

Playing Nice, and Other Lessons From the Field: The First 18 Months

Contributed by Sandra Fortier, LMSW

In the eighteen months since I earned an MSW degree and began working (for money!) in the field of social work, I have been enlightened, sometimes disillusioned, and, most importantly, educated in the school of the life of a social worker. The lessons I have learned cannot be taught in the classroom, but are vital to one's success as a new social worker. I share them here in hopes of enlightening other soon-to-be social workers and commiserating with fellow new social workers.

Lesson #1: What do you do again?

Upon leaving the protective atmosphere of graduate school and entering "the real world," I discovered that the general population was clueless about the profession I had just entered. When meeting new people, attending social gatherings, and even reuniting with family members, the question "What do you do?" is standard. After graduating, it felt so good to reply, "I am a social worker." I had no idea that I would have to explain so much more! In my short experience, most people have associated my occupation with one of two things: a child protective services worker or a veritable martyr. Many people assumed the term "social worker" meant I worked for county or state child welfare departments, removing children from abuse or neglect situations. However, during the summer after my graduation when I stayed on at my internship working with families with HIV/AIDS, I was often viewed as a martyr. People would say "Wow, how do you do that? It must be so hard!"

Additionally, most people do not realize that a large number of social workers are employed as clinical social workers or therapists. When I began working as a therapist, some people would respond "Can you do that as a social worker?"

In the past eighteen months, I've learned the importance about being very clear myself about what I do and to develop a short "sound bite" that explains my job to others. "I'm a social worker" just doesn't cut it, so now I add, "I provide therapy to children in foster care." Just adding a few more words improves the public's understanding of our profession by leaps and bounds. Lesson #2: What I learned from "Hooters" (Yes, the restaurant chain)

Some of my fellow social workers were planning an agency lunch outing. A good chance to network and build relationships within our agency! Where was the luncheon to take place? Hooters! But we're social workers; we don't go to Hooters!! What about the objectification of women, the sexualized exploitation of young women employees working for minimum wage?! I was shocked to be the sole minority in my outrage. After all, we were all social workers! That's when I learned that graduate school and real-life social work are very, very different.

Graduate school was such a thrilling, energizing experience. In class, we were all there because we truly cared about people and social justice. We were fighters, liberators, the staunchest advocates for every marginalized person, and defenders of equality. We were led by our professors, who prodded us to constantly examine issues from various cultural and ethical perspectives. While most of us weren't actually out in the community fighting these battles, we felt strongly, we spoke strongly, and we wrote about it all in our class papers.

Naturally, I assumed that when I entered the workplace as a social worker, I would again be surrounded by like-minded people who cared about the issues I did and were up for the battles I thought social workers were supposed to fight. Not so. Outside of the academia microcosm, social work is filled with diverse people with diverse backgrounds, beliefs, personalities, and motivations. There are social workers who live their lives in pursuit of social justice...and there are social workers who are simply employed as social workers. There are even (to my shock!) social workers who are employed as social workers, but hardly work—and, no, talking on your cell phone to various friends all day does not count as working. Social work is just like any other field of employment: there are dedicated employees, marginal employees, over achievers, and people who should have been fired a long time ago. Rather than assume my own opinions about social justice will be shared by fellow social workers, I've learned to accept the diversity within the profession. I've learned to share my beliefs about social justice when appropriate and to recognize that, although we share credentials, we don't all view social justice in the same way, nor hold it in the same place in our hearts. Lesson #3: Learning to Play Nice with Others

Social workers are employed in a variety of fields, and I (pre- and post-graduation) have had the pleasure of working in several—public schools, residential treatment facilities, and nonprofit social service agencies. I left graduate school knowing what was right, and in class, we could almost always agree on the right way to work with a client. However, when I became one of the few (or the only) social worker(s) in the midst of other professionals, I often got shouted out pretty quickly. Needless to say, I had not yet begun to learn the art of gradual change. I was right! Why

couldn't the other non-social work professionals see that?!

Take public schools, for instance. Teachers did not always agree that a homeless student's unruly behavior is understandable, or that children arriving late to school may have real excuses for their poor attendance (like a mother using drugs or lack of a family vehicle), or that children without winter coats are entitled to be provided with one.

In a residential treatment setting, non-social worker colleagues often did not agree that punishing behavior is not best practice treatment, or that a child's worsening behavior can sometimes be the result of emotional healing, or that every child, no matter what they have done, deserves unconditional love, affection, and respect.

No, colleagues do not always see things through "social work" lenses and, as a new social worker, I have perfected neither the fine art of winning others over to my side, nor the art of tolerating momentary injustice in favor of the "big picture." No, my technique had been more of the bulldozer kind, which, believe me, often gets you stuck in the mud. On my muddy trek through my first eighteen months as a social worker, I have learned that the loudest voice is not necessarily the one heard. Also, kindness and validation go a really long way, as does acknowledging that professionals usually share the same intentions if not the same means. Lesson #4: A Social Work Family

In the past eighteen months, one constant has been an invaluable source of support, affirmation, and re-energizing: the national and local social work community. Participating in the professional social work community has given me a sense of belonging, purpose, and solidarity. For me, knowing that there is an entire professional organization of people who believe in social justice is re-affirming and spiritually strengthening. Additionally, the community provides learning opportunities, continuing education, professional publications, conferences, and other resources that allow me to continue honing my skills. Organizations like the national and local NASW, clinical social work societies, international listservs like the Women's Commission and Poverty Net, and publications like The New Social Worker and Social Work Today, are all well-worth the membership and subscription fees.

These lessons were sometimes difficult to learn, sometimes energizing, but nevertheless essential to my own growth and development as a social worker. I reflect on my first eighteen months with the knowledge that by learning these lessons and sharing this journey with other beginning social workers, I am stronger and more prepared for the next eighteen.

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