States have long functioned as mediators between clients and powerful institutions (Brodwin 2013). And social workers have long had to strike a balance between furnishing clients with greater functional autonomy while coaxing them into adopting state- or society-sanctioned ways of living (Ehrenreich 1985). It is thus no surprise that Cally and Zach express hesitancy at the prospect of becoming “gatekeepers” between clients and essential resources. They understand, nonetheless, their role as interstitial, and their critique of social workers' potential for “gatekeeping” resources stems from an interstitial understanding of where social work takes place.

Angela's reflexive self-distinguishing from more psychologically oriented practitioners, moreover, recalls the biomedical and psychodynamic psychiatric interns in Tanya Luhrmann's (2000) work. Based on their self-identification as either psychodynamic or biomedical psychiatric practitioners, they located mental suffering in either a notion of the unconscious or of neurological dysfunction, respectively, and hence adhered to different formulations of treatment. A similar dynamic can be seen Schechter's (2014) ethnography of classical Freudian and object-relations psychoanalysts in Chicago. Their contestations over the proper *object* of psychoanalysis—whether transference or the therapeutic relationship—signals the importance of a professional object for professionals' self-concepts. What Schechter terms the “undecidability” or “slippery object” of psychoanalytic practice can be aptly translated to the slippery object of social work practice: namely, helping. Centering his research more explicitly on social workers, Jerry Floersch borrows Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the “social field” to explain how strengths-based case managers envision bounded social landscapes (in this case, community mental health networks in Kansas) to which they can adapt specific kinds of “knowledge/power schemes” (2002, 7). In a similar vein, conceptualizing their work as belonging in an interstitial sphere allowed my interlocutors to formulate a space of professional practice that is comprehensive and distinctive to social work. I suggest that when my interlocutors frame their work as a mediative activity, they are identifying the object of their professional activity. It is in this way that interstitial thinking forms a part of my interlocutors' professional vision.

Enfolded in interstitial thinking are ecological models of social work (Germain 1973, 1979; see also Kirmayer 2015 for an ecosystemic approach to psychiatry). Such models emphasize interactions between interfaces. I return to the contentious moment in the psychodynamic methods course when Alexandra defended the role of politicizing intervention in

social work. Her normative vision of social worker–performed psychotherapy is that of a political intervention on the level of systems and demonstrates an ecosystemic concept of psychotherapy. Rather than positing therapy as *solely* a one-on-one, person-centered intervention, she understood clients as nodes within a wider system (here, a society riven through with xenophobia) in ecological relation with other parts of that system. She thus broadened the scale of her intervention (Carr & Lempert 2016) while ascribing it a political intentionality. In this way she conceptualizes her role as that of a “milieu instrument” (Germain 1973, 327) in the mitigation of a politicized social problem (xenophobia). Her comments point to interstitial and *scalar* reasoning.

V.2 Scale and the Multidimensionality of Social Life

For some linguistic anthropologists, scale denotes a relational activity that functions by means of analogy (Carr & Lempert 2016)—much like science itself (Carr 2023). Scalar conceptual work *works* when it is “successfully relational” (Carr & Lempert 2016, 18). Moreover, social reality is “radically scalable” and carries “epistemological aspects,” i.e., it involves a particular perspective in conceiving of social problems and their solutions (Carr & Lempert 2016, 18, 20). If my participants located their work in social interstices, then they deployed scale to relate different modes of practice with one another under the common banner of “social work.” The scaling up or down of social work practice is conceptually derivative of the person-in-environment concept, for the environment itself, per Kirmayer (2015), is scalable to many different levels, from the community- to nationwide. My interlocutors used scale to expand and contract the breadth of social work practice while still retaining the profession’s conceptual boundedness.

As I have demonstrated, my participants often used scalar reasoning to connect particular topics to broader social realities. Abigail, in saying that social workers are able to “reimagine society,” iterated a positive conception of the various societal levels in which social workers can intervene. Hers and the other examples that I have mentioned recall Mizrahi and Dodd’s (2013) ethnographic finding that social work students tend to maintain a dual commitment to micro and macro levels of social intervention. They also recall Carr’s (2023) observations on the scalability of motivational interviewing as a therapeutic method. For Carr’s interlocutors, motivational interviewing is scalable because it can be learned and deployed by many different types of helping professionals in many different contexts; her argument almost exactly mirrors Lisa’s point that psychoanalysis can be scaled to differently scaled contexts. My interlocutors understood their work to be deployable in many different contexts, which sometimes led to the blurring of boundaries between what lay inside versus outside the profession itself, as in Chase’s statement about how their life has changed after being trained as a social worker.

Regarding scalar “leaps”—making perhaps sudden connections between entities existing on different scales—Carr and Lempert (2016, 7) discourage us from treating micro and macro levels and the leaps between them as stable categories. Rather, they can mean different things across different contexts. For my student interlocutors, scalar leaps became not merely a means of analyzing particular client issues or social ills, but also a way of identifying their knowledge or practice with social work as a whole. For instance, Danielle’s understanding of social worker–performed psychotherapy as bringing the “beyond” into the therapy room exemplifies a scalar mode of distinction necessary to retain the identity of “social worker.” In characterizing her inability to see clients long-term in an agency setting as a “policy failure,” Lisa demonstrates her multiscale understanding of social problems, which a social work education is meant to

inculcate (Mizrahi & Dodd 2013). She also engages in an “interscaling” activity by “drawing connections between disparate scalable qualities so that they come to reinforce each other” (Carr & Fisher 2016, 134).

I have noted that social work has long borrowed, practically and theoretically, from other disciplines and professions. It is thus to be expected that social work students, who are still figuring out the contours of their desired way of practicing, should report using assemblages of theories and practice modalities. But these assemblages point to the conceptual utility of scale in crafting one’s notion of expertise. Because their clients are persons-in-environment, my participants feel able to view client problems as decidedly unique and hence craft conceptual assemblages suited to their needs. In the same way that Schechter’s psychoanalysts use “historically specific assemblages of symbolic and pragmatic resources” to adapt their technique to changing political-economic conditions (2014, 73), so too do my participants pragmatically craft theoretical assemblages to meet the demands of their chosen field of work. Their statements match those of Barak’s (2019) student interlocutors who profess using pragmatic approaches to real client situations regardless of their personal commitment to Critical Social Work. As Brodwin (2010) points out, ACT caseworkers “assemble” compliance through appeals to biopsychiatric expertise (which lies in the hands of their supervising psychiatrist) and instruments such as medication cassettes. If “scaling projects typically rely on complex, heterogeneous, and sometimes far-flung assemblages that include extra-discursive forms” (Carr & Lempert 2016), then my interlocutors’ theoretical assemblages are scalar insofar as they account for the multidimensionality of social life.

My participants, then, distinguish their way of seeing through appeals to interstice and scale. I do not want to advance a functionalist argument that these abstractions serve as mere

epistemic grounds for my participants to “justify” their practice. Rather, I operationalize these terms to abductively construct my participants’ conceptual worlds (Carr 2023) and tie thematic threads together. Indeed, though my participants cited particular theoretical commitments—psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, family-systems, and so on—in their practice, these commitments always remained adaptive, multiplicitous, and pragmatic (see Coady and Lehmann [2016] for an overview of generalist-eclecticist social work practice). My interlocutors professed the belief that, to practice most effectively, they needed to adapt their *selves* to the contingencies of practice scenarios.

Though interstitiality and scale have overlapping qualities, particularly with regard to their relationship to systems, I argue that they carry different theoretical affordances. Interstitiality allows my interlocutors to locate an object of practice that is distinct for their profession, while scale characterizes the theoretical and practical activity of my interlocutors. Both, however, entail the epistemological and ontological shifts necessary to construct the facts (Latour & Woolgar 1986) about social life that social workers can make operational.

V.3 Sensibility and the Formation of Presence

I conceptualize a notion of social work “sensibility” among my interlocutors. From my findings, I characterize this sensibility as, in part, an acceptance of “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988; see also Floersch 2002). This sensibility encompasses qualities and experiences that precede my interlocutors’ time at Morrison, as well as a generalized orientation toward client situations. My interlocutors are aware of this sensibility; indeed, they view it as integral to the success of their practice. Hence it is a component of their professional vision. These abstractions also point to the fact that many of my interlocutors reported not finding theory immediately useful in practice, a finding that contradicts Ryan et al.’s (1995) contention that

students tend to place greater stock in applying knowledge and theory to practice in a unidirectional way. Similarly to Lam et al.'s (2007) interlocutors, my participants understood their expertise as a particular way of “showing up,” i.e., of articulating a particular type of presence with their clients.

Sensibility can encompass a form of *intuition*. Tanya Luhrmann, in her ethnography of psychiatry residents learning the biomedical and psychodynamic modalities of practice, elucidates the development of “intuition” around diagnosis (33). She writes: “Clinical intuition is what doctors develop when they become what other doctors call ‘good.’ It is their expertise” (Luhrmann 2000, 33–34). Thus, particularly with her biomedically oriented interlocutors, she notes that, in the process of diagnosis, biomedical theory informs her interlocutors’ practice less than the accumulation of prior practical experience. This intuition does not disavow a knowledge base, but the latter has nonetheless receded. Indeed, diagnosis for these residents becomes a sort of off-the-cuff interpretive gesture rather than the outcome of a rigid application of diagnostic criteria and methodologies: “By the time young psychiatrists have finished training they can recognize the disorders immediately” (Luhrmann 2000, 35). This is in large part because, much like the social ills that social work seeks to redress, psychiatry lacks a repertoire of discrete biomarkers that index diagnosable conditions and hence requires more interpretive diagnostic procedures despite its claim to biological reality. Luhrmann describes the emergence of a psychiatric-diagnostic sensibility that emerges in her interlocutors as they navigate life in the psychiatric hospital.

In a similar vein, my interlocutors connected the knowledge informing their practice to an accumulation of experience coupled with personal identity. Pedagogical value was found not only in coursework or practical training, but in life experiences, too. Danielle’s comment

regarding her ambiguous relationship to practice modalities is emblematic of this tendency. Like many of my other interlocutors, she demonstrates the belief that, rather than navigating practice scenarios with appeals to theory, she is applying her *self* as a professional instrument (see Smith 2017a) in her practice. As shown, many of my interlocutors cited their identity as both a motivation for entering social work and an analytic through which they understand practice scenarios. This was also reflected in the psychodynamic practice course, when students would bring up personal anecdotes to contribute to the course discussion. In this way, this tendency performed a professionalizing function insofar as it contributed to the course's knowledge about how to handle particular practice scenarios (e.g., suicidality in clients). I understand this tendency to fall within the remit of sensibility because it relies less on standards of objectivity (see Daston & Galison, 2007), and explicitly avows a subjective approach to client problems.

My notion of sensibility adapts Carr's notion of motivational interviewing "spirit." In her ethnography of motivational interviewing trainees, Carr identifies in her interlocutors a distinction between MI technique and MI spirit (2023, 99). Spirit is linked with a particular type of "presence" (Carr 2023, 103) that proficient users of MI are said to develop in their training but also *bring* to their training. Similarly, my interlocutors understand their developing expertise to be coterminous with a particular way of being present, which some, as I've demonstrated, term "showing up." My interlocutors articulate a certain kind of "co-presencing" (Carr 2023, 105) or instrumentalization of the self (Smith 2017a) with their clients, which is encapsulated in the notion of "showing up." Showing up comprises a professional activity of its own, and many of my interlocutors ascribe significance to its formation.

Finally, I understand sensibility as a phenomenological orientation that my participants bring to their work. It does not necessarily pre-exist my interlocutors' entry into social work

education. Rather, it is cultivated during the process of this education. My interlocutors' statements somewhat confirm Smith's (2017b) claim that social workers apply a more commonsensical approach to direct-practice scenarios that is buttressed by a form of "apprenticeship" education. My interlocutors regard this sensibility, or generalized orientation, as a key component of the knowledge and practical skills that they bring to a practice encounter. In other words, for my interlocutors, sensibility comprises part their *expertise*, i.e., the ability to enact *being a social worker* in client interactions. In this way, sensibility constitutes an element of my interlocutors' professional vision with regard to how they *perceive* their objects and instruments of practice. My data provide some validation for the notion advanced by Weick (1993) that social work education's focus on generating practice modalities through the instruction of particular theories may be incongruent with how social work students approach their practice. As she points out, "the idea of facts as sources of knowledge are [*sic*] suspect" (1993, 20). My interlocutors seem to agree, insofar as they understand their practice to be informed by knowledge derived from personal experiences and worldviews and less by theory.

VI. Conclusion: Characterizing Professional Vision in Social Work

This study suffers from several limitations. The highly skewed gender distribution in my study sample and the fact that my sample is a convenience sample limits the study's generalizability. Another weakness of the study is the fact that, in part due to temporal restraints, I was unable to conduct ethnographic observation of my interlocutors' work in their field placements. Hence, my knowledge of their practice stems entirely from their reporting thereof; I construct my interlocutors' understandings of their expertise from what they tell me of their day-to-day practice realities without witnessing for myself how this expertise is enacted in practice (Carr 2010). By incorporating these sorts of observations, future studies could complement my

methodology and provide a fuller account of the professional vision of social work students (and, hence, social workers more broadly). These same temporal strictures also limit the degree to which I can check the consistency of my findings through time; a longitudinal study from the beginning to the end of social work students' training would thus be in order. My study took place at a single institution of higher learning with particular theoretical commitments. Students at other institutions may be drawn to different focuses in social work education and hence may give different accounts than mine. Moreover, the students who agreed to partake in my study may lean toward a more self-reflective vision of practice, a selection bias that a more randomized sample could remedy.

Still, this study offers rich insight into how social work students conceptualize the problems posed to and by their professional activity. It has elucidated some of the elements of the professional vision of social work and laid out how students of social work understand the nature of the expertise toward which they are striving. My data demonstrate where my interlocutors situate their work, how they conceptually scale their work, and the relative salience of personal sensibility over universal standards of objectivity. My intent is not to make normative claims about how or what social work education should teach to those who embark on it. But my data do shed light on how students of social work may construct their professional roles, which could be of use to social work educators.

My research dwells in the "phenomenological practice gap" (Longhofer & Floersch 2004)) that I mentioned earlier in this paper and illuminates how my interlocutors connect their practice to their experience with education. The analytic of professional vision has allowed me to frame my interlocutors' perception of their professional activity as an element of their as-yet-formed expertise. If we accept that expertise is engendered through enactment and not through

held knowledge alone, then we can see how the themes that I have described point to an understanding of social work expertise that refrains from reifying expertise as such.

In this regard, my study could point toward a more relational way of theorizing knowledge. I want to reiterate that I am not trying to systematize how social work students develop the knowledge they bring to their professional practice. As Brodwin notes, “[ethnography] can document the distinctive voices but cannot repackage them as a single systematic argument or moral outlook” (2013, 117). Similarly, my interlocutors’ views may not match up with students who, for instance, have no experience in direct practice with clients. But my data do point to some of the ways in which social work students respond to the epistemic dilemmas that I outlined earlier in this paper, such as the anxieties around a lack of knowledge base. My interlocutors found strength in the interstitial nature of their work. They incorporated a multidimensional, scalar conception of personhood to their thinking. They understood their selves to be professional tools of practice. Their statements reflect long-standing conceptual and ethical commitments in social work, such as systems thinking and sensitivity to suffering’s complexity, while also pointing to a divergence from more recent trends in the field, such as the move toward EBP.

A comparative study between professional groups working in the same practice setting could shed further light on the trends I’ve outlined. Many of my interlocutors reported working in practice scenarios with other professionals—medical doctors, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, graduates of public policy schools, and master’s-level clinicians. Future research could comparatively investigate the approach that these different professionals take to similar practice problems or scenarios. How do trainees in clinical psychology, for instance, conceptualize and approach a client experiencing severe acute mental distress differently from a

social worker trainee? How are these approaches differently enacted in a concrete practice setting? How do these different conceptual commitments relate to different practices and—for more clinically minded researchers—to different outcomes for clients? These are some questions that researchers deploying professional vision as an analytic are well poised to answer.

Professional knowledge is always, to some degree, an answer to a particular negotiation of meaning. Through interpretive moves, professions—from biochemical science to law to social work—vie for the ability to pronounce what *is* through the construction of facts (Latour & Woolgar 1986). The views of social workers, particularly those who have not yet *become* fully qualified social workers, provide stark insight into this dynamic because of the inherently fluid and imprecise nature of the profession's professional object—social life itself.

Pseudonym	Age range	Degree track (year)
Abigail	20s	Social admin (1)
Alexandra	20s	Clinical (1)
Alina	30s	Clinical (2, part-time)
Angela	20s	Clinical (1)
Cally	20s	Clinical (2, part-time)
Cassandra	20s	Clinical (1)
Chase	20s	Clinical (2)
Danielle	40s	Clinical (1)
Debbie	20s	Clinical (2)
Fiona	20s	Clinical (1)
Lisa	20s	Clinical (2)
Maya	20s	Clinical (1)
Patty	20s	Clinical (2)
Rena	20s	Social admin (2)
Shania	20s	Social admin (1)
Victoria	20s	Clinical (1)
Zach	20s	Clinical (1)

Table 1. The study's interlocutors, their age range, and degree track. Ages have not been specified for the sake of anonymity.

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