

A BEGINNING PROFESSIONAL'S JOURNEY TOWARD UNDERSTANDING EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL WORK

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The following narrative is a discussion of the experiences of the author's ascent into the profession of social work shortly after the passage and implementation of civil rights legislation. The beginning experiences helped shape the social work philosophy and practice of the author. The lessons learned are the need for equality in the work place and the impact that older workers' workplace behaviors make on impressionable young workers.



The author during her employment at the child welfare agency

This narrative discusses my experiences within two social service agencies that were created under a segregated society and poised to address the changes demanded by the passage of civil rights legislation. The legislation was pivotal in the desegregation of facilities and services. This article is important because it focuses on the social service agencies that are associated with the profession of social work. Today, social work education programs address issues of social equality and justice as they train helpers in the profession. However, these reflections offer a perspective of the professional climate existing in the early 1970s in social services for me—an African American. [In this article, African American and Black are used interchangeably.]

Personal Background

During my twelfth year of life I chose my profession—social work. Specifically, I wanted to be an adoption worker who found homes for needy children. I did achieve this goal. However, in my youthful immaturity, I believed that these children and families would live happily ever after, achieving a storybook ending. Ironically, the variety of placement situations available to these children did not consciously resonate with me even though I am a product of an extended family in which both formal and informal adopted children were plentiful. In addition, my family bound-

aries were penetrable, as I had many fictive kin as well.

Further, I am a child of the 1960s—the civil rights era. As a young high school student, I decided not to participate in integrating the White public schools. My friends and I were quite comfortable and happy with our school. We believed that we were receiving a good education despite the inherent inequalities in the school system. We had excellent, committed teachers and many social supports that allowed us to demonstrate leadership in our schools and communities. The reason we supported the civil rights movement was to freely obtain access to all of life's potential opportunities. It was our belief that all opportunities should be available to all people. Furthermore, both individuals and society have a collective responsibility for the quality of life of the society's citizens. The tenets of social work support the circular notion that individuals affect society and that society (institutions) affects individuals (Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman, 1997).

I believe my family's beliefs and my experiences during the 1950s and 1960s determined my worldview by shaping my sense of fairness, equality, and responsibility to make social changes. Schiele (2000) defines worldview as "the overarching mode through which people interpret events and define reality. It is a racial or ethnic group's psychological orientation toward life" (p.1).

Growing up, we listened to the radio to hear how the latest civil rights struggle was faring—cheering loudly at any achievements made. We marched with the NAACP youth; we sang protest songs during lunch hour at school; we debated both at home and at school the merits of the civil rights struggle. My belief in equality, fairness, and doing what is right was intense. It is probably these early experiences that propelled me to consciously choose social work as my profession. During my graduate school experience, one of my field instructors described me as having “an intense sense of human rights and dignity.” These are the words we hear used in social work to describe the value base of the profession. In fact, some see the intensity demonstrated in one’s commitment to social change as imbued by a strong sense of spirituality, especially in the African American community. My intense emotions were the results of my own family’s strong connection with spirituality. My family view was that difficult times required the backing of your “God” — and your “God” was able to give you the strength to change yourself as well as others. In the Black helping tradition, spirituality tends to supercede religiosity (Martin & Martin, 2002). The church and religion played a significant role in the attainment of Black civil rights.

The following reflections explain how my entry into the field of social work helped me anchor myself as a teacher, consultant, change agent, planner, and advocate (these are the roles that my graduate education in social work taught me as I became an “autonomous social work practitioner”). My family’s influence and my personal experiences provided the foundation for my choosing social work as a profession. These same qualities are the ones that influenced my thinking about and participation in the civil rights movement. These experiences were significant in shaping who I am as a social worker.

Early Job Experiences

My reflections include two early job experiences at the undergraduate level. This is the point when I first saw myself becoming a social worker (social services worker). Upon earning my bachelor’s degree, I sought a job in social services and became a juvenile probation officer. I was emboldened by my undergraduate experiences in understanding and striving for an equitable society. As a student at a predominately Black university, addressing social issues was an essential part of my education. I participated in the marches for movements such as the Welfare Rights Organization, the Poor Peoples Campaign, and student protests about social inequalities. Obtaining a job in the social services field seemed to be a natural extension of my belief, and this achievement began my career as a social worker. I was eager to make a contribution to society and saw my background as being sufficient to do so.

Domestic and Juvenile Relations Court

After completing undergraduate school at age 20, I returned to my hometown to look for employment. I was interested in social work but was told that entering teaching might be easier. As a result, I went to the school system to apply for a job. There I met with the person in charge of social work for the school system. After an interview, I was referred to the supervisor of the probation officers at the juvenile court, as the supervisor at the schools knew that a position was available there and knew the court supervisor well. The supervisor at the school system was a White man and the supervisor at the court system was a Black woman. At the time, I was unaware of the segregated work policies at the court.

However, I was excited about working with young people (especially young Black females) who were referred to the court for a variety of offenses, from status crimes to murder. I really thought I could make a difference. A cordial work relationship existed be-

tween the Black and White workers, but there was little opportunity for professional interaction. The Black workers took me under their wings and supported me through my first professional job. This environment was very supportive despite the segregation, and, as a newly-minted worker, I initially focused on the help I received rather than segregation and other inequalities in the workplace.

The judges at the court were White, but many of the lawyers handling cases there were Black. I developed good working relationships with the Black lawyers—most notably, the Black state senator and first Black governor of the state, who later gave me a reference when I applied to graduate school. My work on his senatorial campaign was my first organized attempt at that level of politics. I avoided problems with the judges, as my supervisor made sure I prepared my work so well that seldom did questions arise about my recommendations; when they did, my supervisor discussed with me how we could have handled the case differently and taught me to anticipate what reactions might be to certain cases.

The following are descriptions of the workers with whom I developed a close professional relationship while at the court.

Worker Descriptions

PN was the supervisor of the Black unit of probation officers. She was a very pleasant woman with a young family consisting of her husband and three children. She appeared to be in her mid-30s. During our weekly supervision meetings, her children's pictures were prominently displayed. She would share some of their milestones and antics with me. She told me that I reminded her of herself when she first began her career. She was an excellent supervisor; she challenged me to analyze my cases and also presented theories and scenarios for me to consider when counseling my clients. She provided opportunities for training and was supportive of my work. I felt very comfortable talking to her

about my cases. If one could have chosen the perfect supervisor for a first job, she was it.

HG was the only other Black female worker besides me in the unit. The other four workers were Black males. HG was pregnant at the time with her first child and was probably feeling somewhat maternal toward me. She was a protector to me, telling me the little things that I needed to watch for at the job. She seemed genuinely happy that I, as a young African American woman, had the opportunity to work this job. She was probably in her early to mid-30s.

RL was the most senior person in the unit. He was probably in his 50s. He was very supportive as well. He would tell stories of how things had been at the court and other situations that affected social services in the city. He had extensive experiences in social services. He was a sage. We attended a graduate class together while I was employed at the courts.

HC, the next most senior person, appeared to be in his 40s. He had a great sense of humor and teased me a great deal about my youth. His nickname for me was "Naïve Nellie." He had a lot of Naïve Nellie stories and would select one to tell when he wanted to make a point. Because I have an unusual sense of humor, I enjoyed these stories and they were a source of levity at a job that was quite serious. He encouraged me to go to school while I was still young because some of the older workers with families did not envision themselves going back to school at that stage in their life.

EH was an ambitious young man around 30. He was planning to attend law school, and after I left, I learned that he did indeed go to law school. He seemed to have the least patience with the "racism" as he saw it at the court. I believe he saw the younger workers at the court as having more opportunity to move on and not be "stuck" at doing probation work. I listened to him and his views; sometimes I agreed with him and other times

I did not. I enjoyed debating him. We both respected each other's viewpoints.

JJ was the next youngest to me. He was about 25. He and I talked more about our careers. He thought the court could do more, and questioned why decisions were made when they did not make sense to him. He and I had the most in common as we shared some friends and were contemporaries. Through our discussions, we ultimately were led to challenge the segregation at the courts.

Analysis of Job Experience at Juvenile Court

At times the job was very challenging as I had a very high caseload. This large caseload meant that I had to work very hard to complete my court reports on time. In addition, the caseloads were segregated by race and gender, meaning that I was assigned exclusively to clients who were Black females. Because more Blacks than Whites were referred to the court, this caused a disproportionate number of Black youth to be involved in the juvenile court system. This is a concept now referred to as overrepresentation of racial groups in certain social systems. After discussing the inequalities at the court with JJ, we agreed that the workload was unfair and wondered why this organization still supported segregated practices. After all, this was 1970!

JJ and I believed that we had not only the responsibility but also the right to change society to be more equitable, so we decided to question this practice of segregation in a very public way. We lived in a Southern town that had a long history of discrimination and segregation, and it was our belief that the public just accepted the practice of segregation as routine. We took an opportunity during a court-sponsored public forum on the radio to raise the question of why the courts continued to support segregation. The judge who was conducting the forum stumbled through a response.

Upon arriving back at the court, the judge contacted our supervisor and we were called in and questioned about the public disclosure of the court's practice. Clearly we had embarrassed the courts. As awkward as our attempt was to confront this problem, it was an earnest attempt at advocacy as we saw ourselves as "championing the rights of individuals and communities" (Barker, 1996, p.11). As bold as we were in publicly identifying the problem and forcing the courts to address the issue, we were disturbed about how the desegregation actually happened. I do not remember staff being asked the best way to desegregate and whether workers had any problems working with persons of different races.

We achieved the goal of desegregation but did not participate in the decision-making process of how best to desegregate the courts. Years later, I better understood the social work practice of using a process to prepare persons for social change. Typically, a social worker applies the problem-solving model as a way to identify problems and determine solutions. This model requires an understanding of research principles as it seeks evidence that a certain solution is the one that might work in creating change. If this change does not work, then it is reevaluated or another test or solution is applied (Goldstein, 1995). More recently there has been a greater focus on the strengths-based perspective, which can help in solving human problems as it recognizes the strengths individuals, groups, and communities bring to the situation (Billingsley, 1968; Saleebey, 2002). This recognition allows individuals, groups, and communities to unearth their capacities to alleviate human problems. The tactic the courts used did not meet the standard of using an inclusive, problem-solving process to determine the best way to end segregation. Such a process could have been empowering for both the staff and community.

The helper is a conduit to assisting with the problem but does not own it. The empowerment model is one that allows the persons most affected by a problem to help pose the strategy and solutions to the problem (Solomon, 1976). Social work readily supports empowerment models. None of these principles was evident to me in this process of desegregation at the court. I believe my co-worker and I were empowered to change the court system's segregated practices by seizing an opportunity to highlight the problem. However, there were some questions that resonated for me: (1) Did desegregation change job opportunities for Blacks and Whites? (2) Did the courts believe any training was necessary for this transformation? (3) Did clients receive better services? This process taught me a valuable lesson: You can be the impetus for change but not necessarily an active participant in making the change.

My experience at the juvenile court was one of "cocooning." In my unit I received unconditional support that made it possible for me to feel successful as a professional. The workers had a great deal of faith in me and for a while kept up with me and my career. This was quite satisfying. I often thought of them when I faced difficult points in my career. I was a child to be protected on the one hand, and on the other hand an adult on the verge of making some life decisions that would have varying consequences for me. I had faith that I could make it. The support I received in this environment was probably more valuable than I realized as I moved on to another job. My colleagues prepared me to sometimes walk alone.

Child Welfare Intake

The next social work job I pursued was child welfare intake. This was a position that came available after an older Black man who held the job died unexpectedly. The desire of a socially active group in the community was to ensure that a Black person be considered for the vacancy. This socially active tactic was

not initiated to replace the gentleman who died with a Black person, but to ensure that Black applicants had access to the position. As a result, young Black college graduates were encouraged to take a state-required examination and pass it to become eligible for the position. Affirmative action was not yet in vogue. In fact, Blacks were not looking for any special consideration but simply wanted an opportunity to qualify and be hired if they met the criteria. I passed the exam, met the hiring requirements, and became a child welfare intake worker. This job helped me realize my childhood dream of working in adoptions.

This was another extremely challenging position. Not only was I a new employee, but I was the only minority in the unit as well as its youngest worker. Being 22 years-old in a unit that had all White workers was an awesome experience as a beginning professional in child welfare. I was five years younger than the youngest worker and about forty years younger than the oldest worker. My perception of each worker was important to my development as a social worker. I believe these relationships began to significantly shape my view of social work and impacted my beliefs about civil rights and its relevance to social work. This was not my first experience with White people, as I had attended integrated schools when as a child I lived in the Midwest. I did have significant life experiences as a Southerner as well.

I did have the understanding that on this job I had to make it on my own and prove my ability to others. I had a very supportive environment and family support, but there came a time when I realized that this was my job to do and to do it well. In this job I was more cautious and less relaxed. I came to learn that some of these workers had uninformed or unfair views about Black people. Being the only Black worker forced me to deal with these views. I went home angry sometimes, disappointed, but not ready to give up. I had friends with whom I discussed these prob-

lems and I believed we were still energized by our work in civil rights and social justice. We knew this work would not be easy. I still had hope that things would change for the better for Blacks in the United States. The people I worked with in this job again helped shape my view of equality and social justice. Their personal descriptions follow.

Worker Descriptions

PD, the supervisor of the unit, was an older White woman who had white hair that was rinsed with bluing, a fashion practice of the day. She was a stout woman with a good sense of humor. She once told me that when a person reaches her age he/she no longer needed "laurels or morals." She was retired from the military and enjoyed talking about her experiences. I had a great-aunt who had also served in the military and I am sure this helped pique my interest in PD. When she was upset, she could use some colorful words. She also had a deep commitment to Black people. She had worked with some Black families for a number of years. In fact, I learned recently that she left her estate to a Black woman with whom she enjoyed a good relationship. I believed her to be inherently fair and supportive in my work and development.

Even though I believed her to be fair and an open person, PD would say some things that I perceived as racist. An incident that stands out in my mind happened one day when a colleague and I were going to lunch. The supervisor seemed to like us both. My colleague was a light-complexioned Black woman who was often mistaken for White. We were both young and single. Using skin color among Blacks to determine status was a common practice. The supervisor suggested that since we were both single, we should go to a county just south of the city and find some nice light-skinned high school graduates to marry. We were both offended as we were college graduates and one of our criteria for marriageable mates did not require men to

be light-skinned. She never knew our reaction to her statement. Sometimes making a response to insensitivity is not necessary.

The above incident is an example of Pierce's (1970) concept of the Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress Syndrome (MEES). This theory refers to the many minor insults that Black people experience daily. It is the consistency of these insults that lead Blacks to experience undue stress that can ultimately lead to depression and other stress-related conditions.

PD supported me in my work when it was not always easy to do so politically. I often had different opinions and perceptions than the rest of the unit. My presence, as the only Black worker, challenged others on the staff to think differently, just as it challenged me to think and approach situations differently or with passion.

MM was an older White worker who was nearing retirement, and I felt that she had begun to distance herself from the workplace, as she often told stories about her grandchildren and was looking forward to retiring so she could spend more time with them. I felt she was the most distant with me. This was not necessarily negative but she had other concerns than work. We had a very limited relationship, although we did share a few cases together.

EB was an older worker as well who was quite thin and frail. She smoked cigarettes incessantly. Those were the days when smoking was allowed in the workplace. EB loved to tell stories of the old "First Families" of the state. She did not seem to notice that that these families were more than likely slaveholders. She was, however, a gifted storyteller. She wrote voluminous notes on her cases in beautiful handwriting. Most of us took brief notes and dictated our reports to the secretarial pool. EB remembered many interesting cases that she took time to tell us about. She introduced me to Welsh rarebit and popovers and prissy little teasshops. We really enjoyed these special lunches. She was

afraid of escalators and requested that I stand in front of her so she could ride them when we went to lunch. I learned to pay attention to detail from her. She marveled in the state's past history and seemed to wish that she had more status. She didn't seem to be aware that the history she loved was the history of pain for Black people.

MA was my nemesis. She was blatantly racist to me. She used the word "niggra" in my presence more than once, prompting me to ask her to say the word "Black" when referring to African American people. She appeared to revel in people's pain and suffering. She was a difficult person to understand. She actually preferred to work with Black people and tried to manipulate her way out of working with White people if they were poor. I finally surmised that she could not understand why Whites were poor, but she accepted Black people as being poor.

At one point, I realized I was working with mostly White people on my caseload and had to ask to get Black clients assigned to me, as I had entered into the field to assist Black persons as well. This was in total contrast to my situation at the courts when the cases were segregated. Sometimes life offers conundrums. MA continued her negativity up until the date I left the agency to attend graduate school. In fairness to MA, it was not just me who evoked her negativity—it seemed to be most Black people.

GN was the next youngest worker and the one with whom I had the best relationship. She was a Midwesterner, confident in her intellectual capacity, and assured that her beliefs were right. Her youth was certainly a unifying factor for us. Our supervisor dubbed us the "Mod Squad." This nickname came from a popular television show that depicted an interracial team of police officers. GN and I hardly saw anything the same way. She would share her stereotypes of Blacks and I would share mine of Whites. At first, she was shocked to realize that Black people had some unflattering beliefs about Whites. I think our

discussions allowed us to understand what perceptions existed in both communities. We discussed policies, politics, and other social issues of the day. I know we exasperated each other, but we maintained an open forum for these discussions. We both had our aspirations. She was involved with an older man and married him during my tenure at the agency. I was encouraged by my family, friends, and colleagues at the agency to pursue a Master of Social Work degree. We worked together for two years, and I was hired to work in the summer during my break from graduate school.

Analysis of My Job Experiences in Child Welfare

This agency was different from my first agency in that caseloads were not segregated. The process for case assignment was typically fair, in contrast to my first job where all assignments were made by race and gender. However, if we requested a specific case or substituted for a worker, we could get cases that would not be typically assigned to us. Each worker was assigned a day of the week and whatever cases came in on your day were assigned to you. The schedule rotated each week because Mondays and Fridays were high-volume days. The intake office not only dealt with poor people but with all people who had difficulties with their children, although most of the cases involved people who were poor. There were clear views about poverty and race at the agency.

All of the workers contributed both positively and negatively to my growth experiences while I was employed there. Older workers do provide a model for younger workers. However, younger workers must be able to critically assess what goes on in an agency and decide how they will develop professionally in, or in spite of, the work environment. These relationships affected me professionally because I decided to pursue macro social work as a result of my experiences at this agency. I wanted to have a greater role in

changing agencies and institutions and saw this happening through macro social work rather than micro social work. Institutional racism needs a macro focus as it is based on power and the ability to use it to effect change (Hamilton, 2001).

This job experience either changed my personality or brought out what was there already as I transformed from a rather shy person who realized that if I did not speak up for me and "my people," I would become angry or hostile. I often sought counsel from older Black workers in the agency on how to handle what I perceived as racism and social injustice. They would support me by observing and advising me on what to say and do. However, in the end, I had to make decisions for myself and accept the consequences. This was not an easy task. I stood at the crossroads and it was up to me to make a difference for the people with whom I worked, no matter what race they were. I felt very much responsible for representing my race in a favorable light. These tensions are ones that I do not perceive that majority workers face. Their successes and failures are their own and not those of the entire race. Hamilton (2001) asserts that White people's perception of color reflects ambivalence and contradiction.

Moving On

After two years of employment at this agency, I applied to graduate school at three prominent universities and was accepted at all of them. I chose to go to a school in the South, both because of its reputation and because of positive feedback from others who attended it. My graduate experience built on my beginning social work experiences. In some classes I felt I had a better understanding of the dynamics because of my work experience. This choice of school seemed right for me given its history with civil rights and the fact that right away we participated in an effort to elect the city's first Black mayor. The opportunity to meet and see prominent civil rights figures going about their daily lives was

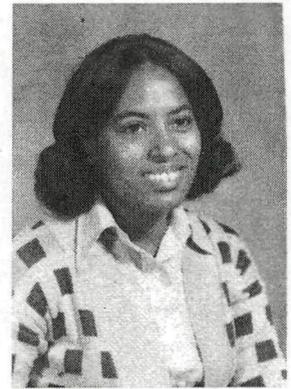
inspiring. We felt so fortunate. Students often ate at a popular restaurant where all the civil rights leaders met and dined. We felt that we were watching and participating in the changing of history. Interestingly enough, my job experiences and graduate education provided me the opportunity to work with African American pioneers and exemplars and enhanced my ability to believe that the sky is the limit.

At the juvenile court, we were faced with a large number of Black youth charged with status crimes (running away and truancy), some acquiring juvenile records. It seemed that for many of these young people, a diversion program with counseling components was needed. I provided a number of services in the child welfare intake unit, such as protective services, out of town inquiries, and adoption home studies. At the child welfare agency, the transracial adoption controversy had not yet affected the system, but efforts were underway to recruit homes for Black children. Today, social justice and economic issues are more complicated and need both advocacy and cultural competence as a practice technique.

The agency supported my decision to attend graduate school and expected that I might return to be a supervisor at the agency. However, I chose a job in New England after my graduate studies.

Summary

As I look back on the 50 years since *Brown v. The Board of Education* and the 40 years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act, I recognize that many of us have traveled a very long and arduous road. Yet we have been able to see the effect of our work on both a community and a professional level. However, when it comes to understanding the basic rights of individuals and living by a code of conduct that honors human dignity and the assurance of economic and social justice, we have more road to travel.



Ruby Gourdine shortly after her arrival at graduate school

These reflections allowed me to do what all good social workers are asked to do—assess ourselves so we may use ourselves effectively in the helping process. The fight for equality and economic and social justice requires tremendous use of self along with the inherent strengths that come from our ancestry. We are still expected to respect people's differences and yet, at the same time, not forget what is a very painful past for many American citizens. An important lesson for experienced social workers to learn is that their behavior affects young beginning-level professionals as they watch what those more experienced do. Using these observations as a guide, young professionals may become either good, competent social workers, or ineffective social workers.

This article serves as documentation of one social worker's experience in helping to desegregate social services, serving as a voice to the voiceless, and providing culturally relevant services. These experiences are useful to social work students—particularly African Americans students—who may need inspiration to believe that they, too, can make a difference in social work. The future of social work relies on all of us to be effective in what we do. To those who labored to make civil rights a reality and who used themselves to change the lives of people for the better, I dedicate this article.

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