

THE SECRET STRENGTH OF SOCIAL WORK: STORY GATHERING

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This issue of *Advances in Social Work* continues the rich tapestry of conceptual and empirical work by a diversity of social work authors published in our journal issues. Dulmus and colleagues provide an intriguing exploration into how social workers view our mission. Taylor spotlights a sorely neglected population, involuntary clients, and the ethical and complex issues of providing social work services to them. Anderson and colleagues bring films into the classroom as an education enhancer and offer us a practical strategy for using films in many aspects of social work education. Wilkerson & Ouellette describe an innovative family-centered intervention for adolescents at risk. Bennett & Marshall tackle a very tough arena, adolescent sex offenders, and offer practical clinical tips for effective practice with this population. Finally, Hodge outlines the careful groundwork for a new measure of spirituality: the spirituality competence scale. Each article is distinctive and expands our knowledge of that area. Scholars and clinicians give us insights that can make us more knowledgeable providers.

In looking back on our previous powerful issues of *Advances*, I am struck by the range of serious work conducted to refine our profession's many areas of practice and advocacy. We have had a collection of top experts contemplate the future of social work (Spring 2005 issue), educators probe into aspects of educational assessment (Spring 2004 issue), and will have distinguished authors discuss theories of human behavior in the social environment (HBSE) in the Spring 2007 issue. We have had authors discuss the power of local community partnerships (Besel et.al., 2004), using different intervention strategies such as bibliotherapy (Vodde et.al., 2003), friendships (Furman et.al., 2003), and poetry (Furman et.al, 2002). We have had numerous social work education innovations discussed. An article I personally found highly intriguing was Besthorn & Saleebey's (2003) challenge to expand HBSE so we connect closer to nature. In short, my time as editor so far has been filled with fascinating manuscripts that inform about our profession and what we can do with and for clients.

Another hat I wear, besides editor, is educator. I teach BSW, MSW, PhD classes with a focus on practice skills development. Each class seeks to enrich their skills and confidence. I hammer on evidence-based practice, protocols, outcome assessments, and knowing what you are doing with clients. Students comply and get more and more confident as the semester progresses. I have great pride in my students as they enter the work force.

But I notice a skill that they have and yet this skill is not spotlighted. This skill isn't usually part of textbooks but is done in spite of all the training. This skill is *story gathering*. Many students come into my classes already respecting and prioritizing the stories of clients. They rationalize it as "building a relationship" or "assessing the problem" but I suspect social workers are natural story gatherers. I recognize that there are specialty areas called narrative inquiry (Frank, 1998) or narrative therapy (Kelley, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). I am not inferring that social work students comply

with any regimen or theoretical framework. It would be fascinating to teach more about these formalized approaches. I am simply saying that social work students excel as listeners and gatherers of the stories and struggles of clients and their families.

Of course, once they have gathered the stories, we encourage students to dissect, categorize, and link pieces to different action or treatment plans for intervention. The wholeness of the story and the power of the story within the client's life can sometimes be lost in our rush to put the client's issues into neat boxes (Frank, 1998). I wonder if we are removing or disguising an already existing skill.

This editorial does not have an action plan. The purpose of this editorial is to offer one editor/educator's suggestion. Perhaps we should acknowledge more that many social work students have a strength entering the program. We should be careful to nurture that strength. The story gatherers should be welcomed and not re-directed. Perhaps social workers, once they graduate, use this skill in many practice settings. I simply ask that this skill be given its due.

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