

BEING A VOICE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

A Commentary on
 "Doing Alcoholism Treatment in Norway: A Personal Reminiscence"
 by Katherine van Wormer

By Dale Weaver, Ph.D.

Dale Weaver, Ph.D., is
 Lecturer, Department of Social
 Work, CSULB

As a profession, social work is informed by both practice experience and scholarly activity, and effective teachers of social work rely on both academic material and lessons from their own professional careers. In teaching macro practice classes, one of the lessons I pass on from my own turbulent administrative career pertains to assessing for oneself just when decisive, ethical career action is necessary. I tell my students that such action is required when a point is reached at which there is significant disparity among the interests of one's own career, the interests of the agency where one works, and the interests of the population being served. We can call this guide to action the 'principle of mutual interests'. The application of the principle of mutual interests rests on a clear understanding of the power differences among clients, workers, and agencies.

The initial importance of this principle is to get students to understand that their interests, and the interests of their agencies, are not necessarily congruent with the interests of their clients; in fact, the interests are not expected to always be congruent

in the real world. The second important purpose of the principle of mutual interests is to encourage students to continually monitor and evaluate the interests of these three 'interest groups.' Though it ought to be a simple matter to articulate one's own career interests, it is my experience that few of us consistently do this. Often we assume that by following the dictates of our public-spirited agencies and by concentrating our energies on serving our clients, our careers will naturally prosper. The idea of consciously pursuing our own career interests, possibly at the expense of the interests of others seems unsavory and at odds with the spirit of our profession. In fact, however, one is both less likely to engage in conflicts with the interests of others and more likely to prosper, if one sets clear personal career goals and milestones of achievement on the way to those goals.

Van Wormer was in a fortunate position, that is, understanding her own interests while in Norway. In spite of the difficulty of sorting out these issues in another culture, the

length of her stay there was proscribed ahead of time, and her career in the States was not threatened by her actions in Norway. It was her task in regards to her own interests to complete the enjoyable family stay in Norway, resolving issues of professional conscience as she left. She did accomplish this temporal balancing act, though cutting it a bit close, as she lost her air fare home at the last moment.

That the interests of our agencies may be incongruent with the interests of both organizational staff and clients is a truism of administrative theory and practice. Much has been written about 'goal displacement' and about the primacy of the need for organizational survival. Again, however, the pursuit of mere organizational survival is a reality which conflicts with the aspirations and world views of social work students. The principle of mutual interests serves as a reminder to social work practitioners of the need to separately consider and evaluate the impersonal interests of our host organizations.

At Gjovikseter no one, with the possible exception of Ed, seemed to be doing that. As described, the agency was little more than a setting for the pursuit of individual interests—professional, financial, and sexual. For van Wormer, the agency was a succession of personal and professional alliances, a system within which she generally felt comfortable, as she was able to establish separate personal and professional relationships with nearly all of the primary actors. However, identifying and articulating the interests of the agency itself, separate from the interests of a tangled web of scheming individuals, may have brought some clarity to the situation.

More troubling, however, in Gjovikseter as described by van Wormer was the lack of overt consideration of client interests. Determining, articulating, and evaluating the best interests of clients is the most difficult of all, because it begs the question of who has the right to speak for clients, and because this action cannot avoid the power differences between clients and helpers. Professionals are quick to appoint themselves the guardians of the best interests of their clients; indeed, professionalism can be defined in terms of the knowledge and values needed to articulate

and represent those interests. But this notion of professionalism rests on the assumed right and power of professionals to speak for clients. Accepting the expressed interests of clients on their own terms is a more challenging method of practice. Never failing to consider the interests of clients is perhaps the most important challenge of our profession because of their frequent lack of power to be heard regarding their own interests. The "very appealing and eager-to-learn clients and their families" at Gjovikseter seemed to be receiving effective treatment at times, while having their rights violated at other times. I think that a clear articulation of the interests of clients in this organizational mess would have gone a long way toward clarifying the need for ethical action, as well as the urgency for that action.

How do we know when the need for action has arrived? Frequently, simply when the pain of continued inaction becomes too great. As social workers, when we feel that these moments have arrived, the principle of mutual interests may help us to rationally recognize and assess these moments. Usually, however, there is a simpler way. Professional codes of ethics, government licensing and oversight of professions, personnel policies and practices, and regulatory oversight of non-profit institutions are attempts to achieve a fair balance of interests by reducing the power differences among clients, workers, and agencies. These codes require that professionals do not discount the interests of their clients, and that agencies do not violate the rights of their workers. Hence, clear violations of written and normative professional and institutional regulations are a sure sign that the principle of mutual interests has been transgressed.

It is not clear from the article just when van Wormer felt the need for action. After "the frequent violation of clients' confidentiality..., and the frequent sexual liaisons between clients and staff," she was "still delighted to be living in one of the most beautiful and richest countries in the world." In spite of a number of egregious violations of ethical and regulatory guidelines, she remained passive until forced to publicly proclaim her loyalty. The difficulty for her must have come from her status as a cultural outsider. We know that rules are never applied exactly as

written; there are always customary informal norms governing the application and timing of formal regulations. How is an outsider to be familiar with these norms? Especially when direct understanding of these norms is cut off through lack of familiarity with the local language. And does an 'outsider', a guest in a foreign county, have the same rights, the same obligations to come forward, when the locals around her seem all too comfortable in the face of violations? It is telling that van Wormer turned to a professional code of ethics for guidance rather than to the local regulations governing her workplace, even though there were consistent clear violations of those regulations. "Increasingly for guidance I looked to professional ideology." Was it her status as a cultural outsider which led her to professional norms for guidance? Can a professional code of ethics guide behavior for professionals cross-culturally?

After determining that the present situation is untenable, what courses of action are available to us? Hirschman (1970) tells us that dissatisfied organizational members have three options for action, expressed in the title of his classic work, *Exit, Voice, And Loyalty*. In choosing exit, we avoid the conflict by leaving the situation and going on to another; voice means that we remain in our positions and work openly to resolve the conflict; and expressing loyalty means that we remain in the situation no matter what, tacitly accepting the violation of interests. Our choice of option depends on our assessment of the viability of the options and our own alternatives. Choosing exit implies generous career alternatives to the present situation. Choosing voice implies a belief in the possible effectiveness of this option, an investment in the present situation, and possibly the presence of alternatives if one is forced to exit. Choosing loyalty implies few alternatives and a belief that expressing oneself will not be effective.

Van Wormer's status as a visitor constrained the exit option in a unique way. While, as she stated, "my inability to speak the language wedded me to the job..." at the same time her departure from the job was predetermined. "Since I planned to return to the U.S. in June, the timing of the inevitable firing

would be manageable." So, while exit was not immediately feasible, it was a certainty in the near future. Generally, this is the organizational situation not of regular employees, but of consultants or of employees on limited contracts. At the same time, her status as a visitor precluded the need for a deep or extended loyalty to the agency. She needed only to "...find a niche for myself." Indeed, her loyalty was to a succession of organizational actors, rather than to the agency itself.

Due to the constraints on her exit and loyalty options in this situation abroad, this article is a wonderful description of the voice option in the face of the need for decisive action, in particular the frustrations of exercising the voice option in a foreign land with an unfamiliar language. The first exercise of voice was a negative one and was forced by circumstances, as van Wormer refused to sign a loyalty oath. Her first proactive voice articulation was negated. "My speech of opposition to the firings went untranslated." What a frustration it must be to act, but to not be heard. She went on to refuse to write some letters, while insisting on writing others—manipulating her voice ethically. However, "effectively cut off from most communication, I became intellectually and socially isolated." Again, professionalism guided van Wormer toward action, as a professional journal came forth to finally provide her with an effective forum for her voice. Her voice was effective in that it led to the official regulations necessary to achieve a balance among interests in social service organizations. And the effective exercise of the voice option successfully resolved van Wormer's personal dilemma, as it "was therapeutic, it was catharsis in the form of revenge." □

Hirschman, A. O. (1970). *Exit, voice, and loyalty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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