



**Elizabeth N. Brehler Scholars Program 2009**

**Dissonance between feminist and social work values:  
A personal exploration of anger**

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My first MSW degree placement appeared to have all the qualities of a perfect position. It had everything I was looking for: a focus on human rights and opportunities to learn about program development, policy and community organizing. I moved through my first project with ease and felt competent in the application of knowledge I had learned. When it came time to determine my second project, my enthusiasm turned into ambivalence. My ambivalence stemmed from the realization that I was being confronted by a serious conflict between my personal and professional values.

This conflict occurred during a meeting with my MSW field instructor, the identified individual who links the course content to field application; and the Policy Director, the person who would oversee my tasks on a project related to policy and community organizing. The conversation started with a discussion about my previous experience and what I wanted to gain through the placement. I expressed a strong desire to receive a project that was related to women's issues where I would gain policy skills. The Policy Director sat quietly for a moment, with her eyes visually darting from side-to-side trying to pull a project idea from her memory, "Well, nothing is really going on at the state level with any women's issues right now, but there is a policy project working with mothers. How does that sound?" From this description, it sounded like it was related to women's issues. I wondered to myself, "If I am going to be working with mothers, the people in society who have experienced what our culture terms the defining moment of womanhood, how could it not be a women's issue?" I probed the Policy Director for more information. She described the project as one that would be working in the state capital with a group of mothers whose sons had been placed on the public sex offender registry. This group of mothers was advocating for legislative changes to the policy governing the required registration of sex offenders. Immediately, I understood the complexity of the

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moment. I was drawn to the project for the opportunity to be involved with state policy initiatives; however, I realized that in working with sex offenders my personal values were being called into question. I was experiencing a discord between my feminist values of equality and a woman's right to live free of fear and oppression, and the social work values of service and dignity and worth of the person. I was being called to advocate on behalf of those whom I judged to be the ultimate perpetrators of fear and oppression upon women – sex offenders. I did not know it at the time, but this clash of values would send me on path of discovery, growth and self-awareness.

Somewhere during the early latency phase of my childhood, I began to recognize the difference in the way men and women's social roles were defined in my family. As the youngest child and only girl with three older brothers, it became apparent to me at a young age that I was not allowed to do "what the boys did". My family held traditional roles for women; these roles lead most women in my family to set goals only related to domesticity. Women were expected to marry and have children, and there was a clear expectation that they were to remain in the home to raise their children. This left little room for a career or individual goals that women wanted outside of the home. Along with the traditional roles came the stereotypical beliefs that women were the weaker sex and men were expected to be the decision-makers for their family. The implicit and explicit messages that I received underscored the view that women were limited in their capacity to achieve and succeed beyond their domesticity; they were judged based on their gender, not for their abilities.

As I became more cognizant of the status of women in my family, I developed a sense of overwhelming frustration and anger. Throughout my adolescent and teenage years, this anger intensified as I immersed myself in feminist readings. I felt a strong sense of injustice and

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inequality for what was being done to me, to all the women before me, and to all the young girls coming into my family after me. This anger, fueled by a sense of injustice, is what led me to the profession of social work; I wanted to make changes in the quality of life for girls and women. Mueller & Whittaker Leidig (1976) note that throughout the women's movement the expression of anger was prevalent and used as a motivator for prosocial change to help overcome women's sense of powerlessness (see also Cox, et al., 2004). Consciousness-raising groups excavated the sources of women's anger, which included: women's reliance on men for economic stability, women's experiences of objectification and social put-downs which judged women based solely on their gender, and the physical disparity that exists between the sexes that makes women fear for their physical and sexual safety. Gradually, I began to realize that the target of my anger were those policies or entities that systematically placed women in positions of powerlessness and contributed to unjust treatment and further fueled women's abuse and fear. In my mind, sex offenders embodied this notion.

My experiences in the field at two domestic violence and sexual assault shelters speak to the sources of my anger. The women I served lived in constant fear of their perpetrators. Stories of severe abuse reinforced my beliefs that men who abuse and objectify women represented society's subjugation of women by men. These men emotionally, physically and sexually control women. These stories greatly impacted my beliefs regarding perpetrators and offenders. I directed my anger towards these men and at the extreme end of my reproach was the sex offender. Sex offenders encompassed all of these control tactics. I blamed them for the fear that I, and most women, live under. My dislike for this group carried into my MSW field education placement questionnaire, where I noted that I would not take a placement working with sex offenders. At the time, based on the views that I had internalized from my experience with

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domestic violence and sexual assault survivors, I felt it was appropriate for me to withdraw from any contact with or to provide assistance to this group. In essence, I did not want to service this population.

“So, do you want to work on this project?” the Policy Director asked me. I sat at the table pondering the opportunity. At the time, my intuition told me to turn down the project; however, I knew it would be critical for my career to have the policy experience. I masked my poignancy and disappointment and accepted the project. I immediately began to experience the internal conflict that arises between contending values. Glassman (1992) suggests that feminist social workers experience conflicts between their personal values as feminists and the ethics and values of the social work profession. On one hand, I strongly believed in the feminist value of upholding a woman’s right to live without fear of abuse or assault such as the one that some women have faced at the hands of sex offenders. On the other hand, I also felt a sense of commitment to the social work values of: providing service to those in need, service to others above self-interest, as well as upholding the inherent dignity and worth of every human being. However, I would soon come to find out that this was only one aspect of a more complex situation.

The first meeting I attended for the project occurred very quickly after my acceptance. The goal of the meeting was to discuss the advocacy strategies the group had been using in the most recent campaign to remove juveniles and young men from the sex offender registry. I listened to the strategies they had used, intertwined with their personal stories with the judicial system and the consequences the offenders and their families had experienced from public registration. Many of the group’s members shared their son’s stories: the event that caused them to be on the registry, their court cases and their experiences as publicly registered sex offenders.

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These young men would be placed on the registry for 25 years for crimes that, although not excusable, did not appear to be equitable for a mistake they made prior to adulthood. A similar anger from my past ignited when I heard the stories of injustice these families were experiencing. What impacted me most was the multitude of stigmatizing experiences these young men had faced. Many of them had been called names such as “monster” or “predator”; furthermore, they had been shunned by some of their peers and their community. As they told these stories, I reflected on times when I had thought of similar names for perpetrators and offenders. I did not fully realize the pain that these dehumanizing words can cause for them and their families.

The descriptive terms I used to dehumanize sex offenders appeared to stem from the anger I felt growing up, which was rooted in my view of how women were perceived within my family and by society at large. Anger, as described by Fitzgibbons (1986) is, “a strong feeling of displeasure and antagonism aroused by a sense of injury or wrong,” and is a general human response when an individual’s needs go unmet. My family denied my need to be treated equitably when they set limitations around goals I wanted to set for my life. These experiences contributed to the onset and maintenance of my anger that I directed towards any perpetrator of injustice upon women, including sex offenders. Beck (1999) furthers the discussion on anger by noting that when one feels angry one establishes a cognitive us-versus-them dichotomy in order to blame someone for the wrong-doing. Upon further introspection, I began to realize that, in my thinking, sex offenders were the ultimate offenders of women – they were the “enemy”. By using stigmatizing and name-calling tactics, whether conscious or unconscious, I blamed and labeled them in derogatory terms. Once the label had been placed I began to perceive these individuals as inherently bad and I judged them only for their criminal actions (Meier & Robinson, 2004). In retrospect, I realize that I had stripped them of any inherent worth or dignity. Beck (1999)

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suggests that, “the more extreme the undesirable derogatory adjectives, the less human the out-grouper appears and the easier it is to aggress against him or her with impunity” (p.154). Out of my anger, fueled by the belief that the value of equality had been stripped from me, I used the sex offender as the object of my hostility. I consciously labeled them and held them in the category of “undesirable” human beings.

I gradually began to realize that if I was to overcome the anger and hostility I held for sex offenders and truly uphold the ethical values of social work practice, I would need to change the derogatory and pejorative labels and views with which I framed the total personhood of these individuals. I would need to see the individual in a different light, a more balanced and realistic perspective. In my field placement, I found myself challenging old beliefs about sex offenders. Although not condoning their behavior or offense, and maintaining a strong sense of empathy for their victims, I tried to adopt a wider perspective that would allow me to appreciate their human worth, and in some cases, understand their own history of victimization. My experiences at the domestic violence and sexual assault shelters provided a side of the issue that spoke to my personal experiences of being a woman and the fear in which I lived. This placement provided the offender side of the issue, which spoke to my passion to eradicate social injustices and provided the opportunity to do an in-depth evaluation and reframing of the narrow and disparaging views I held for sex offenders. I came face-to-face with a conflict between the social work value of upholding the dignity and worth of the person and my judgmental thoughts and behaviors.

When we attach negative and derogatory labels to individuals, it makes it easier to deem them unworthy and to disregard them. The NASW code of ethics compels social workers to respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person (National Association of Social Workers,

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1999). The conflict between my feminist and social work ethics hinged upon my inability to separate the intrinsic value of the individual from his or her behaviors. I was unable to see that regardless of the specific behavior (i.e. sex offenses that were committed) there is always a person that has the same dignity and worth as everyone else. I realized that both survivors and perpetrators of sexual offenses have been subjected to harmful and hurtful experiences. Severson (1994) writes that practitioners who work with offenders must have a different perception of their client, "It demands a rethinking of the concept of victim (p 452)", and even further, that all individuals, regardless of their behaviors, are worth the profession's skills and knowledge to improve their social functioning and quality of life.

The experiences of my upbringing and field placement revealed to me the limitations that we place on ourselves and others when judgments are made based on one aspect of our beings. Through my upbringing I was judged solely based on my gender and not on the possibilities of what I would achieve based on my abilities and character. Yet, I recognized that I had become judgmental. I internalized this judgmental behavior that I had experienced within my family and used it to blame and dehumanize sex offenders, the object of my anger based on the limitations placed upon me. As a professional bound by the code of ethics, I realized that what I had done was wrong and that I needed to express my anger in healthier ways.

Ultimately, my field placement experience forced me to: confront my biases and prejudices, be less judgmental and become more congruent with social work values. I had also become judgmental of my family. I realized that my family did not intend to harm me personally by imposing traditional gender roles upon me. They were simply reliving and recreating generational scenarios and rules that informed them as to how men and women should be and what paths in lives they should pursue. They had replicated historical societal structures that

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perpetuated men's domination of women and shaped their perceptions of the role of women. As hurtful and limiting as these perspectives were, I was able to recognize that my family did not intend to harm me.

I know that anger has both healthy and unhealthy expressions; unhealthy anger can be used to dehumanize, devalue and attack individuals or groups of people. Healthy anger can be used prosocially to overcome and advocate for change, such as in the women's movement or on behalf of those who suffer injustice (Ellis & Tafrate, 1997; Glassman, 1992). Moving forward, I understand that healthy anger can be harnessed as a motivator for change, while unhealthy anger can fuel judgmental attitudes that in turn obfuscate personal and professional values. I can use forgiveness to overcome my feelings towards my family and to forgive myself for making the judgmental mistakes in the past. I truly understand what it means to value the dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their behaviors. Confronting the dilemma between my feminist and social work values allowed me to resolve longstanding feelings of anger. This process compelled me to examine, evaluate and re-construct my judgmental beliefs and as a result I have become more conscious of my responses and reactions to the individuals I serve. I believe this journey has also allowed me to evolve into a more effective and competent social worker.

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