

HOW I LOST (AND GAINED) MY FAITH IN THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE THROUGH RESEARCH

Julie Cooper Altman, Ph.D., Adelphi University

As the author transitioned from practitioner to researcher, she found herself questioning everything that she had based her life's work on. She learned that doing social work was one thing; thinking about it and critically analyzing it through research was quite another. The following narrative is the story of how the author lost her faith in social work practice through researching it, and how she is now gaining it back in a different way.

It was during that wonderful, horrible, exciting, exhausting, motivating, enervating process of the Ph.D. dissertation that I lost my faith in social work practice.

As a social work practitioner for ten years prior to going back to graduate school, I was a believer in the process of social work like no other. Of course social work worked! Of course what I did made a difference in people's lives! There isn't a client out there that can't possibly be affected by good social work process. That's what I thought. Those are the assumptions that I lived. If there was a plaque given for true believers, I would have received it.

But as I transitioned from practitioner to researcher, I found myself questioning all that I had based my life's work on. Doing social work was one thing. Thinking about it and critically analyzing it through research was quite another. The story that I am about to tell is the story of how I lost my faith in social work practice through researching it, and how I am gaining it back.

This is primarily a story of change, like most social work stories. It is about how I changed my perceptions, expectations, assumptions, and, finally, beliefs about the practice of social work in people's lives as I changed roles from practitioner to researcher.

The Beginning

I had always been interested in human behavior and change, even as a little child, so it came as no surprise that I fairly effortlessly decided on a career in social work and pursued it with single-minded devotion. Going from college to one year of working in public child welfare to an 18-month M.S.W. program specializing in child welfare was relatively seamless. Upon graduating, I found stimulating, challenging positions in the field, first with juvenile delinquents, later in infant adoption, and then in foster care and family reunification with children zero to three.

It was only after having my first child that any thought of altering my career path entered my mind. Full-time direct service work in this often sad and tragic area was taking its toll. I had done too many depressing home visits, testified in too many TPR (termination of parental rights) hearings, seen too many children the victims of too many foster-home moves. I had even been to too many (one) funerals of little children who died as a result of maltreatment.

Given my increasing experience doing foster parent and worker training, it seemed logical to accept an offer I was given to teach some short courses at a local community college. Shortly thereafter, and concurrent with moving halfway across the country with my spouse's job change, I was offered an even greater opportunity to teach as an adjunct at

a school of social work. This was just the respite from direct service I had been looking for! This I could see myself doing for the next 20 or 30 years.

Academic life had a lot of appeal, but I knew to do it on a full-time basis would require a doctoral degree. After teaching for a semester or two, searching for and declining several offers of direct-service positions in child welfare, I finally made the decision to pursue a Ph.D.

After five long years of coursework, comprehensive examinations, proposing and re-proposing my dissertation research (during which I had babies number 2 and 3 and moved across the country again), I was ready to embark on my very first foray into the development of empirical knowledge. I was ready. More than ready.

The Researcher and The Doubts Emerge

I decided to study that which I was the very most curious and experienced about: the delivery of child welfare services to families with children zero to three. My dissertation work was qualitative in nature. I sought to better understand the process whereby prospective child welfare clients chose to engage (or not engage) in preventively oriented family support services.

At first, it felt great just to be talking to social work clients again—after a five year hiatus—even if in a research context. From the reflexive journal I kept during the entire dissertation project, I wrote early on:

It is probably the least awkward I've felt in the whole dissertation phase—surprisingly—but, after all, I know this best—sitting and talking to urban clients in their homes with kids 0 to 3...

It was over the first three or four months of data collection that growing questions about

the effectiveness of social work began to emerge. During my conversations with these phenomenally articulate and wise women, I heard how they had to be ready, able, and willing to accept services, or the services just wouldn't work. As we talked about their current decisions about whether to accept or decline the agency-initiated offer of service that I was interested in, they shared stories of times in their lives when they had been ready to change. They told me that when their investment in the services that were delivered was high, the payoff had been good. They shared stories where they had not been ready, willing, or able to engage in services. In these situations, nothing the worker did mattered. Change was not going to happen.

Changing Perceptions

As a good qualitative researcher, these early conversations didn't bother me too much. I wasn't ready to rush to any sort of judgement about "emerging themes." There had been only three or four participants so far.

Try as I might, however, their individual but consistent thoughts about client motivation and change stayed with me. Initially, my dawning lack of faith in the practice of social work masqueraded in what I thought were the early labor pains of role transition—going from direct service provider to researcher. After all, I had always had difficulty in making peace with personal—professional boundaries and the various roles I held in a community.

For example, it used to bother me a lot to be out doing home visits in high crime projects littered with cockroaches and stray cats, talking to young mothers in kitchens with nary ten items in the cupboard, then return home to my warm, safe, comfortable house, walk past my flower-box-decorated doorstep, and into a kitchen with enough provisions to feed a family of four for a month. I had likewise always felt guilty about having chosen to live in the suburbs, in effect

contributing to the deterioration of civic life and social capital in the city. I even wondered, many times, how dare I choose to overpopulate the globe with three children, wrestling with the competing responsibilities presented by my membership in the human race on earth and my selfish desires for motherhood.

So, for me, role conflict had always been a struggle. Maybe that's what was going on now. I was no longer a helper, I was a researcher. But how do I stop being a helper when I am sitting on the other side of the kitchen table with a client who looks and acts an awfully lot like the hundreds I had visited before?

Changing Expectations

The angst this dawning realization provoked was unbelievable. Was I just too far removed from practice? Were the assumptions I had made about the efficacy of social work practice simply pie in the sky? Was I having merely a crisis of confidence the longer I was out of my agency helper role? If this is what earning my Ph.D. was about, I wasn't sure I really wanted it.

One of the strategies I seemed to employ to deal with my ambivalent feelings about my changing role, and the accompanying hint of social work impotence, was to give myself a break! "Take it easy," I seemed to tell myself. "Don't feel so responsible for helping client research participants make life changes – that's not your job anymore...."

I altered the expectations I held about what my responsibility was to the client research participant to be more in line with the reality of the research context. I was no longer their helper; I was a learner. I was there to gain knowledge about how they made decisions about the agency-initiated offer of services. I was there to learn what they thought about that offer and the processes they went through as they decided how to respond to

it. Again, from my reflexive journal, some notes on how this was manifested:

...there is some comfort that these are my "subjects," not my "clients" and so instead of working to help them change their situation, I can instead just relate to them and hear their story – I feel rather "off the hook," yet still feel I am doing important work – just different.

And then, creeping into my consciousness about six months into my qualitative data collection, the crisis of confidence in the effectiveness of social work practice became more fully realized. More conversations with these women; more stories about how it was totally up to them whether change occurred or not. More stories about the impotent machinations of past social workers trying their best in vain to lead them to the waters of change, only to fail. More stories about how it's really about *their* readiness to change, *their* willingness to change, *their* being able at the time to positively involve themselves in a helping process. I note in my journal:

My sudden fear: maybe we really can't help others – only they can help themselves – what an impotent profession social work may really be...

Changing Assumptions

There it was – full blown. It wasn't just me changing hats – it was a true crack in the confidence I had in the faith that social work practice could work for everyone, at any time, no matter what. It had been a terribly blind assumption on my part – very naïve.

I was nearing the end of the data collection-analysis phase of my work, and it could not be denied. What those early research participants had been telling me emerged as a consistent and dominant theme

across all participants. Social work worked only when the clients were ready, willing and able to change. No amount of skill on the social worker's part, they said, made a difference. It was up to them – not the worker.

That basic equation made me depressed. I knew I had not always made progress with clients, but I assumed it was that I was not doing something right. Or that we just didn't know yet what worked with particular clients given their individual, unique circumstance or problem. I had never entertained the thought that clients were that much in control of the helping process.

I now had to assume some different principles regarding the nature of human behavior and change. I had to scale back the tremendous assumptions I had made about the power of social work practice. For some time, I wallowed in professional self-pity. I had been sold a bill of goods in graduate school! I had been indoctrinated to believe in the power of professional practice, only to be told, repeatedly, in the context of empirical knowledge production, that it had nothing at all to do with the worker side of the equation, only the client side.

Changing Beliefs

Reconciling these changing assumptions about the nature of social work practice was a slow process. It took many interviews to fully understand what clients were saying, and to change my beliefs accordingly. In this reflexive journal entry, the pain of losing my earlier faith in the effectiveness of our craft is apparent:

Still hard for me to believe that we have to let people suffer so – that we are impotent because that's just the way it has to be for the client – not because we don't have a more attractive "state of the art" treatment model – my problem, my belief, my training – hardest lesson learned here

– to realize the depth of my belief in the art and science of helping!!

Indeed, in this excerpt of my conversation with one of the last research participants in my dissertation study, M., you can see how reluctant I was to give up my earlier naïve faith. M. was a 28-year-old woman of color, whose two young children had been removed from her care due to neglect. M. admitted an addiction to cocaine and other substances that had lasted for years and significantly impaired her capacity to parent. She was considered an "ambivalent decliner" of the agency-initiated services that had been offered to her as part of this study. She talked to me at length, twice, over the kitchen table in her efficiency apartment:

Me: Well, I hope that I can make some sense of all this, what you have told me and other moms...about why some people choose to go ahead...and why some don't...I'm still curious about the difference.

M: Well, and you know, it's not... I dunno, sometime I just feel like maybe, it, it's just that some people let it be... kind of like... I'll be like, oh, what the hell... I'm never gonna change... nothin's gonna change... I'm just s'posed to be like this...

Me: Hmm...so it's a matter of your head...accepting or deciding, no I want things better than that; I can be better.

M: Right.

In that dialogue, M. tries to tell me, like so many others, that the client is in the driver's seat and that the mechanisms for moving forward with change are in the cognitive

realm. Changing the way one thinks about oneself can impact one's willingness to engage in services toward behavioral change. It is later in the interview that I concede how this is all very difficult to untangle, though my belief in the future efficacy of social work practice shines through:

Umm...it's like a mystery, it's sort of like a mystery, I keep thinking...sort of like maybe it's out there, like there's some key we can unlock for people if we just used the right combination, you know, if we just knew the right kind of things, you know...and I think, that's really what I want to hear from people who know, like you, like what happened, what, what about me or about the service made it work well...but I guess that's what I'm after...what, what's the combination. We want to be able to unlock it for people, and I don't know what...

Gaining Back the Faith

Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on one's self as a researcher. It is recognizing and understanding oneself as the "human instrument" in qualitative data collection and analysis. Through the process of reflexivity, one understands the way we not only *bring* ourselves to the field, but the way we also *create* ourselves in the field.

Reflexivity is often gained in qualitative research through keeping a reflexive journal, excerpts of which have been used throughout this manuscript. It can also be gained through peer debriefing, triangulating data sources, audit checks, and other qualitative research techniques designed to maintain the trustworthiness (validity) of the research process. In this case, reflexivity helped me change who I was and what I believed. It helped me gain back at least some of the earlier optimism and faith I had in the social

work helping process, but in a new and different way.

I have changed from a practitioner of social work to a researcher of social work practice in this process. Leaping from the world of practice into the world of building knowledge for practice has been a jolt, but I think I finally managed to land in a comfortable position. Changing the way I understood the helping encounter in social work, and the possible underlying ingredients of its effectiveness, helped me to grow into a more thoughtful, knowledgeable, competent social work educator and researcher. Indeed, I am slowly gaining back my faith in social work practice.

First of all, I realize that the products of the research enterprise should not be accepted uncritically. Just as I should not have bought into a universal unyielding belief in social work practice, I should not buy into this or any other particular product of research as "truth." Despite (or because of) what I learned in my research about client decision-making with respect to services, I am drawn to question further. Perhaps social work intervention with other kinds of clients, experiencing other kinds of social problems, is less dependent on client motivation to change. Perhaps we need to know more about how to enhance clients' views of their own functioning, or how to assess and/or impact their readiness to change. I have to believe these are all legitimate angles of social work inquiry; I have to believe we still have something very unique and efficacious to offer.

Second, and related, I understand more clearly now the need to regard all knowledge as tentative and context driven. While what I learned in my dissertation research should be respected and regarded as part of a growing knowledge base about social work practice, it does not have to be seen as a complete or lasting conclusion about the efficacy of social work intervention. I now see social work practice, and social work research, as an

iterative, concatenating process (as is, coincidentally, changing one's professional role). Building on what I learned through my dissertation research has led to many more exciting questions about the nature of human behavior and change. It has helped me understand and apply the work of past theoreticians (Ripple, 1964) and further appreciate the contributions of more current ones (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984) to the helping processes in child welfare practice (Altman, 2003; Altman, 2004).

I also realize that in a way I've perhaps begun to displace my faith in social work practice with, instead, a faith in social work research. I've grown from doing what I knew to be the best social work practice with vulnerable families day in and day out, to now doing the best social work research with vulnerable families in an effort to contribute to the knowledge base of social work practice as best I can. It's true that we don't know all the mysteries of effective social work practice, and maybe we never will. But now, instead of thinking we just can't make a difference in people's lives without their wanting us to do so, I believe we may just not yet know how to move them to want it.

References

- Altman, J.C. (2003). A qualitative examination of client participation in agency-initiated services. *Families in Society*, 84, 4, 471-479.
- Altman, J.C. (2004). *Engagement In Neighborhood-Based Child Welfare Services*. Final report presented to The New York Community Trust.
- Prochaska, J., & DiClemente, C. (1984). *The Transtheoretical Approach: Crossing Traditional Boundaries of Change*. Homewood, IL: Dow Jones / Irwin.
- Ripple, L. (1964). *Motivation, Capacity and Opportunity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Julie Cooper Altman, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at Adelphi University School of Social Work in Garden City, New York. Comments regarding this article can be sent to altman@adelphi.edu.

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.