

Rewards and Opportunities in Developmental Disabilities: How an Accident Became a Career

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When I entered my MSW program in 1993, I thought I might like to work with children in a school setting. I had no idea that I would become a social worker with adults who have developmental disabilities. It just seemed to be an "accident" waiting to happen. I wish to share my positive experiences of more than 10 years, in the hopes of interesting future and new social work students in the rewards and opportunities of working with people who have developmental disabilities and their families.

The "Accident";

My career began one day by "accident" with a few phone calls. My MSW program was trying to find a first-year field placement for me, and I had declined the first opportunity because of the location of the agency. In addition, the MSW program had not considered any of my areas of interest that were listed on the field placement form. When the first week of fall classes had begun and I still did not have a field placement, I decided to make some phone calls on my own to well-known organizations in my area, in an attempt to locate my own placement with children.

I ultimately landed a wonderful opportunity at a large, voluntary, nonprofit organization that serves people with cerebral palsy in a large, metropolitan area. The agency receives funding from the state offices of mental retardation/developmental disabilities, Medicaid, and the state rehabilitation agency.

It was a complete surprise to me when I found out I would be working with adults in a newly established Medicaid case management unit. I had initially called this agency because I had always seen school buses parked outside and knew they had children's services. It was here that I got my first experience working with adults with developmental disabilities and their families in a day treatment, clinic, and sheltered workshop environment. I became attached to the population and felt this practice specialty was a good match for me.

At this organization, I worked among a multidisciplinary team of professionals, such as rehabilitation counselors, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and doctors. As a student intern at a place that had not had social work interns in many years, I accidentally "stepped on the toes" of several professionals as I attempted to advocate for several consumers to be moved from the sheltered workshop (where people are paid less than minimum wage) to a higher level program. I quickly learned what a social worker could or could not do in this particular setting. It was an example of social work in a "host setting," where the dominant profession was rehabilitation. I had the full support of my MSW program casework advisor/professor in working out the issues and developing this new field placement site, which still is being used to this day.

At this first-year MSW field placement site, I had numerous other memorable experiences. With my supervisor, I made several home visits to the apartment of a consumer who had mild mental retardation, a visual impairment, and used a wheelchair. The consumer, who lived alone, was often absent from the program as a result of his drinking problems. Ultimately, I helped to admit him into a detoxification program and get a home attendant for him. His attendance improved. I also learned firsthand about hospital emergency rooms when I escorted several consumers with severe seizures in the ambulance to nearby hospitals. I encouraged self-advocacy and advocated systems, as needed. I also learned about the Medicaid offices and Social Security Administration as I escorted consumers and their families to appointments. Thus, it was the first "accident" that really began my interest and career in the field of developmental disabilities.

For my second-year MSW field placement, the MSW program did consider my areas of interest. I was placed at a clinic setting at a nonprofit job training program for young people with learning disabilities, which is also funded by the state rehabilitation agency, the state mental retardation/developmental disabilities agency, and Medicaid. That was a wonderful experience where I did intakes, as well as individual and group counseling with teenagers. There were about six social work interns there, and we had individual and group supervision. As the only second-year student, I was a peer counselor and role model to the first-year students. Moreover, I loved this placement, because it felt good to see the successful progress toward employment for many of my clients. It furthered my interest in working with people with developmental disabilities.

From Student to First Post-MSW Job

Three weeks after graduating with my MSW, I landed a job at a day treatment/sheltered workshop program for adults with developmental disabilities. I found the job from a posting hanging on the bulletin board at another MSW program. (This was 1995, before Internet job postings were prevalent. You had to go on foot to get information!) I was told during the interview that there would be a lot to do, because they had not had a full-time social worker for about three years, and there were a few part-time people who had not stayed very long. I was the only social worker for approximately 200 clients.

I loved this job, where I learned a lot and was always busy. I enjoyed doing intakes with the new consumers and their families and giving tours of the programs. I did individual, group, and family counseling. I assisted the program director with writing reports and supervising college-level interns, as needed. I was a member of a school-to-work committee. I met with parents, students, and school officials to assist in the process of students' transitioning from school-

based programs into adult services. There were always psychosocial reports to do, especially for referral packages to get consumers into residential and recreational services. I helped parents with Medicaid and Social Security issues. When consumers moved out of the state, I helped them locate programs in their new areas, which was often difficult in a pre-Internet era.

After almost three years, I started to feel somewhat discouraged when only a few consumers were allowed by the agency to be referred to "real" jobs with job coaching. Other downsides were that I shared an office and my salary was low.

A New Job and Back to School

In 1998, I was working for the state rehabilitation agency and attending a doctoral program in social work, with the goal of teaching and interesting students in the field of developmental disabilities. I loved my job with the state, because I had a big, quick-turning caseload and I made a difference in the lives of so many people. I especially enjoyed working with a high school, where I worked with students with disabilities (and their families) who were about to graduate and needed counseling and job training services. I did fieldwork, individual counseling, and groups with clients in the areas of interview practice and job search techniques. Moreover, I referred people to the job training programs that I thought worked the best, because we had the choice of hundreds of vendors. One downside here was doing duplicate work in keeping paperwork and computer records, all without much clerical help. On the positive side, I had my own computer, voice mail, a private office, use of the Internet, and e-mail...and the salary here was much better!

The Research Study

For my doctoral dissertation, I decided to study MSW social workers working in the field of developmental disabilities, to find out about the processes of how they entered and continued in the field. I interviewed 24 social workers, members of an organization advocating for the rights of people with developmental disabilities. Guess what! I found out that many of these social workers shared similar experiences regarding their "accidental" path to the field of developmental disabilities. Most of all, like myself, these social workers also expressed high levels of satisfaction with their jobs. Thus, I wish to share with you the "rewards" and "opportunities" of the field.

Rewards of Practice

Participants overwhelmingly spoke very positively about their experiences. The message that they wanted to tell social work students about working in the field of developmental disabilities was "come and do this." They expressed that the "personal satisfaction" of working with the population will outweigh any possible negative feelings, although some negative feelings are always possible. "[working in DD field] is equally rewarding or good as working in a mental health field," one participant said.

The social workers felt that students would find it to be "gratifying" and many social workers used the word "rewarding" in their stories. Those working in residences/group homes and recreation programs also used the words "fun" and "enjoyable" to describe their jobs. Their work with clients taught them not to judge people by the way they look, how to appreciate the simple things in life (such as going food shopping, sending and receiving birthday cards, using the telephone, and eating in a restaurant), the need for clients to give and receive gifts and hugs, and the need to be able to take care of one's own personal needs (bathing, feeding), things that could not happen in institutions.

"Rewards" of practice come from seeing results. Good feelings come from having worked with someone who is better able to express feelings, develop relationships, improve self-advocacy, increase attendance, improve hygiene, decrease negative behaviors, or get a job. On a group counseling level, it is gratifying to see members develop better communication and socialization skills. Good feelings also come from having helped someone access material goods and services, especially after having dealt with bureaucracies and waited for months for services such as Medicaid or SSI/SSDI, a recreation program, a supportive apartment, access-a-ride transportation, a reduced or half-fare subway card, a new wheelchair, or a home attendant.

Opportunities for Social Work Practice

There are many opportunities for social workers in the field of developmental disabilities, which was described as "an exciting place to work." Casework, groupwork, administration, and community organization skills can be used with people with developmental disabilities, many of whom have dual diagnoses. "I couldn't think of a better field of endeavor for social workers to practice every learned skill and to enhance every skill that they've developed over time," one participant said. "Anything that applies to anyone else, applies to people with developmental disabilities," added another.

Clinical work. The study participants expressed positive feelings about the "psychotherapy" that they've done with this population when clinical skills are adjusted depending on the need or ability of the individual. There are opportunities to do groupwork, such as support groups, counseling groups, and sexuality education groups. Development of "insight" is difficult for even a "normal" population. People with "mild mental retardation" are able to benefit from counseling. A behavior approach, such as a token

economy with rewards, often works better than a strictly verbal approach.

Counseling is needed, because people with developmental disabilities face issues similar to those of other populations, such as substance abuse. In wanting to "fit in" with society, some "hang out" with friends, drink, and do drugs. Some want to be more independent, but their judgment, reasoning, and/or social skills are poor, and their families hold them back. Other practice areas that have a wealth of opportunity are services for people with autism, sexuality/relationship counseling, psychotherapy with infants' families, and services for elderly people, especially in nonprofit agencies.

Administration/Community Organization: Several social workers talked about there being good administrative opportunities in terms of managerial work, "running" day programs, supervising clinics, or developing new programs/residences. Several social workers talked about opportunities for social workers to work on big issues such as disability rights, integration, and social policy. Some schools separate students with disabilities during lunchtime in the cafeteria. Even though institutions have closed, issues of discrimination and community inclusion remain in housing, schools, employment, transportation, recreation, and the like. There is a place for social workers to play a vital role in the lives of people with developmental disabilities through policy and advocacy to ensure individual rights and mainstreaming in society.

The Future

Here is some advice to students from the words of a participant in my study:

Don't get bogged down by the rules and regulations that contain you. Find ways to get beyond them and create your own destiny. Don't be limited by mundane responsibilities in carrying out a job. Look for a job that can give you an expansive view, one which you can bring to it your skills, your strengths, and recognize that everyone has their own limitations and their own disabilities. . . . that there are no limits to success. And don't get contained by the term "social work." Don't get limited by what the field is today, but move it to the vision of the world tomorrow. Dream about the future to make people's lives better and then go out and do it...

After graduating with my DSW, I taught an evening course in group counseling for undergraduates in a bachelor of human services program, while still working at the state rehabilitation agency. I tried to interest my students in working with people with developmental disabilities. Despite my numerous case examples of practice with people with developmental disabilities, many of the students expressed interest in working with other client populations. I was able to encourage my students to pursue MSW degrees, and I think they might "keep an open mind" if they get a field placement with people who have developmental disabilities.

"Try it. You'll like it," is the best advice that came from participants in my study. It is a very diverse population. If you are open to doing such a field placement or taking a first job in developmental disabilities, who knows where that experience might lead!

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