

INTRODUCTION: A PATH WELL TAKEN – REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL WORK IN OCCUPATIONAL SETTINGS

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“Work is the only thing which makes life endurable to me,” Charles Darwin wrote, noting that it was his “sole enjoyment in life” (Lehrer, 2010, p.40). While perhaps not everyone would be as enthusiastic on the topic, surely most of us would agree that work is a central life function, and so those who help others to prosper in the world of work are doing some pretty important “work” themselves. Such are the stories that constitute the experiences recorded in this special issue of *Reflections*, a journal which is aptly subtitled *Narratives of Professional Helping*. As the editor of this special issue has been known to say: If there is a good story to tell from practice, then find a way to tell it. To their great credit, the contributors to this issue have done just that, in a scholarly fashion, but personally and informally, and very much in their own words. And what remarkable stories they tell—individually and collectively—capturing the roles of innovative social work professionals who are embedded in the world of work as deeply as any foreign correspondent has ever been embedded with a battalion in combat. Appreciating that all good practice begins with service but likely moves toward collective action, the narrators here poignantly demonstrate that social workers are indeed socialized to understand the cause that is inherent in function (Lewis, 1976).

Beth Lewis’ opening account, “A Path Well Taken: Reflections on Social Work in Occupational Health,” distills her 30 years of experience as a member of multidisciplinary teams providing service and advocacy on behalf of workers who suffer from work-based illnesses and injuries. First at an Ivy League academic medical center, and then at a neighborhood occupational health clinic, Lewis captures the plight of many virtually invisible workers who suffer from industrial accidents:

psychological numbing from performance of dangerous and repetitive tasks that most of us would not want to perform and from the lasting (and often fatal) damage derivative from years of unprotected exposure to endemic hazards such as lead, silica, asbestosis, and organic solvents (Lewis, 1989). She sensitively explores the very complex ethical issues that frequently are present, along with the classic dilemma of which comes first— education, prevention, advocacy, or service—knowing, of course, that all will be required. The need to have command of a generalist practice perspective (which includes provision of case services, formation of mutual-aid groups, development of psycho-education seminars, collaboration with lawyers and unions, and the promotion of social action campaigns) may test a worker’s expertise and comfort zone. Not every professional social worker would see this as her preferred field of practice, but Beth Lewis embraces the opportunities inherent in the setting with a calm and measured enthusiasm which captures the reader’s respect and attention.

Emma Lucas-Darby continues discussion of the theme of social action as a core social work function. The importance of employment, especially for low-income clients of color, is central to the Pennsylvania-based urban renewal encounter she both chronicles and critiques in “Role Change: From Community Work to Activism.” A failed urban renewal experience in the neighborhood in the 1960s and 1970s, which displaced 800 residents, led to a forceful “never again” response from the community decades later. With the formation of a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA), community leaders advocated for a legally binding contract this time that would ensure alternative and affordable housing for those displaced. Most important, as Parks and Warren (2009) and Laing (2009) have

documented, were the written guarantees that community organizers and community leaders built-in to the CBA, which would ensure work force development, guaranteed entry into union apprenticeship training programs, and allocation of jobs with benefits and living wages. Lucas-Darby worries that these gains may not be sustained, and that these contractual promises may not even be kept. But from experience in New Haven and other cities, she concludes that community activism, supported by experienced community organizers, is the surest pathway to success for low-income communities that are coping with institutionalized oppression (Simmons & Luce, 2009).

Marilyn Moch takes us abroad as she shares her experience in Yugoslavia (now Croatia). "Control and Coherence in Service Delivery: The Yugoslav Experience" brings us inside a worker-managed workplace where self-management reversed decades of state centrism prior to World War II. Brigades, Workers' Councils, Business Committees, and Workers' Organizations (Unions) became the units of workplace authority, as decision-making at all workplaces devolved to the workers, while the managers managed. The Workers' Councils routinely hired social workers to carry out broad Employee Assistance Program (EAP) functions, not based on supervisory referral (as envisioned in Roman and Blum's (1988) "Core Technology"), but rather according to a "Comprehensive Services Program" self and peer-referral model (Kurzman, 1993) which conceptualizes EAP services as entitlements. The result of self-management, communal decision making, and worker control of the work environment (Rocha, 2009) produced a humanizing of the workplace, entirely concordant with social work values. Moch concludes with the powerful observation that controlling one's own work life is a necessary, but not sufficient step toward moving in harmony with social work principles.

Louise Simmons' entry entitled "Work and Economic Justice: Connections with Social Work" again underscores the appropriateness and necessity for activism in social work

practice. Her experiences as an activist, formerly in Wisconsin and currently in Connecticut, demonstrate the power of a social work perspective (Simmons, 1994). Her many roles—directing an urban internship program, serving as an elected member of the Hartford (CT) City Council, and participating in progressive social movements and labor-community coalitions—all vividly demonstrate the difference that a skilled community organizer can make in the political arena. Simmons' experience with a protracted strike in Hartford at Colt Firearms in the late 1980s gave her the opportunity to engage her CO students first-hand in an educational experience that no film or textbook could offer. Students witnessed the power derived from developing working partnerships, forging community-based alliances, and building coalitions with unions. Modeling professional behavior as their class instructor, Simmons demonstrated that an educator could be an activist (indeed, *needed* to be one) if an authentic pedagogy means that one has to "walk the walk" as well as "talk the talk." Her course, "Economic Justice, Labor, and Social Work," has become both one of the graduate school's preeminent electives, focused on social workers' obligations under the NASW Code of Ethics and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and a prominent primer for all students in her program on social workers' central role in promoting social and economic justice.

James Williams presents us with a wonderful narrative that reads like a log. "The Role of Labor in Transition to Social Worker" begins with statement that perhaps relatively few social workers could make: "I can't remember when unions weren't part of my life." Before pursuing his M.S.W. (and then Ph.D.), Williams was a rank-and-file member of the International Union of Electrical Workers, Newspaper Guild, United Steel Workers, National Education Association, West Virginia AFL-CIO, and Fraternal Order of Police. He traces his experiences, and the gradual evolution of his ideology, with great humility and candor. His commitment to the labor movement was instrumental in his interest in and transition to social work practice—and

now social work education—where he constantly shares his experiences, professional approaches, and belief in activism and collective representation with his students. In this splendid narrative, Williams' self-awareness, insight, and sensitivity come across with power and authenticity, and we see how blue-collar work and a focus on economic justice (Harding & Simmons, 2009) have shaped his commitment to his students and his profession.

Nan Van Den Bergh's timely entry underscores the value of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CIDS) for work populations that have experienced trauma. In "Debriefing 9/11 through Managed Care: Balancing Ethics and Empowerment with Profit," she speaks forthrightly to the dilemmas incurred by a social work consultant when a for-profit managed care provider contracts for her services. Reminding us of Bakalinsky's classic treatise "People vs. Profits" (1980), Van Den Bergh describes her quandaries with great insight and candor. Told that her CIDS model must conform to the more simplistic (spelled: cheaper) framework which the managed care provider had pre-approved, Van Den Bergh has to decide, for example, if groups of 80 (instead of 8), arranged on a casual drop-in basis (instead of by appointment), and conducted solely by a social worker (without customary collaboration with an occupational partner) represent an acceptable compromise, or a de facto violation of the standards for effective CIDS intervention. Such are the predicaments frequently present in nontraditional world of work settings, posing the core conceptual question: Whose agent are we? While many occupational social work practitioners and authors would argue that it is in fact possible—indeed fruitful—for professional social workers to practice in proprietary settings and under for-profit auspices (Akabas, 1983; Kurzman, 2000), Van Den Bergh vividly illustrates the struggle of a seasoned social worker facing daily real-life conundrums most of us would wish to avoid.

In tandem with the above entry comes Jennifer Shotlander's powerful first-hand commentary on the life of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) consultant. She

too struggles with ethical issues, and the complexity of practicing solo in non-human service settings in the labor-management arena. Her life as a consultant involves one-on-one counseling, management coaching, new employee orientation, lunchtime wellness workshops, consultation with union leaders, supervisory training, and support for a CIDS team which serves several settings. No two weeks ever look the same, but she shares one week very candidly with the reader. Like Nan Van Den Bergh above, Shotlander confronts struggles with observing confidentiality, maintaining appropriate professional boundaries, managing her own counter-transference, and adhering to the precepts of the social work profession and its Code of Ethics (2008). What is prohibited and what is permitted, she implies, are the relatively easy issues. For her, the hard issues involve reconciliation of management's goals, such as efficiency, productivity, and profit, with the norms and sub-dominant values of her profession, such as due process, pluralism, and social justice (Kurzman, 2009). We are left with frameworks for resolution but never with absolute answers, which seems entirely consistent with the practice reality.

Vorricia Harvey, Philip Hong, and Kweli Kwaza's commentary in "Shared Responsibilities: Challenges of Client Empowerment in Workforce Development" takes us inside a sector of practice rarely discussed, even in the occupational social work literature. Despite federal laws and funding, through programs such as the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999, and Job Creation and Worker Assistance Act of 2002, they discover that the placement of low-income, largely unskilled community members in the working world is problematic. Even in relatively good economic times (which we currently do *not* enjoy), meeting contract and funding expectations proves difficult to achieve. In such a situation, the authors movingly ask: How do social workers avoid the feeling that they are just "part of the poverty pimping game?" One is reminded of Bertha Capen Reynolds' observation (1975, p.10) that sometimes one needs to have "faith in the

capacity of ordinary people to do a better job for themselves than anyone outside their situation could do for them.” The authors conclude that they, as outsiders, need to engage not merely in skills training and remedial education, but also in initiating a client empowerment process that starts with hope and leads to self-sufficiency.

Sheila (Shelley) Akabas walks us through her experience as Director of The Workplace Center at Columbia University in implementing a contract to assist the New York City Fire Department with gender integration. More than any other uniformed service, fire departments are known as male enclaves; despite modest prior efforts by the FDNY, the New York City department proved no exception. Set in motion by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and a successful class action law suit in 1978, 42 women became NYC firefighters in 1982. Seeing strong systemic resistance and rapid attrition, the department turned to the well-known and respected Columbia Center in 1988 to advise and assist them with their efforts toward more successful gender integration, hence their compliance with the 1978 class action edict (Akabas, Grube, & Krauskopf, 1989). Using Kurt Lewin’s Field Theory and a Force Field Analysis (Brager & Holloway, 1992), Akabas and her colleagues pursued a sophisticated two-year plan of intervention. However, she candidly notes that in the end “We did all the ‘right’ things, but success eluded us.” There was frankly no way the consultants could foresee the unremitting bitterness, fury, and determined opposition of the firefighters (and their wives). The brotherhood marshaled and closed ranks, providing a closed system for which even Lewin’s sophisticated conceptual framework could not offer a path of resolution. Today, the FDNY has fewer women firefighters than in 1990, but this bittersweet process of engagement has in no way tempered the author’s steadfast commitment to action research, equal rights, and social justice.

Daniel Molloy’s paper entitled “Social Work at Sea” records astute observations from one social worker’s remarkable 30-year commitment to merchant seafarers and their

families. Initiating a Member Assistance Program (MAP) at the National Maritime Union in the late 1970s, Molloy crafted a MAP model that blended professional provisions with peer assistance (Molloy, 1989). The emphasis would be on claiming benefits (including veteran’s status), addressing alcoholism (on ship and shore), serving as an advocate for members within the maritime industry, and providing peer support for seamen who spend long and lonely periods away from family at sea. Recognizing the centrality of work in seafarers’ lives—despite its many hardships—Molloy envisioned the presence of a latent and inherent symbiosis that would support the melding of peer and professional intervention (Molloy, 1986). He conceptualized that the use of natural helping networks, embedded in the world of work, could effectively complement and supplement the activities of professional staff at the MAP. Enriched by vivid and effective examples from the author’s long and fruitful career, the reader readily concludes that members of the social work profession are extraordinarily well-suited for work in such a uniquely collaborative member assistance setting. Molloy illustrates that the goodness-of-fit, of which we so often speak, is present.

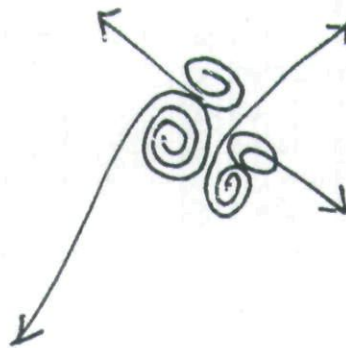
Finally, Mica Slavek-Lamothe’s “A Tale of Two Jobs: When the Body is the Workplace” stands up to its subtitle: “What This Social Worker Learned about Breastfeeding along the Way as a Working Mother.” The narrative chronicles the personal experience of a social work student who was also a breastfeeding mother, as she navigates bumps and moguls at her work setting. Despite the fact that she presents a very personal journal, Slavek-Lamothe makes the point that currently half of all workers today are women, and that they are not present at the workplace merely to fill in for men (like the fabled Rosie the Riveter during World War II). In the language of labor economics, women today have a permanent attachment to the labor force that is no different than for men. The reality is that they overwhelmingly are (or plan to become) working mothers, and that many wish to have the opportunity to breastfeed both at home and at work. Under terms specified in The Patient Protection and

Affordable Care Act of 2010 (just signed into law on March 23 of this year), employers with 50 or more employees will be expected to adapt their workplaces to the legitimate (albeit unique) needs of workers who are also nursing mothers. Although this may be perceived by some as a women's issue, in one respect, it is a universal issue as well, since our entire society should be invested in maintaining a stable work force, personal privacy, gender equity, and healthy children. These very children, after all, are our next generation of workers.

I conclude with thoughts about the profound meaning of work, and the importance of this issue of *Reflections*. To its great credit, the journal has chosen to feature the subject of "work," and the participants in this endeavor have each made enduring and profound contributions. My good friend and colleague Shelley Akabas and I have written several books on the topic (Akabas, Kurzman, & Kolben, 1979; Akabas & Kurzman, 1982; Kurzman & Akabas, 1993; Akabas & Kurzman, 2005) and we have also committed a major portion of our work and careers to developing a better understanding the world of work arena. Too often overlooked, even by sophisticated scholars, work, workers, and work organizations are a pivot—not only for society but for the individuals within. I am reminded that Studs Terkel's famous book titled *Working* (1974) after all is knowingly subtitled: "People Talk about What They Do All Day, and How They Feel about What They Do." One would almost think that Studs was a social worker! In this moving book Terkel writes (xiii), "Work ... is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality too is part of the quest." Dominique Browning, a magazine editor, recently wrote of the closing of the publication for which she had worked for 12 years (2010, p.26): "Work had become the scaffolding of my life," she opined. "It was what I counted on. It held up the floor of my moods, kept the facade intact. I always worried that if I didn't have work, I would sink into abject torpor ... With the closing

of the magazine, my beloved family of colleagues was obliterated. And so was the structure of my life." How could one possibly say it better?

I am therefore deeply grateful to Michael Dover and to the publishers of *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* for their commitment to the theme of this issue. Understanding "Work and the Workplace" is what it's all about, and how could any subject be more important at this moment in history? I feel grateful to have been asked to write this Introduction, and I want the contributors to know that Michael, the publishers, and I are all in your debt.



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