

Coming Home as a Social Worker

Contributed by Natasha K. Nalls, MSW

I entered an MSW program immediately following the completion of my Bachelor of Arts degree. I did not personally know any social workers, yet I had a vague, optimistic perception of why I was entering the social work profession. Although I was unsure of my long-term career aspirations, I was sure of one thing: I wanted to help people. More specifically, as a young African American woman, I wanted to use myself both personally and professionally to have a positive impact on the African American community. I wanted to be an agent of change. {mosgoogle right}

Throughout my academic social work training, I closely identified with the profession's core ideals, principles, and values. The ecosystems model especially stood out to me, as I believed that individuals could not be assessed in a vacuum, but rather as a direct product of their social environments. In terms of program planning and administration, I found myself captivated by my courses on program evaluation and grant writing. I knew that I was being introduced to the theoretical frameworks and concrete practicum experiences needed to fast track my career aspirations and really help people. Combined, my field experience and coursework gave me invaluable insight as to what I could expect once I entered the field as a professional social worker. I graduated on May 16, 2007, in New York, NY. By June 1, I had moved back home to Miami, FL, and was working on a per diem basis for a community-based mental health agency that served highly at-risk children. Shortly thereafter, I acquired a full-time position working with juvenile delinquents who were facing adult sanctions for felony law violations.

As I reflect on my past year as a recent post graduate and new practitioner, my immediate concerns reflect age-old debates that our profession and practitioners have confronted. These include the micro work versus macro change debate, case work and management versus clinical intervention, social workers' competency to be both line workers and agency leaders, and lastly, maintaining social work principles and values while working within host agencies and non-social service systems.

While these issues remain at the backdrop of my professional experiences, what continues to amaze me most is the experience of working within my own community. I am working at home. The background here is the fact that I had been "away" for some time. I had left Miami to attend college in Southern California. Following college, I moved to New York to obtain my MSW. Although I had spent most of my summers in Miami and visited home several times a year, returning home as both a professional and young adult was something totally different. Being a social worker afforded me a particular lens through which to understand and examine my community's problems. I believed this experience was exacerbated by the fact that I worked with the city's most vulnerable population—children who had come from some of the most difficult family circumstances imaginable. Moreover, Miami is a very special space in which to practice social work.

Like any other major urban metropolis, Miami is a space wrought with its share of social problems, including substantial crime and poverty rates, high HIV/AIDS incidence, and low high school graduation rates. Although Miami often conjures up images of palm trees and South Beach, the city is largely racially and culturally segregated, as well as economically and socially stratified. Miami's economic and social diversity aggravates its stratification, as haves and have-nots live within close proximity of each other, but in very separate worlds. In this way, the poorest of the city are highly exposed to the glitz, but have zero access.

Given this context for my work, I began to think about the idea of "community social work practice" and what the term meant. I began to reflect upon my co-workers' perspectives on clients and consider why I sometimes felt differently. What I also noticed was that most of my professional colleagues, and a majority of my co-workers, were transplants, or non-native Miamians who resided in various suburbs of the city. I concluded that this at least somewhat accounted for their experiences of clients and largely accounted for their "othering." Often, for example, even their verbal accounting of their work included language such as "these people" or an emphasized "they." I, on the other hand, often found myself saying "my kids."

Traditionally, community social work practice refers to an area of social work that focuses on macro social change via policy, legislative advocacy, and community planning, and organizing (Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocur, 2004). For me, however, community social work practice has come to mean this: the practice of working within a community, as a community member, for the betterment of the community in either a micro or macro capacity. The caveat here is that there is really little to no space between the professional helper and the client as we literally work, live, share community resources, and possibly socialize together to various extents.

For example, I ran into a client's mom at a local shopping plaza. On another occasion, during the family history portion of a psychosocial interview, I realized that I knew my client's family. The ramification here is that my professional work becomes a personal investment. In addition, incidences of vicarious traumatization are perhaps even more exacerbated, as there is a feeling of connectedness to the client's history and a concern about intervention outcomes. For example, when working with a 15-year-old juvenile offender who has committed an armed robbery, case planning is about more than decreasing his likelihood of recidivism. It is about giving the child the resources that would encourage productive citizenship, non-violence, and goal orientation. And perhaps most importantly, my work is about trying to ensure that this individual will not victimize anyone else in our community—especially me!

To expand upon this particular point, for example, I've thought about the term "criminal justice system" and how the system is not designed to rehabilitate, promote prosociality, or effectively deter recidivism. It seems to me that a prosocial and equitable criminal/legal system might be titled something such as "public safety." This title and the orientation that it connotes would reflect policy, procedure, and planning that aims to protect all community members and promote safety.

I reflectively conclude the following: there is no "Natasha" in community, and at the end of the day,

working within my community as a social worker has proved an invaluable experience, as I believe my work will reap benefits for us all. My job, then, is more than helping clients. It is helping my brother, my sister, my grandmother, and myself.

References

Hardcastle, D., Powers, P., & Wenocur, S. (2004). *Community practice: Theories and skills for social workers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Natasha K. Nalls, MSW, received her Master of Science in Social Work from Columbia University in May 2007. She holds a bachelor's degree in Spanish and Leadership Studies from Claremont McKenna College. At the time this article was written, Ms. Nalls worked at the Law Offices of the Public Defender in Miami, Florida. She currently works for the Alliance for Aging, Inc. in Miami, FL. She enjoys travel and academic scholarship. Her e-mail address is nn2144@caa.columbia.edu.