

Professional Promises: Hopes & Gaps in Access to Oral Health Care

Conflicting Perspectives and Alternative Viewpoints

Shafik Dharamsi, PhD

Assistant Professor,

Global Oral Health & Community Dentistry

The University of British Columbia

A Request for “Social Responsibility” (SR)

- ❖ Growing concern for the oral health of vulnerable populations and equitable access to care
- ❖ Request for a SR ethic in delivery of oral health care
- ❖ Developing SR Health Policies

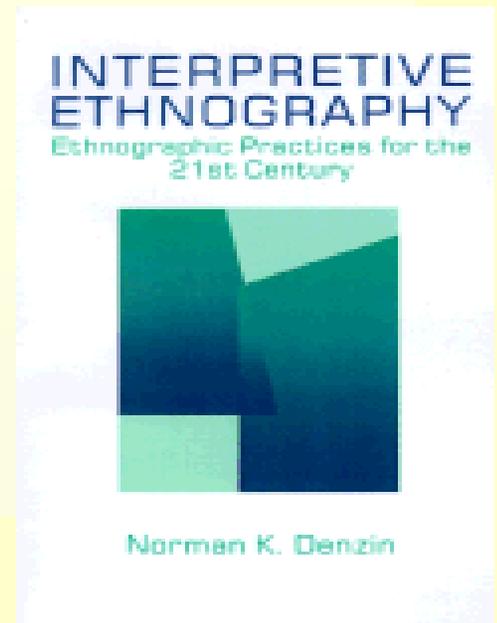
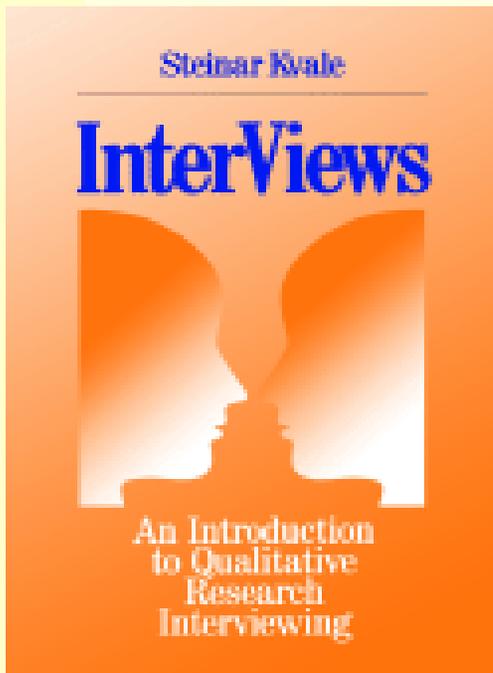
?“Social Responsibility”?

Conceptions of social responsibility toward vulnerable populations

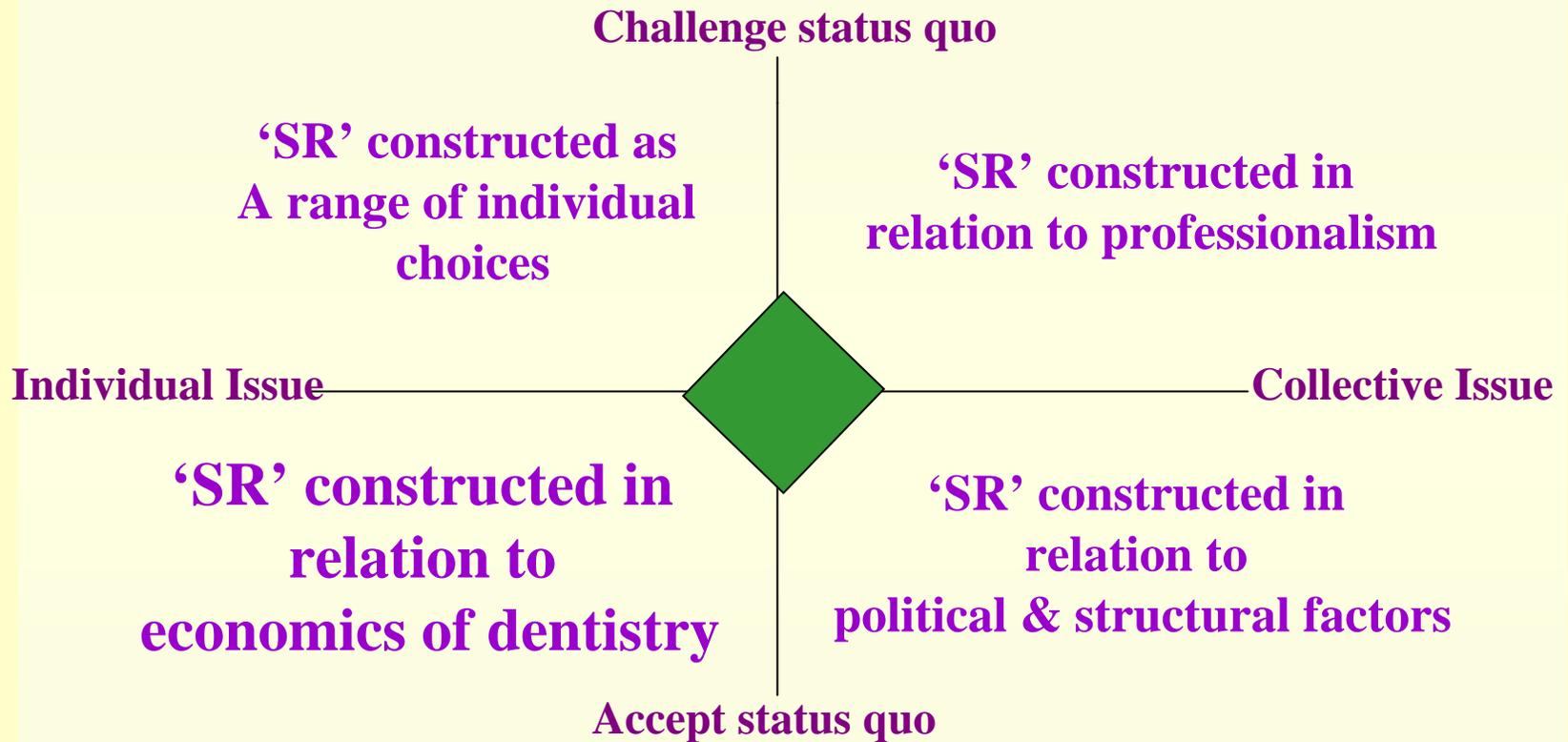
1. How is the concept of social responsibility understood and how is it to be enacted in dentistry generally?
2. How do dentists think about issues of access to care?
3. How do they position themselves in relation to the possible range of issues at stake?

Research Methods

Open-ended interviews with 34 dental experts
(dentists, dental educators, & administrators)
Mainly from Canada and the United States



Four Competing Constructs



‘Social Responsibility’ as an Economical Discourse

- 1. Dentistry as a business**
- 2. The market as a fair arbiter of SR**
- 3. Earning an appropriate level of income**
- 4. Patient as profit & profit motivated tx-plans**
- 5. Leaving the business**
- 6. Too much social responsibility**

‘SR’ as an Economical Discourse

Dentistry as a business

“the financial, business side of the Dental Association crest is so important and generates so much funds that one would have a certain suspicion that the whole process is money driven. What is the dental organization really all about? It’s about the dental trade! You want to talk about social consciousness right; well sorry, we’re a dental trade organization!”

“...the norm is shifting to this entrepreneurial, grab-all- the-money-you-can way... dental care and health care is becoming extraordinarily dictated by what is profitable to a frightening degree and we don’t have a handle on it.”

‘SR’ as an Economical Discourse

The market as a fair arbiter of SR

“[the] dentists is to some degree a businessman and he’s got a big overhead and he’s got to look after this business, and he has to make a living.”

“people would look at health and say that it’s more the market economy that determines who gets health care. We don’t want anything entirely driven by the market [but] I don’t think you can rule out market forces. Standard dental services like periodontal care or fillings have been put into a market setting, and it works! I mean private practitioners are rewarded for their labor, they work hard and produce a lot, but the problem is that there is a segment of the population that doesn’t get service and that’s a big problem!”

‘SR’ as an Economical Discourse

The Market

“[i]f we ask the profession to donate services to one-third of the population, you are asking a great deal. No [other] profession is asked to do this. And you would not hit the profession evenly because the well established [dentists] have got their clientele, so you would be looking at the new graduate who will have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to set up a practice and you would ask them and they would end up with those who need the services, but don’t have the means. Thirty percent of clientele is about the profit in a dental practice and if you are asking the dentist to forego that entirely, well that certainly wouldn’t work.”

‘SR’ as an Economical Discourse The Market

“I don’t think any one would question the need to deal with this, I think it’s important that people who need care should be provided care; it’s a question of how this should happen.”

“to practise you need to create your own small hospital and there are huge costs involved... And don’t forget that not everyone in the profession is willing to service the needy at a reduced fee or at no fee at all....a lot of our colleagues are willing to do something. But...without governments taking a role in this I can’t see how it can develop.”

‘SR’ as an Economical Discourse

The Market

**“I’ve been in practices where the policy was cash only!
If the person doesn’t have I, the dentists says sorry! So
away they go. Now that’s ethically wrong! It’s morally
wrong! It’s socially wrong! It’s bad!! Now there are others
who say no, that’s fine, it’s a business. You can’t walk out
the store with a television until you give them the money!
You can’t buy a case of beer until you give them the
money! Cash on the barrel! What’s wrong with the same
thing for dental?**

Well, health care is different!”

‘Social Responsibility’ as an Individual Choice Discourse

- ❖ **The common good**
- ❖ **Socializing forces**
- ❖ **The typical dental student**
- ❖ **Mutual attraction**
- ❖ **Currency to graduate**
- ❖ **How do you teach SR**

‘Social Responsibility’ as a Professional Discourse

- ❖ **Upholding principles of professionalism**
- ❖ **Protecting professional interests**
- ❖ **Losing privilege vs. economically viability**
- ❖ **Professional autonomy and privilege**
- ❖ **Specialized knowledge**

‘Social Responsibility’ as a Professional Discourse

Upholding principles of professionalism

“...When you hold the title, “Doctor” people hold you to a higher standard ... a higher level of responsibility... otherwise we shouldn’t call ourselves a profession!”

“Professionalism ... has always been understood to be granted because of the promise, professional promise, that practitioners make to use their knowledge and skill in the interests of the public good.”

‘Social Responsibility’ as a Professional Discourse

Economic viability

“I mean it’s very clear! What the right thing to do here is to create a mechanism where we provide a better service to society. The dental profession is not doing it! It’s that simple! It’s not a dilemma at all!! It’s a problem but it’s not a dilemma because it’s very clear what’s the right thing to do, what’s the moral thing to do...there’s no lack of clarity there. We’re not doing it and there are good reasons why we’re not doing it. Dentistry’s hugely expensive and you know, the profession has to remain economically viable!

‘Social Responsibility’ as a Professional Discourse

“Well, it’s an elitist profession! People who go to dentists largely are doing it because they have the means to go and they have the orientation to go and it’s a very high SEC kind of activity, so you kinda get caught up in that; that’s what it’s all about!

‘Social Responsibility’ as a Political & Organizational Discourse

- ❖ **Resistance toward government**
- ❖ **Awakening government**
- ❖ **Society’s indifference to dental health**
- ❖ **The profession’s indifference**

‘Social Responsibility’ as a Political & Organizational Discourse

“It’s easy to blame the profession and say you don’t have a sense of social responsibility. ...If society [was concerned] about access to dental services...they would demand that they would be taxed higher to pay for social welfare or social services. But the government knows that if they raise taxes by 2%, so that we have enough money to give everybody dental care, they would probably lose the next election.”

‘Social Responsibility’ as a Political & Organizational Discourse

“We’re not here to take care of the poor without some return from them. You can’t just ride the system.”

‘Social Responsibility’ as a Political & Organizational Discourse

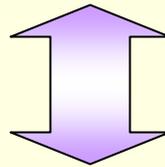
“There’s no political will to change public health care policy to include dentistry in the global health care system...the moment the government steps away from its responsibility in a lot of these areas and tries to throw it back at the professions, the professions say I'm sorry, there's a limit to what we can do as a profession! ”

Alleviating Pain: A Common Ground of Commitment

“When someone thinks that social responsibility is going out and providing care *ad lib* to anybody that comes to them, I do not believe that that’s what it’s about. You do have the social responsibility to take people out of pain and try to remove disease but not to do a whole lot more than that. If somebody comes to me in pain and says I can’t pay then I’m not going think about money...I’ll say, let’s take care of this and will talk about that later.”

So What?

Discourses of SR influence decisions on who deserves what, how much, and who has the power to decide



Discourses shape the formation of the professional dental self : Identity, role, & response both collectively and individually.