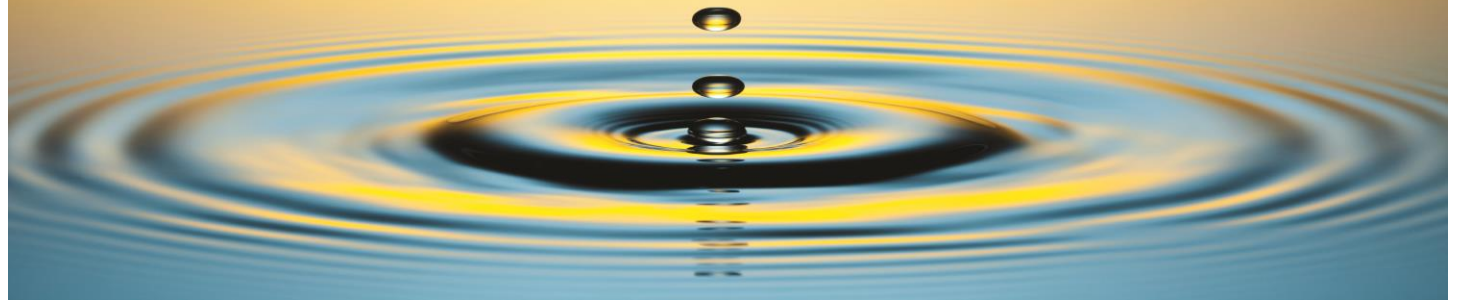


Practice Matters



Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.

Professional Identity & Ethical Practice

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Social work is a regulated profession in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL); a profession governed by provincial legislation titled [An Act Respecting the Practice of Social Work \(Social Workers Act\)](#). Through their practices, social workers are required to be knowledgeable of and adhere to the [Canadian Association of Social Workers \(CASW\) \(2005\) Code of Ethics](#), [CASW \(2005\) Guidelines for Ethical Practice](#) and the [Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers \(NLCSW\) \(2020\) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL](#). This edition of Practice Matters will explore the link between one's professional identity and ethical practice, and how this furthers credibility and public confidence in the social work profession. Case scenarios will be integrated and NLCSW practice resources will be highlighted.

Professional Identity

As outlined in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice "Social workers identify as a registered social worker at the onset of the professional relationship and provide their registration number when requested" (p. 3). Ensuring clients understand they are receiving services from a qualified, regulated professional is an important part of professional practice. In this regard, it is important that social workers use and inform clients of the name in which they have obtained their social work registration. Using a different name in practice from one's registration name that is publicly available can create confusion regarding one's registration status. A legal name change is required to change the name

on one's registration and this can be done with the appropriate documentation (e.g., government issued photo identification with date and year of birth).

There may be situations in which a social worker uses a preferred name, which is different from their legal name (e.g., use of initials, middle name, shorter version of their name, or a name that is used while transitioning or one that has a cultural meaning). In these instances, transparency is essential and social workers inform clients of their official name and their preferred name in writing and verbally.

Case Scenario 1: Paula Marie Dutton RSW has always used the name Marie in her personal and professional life. How does this impact on her professional identity?

Marie is registered as a social worker under the name Paula Marie Dutton. By informing clients of her registered name and use of preferred name, Marie is being open and transparent in fulfilling her professional obligations.

Verbally: My name is Paula Marie Dutton; however, I prefer to go by the name Marie Dutton.

Written: Paula (Marie) Dutton RSW

Case Scenario 2: Chris Andrew RSW began working on an interdisciplinary team. Client records contain case notes from the different professionals on the team. The clients and all the team members know that Chris is the social worker, and he wonders if he needs to identify as a social worker in the client record.

Social workers identify themselves through their written documentation. As it relates to their work with clients, the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice states that "Social workers include their name and professional designation in client notes" (p.6). Client records demonstrate professional involvement in service delivery, and anyone viewing the record should be able to clearly identify who provided the service or intervention (e.g., Chris Andrew RSW). It is important that the reader understand that the note was completed by a regulated professional and part of the social work profession. This is also beneficial as a means of educating others on the team on the scope of social work practice.

Clients also have a right to review their records and correct any inaccuracies contained in the social work file. Therefore, it is important that client's know what information was written by the social worker.

Records and documents have a longevity and certain amount of permanency. In all aspects of professional writing across diverse areas of practice, it is important to identify as a social worker/ registered social worker and demonstrate adherence to the ethics and values of the social work

profession. The NLCSW (2022) [Social Work Recording Explanatory Document](#) is a great document to review.

Case Scenario 3: Jane RSW, provides counselling and therapy in their clinical work. Is Jane able to use the titles Registered Clinical Social Worker or Licensed Clinical Social Worker instead of the RSW title?

The short answer to this question is no. These titles are not included in the Social Workers Act of NL. Some Canadian jurisdictions and US states may grant the use of these titles as per their registration or licensing categories *for use in those jurisdictions*. Currently, NL does not have a separate clinical registration category. While this is something that the NLCSW is exploring, at present time these titles are not legally recognized in NL and their use may be confusing to clients and members of the public in this province.

Social workers in NL may use the titles social worker, registered social worker, or the RSW designation. Using these titles is also important in strengthening the collective identity of the social work profession and enhancing the public's understanding of the essential and vital work that social workers are engaged in across diverse fields of practice.

Case Scenario 4: Alyssa RSW recently completed all their MSW course requirements. However, their convocation is not until another two months. Alyssa wonders if it is appropriate to use the MSW academic credential in their signature or when communicating to clients.

This is a very familiar scenario for many social workers who pursue an academic degree to enhance their knowledge and skills in the provision of service delivery. However, as noted in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice, under Ethical Responsibilities to the Profession "Social workers cite an educational degree only after it has been conferred by the educational institution" (p. 22). While clients and colleagues may know that Alyssa is pursuing an MSW, they must wait until after convocation to begin using the MSW academic credential in professional practice.

Online Professional Presence

Case Scenario 5: John RSW has a twitter account and identifies as a registered social worker. He retweeted a post that some of his followers believed to be heterosexist. A colleague reaches out to John to discuss their concerns. Is John held to the same standard given that he retweeted this on his personal twitter account?

Kirwan (2012) notes that "E-professionalism concerns professionalism in the context of electronic media" (p. 9). Therefore, when engaging in electronic mediums (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Blogs), social workers consider issues pertaining to professional boundaries, client confidentiality and

privacy, collegial relationships, professional integrity, and self-disclosure. The online environment can be quite unforgiving and one's professional reputation can be negatively impacted by quick and immediate online actions. Things live forever on the internet and social workers must consider the impact (real, potential, or perceived) that their digital actions or words may have on clients, colleagues, employers, the communities in which one lives and works, and the social work profession. What is the boundary between one's personal and professional actions and how do social workers navigate the complexities when these boundaries intersect?

The CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice notes that "Social workers distinguish between actions and statements made as private citizens and actions and statements made as social workers, recognizing that social workers are obligated to ensure that no outside interest brings the profession into disrepute" (p.22).

When engaging online, it is difficult to completely separate the personal from the professional. In the above scenario, John identifies as an RSW, but is not directly speaking about his work or clients. However, as noted in the NLCSW Standards of Practice under the standard pertaining to accountability and professionalism:

- Social workers do not engage in activities or behaviors that diminish public trust in social workers or the social work profession.
- Social workers do not discriminate against any person due to culture, religion, social economic status, gender, age, sexual orientation or disability.

(p.17)

It is important that John consider the content of his online postings, assess the impact on his social work reputation and reflect on the importance of stopping and pausing before hitting the retweet button. The following reflection questions may be helpful:

- 1) Is John's personal online image congruent with the professional image he portrays?
- 2) How might John's tweets impact his current or future social worker-client relationships?
- 3) Is John able to explain or defend his decision to retweet the post based on his social work values and ethics?
- 4) How would other social workers view/perceive this action?

John should also review NLCSW Practice Resources including:

- [E-Professionalism](#)
- [Ethical Considerations in the World of Social Media](#)
- [Technology Use in Social Work Practice Explanatory Document](#)

Conclusion

This edition of Practice Matters explored professional identity within the context of ethical practice. Identifying as a social worker/registered social worker/RSW is an important part of professional practice. It provides clients with assurances they are receiving quality services from a regulated professional with high ethical standards. Therefore, it is important that social workers reflect on how they professionally and publicly promote their professional identity and advance the social work profession. It is through one's actions and behaviors that social workers, and the profession, are viewed. Continuing to engage in this dialogue, reviewing one's ethical and professional obligations, seeking collegial ethical consultation and consulting NLCSW practice resources are essential to one's decision-making.

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