

# Creating YOUR Social Work Career: Understanding the Purpose of Social Work

Contributed by Lyndal Greenslade, BA, BSocWk, MAASW, and Amanda Vos, BSocWk, MAASW (Acc)

In last edition's column, we talked about the importance of clarifying your purpose. This involved gaining insight into your values, strengths, and passions. We asked the big (and sometimes scary!) question, "What is your life purpose?" We talked about the importance of beginning your social work journey with reflecting on who you are, because when you have great self-knowledge, you are much better equipped to identify experiences that will add meaning to your life.

This edition, we widen our focus even further, to examine the bigger picture purpose of social work as a profession. Put simply, what is the actual point of social work? WHY do we do what we do? Although we all spend significant amounts of time during our studies pondering the question, "What is social work?" reflecting on it after you have spent time clarifying your individual purpose will enable you to put the two together and uncover how to use your purpose to contribute to the purpose of social work.

The logical place to start is to try and define exactly what social work is. If right now you're thinking, "not another social work definition!" do not despair. What we're after here is not simply reading through endless definitions in textbooks, but rather looking for some common themes and then building a personal relationship with the purpose of social work, so that your purpose in social work becomes crystal clear to you.

Although what we do as social workers may look different around the globe, it's WHY we do what we do that unites us. So what exactly are we trying to do? Drum roll, please...maximize human potential. Ta da! That's it! Whether we're in the U.S., India, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Argentina, the UK, or the at least 70 other countries where social work is practiced, the underlying common core purpose is to maximize human potential.

At this point in time, Amanda is rather excitedly suggesting that if you remember nothing else from this article, remember these three words: maximize human potential. These three simple words will see you through times of doubt, confusion, stress, and minor breakdowns, because when we remember WHY we do what we do, we create a path of meaning. Those three words are our lighthouse when the sea is stormy and you just realized your boat is leaking. If you just keep heading for that lighthouse, you'll stay right on track and it will ultimately be okay...even if you do reach it in a leaky boat.

Okay, so far so good. So how are we going to do that? How are we going to turn the words on the page into meaningful action that not only benefits the people we work with, but also nourishes our individual purposes so we can build sustainable careers? Let's begin by taking a look at these five social work values—human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity, and competence. What do they mean to you? Do any of them jump off the page and excite you more than others? Why? Do any of them match directly with the personal values and strengths that you identified during the first phase in last edition's column? How would you go about embodying these values in your everyday life? What would your work look like if you were practicing from this value base?

To help us build this picture, the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (1999: 5) has a useful definition that suggests ways in which social work is able to maximize human potential. The following list gives us a base from which to build a concrete picture of how we might deliver on social work's aim.

Social work aims to maximize the development of human potential and the fulfillment of human needs, through an equal commitment to:

Working with and enabling people to achieve the best possible levels of personal and social well-being; and working to achieve social justice through social development and social change. This involves:

- Upholding people's interests and rights
- Working with individuals, groups and communities in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic and political resources
- Providing assistance to improve the well-being of clients. (Clients are individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations and societies, especially those who are neglected, vulnerable, disadvantaged or have exceptional needs)
- Raising awareness of structural inequities
- Promoting policies and practices that achieve a fair allocation of social resources
- Acting to bring about social change to reduce social barriers, inequality and injustice.

(AASW, 1999)

This Code gives us an overview of the pieces required to finish the puzzle of maximizing human potential.

The next step is to apply your personal value base, passions, and strengths, with the social work values that speak loudest to you, and to the above list so you can develop a clear understanding of your unique purpose in social work. For example, let's say that during self reflection you discovered you value fairness and believe that deep down, all individuals deserve the right to freedom. Additionally, you identified that one of your strengths is leadership. Reading over the above list, let's imagine that the final point, acting to bring about social change, really resonated with you. By putting these together, you might articulate that organizing an event to advocate for and promote change for a marginalized group would tap into your purpose. This gives you a clear vision of the sorts of experiences that would contribute to your having a meaningful and sustainable social work career.

This is not an easy exercise to do. You may well get stumped along the way! If you find yourself stuck, broaden your mind and get creative. Remember, social workers don't just work in traditional settings of child protection, private practice, or health. Human beings are everywhere, so if we hold in mind that social work is primarily concerned with maximizing human potential, we can see just how diverse a social work career can really be!

Let's take a moment to explore some of the possibilities from the view that there are no limits to the how because we're all bringing our own interests, passions, and strengths to social work. You might be a talented writer with a life-long dream to write a novel. Or perhaps you have an interest in film or TV. Maybe you're a photographer or a painter. We talk with many social workers who have great creative talents. You don't need to leave social work to be a writer, film-maker, photographer, or painter. These are wonderful and potentially massive platforms to maximize human potential. Just think about how a classic novel can influence generations, or the impact meaningful films can have throughout the world. If you want to make use of these interests and strengths as a social worker, then go for it!

To do this exercise and to create these experiences throughout your life, you really do need to give yourself permission to think broadly. The bigger you can dream, the more ways you will imagine how to use the purpose of social work. And take heart should anyone ever say to you, "Why are you doing that? That's not social work." Just smile and nod politely, for it is better to pursue your own potential than to listen to those who have forgotten their own. Simply remember why, so you don't lose your way.

In the last edition, we introduced the idea of a statement of purpose, in the form of a career objective or tagline. The final stage of understanding the purpose of social work and identifying how you might add value to this purpose is to revisit this now that you have a greater understanding not only of your purpose, but the purpose of social work and how you're going to pursue it.

We found doing this exercise personally very rewarding, and many of the students and new graduates we work with have also shared that getting their mission on paper was somewhat cathartic. If you're feeling daunted by the task and not sure where to start, remember that it's not set in stone! Your career objective will no doubt change over time, so approach writing it with a sense of humor, and see what comes out. If you're really stuck, just write down the first thing that comes to your mind. If this doesn't capture what you're about, cross it out and write the next thing that comes to your mind on the next line. Keep writing until you have something that makes you smile, shout, or cry! You're looking for that "this is it!" moment. If it takes you a week or a month or all your study years to do it...no problem. It will be worth it to know what you feel called to do!

Lyndal has included her personal career objective below, and we've reprinted Amanda's tag line for easy reference, so you have an example.

#### Example Career Objective

by Lyndal Greenslade, Social Worker, Horizon Career Centre

My intention in all areas of my life is to commit to building connections with others that promote relationships of integrity. This approach to living and working enables me to join with others in a journey toward reaching our full potential as individuals and as a human collective.

#### Example Tagline

by Amanda Vos, Manager, Horizon Career Centre

"Assisting social workers to fulfill their potential"

This phase has been aimed at allowing you to connect with the "bigger picture" purpose of social work. Although social workers can do very different types of jobs in a multitude of different settings, we are united by why we do what we do. We need to build a deep relationship with the why of social work in order for us to create meaningful experiences that will allow us to feel nourished and purposeful as workers and as human beings.

In next edition's column, we will move on to Phase 3 of the "Creating YOUR Social Work Career" Framework, which is all about Creating Your Purpose. This is where you will use your newly gained insights to proactively develop career possibilities that will allow you to work with your strengths and purpose. We'll give you tips to research organizations that might fit with your purpose and suggest ways to reach out and get connected. Get ready for action!

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Editor's Note: This is the second in a 4-part series on creating YOUR social work career! I am delighted that Lyndal Greenslade and Amanda Vos of the Australian Association of Social Workers are sharing these ideas with readers of The New Social Worker. We will be discussing the first two articles in the series in a live online chat on July 27 at <http://www.socialworkchat.org>.