

Inclusion of “Human Service Professional” in the Standard Occupational Classification System

Narketta Sparkman-Key, Edward Neukrug

Abstract

The human services field has continued to grow, and today, it is considered one of the major social services professions. Despite its establishment, the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) continues to exclude the term “human service professional” from its classification system. This manuscript encourages advocacy for such inclusion.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, there has been tremendous growth and development of the field of human services (Neukrug, 2017). Despite this growth, inclusion of the term “human service professional” by government sources, such as the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system, has not been realized. This article briefly describes the development of human services, identifies recent research that underscores the belief that human services is a unique profession, and suggests advocacy for inclusion of the term “human services professional” within the SOC.

The Establishment of the Human Services Profession

The 1960s saw a great increase in the kinds and numbers of social service agencies in the United States (Zelizer, 2014) and a concomitant need for highly trained professionals. Recognizing this need, Dr. Harold McPheeters of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) obtained a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to develop mental health programs at community colleges in the South (Diambra, 2001; McPheeters, 1990). These became the first associate-level human service degrees in the United States, and McPheeters is often referred to as the “founder” of the human service field (McPheeters, 1990).

With an increased need for highly trained mental health practitioners, the mid-1970s saw the importance of offering a bachelor’s degree in human services. Since that time, graduate programs have also arisen (Diambra, 2001; Neukrug, 2017). Today, close to 900 associate, bachelor, master’s, and doctoral level human service programs can be found across the country (The College Board, 2016).

The emergence of the human service degree and profession led to the development of a number of professional associations and services. In 1975, the National Organization for Human Service Education (NOHSE) was founded and is now known as the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) (DiGiovanni, 2009). In 1979, NOHS launched the *Journal of the National Organization of Human Service Educators*, later called the *Journal of Human Services*. Four years after the establishment of NOHS, an affiliate association, the Council for Standards in Human Service Education (CSHSE), was formed “to give focus and direction to education and training in mental health and human service throughout” (CSHSE, n.d., History section, para. 5).

With the support of NOHS and CSHSE, the first ethics code in human services was approved by NOHS in 1996. Recently revised (NOHS, 2015), this code covers 44 standards that address a broad range of human service professional responsibilities. In 2009, in consultation with CSHSE and NOHS, the Center for Credentialing in Education (CCE) established its first

credential: the Human Services—Board Certified Practitioner (HS—BCP). Today, CCE has credentialed thousands of HS—BCP (Sparkman & Neukrug, 2014).

Today, the field of human services is unique in its training, unique in its ability to service a wide range of clients, and unique in how it applies its skills to clients (Neukrug, 2017). The generalist ideology sets human services apart from other fields, and in contrast to undergraduate training in psychology, criminal justice, and sociology, human service education requires extensive field placements that give students real-life experiences. As opposed to other, non-applied degrees, human service students are ready to work when they graduate (Martin, 2014).

Recognition by the Standard Occupational Classification

Despite the establishment of the human service field over the past fifty years, the SOC continues to exclude the term “human service professional” from its classification system (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Exclusion results in the term not being included in other governmental resources, such as the Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH) and Occupational Information Network (O*NET). It ultimately limits the ability to find accurate career specific information on the field.

To address this problem, the authors of this article, and one other researcher, determined the Holland Code of members of NOHS to further establish the uniqueness of the human service professional (Neukrug, Sparkman & Moe, in press). The Holland Code is a well-recognized classification system for identifying job personality profiles. Using the O*NET Profiler-Short form, members of NOHS were emailed. 355 respondents were shown to have a Holland Code of “SA,” with I, E, C, and R being significantly lower than A, although pairing SA with I, E, or C would be reasonable (i.e., SAI, SAE, or SAC). This code is similar to, but different from, a number of related mental health professionals (e.g., mental health counselors (SIA); mental health and substance abuse social workers (SIA); psychologists (SIA); marriage and family therapists (SAI); child, family, and school social workers (SE); substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors (SAI), and others) (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

In an effort to advocate for the inclusion of “human service professional” in the SOC, the researchers sent a manuscript that described the development of the human service profession along with the results of the Holland Code study. Unfortunately, the researchers were told that the term “social and human service assistant” encompassed what the human service professional does at work, and the SOC revision committee would not consider adding the suggested term (National Center for O*NET Development, personal communication, March 9, 2016).

It is our belief that the revision committee’s decision was ill-informed. This is because the term “social and human service assistant” asserts that the “paraprofessional” does not need a degree beyond a high school diploma and also suggests the helper is not an independent practitioner at agencies (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). This identification clearly does not match the current definition of “human service professional.” In addition, the Holland Code of “social and human service assistant” is CSE (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). As stated previously, this code is significantly different from that found in our research. CSE is more consistent with those who do assistant and supportive clerical tasks (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). The use of the term “social and human service assistant” by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and non-acknowledgement of the term “human service professional,” creates confusion for those interested in pursuing a career in human services.

Recognition of the term “human service professional” would alleviate this confusion and be beneficial to the field in numerous ways. For instance, it would denote a human service professional as separate from a social and human service assistant, thus immediately separating it from a career that assumes a paraprofessional identity and has high school diploma as its needed degree. Second, it would establish a mechanism whereby associations, such as NOHS and CSHSE, would become more visible, as they would likely be referenced in the SOC and its affiliates. Third, it would allow the public to understand who the human service professional is and what he or she does. Fourth, it would allow for easy and reputable access for those seeking information about degrees and careers as a human service professional. Finally, it would be one of the most important ways to acknowledge that the field exists. Like its social service cousins—social workers, counselors, and psychologists—human service professionals would also have their place in highly recognized government publications.

Conclusion

Since the 1960s, the human service profession has evolved into a major field that includes professionals at all levels, professional associations, and a myriad of related professional services. The time is ripe for the profession to be included in the SOC. Researchers on the Holland Code of human service professionals, other interested human service professionals, and the boards of NOHS and CSHSE must take the next step and aggressively advocate for such inclusion. This important step in the development of the profession will denote full acceptance of human service professionals in the professional community.

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