Conflicts Within:

Personal Bias and the Professional Self

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Introduction:

Growing up our values and belief systems begin to develop essentially at birth. They form around our cultures, our family systems, social environments and our communities. Based on the positive and negative experience we have with all of these life factors, our beliefs and values are tested and tweaked to form who we are as individuals. By the time we begin our careers the ideal is that we know exactly who we are. That is the ideal anyway.

I choose social work as my career path for many reasons. The main reason was based on my personal experiences with discrimination and social injustice. I became a mom at a young age and was wrongfully judged for this. I was treated like less than a person when asking for help. They made me feel embarrassed and ashamed. I began to question whether I deserved to be helped. No one should have to go through this, no matter what mistakes they may have made.

I wanted to be a positive resource, a professional who treated all clients with the respect and dignity they deserve. According to the National Association of Social Worker’s (NASW) Code of Ethics (1999), Social Workers “…strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty and other forms of social injustice.” I take great pride in being a social worker. It is a privilege to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves and empower those who have been oppressed. During my undergraduate studies my professors taught, as well as instilled in me, the values of respect, empathy, equality and the power of knowledge.
Once I began my undergraduate studies I realized that social work in the classroom is a totally different experience from practicing social work in the community. In the classroom we would discuss real problems that affected real people however the answers seemed so simple and obvious. While working with clients at my field placement, I began to see how complex their problems really were. They faced many obstacles while trying to overcome their problems. Some of the obstacles were from a lack of community resources, while others were barriers clients built up within themselves from years of oppression. The problems were not so obviously solved as they had appeared in the classroom.

I have dealt with many difficult situations and had the pleasure of learning about and working with many different ethnic and cultural clients since beginning my social work career. Out of everything that I have learned through school and in my career, the most challenging work I have had to do, so far, has been on myself.

Self Awareness:

There is a lot of focus on the importance of self awareness in the social work profession. To be able to effectively help clients, we need to be aware of our own experience, values and biases. Without this knowledge, we risk damaging the relationship we have established with our clientele. There are different levels of self awareness, each representing deeper understanding. First there is what is called simple conscious awareness, which is being aware of one’s present surroundings and how we feel or perceive them. The second awareness is being able to take a step back to observe and critique these feelings and perceptions of our present surroundings. This is called reflective awareness. The last form is reflexive awareness. This is acknowledging that
our past life experiences influence how we interact with people in the present (Kondrat, 1999). Our histories have made us who we are. Every experience we go through, the good, bad and the ugly, has formed our beliefs and values. From our life experience, biases towards certain populations develop. Sometimes we do not become aware of our bias until after we have begun our work with the population. This is why self awareness is a life-long process. It is crucial to be aware of our biases for our own health and healing as well as for that of our clients.

Conflict begins

Shortly after graduating with my BSW, I accepted a social work position in the child protection field in Juneau, Alaska. I chose Alaska for a new experience, professional growth, and partly because my mother lives there. I never had much of a relationship with my mom when I was growing up. She left my brother and me with our father when I was 4 ½ years old. She visited only sporadically after that. It was extremely hard growing up without my mother, especially when I became a teenager. We had a strong attachment to our mother, which made her leaving tremendously hard on us.

Having a strong attachment with a primary caregiver helps children build identity and trust in themselves as well as with others. So what happens when that attachment is severed? Separation of a child from the primary caregiver is devastating. It can cause the child’s world, as he or she knows it, to crumble and everything to lose meaning. Children can become very depressed and lose hope and trust in people (Fahlberg, 1991). “Children’s relationships with their parents are crucial to their development and sense of well-being and influence their later personal relationships (Andersson, 2005, p. 43).”
When my brother and I were growing up, our father told us many horrible things about our mother. He tried very hard to make us hate her. I found that, no matter how angry and upset you get with someone you love, that love never goes away. I chose to ignore everything my father would say. However my brother sat and listened, soaking it all in like a sponge. As a result, he became angry and the anger consumed him. His whole identity changed. I went through all the emotions, from loving and missing my mom, to being angry and hating her too. As I grew up I decided that what was in the past was done and that it was time to make a fresh start. I decided to forgive my mother and I was ready to start a relationship with her as an adult. This does not mean that I dealt with my loss and abandonment problems. I never confronted my mom about it, so that we could heal together. Instead I did what many people do: I suppressed my feelings and acted as though nothing was wrong. After some time, I believed that nothing was wrong and felt that I had worked through any possible problems and was ready to begin my career, bias free.

My new social work position consisted of working with children who had been abused, neglected and essentially abandoned by their parents. Working in this field of child protection was an emotional rollercoaster for me. According to Fahlberg (1991), when working in child protection, removing a child from a parent can stir up unresolved losses or separation issues that the worker may never have dealt with. When I accepted the position, I knew that it was going to be challenging; however it opened my eyes to a whole different world. A world I was essentially oblivious to as an adult.

As of September 2001, over half a million children in the United States resided in the foster care system (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). When children are removed from their
families and placed into the foster care system, they often go through feelings of guilt, loss and anxiety. Having and maintaining attachments to their primary caregiver (usually the mother) is something children in foster care struggle with (Fahlberg, 1991). Many of these feelings are the same as when a child loses a parent through divorce or even death.

It is one thing to discuss child abuse and neglect in a classroom or hear about it on television. It is a totally different experience seeing it first hand. For the first three or four months that I worked for the agency, I was an emotional basket case. Everyday I would close my office door and cry. I started to think I had made a horrible mistake. “What was I thinking making such a drastic move?” I wanted to run home as fast as I could, but I had to stop myself and commit to giving it a chance. I told myself that I was exactly where I was supposed to be at that moment in my life. My grandmother once told me that God never gives us more then we can handle. I felt I was truly going to put that to the test.

Early on I began having difficulties with this population. I loved spending time with the children. It was truly amazing how resilient the children were when going through such a traumatic event. At first I was surprised how much the children loved their parents and wanted to return to them. I had forgotten how strong that parent child bond can be. However I found it hard to work with the parents. Even though I knew how important these relationships were, inside I was struggling with anger and disgust towards these parents. I was surprised at how many of the parents had abandoned their children for various reasons and then would come back, sometimes years later, expecting to get their children back. I found myself rooting for the parent’s rights to be terminated. I felt horrible for thinking this way. “Birth parents deserve to be considered as unique
individuals, products of differing backgrounds, cultures, interests, and values (Fahlberg, 1991, p.237).”

As a social worker, I had an ethical responsibility to promote the well-being of my clients, the parents. I did not know the circumstances behind their actions or take into consideration the problems they were facing. They deserved to be treated with respect and dignity, no matter how they acted, just as I did when I looked for help as a teen mother. At that moment, I had forgotten why I went into social work. My job was to help these parents with whatever their needs were, not hinder their progress (NASW Code of Ethics, 1999). My job was to work with these parents, help them make the changes necessary so they could get their children back. I was not doing any of this, and it was wrong. In cases when they could not have their children back, my job was to try to keep some form of connection open and help them grieve their loss. No matter how poorly children are treated by their parents, the children always love them. I realized, working with this population, that the more contact with the birth family the child could have, the easier it was for them to grieve and move forward with the transition. These were all things that I knew, but I was unwilling to pay any attention to them.

I could not help how I was feeling, and it was becoming unhealthy, for my clients, and for me. Emotionally, I was bringing my work home and it was affecting my family. At this point I realized I had built a bias towards the parents who were my clients. I was not giving them a chance to speak or explain their case before I started judging them. In most cases, there were many other factors contributing to the problems of these families. Among other things, Alaska is number one in alcoholism and child sexual abuse. Many of these parents had been abused in some fashion when they were children. It has been
an unfortunately vicious cycle among child abuse victims. A lot of parents on my caseload also had substance abuse or mental health problems, sometimes both.

I knew that I needed to take a step back and evaluate myself. Something was going on with me: I was taking these cases personally, something I had never done with any other population I had worked with. My thoughts drifted to a prayer often used in substance abuse recovery, the serenity prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference” (Covington, 1994, p.114). I had to come to terms with my true reason for having trouble serving these parents. My work with them was bringing back all the emotions I felt when my mother left us: pain, anger and confusion, feelings that I never truly addressed. I cannot change the fact that our mother left us and barely visited throughout our lives. But what I can change is how I continue to handle it now. It was time to face these problems head on, and work through them. According to Worden (2002), “looking at one’s own grief will help the counselor or therapist know his or her limitations with respect to the kinds of clients and the kinds of grief situations that one is able to deal with (p175).” This is truly an emotional and draining process for anyone and a task that I was not looking forward to confronting. The positives of going through with this process outweighed any negatives I could think of. I would be able to lift a life-long burden I had been concealing and truly be able to build a relationship with my mother without any resentment. I was also hopeful that I would be able to prevent myself from burning out on my job and be able to work with these parents in a beneficial manner.

I bought myself a journal and began to write down all the details I could remember from the first moment my mother left, including how I felt and what I was
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thinking. I was so young and yet I remember so many specific details from clothing to facial expressions. It is remarkable how much you can remember about an event in your life when it leaves such a traumatic impression. Growing up, I was never able to grieve the loss of my mother. I went through a delayed grief reaction. Delayed grief describes the situation when a person suffers a loss, but does not fully grieve at the time of the loss. At a later date, an event, sometimes another loss, can trigger all the feelings that were lacking during the first loss. This can occur years later (Worden, 2002). When I started working with these children who had been abandoned, all the feelings of loss that I did not let myself experience growing up came rushing back. I had to postpone my grief so that I could be strong for my brother and my father. During my career in child protection I often saw this happen, usually with the oldest female child. They became the parent, taking care of and protecting their siblings from the pain of their separation, and often not taking care of themselves and their own grief.

According to Worden (2002), “One mediator that frequently is associated with delayed grief reactions is the lack of social support at the time of the loss” (p. 91). My brother had such a hard time around our mother leaving. It changed his whole spirit. To this day he has never recovered and has isolated himself from the family. My father was not a person who liked showing emotions, and it was taboo to even bring them up. After time went by, it never felt like the right time to grieve, so I buried it. It was easy when we rarely heard from our mom.

I went to visit my maternal grandmother to ask questions and gather more information. I wanted to make sure that I had all of my thoughts together before I brought up anything with my mother. I was afraid that she would get upset and say I was
“dwelling” on the past. After 20 years of never addressing it, I felt that I did not have the right to bring this up. To this day, my grandmother tears up when she talks about my mother and how “painful” it was for her to give us up. I usually have to sit through the same thing my father would put us through, negative statements about how horrible the opposite parent was. It is a process with which I have become far too familiar. I often have felt that our grandmother and father took joy in my brother’s and my pain. Our grandmother and father did this to us in different ways. Our father had so much anger built up, he was miserable, and, as the saying goes, misery loves company. With our grandmother it was more of a co-dependent relationship. She liked the idea of being needed to provide love and comfort in a twisted kind of way. As soon as we would begin to cry she would swoop in like a super hero and save us.

I remember one time we were on our way to a Christmas party at an aunt’s house. We were parked out front and, before she would let us out of the car, she began talking about our mother and how it was our father’s fault that she was not with us. As soon as we were both crying hysterically, she made us get out of the car and go into the house. When people saw us, they immediately went to our grandmother and asked her what was wrong. I remember watching as she sucked up the attention and told everyone how upset we were that we could not see our mother, because our father would not let us. As a child I was embarrassed going to family functions and having family members talk about me as if I were not there. Many times, I felt like someone’s misfit toy, on display for the world to stare and point at. I often imagine it is like this for the children in foster care. In some ways they are put on display for everyone in the community to be seen and pointed at, with people talking about their parents, sometimes blatantly, in front of them. I do not
understand why, as adults we have this misconception that children do not know or understand what we are talking about. They soak everything in and understand a lot more than we give them credit for.

Surprisingly, my visit with my grandmother went fairly well. She did not make any negative comments about my father. We talked about my mom and looked through old photographs of my brother and me when we were growing up. I found a photo of me on the phone when I was roughly five years old. My facial expression was painful to look at. The little girl in the photo was so sad, tears in her eyes and a frown on her face. When I took the photo out of the album and turned it over, it said, *Kelly talking to her mother, Christmas Eve.* My grandmother reminded me that my mom had made a video tape of herself when I was 12 years old. Of course my grandma had saved this tape, which I could not remember watching. On the tape, my mother tried to explain why she left us and how sorry she was. She could barely talk through all the tears but she made one statement that stuck out to me. She stated, “I hope someday that you will be able to forgive me.”

I realized my mother had never finished grieving the loss of her children or the guilt for her choices. I took some time off from work and flew from Juneau up to Anchorage to visit my mother. I was nauseated. How do I bring up such an emotional topic to someone who essentially has been a stranger my whole life? I brought up the trouble I had been having at work. I could tell that my mother knew where the conversation was going. Her eyes filled with tears and the rest of the conversation turned into an emotional release that was long over due. I hate to cry. I always have felt embarrassed by it, but that night I cried like I was crying to make up for 20 years that I
missed out on. It was the beginning of a real relationship with my mother not the artificial one we pretended was perfect.

This struggle with my personal bias opened my eyes to how important it is to take care of ourselves in both our professional and personal lives. Sometimes the two can become so intertwined that we have a hard time separating them, which, as my experience hopefully showed, can cause major problems in all areas of our lives, including physical and emotional health and wellbeing. I learned from my mother that everyone makes mistakes in life. It is part of being human. It’s not the mistakes that we should focus on. It’s what we can overcome and accomplish after we make these mistakes. So as I went back to work that following week I chose to be the social worker that focused, not on the mistake my client made, but on how I could help them work through and overcome it. Working with these families has now become my passion. Without the negative experiences I went through growing up, and the healing process I am working through with my mother, the compassion I have for these families may have never evolved.
References


