
Resident Guests: Social Workers in Host Settings

SINCE their profession was formalized, social workers have been working guests in "host settings," or organizations whose mission and decision making are defined and dominated by people who are not social workers. Like guests in any circumstance, social workers in host organizations must make their stay of continuing interest to their employers by providing evidence on a regular basis of their indispensability to either the mission or overall welfare of the host.

Hospitals, schools, psychiatric clinics, and juvenile courts constituted the first wave of host organizations that invested in or at least tolerated social workers during the heyday of progressivism and the settlement movement (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1986; Radin, 1989; Roberts, 1983; Shevlin, 1983). As urbanization, industrialization, and immigration accelerated the urgency of interconnecting the resources of families, informal support networks, and community institutions, social workers carved out roles and responsibilities in diverse arenas, many under the aegis of other professions. This centrifugal tendency intensified following World War I, when industrial and military organizations began employing social workers in a systematic fashion (Akabas & Kurzman, 1982; Maas, 1951).

During the New Deal, federal and state governments became host settings for thousands of social workers (Fisher, 1980). Still later, leaders of labor unions, juvenile correctional facilities, prisons, jails, probation and parole programs, police departments, and legal aid societies invited social workers into their midst (Roberts, 1983; Weiner, Akabas, & Sommer, 1973). More recently, new niches for social work have emerged within nursing homes, health maintenance organizations, and hospices (Profitt, 1987; Rossen, 1987). In addition, corporations, long-standing employers of social workers, have found additional

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Social workers have practiced in diverse host settings since the profession's origins. Host settings—arenas in which social workers practice that are defined and dominated by people who are not social workers—proliferated during the 1980s as key sites of social work with children, workers, families, and terminally ill and older people. Four predictable problems accompany social workers' presence as resident guests within host settings: (1) value discrepancies between hosts and guests; (2) the marginality of social workers' token status; (3) the devaluing of social work as women's work in settings that are predominantly male in inspiration and composition; and (4) role ambiguity and role strain within the cluster of roles that social workers enact as resident guests. Social workers in host settings must engage in advocacy and collaboration, form working alliances with diverse others, and mobilize resources and influence.

roles for them in employee assistance programs and philanthropic units.

The status of resident guest has carried with it a number of problems and opportunities that merit periodic reexamination as social work and host organizations evolve. Some of these challenges are idiosyncratic, found only in host organizations of a particular category such as hospitals. Others are generic to most if not all host settings, regardless of occupational domain. This article addresses generic challenges, drawing on a century of professional experience that can guide contemporary students and experienced practitioners working in a variety of host organizations.

Social workers have repeatedly been confronted with predictable forms of professional challenge during the many decades of residence in host settings. These challenges appear to be associated unavoidably with guest status. Regardless of the kind of host setting, social workers have repeatedly encountered four types of problem: (1) discrepancies between professional mission and values and those of dominant individuals in the employing institution; (2) marginality of token status within workplaces employing few social workers; (3) the devaluing of social work as women's work in settings that are predominantly male in inspiration and composition; and (4) role ambiguity and role strain.

Predictable Issues Encountered in Host Organizations

Discrepancies between Professional Mission and Value Differences

One does not have to work long in a hospital, corporation, or school before recognizing the discrepancy between the mission and values of the organization and those of the social work unit, team, or lone practitioner. Social workers in host agencies face numerous stresses and pressures if they serve with integrity and maintain their commitment to client self-determination. Although the social work profession traditionally has recognized the value of the individual practitioner as one of the constituent components of practice, organizational leaders in host settings necessarily focus more on accountability to boards of directors and funding sources that focus on cost containment and profit incentives; in these instances, organizational goals are placed ahead of client well-being (Balgopal, 1989). A host environment with multiple and often conflicting expectations poses predictable difficulties

for social workers, including stress, accountability, and shrinking resources.

Stress is inherent in host agencies in which multidisciplinary teams invoke values that may be at variance with the values to which the social worker owes allegiance. The social worker collaborates with legal, education, penal, corporate, and health professionals who see clients through heterogeneous, distinctive disciplinary lenses.

For example, school administrators and teachers may stress the primacy of cognitive development, whereas social workers may emphasize multidimensional student growth. Yet student development remains the common ground that both educators and social workers share. In other circumstances, the variance may be of major import, perhaps even threatening the integrity of the social work conducted. For instance, a school administrator or board of education may decide that a school should devote itself primarily to the success of children who have demonstrated the best verbal and mathematical talent, relegating to secondary status the development of students who have evidenced less intellectual promise. Collaborating with this stated or unstated mission would pose a fundamental difficulty for school social workers, who are charged by their profession with serving clients in an equitable manner.

Although social workers in host agencies often have values akin to those of the organization, tacit value differences usually abound. In the prison system, a social worker faces value conflicts with guards who view prisoners with contempt, hostility, or rejection based on the premise that the prisoner deserves punishment rather than rehabilitation. Contradictions are often present between legal requirements and child welfare policies and procedures. For example, working in the best interests of the child may be at odds with court-ordered mandates and directives (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984).

A second source of strain for social workers is the intensification of bureaucratic control over service delivery. Numerous regulations and monitoring bodies, compounded by an espousal of business principles and bottom-line values as the panacea for salvaging

social service delivery, constrain social work professionals who are serving clients in host organizations. Administrative decisions that reflect the priorities of boards of directors and of funding sources who reconfigure the allocation of agency resources and profits sometimes pose a dilemma for social workers, whose central mission is maximizing the resources and choices of clients.

Social workers are required in host agencies to be both diplomatic and assertive in defending actions reflecting professional values. As a result, social workers are caught in a number of disempowering organizational binds that grow out of inherent differences between the priorities of agency executives and line workers. For example, in hospital settings, administrators must emphasize efficiency and cost containment, whereas clinicians necessarily focus on patient problems and services. Timely assessment and discharge planning appear to be the central tasks for social workers. If the physician or hospital administrator wants to discharge the patient before community resources are in place, ethical problems arise for the social worker who is asked to implement this decision.

Other examples of conflict between agency priorities and workers' values can be found in unions and schools. In one union, a social worker proposed day care for employees' children or elderly parents suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The agency administrator, however, was more interested in work performance and increased productivity and believed resources should be allocated to treat substance abuse problems. In school, administrators focused on student absenteeism and reorganized the school accordingly, sometimes eliminating social workers and replacing them with field workers who contributed to the school's mission of filling classroom seats, rather than treating students and their families.

Unable or unwilling to deal with the double binds and value conflicts in host agencies, some social workers leave the system. Others incorporate and identify with the values of the host organization. To diminish their value conflicts, they screen out the double-bind messages of the agency. Sherman and Wenocur

(1983) reported that these social workers stop acting as effective advocates for clients, shut down their empathic responses, and often resort to complex paper shuffling. Kadushin (1985) suggested that social workers should acknowledge the stress these actions induce and accommodate and articulate different points of view regarding a problematic situation, keeping in mind their own conception of the best interests of the population served. Social workers should foster an open climate in which different points of view can be heard, even when their views differ from those of others.

Marginality of Token Status

Tokens are members of an organization who belong to a subgroup that constitutes 15 percent or fewer of the members of a work force in which another subgroup predominates (Kanter, 1977). In host settings in which 85 percent or more of the employees share a profession or occupation other than social work, social workers are tokens. Prisons, corporations, schools, hospitals, and military organizations are all institutional contexts in which social workers are a tiny minority.

As Kanter discovered in her path-breaking studies of women within male-dominated corporations, token workers encounter many barriers and discriminatory practices caused by perceptual distortions of the predominant majority within an organization (Kanter, 1977). Token workers' unusual visibility within a workplace results in extreme performance pressures and allows them little margin for error and few opportunities for trial-and-error learning. Majority group members tend to view token workers as different from themselves in every respect and overestimate the homogeneity among tokens. These misperceptions lead majority group members to avoid token workers and to prejudge them as inadequate to perform their assigned tasks. Token workers are isolated on the job and deprived of important informal opportunities to learn from and work side by side with majority group members (Kanter, 1977).

Social workers within host institutions are subject to the same hazards of

tokenism that Kanter's corporate women encountered. Because there are relatively few social workers in corporations, schools, prisons, hospitals, and military organizations, their every decision and action can be scrutinized for deviation from overall organizational norms, routines, and ideology. Lone social workers on psychiatric units of hospitals, for example, have reported experiencing extreme pressures in team meetings and case conferences to perform and conform (Hubscham, 1983). The small number of social workers in host settings makes it possible for other professionals and staff members to work for months or even years without direct face-to-face exchanges with the social workers which permits biases to remain unexposed to experiential verification and challenge. Testimony from social workers employed at jails and prisons suggests that correctional officers and wardens tend to view the work of social service personnel with the presupposition that social workers, unlike themselves, are "soft" on criminals and easily taken in by the manipulations of the inmates (Grodd & Simon, 1990). Veteran and beginning social workers alike fight a continual battle to reduce misperceptions of themselves in host settings.

Devaluing of Social Work as Women's Work

Social work has largely been a profession peopled by women (Leiby, 1978; Lubove, 1975). Consequently, it bears the attributes and stigmas historically found attached to such professions. Like teaching, nursing, and librarianship, social work was founded to attend in the public domain to the same functions that women were assigned under industrial capitalism and its family ethic (Abramovitz, 1988; Kessler-Harris, 1982). These functions included caring for dependents and ensuring intergenerational continuity by nurturing people and transmitting traditional values.

Caretaking, child-raising, and social maintenance generally have been conducted during the 20th century by women from the lower professional rungs of large public or not-for-profit bureaucracies such as hospitals, schools,

and welfare offices (Ehrenreich, 1985). In most circumstances, these large bureaucracies are headed and managed by men (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1987). For social workers in host settings, this predictable gender distinction between line workers and executive-level leaders compounds the differences between hosts and guests. One consequence of this gender distinction is that, even in the same agency, social workers are paid less than other line-level members of male-dominated professions, such as physicians, correctional officers, and accountants (Kessler-Harris, 1982; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989).

The legacy of the family wage remains embedded in the salary structures of women's work and women's professions. The family wage—the wage paid to male breadwinners that was supposed to be sufficient to maintain an entire family, including their wife and children—hinged on the dual assumptions that all women are married and that women workers, therefore, do not need to support themselves or their families. The correlative concept to the family wage was that of "pin money," or wages allotted to women workers who, it was presumed, worked only to afford extra treats because basic necessities were covered by their husbands' earnings. As outmoded as these two notions are in a world of two-earner households, their potency throughout at least eight decades of professional life, from 1890 to 1970, has a lasting effect on the wages of female professionals and of male professionals in women's professions (NASW, 1987).

Another consequence of the gender difference between most social workers and most managers in host agencies is the reduced likelihood that social workers will be promoted into top decision-making positions within those agencies. The homosociality that Kanter (1977) documented in corporations—the preference for surrounding oneself at work with people as much like oneself as possible—appears to work directly against such promotions. Social workers in host settings are "other" in two senses: they bring an alien professional tradition with them, and they are typically female. Regrettably, pay and formal

promotions are not the only casualties of this gender difference. The informal influence that social workers can bring to bear on host environments is less than it would be if managers were women or if the majority of social workers were men (Gummer & Edwards, 1985; Holloway & Brager, 1985; Karlins & Abelson, 1970; Reardon, 1981).

Female social workers in host organizations run by men of other professions encounter a work universe of male-defined behaviors and assumptions. Distinctions between men's and women's ways of talking, interacting, making ethical judgments, knowing, leading, and making decisions reflect behavioral and attitudinal patterns that women's studies scholars have elaborated on and documented in detail (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Henley & Thorne, 1976; Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984; Wood & Karten, 1986). Women or men in male-dominated organizations who conduct themselves in a "female mode" risk invisibility and inaudibility. A female mode is an interactional and problem-solving style in which open-ended statements and questions are used more frequently than closed-ended statements. This mode relies more on direct references to experience, intuition, and logic than does the "male mode" of communication (Belenky et al., 1986; Henley & Thorne, 1976; Wood & Karten, 1986). The risks of operating in a mode other than the dominant one are accentuated by the generic role ambiguity and role strain experienced by resident professional guests in host settings.

Role Ambiguity and Role Strain

Role ambiguity and role strain engender stress for social workers in a host agency (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). Although much of the research has been in the child welfare arena, role strain and ambiguity can be found regardless of occupational domain. The intensity of the stress experienced may change from one host setting to another.

Depending on the social, economic, and political conditions of the organization, the social worker is asked to assume both a helper and controller role. In the helper role, direct services to

clients on both an emotional and a concrete level are paramount. The allocation and management of resources, the drive for efficiency, and the engagement in routine tasks to meet the demands of regulatory agencies and fiscal constraints invoke the role of control.

The political and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s inspired social workers to organize client groups to advocate for services and civil rights. In contrast, present regulatory policies, budget constraints, public scrutiny, and civil liability (Besharov, 1984) have reshaped social work's role and the delivery of services. Larger numbers of elderly people, social and political upheavals in the Caribbean and Central and South America, and changing immigration policies in the Soviet Union have shifted the composition of the population and presented new problems and client populations for social workers.

Increasingly, professional roles in large host service agencies focus on outcomes and the processing of a maximum number of people in the shortest period of time (Fabricant, 1985). This shift toward short-term interventions, rapid assessment, and brief treatment requires social workers to modify their practice orientation to meet organizational needs while continuing to protect the quality and continuity of care.

Operating, as social workers often do, from a low-ranking position in host agencies, they must exert deliberate efforts to influence organizational life. This society socializes many of its members to fit into prescribed organizational roles rather than to create or expand them. Creative and innovative social workers in host agencies have exploited ambiguities of function to extend the scope and character of the profession's function (Gitterman & Miller, 1989). For example, hospital social workers can engineer a new work role by redefining their tasks as discharge planners. Instead of being bombarded with referrals from all personnel on their assigned floors, they can coordinate the discharge planning process by initiating weekly rounds with team members. This process allows them to gain more control over the content and context of the work assignment (Murdach, 1983) and provides an opportunity to exercise judgment and to refine

skills. Social workers in employee assistance programs in corporations initially provided only alcoholism counseling, but they have broadened their role to include labor and community relations, case management, retirement planning, and work with retirees.

Some social workers undervalue concrete services because they sometimes require less clinical skill than other tasks. Social workers who have relinquished task responsibilities to other professions in host agencies have suffered a significant loss of power (Fabricant, 1985). Ironically, the mundane details of discharge planning (for example, the provision of wheelchairs or homemaker services) have become a priority in the current fiscal climate in health care, and recognition for the performance of this important function has gone to other disciplines.

Questions of professional turf and autonomy arise because many professionals in host agencies are concerned with similar activities and interventions related to clients' welfare. Although these problems are not new in host agencies, there is growing concern and discussion about the increased role blurring in work with psychosocial aspects of the client's life. Environmental demands and current trends cause some social work roles to be relinquished to other professions in the organization. Confusion over the role of other disciplines occurs most often when a task seems to belong to more than one discipline (Lister, 1980). Toseland, Ganeles-Palmer, and Chapman (1986) studied teams in psychiatric hospitals and found that role confusion emerged around the question of who was responsible for supervising the work of team members. For example, some social workers reported that nurses were performing traditional social work roles. Such role confusion, according to Burt (1979), is not something to be avoided. It is not a sign of weakness but rather is an accurate reflection of the nature of interpersonal and power relationships in host agencies.

In the criminal justice system, the collaborative role of social work has complemented the orientation of parole officers to achieve a treatment goal with a client. The officers' more directive approach can help greatly when tempered

with social workers' understanding of the client's needs.

Social work practitioners in host agencies can provide leadership and still maintain their traditional concern with clients and their environment. While tending to clients' needs, social workers can respond to both changing agency environments and organizational structures.

Social Work's Strengths

In spite of the complexity of guest status in host settings, social workers are in an advantageous position because of their holistic perspective and their specialized knowledge and ability to transfer skills across disparate settings. Siporin (1980) stated that from the beginning, the social work profession has been concerned with people and their environments. Social workers' educational training and knowledge, modeled on an ecosystem framework (Germain & Gitterman, 1980; Meyer, 1983), support this view.

Social workers in host settings are often viewed by staff as possessing special expertise in the areas of human services, community resources, community organization, and assistance in obtaining financial benefits. These perceptions have given social workers a base from which to exercise influence. As one of the leading professions for advocacy for the rights of clients, social work historically has focused on prevention. When social workers have worked together with parents, union members, or health professionals to advocate for change or to safeguard existing legislation, a forceful and effective alliance has resulted. Social workers' advocacy strategies have focused on providing support, information, and organization for the exertion of political pressure to obtain expanded resources. The advocacy role is one of many discrete roles used by practitioners to balance the needs of their clients with the demands of the social environment (Compton & Galaway, 1989). Constructive parental involvement has a multiplier effect among school personnel. When the worker initiates purposeful, professional interchange with parents, it may well be the parents' first positive contact with school personnel, and as

a result parents may become advocates for the school. A number of special interest groups such as Concerned Citizens for Handicapped Children have emerged because of social work (Dane, 1985). The school social worker can further advocate for students by reaching out to varied constituencies in the district.

The process of collaboration is pervasive in host settings. All forms of collaboration require particular knowledge, skills, and attitudes in working with others to meet clients' needs, to solve problems, and to carry out clinical tasks. The social worker views the strengths and disabilities of clients within the context of the environment in which they need to function. This perspective can be shared with other staff members and is helpful to each discipline involved in the client's life.

One area open to collaboration between social work and medicine is health care delivery to special populations. Social workers and doctors can influence the design of clinics and programs aimed at low-income, immigrant, aged, and handicapped populations. Physicians are knowledgeable about disease, disability, and treatment. Social workers understand social characteristics and their effects on patient access, communication, compliance, and comfort (Schilling & Schilling, 1987).

School social workers can encourage pregnant adolescents to comply with both their school work and medical regimes by collaborating with both teachers and doctors. Social workers employed by a public defender's office can advocate for clients in the legal system and perform valuable services for clients and attorneys (Ashford, Macht, & Mylym, 1987).

The use of interdisciplinary teams to plan and deliver human services has become increasingly common in host settings. Most social workers are members or leaders of an interdisciplinary team (Toseland et al., 1986). Team members lay claims to areas of competence and particular associated tasks. Effective teamwork is particularly important for social workers in a host agency because it gives them an opportunity to cultivate support and alliances. For example, in a psychiatric setting, social workers can help each other re-

duce isolation; share the joys, tensions, and frustrations of clients; and become valued team members by providing a comprehensive and coordinated treatment plan for discharge. As the social work profession matures and validates its particular areas of expertise, it will have the capacity to gain power, influence, and respect in host settings.

Recommendations

Like any group in the minority, social workers in host agencies are frequently vulnerable and under scrutiny. Stereotypical behavior may be attributed to the social worker, who has yet to be viewed as an equal partner in the host agency. Social workers will only take their rightful place in host agencies when they can demonstrate their value to the organization and articulate their contribution to the setting and when they are represented in sufficient numbers and strength to make evident their support of the central mission of the agency.

Imprecise delineation by social workers of their responsibilities and inadequate performance by social workers may be responsible for the chipping away of many traditional social work roles by other practitioners in the helping professions. Social workers must not weaken their power by carelessly abdicating professional territory to other individuals or groups. This does not mean that social workers should hesitate to share their responsibilities; in fact, they need to share them willingly with others. They must, however, always maintain the right of final review and approval for any shared task.

Social workers should establish realistic expectations about what they can and cannot do. This stance requires social workers to maintain a willingness and capacity to continually negotiate the conditions of their work. They must become aware of the many sources of power available to them in their role and become comfortable with taking and using power (Patti & Resnick, 1972). Social workers in host settings must decide on their role and then make it viable and essential; the knowledge they bring and the values they espouse add a positive dimension to client services.

By managing tension and being aware of value differences, social workers can create a work environment that is sensitive to both clients' needs and agency diversity. Wax (1971) explained that such tensions need not be detrimental and can be healthy if managed creatively. He noted that practitioners and team members in host agencies draw on the same principles and values in their respective practices. Both subscribe to behaviors that enhance dignity and self-esteem in the individual, maximize their capacities, and foster self-determination.

Token workers in many settings have found support groups to be invaluable aids for surviving and thriving. These groups can consist of social workers from the same workplace or from several different workplaces (Toseland et al., 1986). Supportive mentors on the job or from other arenas are another recommended and less costly source of assistance for token social workers. Informal or formal caucuses of token workers at worksites also assist them in drawing strength from each other and making suggestions to or demands on the organization in a collective fashion.

Similarly, female social workers in male-run organizations can help themselves with support groups, mentors, and caucuses. In addition, if study groups of female social workers explored the literature on male and female patterns of behavior in complex organizations, they would be better equipped to navigate the water of host bureaucracies.

In the 1990s the social work profession is entering new areas of practice in host settings, such as employee assistance programs and outplacement agencies. New kinds of client problems, new reference groups, and new organizational settings will challenge the social work profession to expand its eclectic and ecological orientation, to remain open to new perspectives on practice, and, simultaneously, to function flexibly in multiple host settings.

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