

Motivations for Choosing Social Service as a Career

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ABSTRACT

Why do people choose social service work as a career? What type of person forgoes the financial rewards, greater job security, and lower stress levels of other careers in favor of working with the needy and indigent? People who are drawn to these careers tend to be classified as idealists according to the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, and their basic personality types suggest that they place more value on helping others and making a difference and less value on receiving a good paycheck and benefits. However, that motivation, though remaining idealistic, has changed somewhat from the radical 1960s through the "Me Generation" of the 1980s and into the realistic idealism of the 1990s. This paper examines these motivations and also discusses a few of the challenges faced by social service workers.

"What do I want to be when I grow up?" That is a question that people ask from early childhood. Indeed, many continue to ask that well into adulthood, as they consider what they want out of their careers and lives. In that regard, it is quite common for people to change careers in mid-life.

What do people want out of careers? The obvious choice would appear to be money. The main reason anybody holds a job is to pay the bills, put food on the table, and hopefully have enough left over for one's wants. If that were the only concern, though, then everyone would be competing for the highest paying jobs available, and obviously that is not the case.

Prestige is another area, sometimes but not always connected with money. Some careers give people public recognition of accomplishment, cause a great deal of attention to be lavished on them, allow them some social perks that do not come from wealth alone.

People frequently want jobs that meet their academic interests. People in general find that, for whatever reasons, they tend to be interested in certain subjects and disinterested in others from the time they are young children, and no matter what the financial rewards, taking a career in an area where one holds no interest is likely to be unbearable.

Some, plain and simply, want easy work. The idea that one can work at a job eight hours per day, five days per week, and then forget about it is very attractive to some, especially when minimal effort is needed.

Then there is the question of interacting, and indeed, impacting others. Some people are drawn to careers in which the financial rewards may be limited, prestige may

be minimal, and effort may be great (including during time off). Interest in the field may be academic in nature, but that may also be secondary to the need to positively benefit the lives of others.

Social service work is one of those fields, and what draws one into social service work is the subject of this paper. It would seem that a field in which financial rewards are few, stress and burnout are high, recognition is limited (and often negative, as the clients of a social service system may resent their involvement in the system), job security may be low, and work is frequently difficult would be unattractive, even repulsive. Yet many enter the field in spite of that. In addition, many social service workers entered into their positions later in life, after reporting dissatisfaction in their former careers.

Social service work refers to a variety of fields, generally aimed at improving the lives of the indigent and needy. Welfare services, chemical dependency counseling, and mental health counseling are three clear examples. All three are high stress, low paying fields where the client rarely holds the worker in any positive esteem. Yet in all three cases, without these workers, the client's life would be significantly worsened.

Many in these fields refer to the work as a "calling," and indeed, those around them also use the same term in describing it. Reasons people enter into the field are often intangible, difficult to put into words. People not involved in the field sometimes cannot make sense of the reasons when they are expressed. To some, there seems to be no tangible benefit to the work, while to others, the benefits seem to be plentiful.

The benefits one gets from one's job can be described as extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic benefits are those easily tangible, external in nature, such as money, vacations, insurance benefits, retirement benefits, and a nice office. Intrinsic benefits are much more

difficult to grasp. They include such things as a feeling of satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, and a love for one's work.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) refers to "idealists" as those who are of the NF (iNtuitive/Feeling) temperament. "The Idealist's core needs are for the meaning and significance that come from having a sense of purpose and working toward some greater good" (Myers, et al, 1998). The NF temperament is most predominately found both among counselors and those seeking counseling. NF's tend, in particular, to be very impatient with the business world and its policies, procedures, and focus on the bottom line. They tend more toward creativity, empathy, and a focus on feelings as more important than facts (Myers, et al, 1998; Kiersey & Bates, 1978).

By comparison, there are three other temperaments. The NT (iNtuitive/Thinking) "rational" temperament tends to favor scientific or mathematical pursuits and does not have much interest in feelings. The SP (Sensing/Perceiving) "artisan" is focused on the present, on accomplishing something right now, and thus does not work well with something as intangible as feelings or potential. The SJ (Sensing/Judging) "guardian" is businesslike, focused on decisions and results, disinterested in the potential without the actual (Myers, et al, 1998; Kiersey & Bates, 1978).

The MBTI classifies 16 personality types, four for each of the temperaments listed above. Personality types tend to be consistent throughout ones' life, even from childhood, and temperaments in particular rarely change (Kiersey & Bates, 1978). Therefore, a point could be made that the counselor is born, or at least made as a child. Indeed, many who enter into social services have considered doing so from a very young age (Hanson & McCullagh, 1995).

Within the NF "idealist" temperament, there are four personality types, ENFJ, ENFP, INFJ, and INFP. While each tends to be idealistic, they express their idealism in different ways.

ENFJs are sociable, energetic, and organized. They make excellent leaders through their extraordinary ability to motivate. They tend to be attuned to the feelings of others as well as to their own values. Their values may at times get in the way of relationships, however, and they can seem demanding and impatient. They frequently work as counselors, teachers (especially in creative fields like art and music), actors, ministers, or journalists (Kiersey & Bates, 1978; Myers, et al, 1998; Skehan, 2003).

ENFPs focus highly on life and its possibilities. They tend to be energetic, outgoing, highly emotional, observant, persuasive, and insightful about the present and the future. They struggle with schedules and structure, and are not particularly detail oriented, so the business world does not fit well with them. They frequently work as journalists, counselors, writers, salespeople, and drama or art teachers. (Kiersey & Bates, 1978; Myers, et al, 1998; Skehan, 2003).

INFJs are highly introverted and highly intuitive, tending to be quiet observers of the world and of people in it. They focus on the complexities of human relationships and have an uncanny ability to examine them, though they frequently have trouble expressing what they clearly see, and often speak in metaphors. They are highly compassionate and passionate, deeply committed to their ideals. They often work as counselors, clergy, librarians, or nurses. (Kiersey & Bates, 1978; Myers, et al, 1998; Skehan, 2003).

INFPs are quiet, spiritual, deeply idealistic people who see their lives as having a far deeper meaning than anybody else can comprehend. To them, life is a quest, a

journey, and day-to-day realities may be little more than a nuisance. Indeed, to some, INFPs seem odd, even out of touch. However, their extreme grasp of values and ethics, their focus on the hypothetical, the potential, the visionary makes them ideal for social service professions. They also frequently work as psychiatrists, journalists, writers, actors, and teachers. (Kiersey & Bates, 1978; Myers, et al, 1998; Skehan, 2003).

Considering again the question as to whether social service professionals are born or made through their personality types, however, it must also be considered that environmental factors might also have an effect on this.

Many in helping professions learned their helping roles long before they began any professional training. Vincent (1996, cited in DiCaccavo, 2002) noted that more than 2/3 of social workers he studied reported partaking in care-taking roles within their families, only 50% reported optimal bonding experiences with their parents, and 42% reported significant childhood separation from one or both parents during childhood.

People in helping professions in general--psychologists, counselors, social workers, tend to report higher amounts of childhood emotional neglect, abuse, and other adverse experiences from childhood (DiCaccavo, 2002). While perhaps their training and work experience may make them more attuned to those aspects of their childhood, it is also true that many people are drawn to these professions through childhood experience.

Many people in helping professions report, in particular, role reversals in childhood. Inadequacies in a parent, sometimes physical but more commonly emotional, lead the parent to seek out the support from the children in a way not expected in the healthy family. Children take on roles generally reserved for the parents, from domestic chores (cooking, laundry, etc.) to emotional ones (mediator, confidante). In some cases,

the child appears to become the parent and the parent the child. These children become particularly attuned to the emotional needs of the parent and other children in the family, as this becomes necessary for optimum survival. As these children become adults, they still keep these roles, the skills highly honed, and extend them beyond their own families, gravitating towards the helping professions.

These people, working in the helping professions, are referred to in the literature as "wounded healers." They report great dissatisfaction in their childhoods, and their work in the counseling professions is not only an extension of childhood roles, but also an attempt to come to terms with their own hurts and disappointments. Understanding the pain of another who is seeking help for familial dysfunction may help them understand their own pain and thus allow them to recover from it. In addition, these role reversals may not actually be appreciated by their own families. One child may resent, or at least fail to comprehend the parental roles taken on by another child, and in particular may take issue to these roles carried on into adulthood. Helping professions provide validation for the acting of these roles, as the counselor is rewarded and recognized for these care-taking behaviors (DiCaccavo, 2002).

In addition to the emotional experience by many in the helping professions, there is frequently more tangible experience. People in the helping professions frequently have had contact with people in these professions as children. Some social work students reported that they were interested in the field at a very young age, as social workers had contact with their own families growing up (Hanson & McCullagh, 1995).

In poor families, for example, social workers are frequently involved in their lives. In order to secure welfare benefits and housing, for example, one must endure large

amounts of contact with social workers. Social workers may examine and interview the family, may frequently visit the family to monitor living conditions, and may monitor the family to watch for evidence of welfare fraud or other illegal activity. Families not involved in the welfare system, families that are financially better off, do not have to endure these experiences.

For one in this family, the social worker is as tangible a career as the teacher or fireman. There is little question of what the role of the job is. The children observe and learn about that profession just as they would any other profession they regularly come in contact with. Although there may be some observed feelings of resistance in the parents over the intrusions of the social worker, the children may be aware that the social worker exists to make their life beneficial, providing them with food, money, and housing. Thus, they may see the positive benefits of the work and may be drawn to help others in the same way.

Children may also be introduced to social service professions through other involvements in their own families. They may be involved in some degree of family counseling, family reconciliation, or foster care. If they have a family member battling addictions, they may have contact with chemical dependency counselors through family sessions.

An unsatisfactory childhood resulting from family dysfunction frequently leaves the children confused, empty, battling their own inner difficulties. As they attempt to come to terms with their own childhood, they may begin the study of psychology or social work. Indeed, the need to understand the self is one of the most frequent

motivations cited when social service students are questioned about their interest in the field (Hanson & McCullagh, 1995).

There is also a stated need to help others. Altruism is a very common trait among social service workers. Altruism and idealism are closely interrelated, as this altruistic work is a clear expression of altruism. The idealist observes that there is a group of people less advantaged than they and sees that he or she is of some capability to address these inequities in a positive fashion. Since idealists, as a group, seem to draw energy from positive feelings in others (Kiersey & Bates, 1978), helping these others draws positive benefit for them in a way it might not for many others.

Students who report this altruistic attitude as a motivator to study social work frequently enter into this field of study after disillusionment with more traditional fields. Hanson & McCullagh (1995) report that in their 10-year study of BSW (Bachelor of Social Work) students, 80.9% of them had considered another major or career in college before deciding on social work. The vast majority of them considered teaching, business, or psychology (note that two of the top three are themselves helping professions common to idealists), and the desire to work more with people and finding more personal satisfaction in social work were two of the main reasons for changing majors and career paths.

Hanson & McCullagh's study reported the following reasons for choosing social work as a career. In order of importance: working with people; contributing to individuals; contributing to society; a belief they could succeed in this type of work; effecting social change. Less important areas included: becoming a better person; good

job opportunities; job security; good working conditions; status and prestige; good salaries.

This is consistent with the reality of the profession. Compared with other professions, the working conditions of many in social service professions are substandard.

Working with a disadvantaged clientele means that funding comes from sources other than the client. People in this field frequently work for the state or for non-profit agencies. Funding for these programs are frequently cut, and as a result, salaries are kept low in comparison to the need for training. Job security may also be minimal, as frequent funding and budget cuts means frequent layoffs.

Hours may be long, hard, and inconsistent. Many social service positions require evening, weekend, and overnight duty, and schedules may change to fit the needs of an agency or its clients. Home visits, often using one's own vehicle, are also fairly common, and these visits are frequently not welcomed and may indeed be confrontational and dangerous.

In total, the work can be quite stressful. Given the degree of empathy a good social service worker holds, and the degree of identification that many have with their clients, there is a definite tendency to take the stresses of the work home.

Considering also that the clientele of a social service worker is often on the fringes of society, there may also be a tendency to see a great deal of personal disappointment. Clients may abuse drugs, get arrested, commit crime, and die unexpectedly, all at higher rates than the populace at large. Seeming successes may also be detoured, causing an especially strong disappointment. The successful drug

rehabilitation client suddenly drinks and is in a drunk driving accident. The ex-convict who seemed to do well on a job is suddenly fired. The welfare mother who did well at a community college suddenly stops going to class and flunks out.

In addition, some setbacks may get blamed on the social service worker. A child is placed in foster care and is abused there--the worker who arranged the placement is thought of as partially responsible. That same child, if not removed from his or her own home may continue to be abused and neglected, even killed, by his or her parents, at which point the social service worker is still seen to be culpable. A social worker helps place a convict in a job. When that convict steals from the company, that may reflect on the worker.

Understandably, burnout is extremely high in social service professions. The idealism that drove many to the field may be replaced by cynicism, as the counselor feels he or she is working harder on the client's life than the client is. There are attempts to reconsider motivations for entering the field and to reflect on accomplishments that have occurred, to see if one is really making a difference.

There may be changes in jobs. In fact, sometimes, those changes are encouraged, completely in contrast to the business world where loyalty is requested. One informal suggestion among chemical dependency counselors, for example, is either to change agencies or to change jobs within the same agency every two years. The idea behind that is to keep things new, to start over, to change one's perception of the clientele. Such a suggestion may keep a counselor in the field several years, while attempting to keep one single job may keep him or her in the agency for a few years, but then result in a complete career change thereafter.

Wagner (1989) interviewed members of "The Catalyst," a New York City collective of radical social workers who, among other activities, published a social work journal. Being radicals, they specifically entered into social work for idealistic reasons, generally because of beliefs that they could better the world and that social work was a means to live out their ideology. Many of the interviewed subjects became involved in social work in the late 1960s or early 1970s, when radicalism was at its peak and when social reform movements were commonplace.

They described a "missionary zeal" that drove them to the field. One stated "I thought that if I wanted to change the world ..I would be a social worker." Another stated "One becomes a social worker to do good ..It is a way of understanding the human condition and acting on it and changing it ..It goes back to when I was nine years old, understanding that poverty was wrong" (Wagner, 1989).

These same subjects, however, then encountered what Wagner described as "Images of Success, Worlds of Pain" (Wagner, 1989). While their idealism was at its peak when the students left graduate school with their MSW (all of Wagner's subjects were MSW graduates), the reality of the field sunk in. Although they all had achieved well in their fields (not only in writing for "The Catalyst", but in their work as well), they frequently struggled to justify their careers and their current situations and motivations.

Many of the social workers were now employed in other fields, as business executives, union officials, college instructors, and researchers (Wagner, 1989). Discussing their resumes led to some defensiveness, as they minimized their instances of job turnover, especially downplaying periods of unemployment and the importance of job tension and stress. The average subject in Wagner's study held five different positions in

the past 10 years, some including arts, carpentry, or business, and yet they generally attempted to make this appear as normal, rational, logical. One stated: "It's not like I feel I have this career. You know, like a career that's moving along . . . I just ended up doing different things" (Wagner, 1989).

In any other field, such as business or education, this would be unusual. Yet, considering that 19 of Wagner's 24 subjects reported instances of high tension (defined as at least one extremely conflictual job situation that lasted two years. Wagner, 1989), such a response might not be so surprising. If idealists tend to work for reasons other than a paycheck (as Kiersey & Bates, 1978, and Myers et al, 1998, suggest), then if the job does not fulfill those expectations, there would be a need to move on to something else, at least temporarily.

Although Wagner's subjects reported a lessening of their idealism, they reacted to it in different ways. Some still remained committed to the idea of social change through social work--they remained in the field. Some still held a commitment to the ideology but were disillusioned with social work in general--they became academics, movement organizers, or union leaders. Some were completely detached, with no commitment to social change or social work, seeing their radicalism as a folly of youth--they moved to business or public agency or non-profit agency management.

Whereas the radicalism and belief in social change may have been the primary motivator for entry into the social service fields in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s saw a major change in motivation. Graduates during the "Me Generation" frequently saw social service work as a means to a greater personal end, and many saw the field as a stepping stone towards work as a private psychologist or other professional. Others worked as a

way to prestige or to finance their education. Private practice social work became common, increasing the degree of professionalism associated with it, but removing much of the ideology. Helen Land (1987) in researching this change, came across students who stated "Why did I go into social work? Truthfully, I wanted a relatively quick license to become a shrink," and "Why should I have to settle for living on the margin? I want it all--the status, the prestige--just like everyone else." Most disturbing was that the needs of the client were frequently unimportant with this new breed of social workers. "I realize short-term treatment can be more effective than traditional psychotherapy, but building a steady private practice makes its use untenable."

Though social service work has historically been aimed toward the economically disadvantaged, in the 1980s, that began to change. While it has always been taught that social work professionals need to "be willing to contribute a portion of their services for which little or no financial return is received," (Caughlan, et al, n.d.), in the 1980s, private practitioners began to reduce or eliminate that portion in order to serve more paying clients.

Consequently, the people who often need social work the most--the indigent, the aged, the disabled, women, minorities, and children usually had the least access to services. Without health insurance, they could not visit the private practitioners, and the public agencies were understaffed and underfunded, limiting access there as well.

Idealism returned to the forefront in the 1990s, however, and again most people entering the field are doing so for altruistic reasons (Csikai & Rozensky, 1997). However, their idealism is grounded in reality. Unlike the 1960s and 1970s, today's idealist knows that he or she will not change the world, but may make life a little better for some people,

and is satisfied with that prospect (Katona, 1999). Quite commonly in the 1990s and today as well, are people who are entering the field because of identification with the disadvantaged. Many people entering the field today come from disadvantaged backgrounds themselves, dysfunctional families, broken homes, and the like.

So it is clear that social service work is a calling for many, if not most who are involved with it. Certain personalities seem natural for counseling and aiding the disadvantaged, and those personalities tend also to see intrinsic rewards (a sense of being able to make a difference) as more important than extrinsic rewards (a paycheck). The concern, though, would be how to keep the idealism alive, to keep these people from burning out and moving on into another career.

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