

The Role of Perceptions in Collaborative Relationships: Implications for Forensic Social Work Practice

PORTIA L. COLE

*School of Social Work and Family Law Clinic, Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond, Virginia, USA*

This study aims to explore the perceptions held by law students who work collaboratively with social work students. Findings from the focus group data indicate that law students' perceptions of social work may be influenced by stereotypes. Implications for students preparing to enter into forensic social work practice are considered.

With the increasing amount of professional collaboration occurring between social workers and attorneys, it has become more important to understand why these collaborations can at times be successful and other times unsuccessful. Given that laws and policies often affect our clients, it is imperative that practitioners integrate their understanding of collaboration, the law, and specialized skills with generalist social work practice (Maschi & Killian, 2009). The ability to work interdependently with others is critical to achieving successful client outcomes. As Bronstein (2003) noted, “interdisciplinary collaboration is an effective interpersonal process that facilitates achievement of goals that cannot be reached when individual professionals act on their own” (p. 299). Abramson and Rosenthal (1995) also noted that engaging in this group problem-solving process makes it possible to examine client problem(s) from all angles.

Social workers have long been familiar with the need to adapt to host settings and have worked alongside attorneys, probation officers, and other court officials since the early 20th century. Kruse (2004) noted “the creation

I thank the law students who participated in this study. Special thanks to Christy Damrath, Fatima Smith, and Amanda Long for assisting with data collection and commenting on earlier drafts of this article.

Address correspondence to Portia L. Cole, School of Social Work and Family Law Clinic, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, 1001 W. Franklin Street, P.O. Box 842027, Richmond, VA 23284. E-mail: plcole@vcu.edu

of the juvenile court in the early 20th century was an experiment in ‘law as social work’ and it endeavored to conduct its investigations and the supervision of children in accordance with the principles of social work” (p. 58). During this period, the early roots of forensic social work seemed to emerge concurrently with social work pioneer Jane Addams’ efforts to establish child labor laws (Addams, 1910). These concerns are consistent with the vision and framework for the future of forensic social work that a social justice systems approach be used to ensure that “all members of society have the same rights, protection, opportunities, and social benefits” (Barker, 2003, p. 404; Maschi & Killian, 2011).

In recent years, legal academic institutions have included more teaching content from nonlegal fields in order to prepare students for the realities of work settings in which some type of collaboration is becoming commonplace (St. Joan, 2001; Benson, 2007). Many opportunities exist for social work and law students to interact and collaborate, but the level of collaboration and interaction depends somewhat on the initiative taken by the students. An understanding of factors that shape perceptions and attitudes early on in the lives of students will help to circumvent many of the barriers associated with unsuccessful collaborations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies concerning the perceptions of the law and social work professions within the contexts of interdisciplinary collaborations are present in existing literature (Benson, 2007; Coleman, 2001; Galowitz, 1999; St. Joan, 2001; Taylor, 2006). Although these studies may not explicitly state an overarching theoretical perspective, many of the aims and intended outcomes proposed are consistent with what is referred to as the practice of *therapeutic jurisprudence* (TJ). According to Madden and Wayne (2003), “therapeutic jurisprudence is an interdisciplinary area of scholarship emanating from mental health law” (p. 339). TJ requires that policymakers, judges, lawyers, and other legal actors examine all the ways that the law affects individuals, families, and communities to evaluate the effects of the legal process and ultimately to improve legal outcomes (Wexler & Winick, 1996). One of the assumptions implicit in the TJ literature is that client concerns and public policy issues transcend the expertise of any one profession. As a result, implementation of TJ is dependent on open interactions among disciplines (Madden & Wayne, 2003). Effective interprofessional practice involves communication, cooperation, and coordination (Council on Social Work Education, 1998; Johnson & Cahn, 1995). There is a movement within forensic social work toward broader adoption of TJ, which in turn underscores the need to take a closer look at perceptions and attitudes within collaborative partnerships.

According to St. Joan (2001), perceptions of social workers and lawyers can color workplace interactions. These perceptions are largely based on stereotypes. When asked of their perceptions of their law student team members, social work students described them as being “cold and arrogant,” whereas law students described the social work students as “vague” and “easily suckered” (p. 15). Additionally, Faller and Vandervort (2007) noted that lawyers were described as “aggressive, domineering, dogmatic, critical and highly competitive,” whereas social workers were labeled “submissive” and viewed as particularly nonconfrontational.

In her research, St. Joan (2001) surveyed law and social work students primarily focusing on their perceptions of the collaborative model. The social work interns noted how power seemed to be fully in the hands of the legal professionals and therefore felt their concerns were being dismissed by the law students and faculty they interacted with. Whether this was due to the law professionals focusing their sole attention on the legal concerns of their clients or to perceptions of how involved each professional needs to be in the other’s discipline is uncertain.

Galowitz (1999) advocated for the potential benefits of lawyer–social worker collaboration and pointed out problems that may arise due to differing ethical codes, role perceptions, and values. She drew upon her experience working in a legal clinic in New York in which law students represent indigent clients in a variety of civil legal matters. Focusing mostly on clinical social worker skills, she posited that collaboration with social workers could enhance legal services in a number of ways. Some areas in which social workers could improve upon the current practice of law include assessing personal aspects of the clients, such as mental and emotional status, determining the goals of a case in a more holistic manner, and improving on counseling and other interpersonal skills. According to Galowitz, collaboration with social workers is especially important for those lawyers who see their role as a helper or as one who politically advocates for his or her clients. She also mentioned other “macro” contributions that social workers can make to the practice of law such as community development and social policy analysis.

Collaboration(s) may also be influenced by different educational experiences of social workers and lawyers. In her research, Taylor (2006) found that the different teaching paradigms she observed could influence how students interacted with other professionals in the workplace. Using social identity and organizational culture theories, she observed how social work classes and law classes socialized new students to their respective fields. In general, she found that social work classes incorporated more discussion and personal reflections, with fewer boundaries existing between professor and student. In contrast, law classes emphasized the teacher–student power differential, were more lecture-oriented, and also included fewer personal reflections than in the social work classes. In addition, law professors

expected law students to be more independent in their search for answers and did not always answer a given question. Faller and Vandervort (2007) indicated how this style of teaching, or the Socratic Method, fully maintained the professor's control of the lecture. These two respective teaching styles imply broad theoretical differences between the two professions of law and social work, which can then be seen as contributing to the difference in service delivery and case analysis.

The duties of each professional as an advocate can and often conflict, implying broader ethical concerns. This tension can elicit confrontation in regards to the roles of each individual within their chosen profession. The lawyer is an advocate for the client's wishes regardless of whether these wishes are in his or her best interest. Whereas, the social worker will listen to the client's expressed wishes but only advocate for those that are in his or her best interest. Galowitz (1999) saw this as an "inherent tension" between the two professions and, when viewed purely from a theoretical perspective, this is true (p. 2140). However, other commentators have argued that when the lawyer's role as a counselor and the social worker's duty to empower the client are considered, this tension all but disappears (Anderson, Barenberg, and Tremblay, 2007).

Another potential barrier to collaboration addressed by Galowitz concerned with values embedded within the respective professions. Specifically, the lawyer values the client as an individual, and his or her goals are paramount to the rest of the world. A social worker views the client in his or her environment and considers the various systems and relationships in existence. It is important to note however that both professions place importance on the value of self-determination. Although it is referred to differently in the field of law (e.g., client self-directed advocacy), both professions value the client as an integral part of the working relationship. Hence, these are important aspects to keep in mind when studying the perceptions each profession holds of the other.

Faller and Vandervort (2007) also discussed several topics that make collaboration between law and social work students difficult. Students in the different schools may exhibit individual personality differences. More submissive and group-oriented individuals are likely to choose a social work program, whereas individuals with more individualistic, assertive personalities may pursue law as a profession (Faller & Vandervort, 2007). The manners in which students engage in self-reflection may differ between the two schools of law and social work. Social work students would more likely reflect on their subjective ideas or feelings concerning a situation; whereas law students would focus on the objective, practical aspects of a previous experience. Faller and Vandervort discussed other differences between the two professions such as their sources of knowledge and the ways in which the respective professionals view evidence (circumstantial vs. empirical) as possible obstacles to interdisciplinary work.

Dickens (2006) used semi-structured interviews to study the perspectives of lawyers and social workers who worked together on child welfare cases in England. Direct care social workers and their managers viewed the lawyers' roles differently. Direct care workers considered the most successful social worker-lawyer interactions to be those in which the lawyers exhibited care and understanding, but managers thought the lawyers should perform in the "zealous advocate" role they are known for. Confusion also existed among the lawyers concerning their roles in the cases. The lawyers knew they were responsible for the legal aspects of the case, but the scope of such case(s) overlapped with the social worker's duties because these [cases] were bound to have legal ramifications. This confusion was compounded because many direct care social workers welcomed an enlarged role for the lawyers, who often had greater experience in the child welfare field.

Although this study seems to illustrate the importance of role definition in interdisciplinary collaborations, in that one's perceived role inevitably affects his or her direct practice with clients, it also demonstrates that some of the generalizations expounded in much of the theoretical literature are contradicted by practical situations. For example, social workers saw some lawyers as "overemotional," and some social work managers were seen as tough advocates for a particular position and hesitant to adapt for individual cases (Dickens, 2006, p. 29). This role reversal contrasts with the generalizations drawn by Faller and Vandervort (2007) concerning personality differences likely to be found between workers in these disciplines. These counterintuitive examples demonstrate the importance of observing individuals working with actual clients when examining these issues. As this literature review demonstrates, much of the academic work in this area has drawn from the theoretical perspectives of the law and social work professions or the personal experience of authors in the fields. Other methods have been used, such as Taylor's (2006) ethnographic approach and Dickens' (2006) semi-structured interviews, but these still leave many gaps in the knowledge about interdisciplinary collaboration between lawyers and social workers.

Overall, it seems that the benefits of law and social work collaborations outweigh the disadvantages. In most cases, lawyers have noted that having social workers on staff were helpful in addressing the psychosocial needs of a client (Pierce, Gleason-Wynn, & Miller, 2001). Pierce et al. (2001) indicated that having the support of both a lawyer and social worker provided extra "layers" in the form of protection, allowing clients to feel safe and secure as they continued with the litigation.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research was to more fully understand the perceptions law students held of their social work colleagues in the context of an

interdisciplinary legal clinic. Specifically, this study was guided by two questions: (a) What perceptions do law students hold regarding social workers and their respective roles?" and (b) What dimensions are associated with those perceptions? *Perception* refers to processes that give coherence and unity to sensory input. There is an awareness of the truth that is largely non-technical but also connotes a kind of implicit, intuitive insight (Reber, Allen, & Reber, 2009). Hence, it is important to shed light on the formative processes of perceptions and attitudes in order to develop an understanding of the complexity and uniqueness of lawyer–social worker partnerships. Developing knowledge about issues that may surface is vital for the training and guidance of social work students who want to pursue a specialization in forensic social work.

METHODOLOGY

Law Clinic Setting

The Family Law Clinic (FLC) aims to provide comprehensive services to individuals and families by using a holistic perspective for service delivery. This opportunity was created via a contractual agreement between Virginia Commonwealth University School of Social Work and University of Richmond School of Law in 2008. Low-income families are often faced with a myriad of complex issues; therefore, the funding source for the Family Law Clinic (FLC; Jeanette Lipman Foundation) stipulated that simply addressing only one of the presenting problems would be inadequate. Since the doors opened in 2008, the FLC has served approximately 25 low-income individuals/families in the city from its downtown site at the University of Richmond.

The FLC aims to help low-income citizens of the Richmond community receive legal services while strengthening the professional capabilities of the students who offer these services. Law students work in teams on assigned cases and work as if they were the attorneys of record. Eligible law students may represent clients in legal proceedings under the supervision of the clinical director and faculty member at University of Richmond Law School. Social work students work directly with the law students (under the supervision of a field instructor and social work faculty member) in performing assessments and discussing certain aspects of the legal proceedings such as motions, written discovery requests and pleadings.

Study Design

This study used a focus group interview approach with five law students who attended a year-long University of Richmond law clinic class. Over the last 15 years, social scientists have used focus groups as a method for collecting qualitative data. With focus groups, a moderator uses the group process with

a small number of participants to stimulate discussion and obtain information on participants' beliefs, attitudes, or motivations regarding a specific topic (Linhorst, 2002). Krueger (1994) suggested that focus groups could be used to plan programs (e.g., needs assessment, strategic planning), assess ongoing programs (e.g., formative and process evaluations to determine program outcomes), or to understand why programs failed (e.g., summative evaluations). FLC is in the process of developing a strategic plan for the purpose of program evaluation. A focus group format seemed logical in light of the FLC's organizational needs and requirements set forth by its' funding source.

Two social work law clinic interns (who were teamed with the law students in representing clients throughout the academic year) facilitated the focus group. The author participated as a nonparticipant observer to record nonverbal behaviors of focus group participants. The social work interns received training in group facilitation and research procedures. Their role included creating an atmosphere of safety to foster trust and comfort among participants, initiating and facilitating group discussions and conducting a debriefing session with participants after the focus group ended. The facilitators were instructed to initiate discussion on four topics: role of social worker, social work tasks, previous experience with and perceptions of social workers, and perspectives regarding interdisciplinary collaboration.

Data was collected via a focus group interview (see the appendix). Prior to the one-hour focus group session, participants received a consent form explaining the processes undertaken to ensure respondents' confidentiality. The participants also gave consent to tape recording, videotaping, and potential publication of research findings. They completed a brief demographic questionnaire to obtain background information, including age, year in law school, race/ethnicity, and gender (see Table 1).

Data Analysis

A dimensional analysis framework proposed by Kools, McCarthy, Durham, and Robrecht (1996) and Schatzman (1991) guided data analysis. In using dimensional analysis, the objective is to address the question, "What is involved here?" (Schatzman, 1991, p. 304). According to Kools et al.

TABLE 1 Profile of the Study Participants

	Participants				
	CP	AR	EM	MS	GM
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female
Race/Ethnicity	African American	African American	Latina	White	White
Age	24	24	25	24	28
Year in Law School	3rd	2nd	3rd	2nd	3rd

(1996), “the key process in the analysis is to ‘construct and understand the components of a complex multi-dimensional social phenomenon’ from the participants perspective” (p. 316). This construction and comprehension is achieved by conducting a line-by-line analysis of the focus group transcript with the goal of identifying the parts of the phenomenon (e.g., perceptions about social work and interdisciplinary collaboration) and the interrelation among the parts (Kools, et al., 1996). The line-by-line analysis allows the researcher to discover and describe the salient dimensions of the phenomenon from the participant’s perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Sellers, Ward, & Pate, 2006).

The author and focus group moderators analyzed each line of the transcript to identify the most salient concerns about social work–lawyer collaborations. One of the clearest concerns that appeared to influence perceptions was defined as *social workers help with non-lawyer needs*. After this was identified as an overarching perception that seemed to emerge across all participants, the author further analyzed the data to identify factors associated with this perception. Salience was determined by language expression such as phrasing and repetition of key words such as *helping* or *identifying services*. The dimensions identified were then compared across participants to better understand the dimensions and interrelations among them. This comparative method is known as constant comparative analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this study, constant comparative analysis was used to identify shared dimensions across participants; to identify various components of multidimensional social phenomenon, in this instance, perceptions; and the interrelations among the various dimensions.

To increase the rigor of the study, the author engaged in a debriefing session with focus group participants immediately after the focus group session. The author also disseminated the focus group transcript and video to focus group members so that any discrepancies could be corrected.

RESULTS

Analyses focusing on the first research question, “What perceptions do law students hold regarding social workers and their respective roles?” indicated that law students associated specific types of tasks with a professional role and identity of what social work ought to be. There were a set of contextual factors and conditions that seemed to play a role in shaping their perceptions. According to Kools et al. (1996), context indicates the boundaries for inquiry—that is, the situation or environment in which dimensions are embedded whereas conditions are dimensions of a phenomenon that facilitate, block, or in some other way shape actions and/or interactions which are the processes of a given phenomenon. The students’ responses during the

focus group revealed an interesting interplay of contextual factors such as media portrayal of social worker(s), previous knowledge of controversial rulings by social service agencies and the pathway by which these factors led to conditions that facilitated certain types of interactions with nonlegal professionals. Analyses focusing on the second question sought to identify the dimensions of the perceptions by outlining themes, categories, and sub-categories of phenomena. This analysis revealed the intricacies as well as the power of perceptions often associated with stereotypes. The conceptual model illustrating the dimensions associated with perceptions among law students is presented in Figure 1.

Themes

ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKER

Law students' perceptions of the social worker role provide insight into their expectations, for example, who is responsible for which tasks within an interdisciplinary collaboration. *The Richmond Family Law Clinic Social Work Operations Manual* (2010) stated that "social work students are expected to counsel clients and educate law students on matters regarding social services (TANF, Medicaid, Medicare, WIC, SNAP, etc.), make referrals, attend law clinic class weekly, make presentations to law students, and accompany clients to court for hearings" (p. 6). The purpose of the question on the role of social workers was to elicit responses to assess alignment of participants' perceptions with what the actual description of the role of social worker was as defined by the manual. Two categories emerged from this theme: Resources

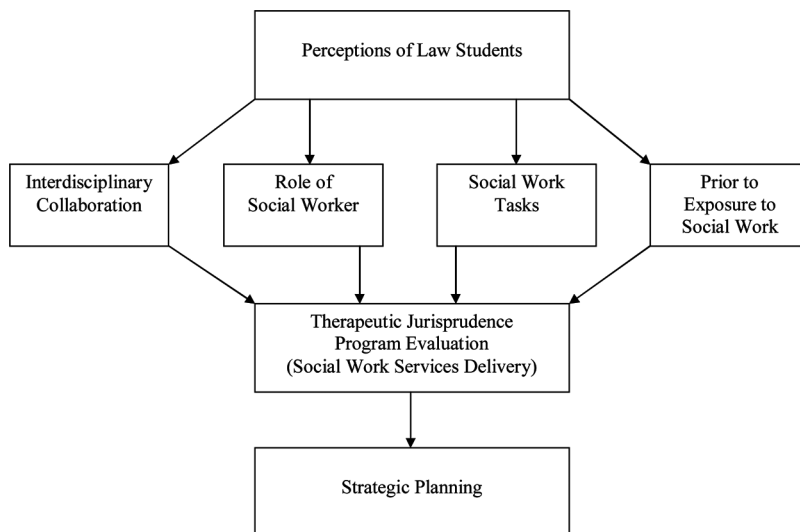


FIGURE 1 Dimensions of Perception(s) Conceptual Model.

(generally referred to in the context of “making referrals” as well as “identifying” and “providing” services) and Assistance/Support to Law Students. Three of the focus group participants (C.P., E.M., and E.R.) characterized support by using the words *emotional issues* to describe the ways in which social work interns helped them address client needs and verbalized concrete ways that social work students provided support by citing the following words: *encouraging* or *motivating*, and *helping*. C.P. noted “without the social work student there to make [the free cell phone] happen then it would be even harder to communicate with the client.” C.P. was referring to a program that provides free cell phones to individuals with little to no income. Similarly, E.M. stated “the social work student assigned to my team helped the client to connect with someone at Social Services to get insurance benefits that were badly needed.”

Interestingly, in light of the positive statement cited by C.P. and E.M., all focus group members were in agreement about the challenge of working in a collaborative relationship when one party does not meet the expectations of the professional role, for example, social work. At this point in the discussion, participants appeared uncomfortable as evidenced by lack of eye contact with the focus group moderator and with each other. One focus group member felt there was a lack of communication with the social work intern on her team, and that this law student was not always clear about whether she [social work intern] had followed up on social work issues. Another law student refused to discuss her concern by stating, “I take the 5th on this topic.”

It should be noted that a social work client log regarding actions taken or tasks accomplished for a specific client in any given week was sent out weekly to all team members and reviewed by the social work field instructor. It is not clear if this focus group member read the log each week or perhaps did not understand the purpose of the log. Conversely, the social work student may have felt that she was reporting her progress on the client log, and it was not necessary to verbalize tasks accomplished to law student team members. It is not known how these perceptions influenced interactions in team meetings when the social work field instructor and/or clinic director were not present. The lingering question is whether the client assigned to this team received the highest quality of assistance from the social work student and whether principles of therapeutic jurisprudence were supported. E.R. noted “last semester, a social work student lacked wanting to be here and there was a lack of communication to team members about one client.”

C.P. stated:

“There were things that I expected the social work student on my team to do, and last semester the student did not think she should be doing that...my position is that if you are social worker, you should take responsibility because this is what your role entails.”

It seems that the perception of social work interns changed in the spring semester. Two of the fall semester social work interns requested to leave the law clinic placement because they felt it was not “clinical” enough. Another social work student was assigned to the clinic toward the end of the fall semester due to her current placement not working out. MS expanded on her colleagues observations by stating “last semester it seems that law students had to prod certain social work students to get them to do anything; however, social workers this semester have been very helpful.”

SOCIAL WORK TASKS

Several broad categories of social work tasks were cited including referrals to local agencies to access affordable housing and employment. Several examples of life circumstances that would warrant help from a social worker were cited, for example, getting a divorce, being involved in a child custody battle, struggling to pay for child support as result of poverty, and transitioning out of jail or prison. Three subcategories emerged that included assisting with “nonlegal” tasks; preparing clients to speak with law students; and understanding a client from a holistic perspective. For example, one law student felt that service delivery is more effective in an interdisciplinary setting because there is a team member specifically focusing on nonlegal matters. GM noted “the outcome of one client’s case was based on securing housing as the judge had ordered . . . the social work students know how to go about this whereas we [law students] do not.”

One law student mentioned a holistic perspective, and four of the focus group members nodded their heads in agreement. MS offered the following perspective: “if you represent a domestic violence survivor who is seeking a divorce, you have to address her other needs . . . all of that is nonlegal but it still needs to be done . . . this where the social worker comes into play.” GM added “they [social work students] make them [clients] feel more relaxed when talking to us . . . and ‘contribute to client’s willingness to cooperate,’ so that law students are free to focus on the legal needs.”

AR added to MS’s statement:

“I would work in another collaborative setting because social workers play a role with the client in a way that lawyers do not . . . if we really want to view the clients problem in its totality, collaborative law is a way to accomplish it.”

In contrast to many positive responses about the benefit of a holistic perspective, E.R. noted that “I didn’t pick this internship because of collaborative learning or holistic perspectives, its more about what I have to learn in order to meet the requirements of graduation.”

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE AND/OR PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Two categories emerged from this theme: previous experience within a legal setting and experiences within the context of personal/family matters and the media. Perceptions influenced by the media tended to be negative and did not appear to be informed by any personal experience. A.R. noted that “I didn’t have any positive thoughts about social workers . . . I never thought before that social workers were really needed to help the clients. I didn’t know that before interning at the FLC, but I know that now.” A.R. commented, “I saw a social worker as an agent of the state to take things away from people.”

Three focus group members expressed perceptions that seem to have been influenced by the media. E.M. commented that “stereotypically, they [social workers] let kids stay in the home and then the kids die, that’s what’s in the media about social work” whereas C.P. noted that social workers are often overworked and placed the blame on the system by observing that “lots of social workers are overworked and have too many cases; it’s the systems fault and not the individual social worker’s fault.”

The most riveting perception influenced by personal experience was based on A.R.’s family involvement with Child Protective Services. It is important to note that after the participant disclosed this sensitive information, everyone was silent for a few moments and seemed to be attempting to absorb the magnitude of A.R.’s life altering event.

At school, a teacher asked the class who got spanked at home; my brother was the only one that said he did. Social workers came to our house because my brother stated that he got spanked. The social worker asked to see the backs of all of my siblings to check for bruises. I was told that children are taken away from their families by social workers. They came back to my house unannounced, like three times . . . I have only had poor experiences. I hate social workers. I love my family . . . why would I want them [social workers] to come and take me or my brother away.

VALUE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

This theme was divided into three categories: (a) team meetings facilitate communication, (b) quality of services perceived as “better” in interdisciplinary setting, and (c) collaboration is helpful but not necessary. All focus group members reported that observing someone from another discipline helps them to understand the purpose and value of a particular discipline. It was also noted that team meetings are beneficial for establishing communication among students from different disciplines.

C.P. spoke in depth about a client who had come in for an intake interview. During the course of the interview, it was revealed that the client had a schizophrenia diagnosis but was not taking medication because he could not

afford it. After the interview, C.P. expressed concern to the FLC Director and the Social Work Field Instructor about her safety. The social work students seized this opportunity to provide literature to all law students about mental illness in general and specifics about schizophrenia. C.P. noted “Now I am more aware . . . in the past I was unaware when meeting with a mentally ill client about what I should do . . . I realized how much I didn’t understand or know.”

E.R. disagreed with C.P. regarding the value of collaboration. She commented,

It’s not going to matter, when you get out of law school . . . you are going to do whatever your current job requires . . . if someone needs social services, I will refer them . . . I will be aware that there are social work needs but in most cases I won’t have the power to really do anything about the needs . . . collaboration is helpful but not necessary for me to practice law.

Although E.R. disagreed with C.P. regarding the value of collaboration, when asked about experience gained at the law clinic, E.R. expressed a broader understanding of a systems perspective and that factors or decisions may not always be under the social worker’s control. The social worker is a part of the system but there are these layers of power and authority in the system. E.R. stated,

Working with social workers helped to dispel the myths of social work to some extent. . . now I know more about the court process. For example, if a Child Protective Services worker took away a kid in the past, I would have thought there is good reason for the decision being made . . . but I now have a negative feeling about Department of Social Services and not as much for social workers.

All focus group members expressed that a six-figure salary was important to them and that collaborative law may not present the most lucrative job opportunity. G.M. noted “I don’t know if there is money-making potential with collaborative law practice.” Focus group member(s) nodded their heads as if they were also pondering this question.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the view of collaborative law is positive. Law students expressed the benefits of having social workers who are knowledgeable about resources as well as mental health issues. Although law students were able to identify areas in which social work students assisted, the law students seemed to have a lack of understanding as to the exact role of social work at the FLC. The perceived value of the social work students in the clinical setting may affect

collaboration. A law student expressed, “lawyers can do work without social workers, but it will ease the work for lawyers if they get help [from social workers].” Questions may arise as to whether law students perceive the social work student as an equal contributor to service delivery or as an assistant. Most students, with the exception of one, only mentioned legal skills they learned and not social work skills. Is there enough emphasis on the social work component? Are the law students learning about social work perspectives and theories? One would like to assume connections are made between the social work and law students, but perhaps opportunities for increased dialogue in law clinic class needs to occur to clarify the connection.

In regards to law students identifying skills gained from the clinical setting, the students did not mention collaboration as a learning point. An example of how little emphasis is placed on the benefits of collaboration can be noted by one student’s response, “I didn’t pick this internship because of collaborative learning.” The skills that law students identified as desirable to learn prior to beginning work at the family law clinic did not include understanding clients better or being able to relate to them. Both skills are necessary not only for identifying the needs of the client but also for creating conditions for positive client outcomes. Law students may benefit from the use of “self-awareness” in regards to service delivery. It is possible that the presence of social workers in clinical settings is not solely to address client’s nonlegal concerns. It may be that the focus could be on exposing law students via observation to “meeting a client where he/she is” and addressing needs at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. One area of collaborative law needing further evaluation is the effectiveness of social workers in a family law clinic setting.

There are other issues that need to be addressed and barriers to overcome when working with a client. Some issues, which can turn into barriers, require a social worker’s skill set. Law students should understand the role and responsibilities of the social worker prior to working with the social work students and vice versa. The FLC has separate operations manuals for the law students and social work students. The ambiguity of the other discipline’s role and responsibility within the clinic may be minimized if the law students read the manual for the social work students and vice versa. There should also be an in-depth discussion about the manuals with the social work field instructor, clinic director, law, and social work students to address any questions about professional roles.

Law students’ perceptions about the social worker’s role are useful in understanding the working relationship between the law students and the social workers. Cole (2010) provided a written description of the social worker role. Whether the role of the social workers is known and understood by the law students may affect service delivery and agency productivity. The focus group data identified making referrals, identifying services, and providing services as three social work responsibilities. During the focus group, law

students spoke of the types of referrals and services provided by social workers. There seemed to be a general perception regarding what “providing services” meant. One law student referred to the ability of a social worker to complete a monumental task such as securing housing for a client or placing a client into stable employment. Based on what is known about the basic functions of social work practice, “providing services” would not be equated with “securing housing” for a client. A social worker does not have the ability to “secure housing” without working in tandem with stakeholders in the community. However, the social work intern can serve as a “broker” in terms of connecting clients with community agencies that could facilitate a housing placement or stable employment. The “provision of service” entails presentation of information and referrals by the social work intern to the client. In this example, the local housing authority would place the client in a home or the local employment services agency would place the client into stable employment. This example speaks to the confusion that law students might be grappling with as to who actually provides the service. This is the type of clarification that should be discussed in the weekly law clinic seminar where the social work field instructor, social work interns, law students, and FLC clinical director convene. It is assumed that this perception regarding who actually addresses client needs could have resulted from an inaccurate understanding of social service agency functions and the role of social workers within such agencies.

The law students were asked to discuss their previous experience/perceptions of social workers. The majority of the law students had limited experience with social workers. The few experiences and opinions they had were negative. This finding is consistent with the St. Joan (2001) study, which also found that perceptions were based on stereotypes. Two students thought of social workers as people who remove children from the home. These stereotypes and negative perceptions may explain the law students’ misunderstanding of the social worker’s role in a family law clinic setting.

Social work interns contributed to the family law clinic in a variety of ways. An attorney and/or law student alone cannot always manage the needs and problems of a client. The addition of social work students to this legal setting provided law students with assistance on nonlegal issues, client communication, service delivery, and an alternative perspective. The overall experience of an interdisciplinary collaboration was positive for the law students, and one student noted, “I would work in another collaborative setting.” The law students recognized the limits of their knowledge, and the gaps in their knowledge may have been supplemented by social workers. For example, one law student noted, “housing for instance; social workers know how to do this whereas lawyers do not.”

The data showed that there were similarities between law students and social work students in what they hoped to gain from their experience at the clinic. Law students expressed a desire to make a difference in their lives and

to advocate for members of vulnerable populations; both are principles espoused within a social work perspective. According to participants' responses, the collaboration component was not a high priority among law students in completing their clinic experience. There was only one law student who spoke of a desire to better understand social work. It is hard to say whether this level of interest is consistent across many law schools or if it is just representative of the students in this particular sample. It would be interesting to delve into this issue deeper since interdisciplinary collaborations may not even be on the radar of many universities that have both law and social work programs.

Although it seems to be clear that the majority of law students have an emerging understanding of the benefits of interdisciplinary collaborations, it is unclear as to what extent they were viewed as preferable. In reference to the practice of corporate law, a student made a point of noting that collaboration was not necessarily needed in all areas of law; however it could be a beneficial model when working with oppressed and vulnerable populations. This indicates an understanding of the overall purpose of interdisciplinary collaboration in a legal setting because this student recognized the differences in socioeconomic status among individuals involved in different types of cases. In addition, many responses convey the notion that perhaps the main reason having social workers on site is helpful is because it eases the pressure for law students. When asked what their first impressions were upon arrival at FLC, all focus participants stated they were "overwhelmed." C.P. lamented, "I thought we would have in-house counsel and access to legal associates, instead we had to independently work on our cases and manage files . . . it was hard to incorporate all of the information and keep up with readings for class."

Preparing Students for Work in a Forensic Social Work Practice Setting

One of the areas of growing importance to social work is the law. If the social work profession is to be in control of its future, it must become committed to the role of exerting influence on the legal system through education, advocacy, and proactive legal policy development (Madden, 2000). There is often an implicit assumption that by developing collaborative models where social work students and/or professionals work side by side that it will ultimately result in the client being better served. However, the specific training that occurs within each discipline results in a particular lens through which the client needs become viewed (Colarossi & Forgey, 2006).

TJ shares much common ground with the generalist approach to social work. Specifically, the generalist social work model encompasses social workers operating effectively within an organizational structure, using their knowledge, professional values, and skills to target change at the individual,

group, organizational, or societal levels (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2009). It is interesting that only two of the focus group participants in the present study acknowledged a systems perspective. Reber, Allen, and Reber (2009) stated that the observational learning can serve as a way to modify perceptions. Social work students can be instrumental in helping law students to consider how micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level factors would impact, for instance, a male defendant in a criminal domestic violence case. By creating an analysis or chart outlining how the case impacts the clients at all of these levels, social work students would be engaging in the practice of TJ. Hartley and Petrucci (2004) noted,

TJ encourages a multilevel approach . . . if a lawyer is willing to consider how the case impacts the client at all of these levels, such consideration may provide useful information in formulating an approach” (p. 133).

Social Learning Theory Application in a Forensic Field Placement Setting

Social learning theory is based upon the role of observations and the mimicking or imitating of behaviors observed in others (Reber, Allen, & Reber, 2009). Could social work students use social learning theory principles in anticipation of perceived power differentials (e.g., social worker viewed in a narrow sense as helper/assistant as opposed to being perceived as an “equal” partner)? Cole (in press) noted that, in general, collaborative relationships do not tend to entertain power balances very well. Similarly, could social learning theory principles potentially explain how respondents with little prior exposure to social workers formed their perceptions? As noted by Thyer and Wodarski (1990), “social learning theory in social work education is grossly underused . . . it comes the closest to providing a true person-in-environment focus to conceptualizing and remedying human problems” (p. 147). This type of theoretical application along with role theory as encouraged by (Bronstein, 2003) when integrated with practice will help to strengthen forensic social work practitioners’ skill development in the areas of negotiating, sharing power, advocating, as well as adapting and maintaining a strengths-based perspective.

Another area for future inquiry is to delve deeper into the rapport building process. For example, if the law student was able to strengthen rapport with a client by engaging in reflective listening or being cognizant of nonverbal cues from the client, it could influence the legal strategy and/or outcome for the case. A client might divulge extremely sensitive information to the law student that could change the opening arguments that the law student might make in court on the client’s behalf. It is this kind of reinforcement that could have a ripple effect on other law students working in collaboration with

social work students. Concepts such as observational learning, imitation, and modeling would need to guide social work student interactions with law students. In this way, the social work student serves as an educator as well as a colleague, which might assist in broadening perception(s). In addition to being perceived as “supportive,” the social work students’ underlying motive would be to move toward equal footing in the collaborative relationship which Madden (2000) contended is crucial for social workers if they want to exert influence on the legal system.

Future research should seek to assess changes in law students’ behaviors by having social work students purposely model behaviors that are not typically associated with lawyers, for example, safeguarding client’s best interest as opposed to zealous advocacy for client’s stated interest or approaching problems synthetically (i.e., put parts together to assess whole) as opposed to taking an analytic approach (i.e., breaking whole into parts). On one occasion in the FLC, a client cried while undergoing a legal intake interview with two law students and one social work student. The law students proceeded to ask questions although the client was visibly shaken. Because the social work intern’s orientation was on the “process” as opposed the law student’s focus on “outcome,” the social work intern excused herself from the room to get tissue for the client. In terms of social learning theory, this is an example of “modeling” (for the law students) the ability to identify with the client’s emotionality. According to Bandura (1977), the law students (observers) would need to experience “reinforcing consequences” in order to replicate this behavior in future encounters with clients.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation is the fact that questions were based on the author and social work interns’ observations and experiences at our law clinic site. I did not perform statistical analyses (e.g., factor analysis to formulate questions). I viewed the questionnaire as a guide to help to identify a formal instrument to expand on the findings from the present study during the next academic year. I identified a 21-item measure of interdisciplinary attitudes proposed by Hyer, Fairchild, Abraham, Mezey, and Fulmer (2000) for the second phase of this research project. It has been determined that modification of some of the instrument items will be necessary as it was originally designed to measure attitudes within interdisciplinary health care teams. Some of the items measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) include “Professionals that work on interdisciplinary teams are more responsive to client needs,” “I have a strong desire to work interdisciplinarily in the future,” and “Working in teams unnecessarily complicates things most of the time.” This instrument was successfully used in a study conducted by

Colarossi and Forgey (2006) in their evaluation of an interdisciplinary social work and law curriculum for domestic violence.

The study used a cross-sectional approach meaning that data were collected at one point in time. The true essence of dimensional analysis could have been enhanced had there been multiple focus groups throughout the academic year to closely examine the interrelatedness of perceptions among law students. In addition, future research should seek to explore how perceptions evolve throughout the academic year. I also noted that many focus group participants were not as expansive in their responses and that two group members tended to dominate the discussion. Linhorst (2002) suggested generous use of probes and pauses to prod those group members who may be more hesitant to express themselves in a group setting.

CONCLUSION

In the context of interdisciplinary collaborations, it is important to be knowledgeable of the views held by one's colleagues. Participation in exploratory studies can provide social work students with a certain level of awareness of how they are viewed in a professional setting. It is the responsibility of social work education to prepare students in this regard (Madden, 2000, p. 15). In light of the fact that "attitudes and behaviors are hard to change, especially when individuals perceive that change may cost them personal and professional autonomy, power, and identity" (Colarossi & Forgey, 2006 p. 320), efforts to understand factors that influence perceptions held by students as well as professionals should be encouraged in future research on the practice of forensic social work.

REFERENCES

- Abramson, J. S., & Rosenthal, B. S. (1995). Interdisciplinary and interorganizational collaboration. In R. L. Edwards (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social work* (19th ed.) (pp. 1479–1489). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Addams, J. (1910). *Twenty years at Hull House*. New York, NY: The MacMillan Company.
- Anderson, A., Barenberg, L., & Tremblay, P. R. (2007). Professional ethics in interdisciplinary collaboratives: Zeal, paternalism and mandated reporting. *Clinical Law Review*, *13*, 659–718.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. New York, NY: General Learning Press.
- Barker, R. L. (2003). *The social work dictionary* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Benson, S. R. (2007). Beyond protective orders: Interdisciplinary domestic violence clinics facilitate social change. *Cardozo Journal of Law & Gender*, *14*, 1–20.

- Bronstein, L. R. (2003). A model for interdisciplinary collaboration. *Social Work, 48*, 296–306.
- Colarossi, L., & Forgey, M. A. (2006). Evaluation study of an interdisciplinary social work and law curriculum for domestic violence. *Journal of Social Work Education, 42*, 307–323.
- Cole, P. L. (2010). *The Richmond Family Law Clinic Social Work Operations Manual*. Richmond, VA: VCU School of Social Work.
- Cole, P. L. (in press). You want me to do what? Ethical practice within interdisciplinary collaborations. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*.
- Coleman, B. (2001). Lawyers who are also social workers: How to effectively combine two different disciplines to better serve clients. *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy, 7*, 131–158.
- Council on Social Work Education. (1998). *Working paper on interprofessional education principles*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dickens, J. (2006). Care, control and change in child care proceedings: Dilemmas for social workers, managers and lawyers. *Child and Family Social Work, 11*, 23–32.
- Faller, K. C., & Vandervort, F. E. (2007). Interdisciplinary clinical teaching of child welfare practice to law and social work students: When world views collide. *The University of Michigan Journal of Law and Reform, 41*, 121–165.
- Galowitz, P. (1999). Collaboration between lawyers and social workers: Re-examining the nature and potential of the relationship. *Fordham Law Review, 67*, 2123–2154.
- Hartley, C. C., & Petrucci, C. J. (2004). Practicing culturally competent jurisprudence: A collaboration between social work and law. *Journal of Law & Policy, 14*, 133–181.
- Hyer, K., Fairchild, S., Abraham, I., Mezey, M., & Fulmer, T. (2000). Measuring attitudes related to interdisciplinary training: revisiting the Heinemann, Schmitt and Farrell attitudes toward health care teams scale. *Journal of Interprofessional Care, 14*, 249–258.
- Johnson, P., & Cahn, K. (1995). Improving child welfare practice through improvements in attorney–social worker relationships. *Child Welfare, 74*, 383–394.
- Kirst-Ashman, K. K., & Hull, G. H. (2009). *Generalist practice with organizations and communities* (4th ed.). Florence, KY: Brooks/Cole Cengage Learning.
- Kools, S., McCarthy, M., Durham, R., & Robrecht, L. (1996). Dimensional analysis: Broadening the conception of grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research, 6*, 312–330.
- Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Kruse, K. R. (2004). Justice, ethics, and interdisciplinary teaching and practice: Lawyers should be lawyers, but what does that mean?: A response to Aiken & Wizner and Smith. *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy, 14*, 49–84.
- Linhorst, D. M. (2002). A review of the use and potential of focus groups in social work research. *Qualitative Social Work, 1*, 208–228.

- Madden, R. G. (2000). Legal content in social work education: Preparing students for interprofessional practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 20*(1/2), 3–17.
- Madden, R. G., & Wayne, R. H. (2003). Social work and the law: A therapeutic jurisprudence perspective. *Social Work, 48*, 338–347.
- Maschi, T., & Killian, M. L. (2011). The evolution of forensic social work in the United States: Implications for 21st century practice. *Journal of Forensic Social Work, 1*(1), 8–36.
- Maschi, T., & Killian, M. L. (2009). Defining collaborative forensic social work with diverse populations. In T. Maschi, C. Bradley, & K. Ward (Eds.), *Forensic social work: Psychosocial and legal issues across diverse practice settings* (pp. 3–9). New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.
- Pierce, C. T., Gleason-Wynn, P., & Miller, M. G. (2001). Social work and law. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 34*(3), 61–71.
- Reber, A. S., Allen, R., & Reber, E. (2009). *Penguin dictionary of psychology* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Schatzman, L. (1991). Dimensional analysis: Notes on an alternative approach to the grounding of theory in qualitative research. In D. R. Maines (Ed.), *Social organization and social process* (pp. 303–314). New York, NY: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Sellers, S. L., Ward, E. C., & Pate, D. (2006). Dimensions of depression: A qualitative study of wellbeing among Black African American immigrant women. *Qualitative Social Work, 5*(1), 45–66.
- St. Joan, J. (2001). Building bridges, building walls: Collaboration between lawyers and workers in domestic violence clinic and issues of client confidentiality. *Clinical Law Review, 7*, 403–467.
- Taylor, S. (2006). Educating future practitioners of social work and law: Exploring the origins of inter-professional misunderstanding. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*, 638–653.
- Thyer, B. A., & Wodarski, J. S. (1990). Note on social work education Social learning theory: Toward a comprehensive conceptual framework for social work education. *Social Service Review, 64*(1), 144–152.
- Wexler, D. B., & Winick, B. J. (Eds.). (1996). *Law in a therapeutic key: Developments in therapeutic jurisprudence*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What is your understanding of the term “interdisciplinary collaboration”?
2. Generally speaking, before you began working at the FLC, what were your impressions and/or expectations? Probe: Impressions when you first got here?
3. Is there anything specific that you have learned about the field of social work as a result of your experience at the FLC?
4. Based on your experience at the FLC, would you consider working in another interdisciplinary collaboration?

5. In what ways, if any do you think you have benefited from your experience at the FLC?
6. Can you think of an example in which you experienced difficulty/challenges in working with the social workers in this clinic?
7. Can you identify an experience where there has been positive interaction/collaboration with the social workers in the clinic?
8. Can you think of any personal experience with social workers that would impact your perception of social workers in a professional context?
Probe: Any personal experience that may color your impression of the social work field?
9. In what ways, if any have you gained experience from the FLC?
10. How did you get placed here at FLC?
11. Why are you interested in family law?