



Constructing "the Self of the Profession"

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I affirm that my true self is spirit, is not contained within the limits of my body, had no beginning, will never end. This thing that I am is a subtle thing, underlying my ego and my sense of personal self. It is of such dimension that I must constantly strive to understand it.

I center in the Creator, become detached from my personal ego. I observe my ego as a person apart, with understanding but with control.

I see that I never was what I truly am.

-Native American Indian Meditation

What do I mean by the phrase "constructing the self of the profession?" I believe the self is found at the center of mind and body, of known and unknown and of mental life and behavior. The self is the conduit to our focused attention as used in therapy. In essence, it is the idea of observing oneself being. (Elliott, 1999) Self as a word is easily defined as the identity, character, or essential qualities of any person or thing. Profession is defined as a vocation or occupation requiring advanced education and training which also involves intellectual skills.

This paper is a narrative briefly outlining my journey to finding my true self and the process I have begun in constructing the self of the profession. Attention will be given to the values outlined in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, and an examination of related professional literature will be included. The concepts presented herein will be defined and highlighted according to a constructivist perspective.

I would first suggest that, as a humanist, I bring myself to the profession. Even before I arrived at the profession of social work, I began developing a professional identity through the intentional observation of my own being (Bollas, 1992 as cited in Elliott, 1999). Second, as a social worker, if I do not construct a self for use in the profession I will be of little or limited value to my clients. Therefore, the self of the profession is my observation of my own identity, character, and essential qualities used in the practice of social work. Similarly, one of my essential qualities is the spirit of my true self.

As a social work theory, constructivism holds that people do not discover reality; they instead use language to construct a conception of reality through social interaction (Goolishian & Winderman, 1988 as cited in Greene, 1996). The events of September 11 were very real to the citizens of New York, all Americans, and people across the globe. I suspect a lot of people imagined the families who turned into victims of this tragedy on September 11th. Those people who imagined the families as victims likely were affected by thoughts of sudden violent death occurring in their own families. Perhaps as social workers we imagined ourselves on the scene providing crisis intervention or planning long-term counseling for families affected by such a massive tragedy. According to Madelyn Miller, NASW Chair of the NYC Disaster Trauma Working Group, social workers were committed to helping on some level, almost as if compelled. It is seemingly instinctive for those in this profession to want to find a way to respond using our own perspective, skills, and conceptualizations (O'Neill, 2001). For me, the imagining closely paralleled a personal reality since I am married to a firefighter. This imagining construct could become reality if tragedy waves its hand in my direction and my husband does not come home.

The spirit of my true self is what has guided me for the past four years both personally and intellectually. I believe that as I enter the professional world of social work, the spirit of my true self will guide me in professional practice with clients. I believe it is the spirit of the true self in all of us that has given us strength to carry on in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. I consider myself a student of human nature and human affairs. Natural curiosity about people is part of being a humanist. This curiosity will allow me to practice the perpetual role of student, learning from and about others. My passion for social work is more than a desire to help people. I want to learn from them and, in the reciprocal nature of our encounter, perhaps they will learn from me and we will be enriched as humans because of our efforts.

I was not always a humanist. For a period of time I was a materialist. Regretfully, I was preoccupied with the accumulation of material wealth and goods. I shopped because I was attempting to console a lost spirit and satisfy a need for companionship. Although I practiced an established religion and had many friends, I felt lost and was terribly unhappy. Materialism gave me a short respite from my personal anguish. Eventually, I realized I was only serving myself.

I did not consider who I was as an individual until anger and unhappiness seemed to take over my life. As I examined my life through hypnotherapy, I realized I spent much of my early 20's

first trying to be like my mother and then trying to be like my ex-husband. Anger erupted when I failed to succeed in either effort. As I took control of my life, I succeeded in constructing and finding a self for my spirit and my profession. Since I know my true self is spirit I can effectively use this self in the profession of social work. It is a self that mirrors the core values of social work and is free of bias, fear, and guilt.

According to Greene et al. (1996) a person's reality and definition of self are socially constructed. A person's conception of reality is made up of the meanings given to their interpretation of the world (Goolishian & Winderman, 1988 as cited in Greene, 1996). A major aspect of the socially constructed reality is one's sense of self (Gergen, 1985 as cited in Greene, 1996). Moreover, the profession views social worker's use of self as an important element in successful clinical work. Social workers need a working alliance with clients. The working alliance has been found to demonstrate the interactive, relational aspect of the therapeutic exchange wherein the client's and therapist's personal and cultural characteristics come into play (Shonfeld-Ringel, 2001).

Part of the working alliance includes an effective use of self. According to Real (1990 as cited in Greene, 1996) the only behavior directly within the therapist's control is his or her own behavior, and the use of self is the only tool available to direct the behavior. Real (1990) also developed five stances for guiding therapeutic use of self, which deserve mentioning here: eliciting, probing, contextualizing, matching and amplifying. Therapists use the stances mentioned above with clients in the course of a therapeutic conversation. The goal of this conversation is not to impose reality as the therapist constructs it, but rather to facilitate the construction of a more effective reality for the client (Greene, 1996). Similarly, the therapist's self de-emphasizes therapeutic hierarchy or control and engages in the process of doing therapy with the client rather than to or for the client (Hoffman, 1988 as cited in Greene, 1996).

Family of origin and ethnicity are two naturally occurring elements that contribute to the social worker's use of self. Since the self of the client encounters the self of the therapist in the course of therapy, family of origin issues for both participants may likely converge as well (Greene, 1996). Consequently, potential risks exist whereby the therapist may unconsciously undermine client growth (Baldwin & Satir, 1987 as cited in Greene, 1996) or contribute to a client's decline (Lambert et al., 1977 as cited in Greene, 1996). As such, therapists must be aware of their own unresolved family of origin issues, which may cause them to reinforce clients' difficult behaviors

(Kramer, 1985; Meyer, 1987 both as cited in Greene, 1996). Effective therapists are attuned to their own family of origin issues and endeavor to keep them from interfering with the therapeutic relationship.

The ethnicity of the therapist also encounters the ethnicity of the client in the course of therapy. The challenge, therefore, is how to effectively use a self that is perhaps ethnically and culturally different from the client. Pinderhughes (1989 as cited in Greene, 1996) suggests that therapists need to be aware of and comfortable with their own ethnic and cultural identity. Pinderhughes (1989) further suggests that therapists must be aware of the development of their attitudes, feelings and perceptions towards other groups as a result of their own group's status.

The reactions therapists have towards their clients are shaped by their emotional lives and influenced by their values (Aponte, 1992). At some level it is possible that we see ourselves as our clients and can imagine the issues presented by our clients as they apply to us or as they might have been played out in our family of origin. Seeing ourselves as our clients is a likely reason why so many social workers may be drawn to specialties that deal with issues with which they themselves have personal experience. Yet the true self of the profession is aware of countertransference, guards against it and recognizes why the past is important. Aron (1996 as cited in Shonfeld-Ringel, 2001) sees countertransference as a necessary part of the working alliance with clients. It is not an occasional lapse that periodically requires investigation. Instead, the therapist as a person and his/her fluctuating affective experience in the therapeutic exchange is a major part of the method used as well as part of what is being investigated. A good understanding of the therapist's own past is important because he or she must recognize how clients have the potential to trigger us with past memories or unresolved issues.

I am drawn to social work with children because of the feeling of isolation so many children express feeling at home, school, and in the community. From a psychological or sociological viewpoint, isolation of the person is generally defined as being related to someone or something that is set apart. The state of being set apart may be voluntary or involuntary. I sense that, despite familial affiliation, there is a strong need for belonging which many children have trouble achieving. I am the first and only member of my family born in the United States and grew up an only child, which has given me a very personal perspective on feelings of childhood isolation. However, my true self is aware of the interpersonal material brought into the therapeutic relationship and is capable of normalizing my reactions during therapy (Patterson, 1998). As such, there may be

behaviors, feelings, and thoughts that emerge from my past when working with a child I perceive as isolated when in fact there is more for me to learn.

Social work is a profession with a set of core values that have been embraced by practitioners throughout its history. The core social work values include service, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, competence, and social justice (NASW Code of Ethics, 1999). I will address these values in conjunction with constructing the self of the profession.

The social worker draws upon knowledge, values, and skills both learned in educational efforts and inherent to the true self to provide service to people in need and to address social problems. Service to others is primary to self-serving interests. Efforts to challenge social injustice are carried out on behalf of vulnerable or oppressed groups and individuals. The true self may represent an ethnic minority and identify with the idea of social injustice. Respect for the inherent dignity and worth of the person is promoted through the belief in responsible self-determination. The true self recognizes that they may have limitations in carrying out this principle if they cannot reconcile their feelings about being non-judgmental. Accordingly, they cannot effectively advocate for these clients and recognize they should not attempt to do so. Knowledge of human relationships is integral to social work practice. The true self knows that this knowledge cannot be formulated in universities but comes from the living situations that are observed in encounters with people (Rein and White, 1981 as cited in Payne, 1997). Finally, social workers conduct themselves in a trustworthy manner and practice within their areas of competence. The self of the profession uses a unique identity, character, and essential qualities in daily social work practice. Demonstrating competence and the use of self facilitates client trust in the social worker.

As I reflect back on the journey to find my true self I realize that my ego occasionally takes me on a detour. I become confused about what is real and am willing to settle for a reality based only on feedback from my physical senses (Jampolsky, 1979). As my ego causes me to settle for this reality I become fearful and lose sight of the spirit of my true self. Eventually I let go of the fear and once again see my ego as a person apart from my true self.

I began this program in the fall of 1999 as a student at the beginning of another beginning's end. Shortly I will be ending this program with another new beginning. My path to social work was not developed out of a singular life experience or struggle. Rather, it has been and continues to be

a process of personal growth marked with significant milestones. A person's constructed reality is impacted by their family of origin, ethnicity, mental life and behavior. Knowing what your constructed reality is contributes to the social worker's use of self in the therapeutic dialogue. Our reactions to clients are shaped by our emotional lives and influenced by our values. As such, the self of the profession is on guard against the possibility of countertransference but also reminds us that the events of our own past are important to the process.

I did not know Elizabeth Brehler but I can sense her spirit around me as I memorialize my own process of growth. Apparently she was inspired by faith in a supernatural being which had the power to enable people to treat themselves and others with love and respect. It is likely that had Elizabeth gone on to practice social work she would have done so with a well-developed self of the profession. Moreover, she would certainly have found the spirit of her true self in the practice of social work. I believe that ultimately we all share a common spirit of inner peace comprised of love and respect and that is the only reality that truly matters.

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