

How Interprofessional Collaboration Taught Me the Central Importance of Human Relationships

Florence Ellen Netting

Abstract: The central importance of human relationships is a principle of the NASW Code of Ethics. Using organizational culture theory, this narrative focuses on how one social work educator learned lessons about this ethical principle in conducting research with colleagues from public health and veterinary medicine. This early collaboration set the stage for a career in which the central importance of human relationships permeated social work practice and education, regardless of the role being played. The author concludes that whether these relationships are developed through physical interactions or virtual exchanges, they are central to social work practice.

Keywords: ethical principle; code of ethics; interdisciplinary; organizational culture; human-animal interaction

One of the six core ethical principles in the NASW Code of Ethics (1996) is: “Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.” In considering this principle, I keep thinking about how the organizational culture literature helps us understand the artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions in those groups and organizations in which our daily professional and personal lives are incubated (e.g., Schein, 2010). Metaphorically these cultures can be seen as a tree in which the artifacts are the very visible leaves, held up by a strong trunk of espoused values. Just below the surface and not as visible is the root system, the deeply held assumptions without which the entire tree would fall to the ground. When the tree blows in the wind, some leaves will fall and even limbs may crash down from the trunk as artifacts and values change. But those deeply held assumptions resist the elements and are held on to with tenacity. One of those assumptions in our professional root system is the central importance of human relationships.

We often think of artifacts as concrete, such as the photographs and pictures on the wall, how the physical space is arranged, or what tangible products are produced. But in social work circles, human relationships are the central artifacts of our organizational cultures. They are the way in which we relate to one another, our behaviors, our interactions, and even our body language and nonverbal cues. Thus, the pivotal question for social workers is: Do our behavioral, interactional artifacts reflect the central importance of human relationship? Or does that importance get lost in the

frenetic pace we keep, the metrics we use to measure our worth, the push for efficiencies, and the lack of time to nurture those very relationships we say that we value? In other words, is that tree trunk of espoused values reflected in those artifactual leaves of interaction?

Early Lessons Learned

Just as organizations develop cultures; so do teams, groups, partnerships, and collaborations. In reflecting about how these cultures develop I found myself thinking about a collaboration that began in 1981 (almost 35 years ago) when I was a social worker at an Area Agency on Aging in East Tennessee. This was a time when my prize possession was a bright red IBM correcting selective typewriter, when phone calls and snail mail were our primary means of communicating, and when I was teaching as an adjunct instructor at the University of Tennessee.

I had collected my dissertation data in Chicago and we had moved back to Knoxville where I was working part-time and writing my dissertation. One day I saw an ad in the paper for a part-time position for someone with administrative and program development skills, and I thought it would be a good change of pace while I finished my dissertation and before I mounted the long search process for an academic position. This position was the Executive Director of the County Humane Association. I submitted my resume and was invited to interview.

It was a Sunday afternoon. I drove downtown to one of the all-glass, high rise bank buildings where

the board of directors of the humane association was meeting interviewees. We sat high atop the city, in a large board room, and the interview was going well, until the pivotal question was asked “Would you be able to euthanize an animal?” I stopped, stunned. When I found my voice I said, “But why would you even ask me that question? I thought this was an administrative/program development position.” The board member responded, “Well, you’d have a small staff, and sometimes people are out sick and no one else might be available.”

I must have had a look of stark horror on my face when I replied, “I would have my entire house and yard full of animals if it came to that. How many animals are you talking about?” And the answer almost put me under the table, I didn’t pause, “I don’t think you want me for this job.” The interview ended abruptly, and I cried all the way home.

The next day I had a meeting with a friend and colleague in public health. Cindy was teaching at the University of Tennessee and an avid animal lover. I told her about what had happened and our minds starting working overtime how would we save some of those animals. One of the board members the day before was also the Program Officer of the Levi Strauss Foundation, whom we both knew. I was on the Board of the Senior Citizens Home Aide Service and I knew a number of their clients had been very attached to pets and others wanted pets but could not have them in their public housing units. We came up with a plan, and took the program officer to lunch.

As a result the Senior Citizens Home Aide Service and the Area Agency on Aging were funded to design and implement a human-companion animal program. We found John, a faculty member in the College of Veterinary Medicine to work with us. Soon we had embarked on a project to link animals from the shelter with older people. We knew we needed to carefully assess both the elders and the animals. John knew how to assess the animals for appropriate placements, but Cindy and I wanted to use the Functional Assessment Inventory (FAI) (a short version of the OARS multidimensional assessment tool out of Duke, affectionately called the “son of OARS”) to assess the older people. We needed to be trained to use the tool and could then

train others. John thought it was important for him to know how we were assessing the human companions, so he accompanied us to the training. And thus began a long series of interactional experiences in which our relationships gelled as a team.

We flew to Florida and rented a car so we could drive to the Suncoast Gerontology Center to attend training for the Functional Assessment Instrument (FAI). John was a big man, and Cindy and I laughed about stuffing him in the back of a compact car as we headed out. As we approached the Center, John scanned the horizon for birds because he was an avid birder, and upon spotting one of great significance, told us to stop the car, unfolded himself from the back seat and leaped onto the side of the road to run after that bird, binoculars beating against his chest. That image remained etched in our minds, as we discovered the excitement of this larger-than-life man, thrilled at the sight of a special bird. Several years later when John came to Arizona where I had taken a faculty position in social work, my spouse took him to Camelback Mountain to see the hummingbirds. Karl recalls that adventure as “this big guy appeared lighter than air as he marveled at the sight of those tiny hummingbirds.”

When we arrived at the Suncoast Center, we were met at the door by Eric Pfeiffer, the geriatric psychiatrist who had developed the FAI. He shook John’s hand and said, “I’ve been wondering why you have been communicating with me on College of Veterinary Medicine stationary.” John looked Dr. Pfeiffer straight in the eye and said as seriously as he could, “Oh, I’m a veterinarian and I’ve been wanting to develop a similar assessment tool to use with older animals.” Dr. Pfeiffer had a curious look on his face as he considered the possibility of using his tool with animals, a tool that would require asking them questions about their well-being. And it was then that I discovered the mischievous humor of John New. I suspect Dr. Pfeiffer never forgot that introduction. And this was just the beginning of our shared stories that bonded our interprofessional relationship. We would tell this story in our respective classrooms for many years to come.

When we got back to Knoxville, we began the pet placement program with Senior Citizens Home Aide clients. We were trained in how to use the FAI and

we contacted the director of the human services program (which later evolved into the BSW program) at The University of Tennessee. We trained his practice class in the use of the FAI so that they could work with us on assessing older clients. The Home Aide Service had no standardized assessment procedure at the time and the project gave us the opportunity to conduct assessments of all their clients, some of whom might want pets and others who would not. Thus, our team expanded to include students who wanted to work with elders.

We arranged for John to provide in-home veterinary care for any animal that was placed. We petitioned the local housing authority to allow their residents to adopt small animals. John placed over 40 animals the first year of the project. As we conducted reassessments and asked pet owners about the human-animal bond, we received rave reviews. What we discovered is that if you give older women access to a kind and caring veterinarian, you will improve their well-being and quality of life. Cindy and I used to say that John was our best intervention; the animals were a nice addition.

Over the years we joined with others in the country advocating for change in the public housing laws to allow small animals for elders who would not give up pets to move out of substandard housing. We began to train veterinarians to make appropriate referrals to the aging network because they were so often confronted by older pet owners bringing “Muffy” or “Fluffy” into their clinics because “she doesn’t seem to be feeling well,” and then pouring their heart out to the veterinarian about the loss of a spouse or grief or illness with which they were dealing.

The central importance of human relationships permeated our experience. But just recognizing the centrality of human relationships is only the beginning in the NASW Code (1996). The Code goes on to say that “Social Workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change.” My relationship with Cindy and John grew out of our desire to make a change and in the process we developed long-lasting professional and personal relationships. Our interactions with older people who engaged in this

human animal interaction program made us fully aware of how central human relationships are as one ages. Students who conducted assessment interviews joined in relationships that enhanced their learning in the field of practice known as social work.

As a community partner, my role as a social worker was respected by my faculty colleagues in public health and veterinary medicine. Years later John advocated for a tenure-track faculty position into which was hired a Ph.D. in Social Work into the School of Veterinary Medicine because he valued the central importance of human relationships in the practice of veterinary medicine.

My memories of John are etched in my mind because they were so important to my development personally and professionally. He was so aptly thought of as a gentle giant because he was one of the kindest colleagues I have known. By recognizing social work as having a role to play in veterinary medicine, he affirmed both me and my chosen profession. Even more significant was that he was part of the first funded research project in which I participated. Our team cut our teeth on presenting and publishing the results of our small study and this launched all of us in our respective fields into an interdisciplinary arena. As we embraced the “publish or perish” ideology of the university, I remember John saying something to me that literally transformed my academic life. Recognizing the potential for work to become overwhelming, he once said when we were racing to get the writing done, “well, it all depends on whether you want your grave littered with reprints.” I remember stopping short to digest those words and they have lived with me throughout my professional life. John never forgot what was truly important – it was not about the products, it was about the relationships. How he treated people (and animals) is as much a part of his legacy (how he lived) as what he did. What a role model he has been to so many and how fortunate Cindy and I were to have him on our team.

The Core of Human Relationships

Edgar Schein, the author of *Organizational Culture and Leadership* writes that assumptions about relationships must address these questions: 1) who am I supposed to be in this group and what will be

my role? 2) Will my needs for influence and control be met? 3) Will the group's goals allow me to meet my own needs? 4) Will I be accepted, respected, and loved in this group? How close will our relationships be (Schein, 2010, p. 149)?

I've been thinking a lot lately about these questions because they get to the core of human relationships and whether we feel valued by others. Cindy, John, and I came from different professions and that likely helped us determine our roles. Cindy and John both had public health backgrounds, but hers was focused on human relationships whereas his was focused heavily upon our relationships with animals. My social work practice background was respected by both of them as they allowed me to take the lead on the human side of our intervention. We were young then, just beginning our professional academic careers, all in different organizations which gave us the opportunity to share the issues we confronted within our respective settings without being so enmeshed within the internal policies of one another's domains. We listened and problem-solved with one another. Our project required us to negotiate the community relationships with the funder and the home aide service, giving us experience in what is now touted as "community engagement." We cut our professional teeth on community engagement with our project and knew that relationships with community practitioners were absolutely essential to our work. Even when we moved to different cities and became professors in different universities, our relationships remained close over time, and today Cindy and I are still working on human-animal interaction projects together.

I don't think I realized early on how important this first funded research project was to my professional development, until I encountered situations in which the importance of human relationships seemed to have become subjugated. I've noticed in recent conversations with so many people in multiple types of organizations that I'm hearing these type of statements:

I just don't feel valued.

Things are changing so fast that I don't know how to keep up.

I feel like I'm becoming marginalized.

I don't even know what I'm supposed to do anymore.

What happened to basic human civility?

These conversational artifacts are reflective of organizational trees blowing in the heavy winds of change. And I believe they attest to the neglect of human relationships that are necessary for working through the process of rapid change and to addressing the social needs of humankind and the quality of life of individuals. I am convinced that it is the centrality of human relationship that will make the difference in both professional and personal quality of life. As social workers we know this, but it seems increasingly important to remind ourselves and others of this basic social work principle.

Organizational culture theorists are attentive to how we transmit and embed cultural norms and values by what we do. The smallest interaction becomes an artifact of the culture. Norms about how we relate to one another grow out of the legends and stories that blossom out of our shared experiences. Thus, people are watching, even when we don't think they are watching. Our interactions aren't just passing artifacts, they are remembered by others, we leave imprints along the way. We have incredible power in what we pay attention to and *just as importantly in what we do not pay attention to.*

What We Pay Attention To

Human service work is relationship intensive, yet in an era of performance-based measurement it is often hard enough to design information systems that will capture the basics of efficiency and effectiveness, much less to capture the quality of our relational work. We often adopt those tools that have been used by the corporate sector and try to adapt them to our human service use. One such tool is the electronic dashboard. One designer explains, "Ideally a dashboard report conveys in one page the key indicators for the organization and relates those indicators to goals, historical information, or benchmarks, the art of creating a good dashboard is identifying what information really matters" (Nonprofits Assistance Funds, 2011).

In the context of human relationships, then what do we pay attention to? What really matters? And does what matters get conveyed on our organizational and programmatic dashboards? Even more importantly, who determines what gets to the dashboard, what gets privileged, what counts? How can we get the principles of our code of ethics onto the dashboard? Are we empowered to influence what goes on the dashboard and even more importantly how can we find ways to measure the importance of quality indicators like the importance of human relationships? This is the challenge and we must not give up *just because* quality is hard to measure.

The central importance of human relationships permeates social work practice, regardless of the role being played. Whether these relationships are developed through physical interactions or virtual exchanges (Reamer, 2013), they are central to social work practice. I owe a great deal to Cindy and John as collaborators who lived the importance of human (and animal) relationships.

This reflection is dedicated to the memory of Dr. John Coy New, Jr. (1947-2013)

References

- National Association of Social Workers. (1996). Code of Ethics. Washington, D.C.: NASW. <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code>.
- Nonprofits Assistance Fund: What Gauges Belong on Your Dashboard? Retrieved on March 26, 2011 from <http://www.nonprofitsassistancefund.org/index.php?src=blog&srctype=detail&blogid=19>
- Reamer, F. G. (2013). Social work in a digital age: Ethical and risk management challenges. *Social Work, 58*(2), 163-172.
- Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th edition). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

About the Author: Florence Ellen Netting, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Social Work (enetting@vcu.edu).