

Episode 69 - Dr. Patricia Carlson and Dr. Nancy Humphreys: The Walmartization of Social Services: Impacts and Ethical Considerations of When Clients Become Workers

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson. And I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed the living proof podcast as evidenced by the more than 130000 downloads today. Thanks to all of you. We'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcasts in your classrooms. Just go to our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click on Contact Us tab. Again thanks for listening and we look forward to hearing from you. The walmartization to a sign of social services. This is what today's guests Dr. Patricia Carlson and Nancy Humphreys call the financial effect that often occurs for those who leave the welfare rolls to work. And social service agencies. Poverty wages hours short of full time and loss of health insurance coverage often accompany this transition. When that transition is from welfare to work that agencies from which they formerly received services ethical issues arise. Dr. Patricia Carlson is a senior research associate with the Tennessee Foundation. Her areas of specialization include public and private child welfare and family services.

[00:02:10] The intersection of poverty and child abuse and neglect. And moving from welfare to employment. Dr. Nancy Humphreys is a professor of policy practice and director of the Nancy Humphreys institute her political social work at the University of Connecticut. She is a former dean of the School of Social Work and past president of the National Association of Social Workers. Her areas of specialization include public Child Welfare and Family Services women's issues social work education and social work in Armenia. Doctors Carlson and Humphreys discuss their research on the phenomenon of moving from welfare to work and social service agencies. Its impact on workers and clients and the ethical implications that follow. Charles Sims clinical associate professor at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work spoke with doctors Carlson and Humphreys by telephone. Good afternoon. This is Charles Syms and I'm with doctors Patricia Carlson and Nancy Humphreys Well doctors how are you today. Fine and you. How are you. Fine fine. I teach the interventions one class here at the school and we spend time talking about ethics. And one of the things that I often talked with the students about is the fact that it's in schools that we had the opportunity to talk about ethical issues or ethical considerations. But once we move into professional practice we often don't get the opportunity to have those grave ethical discussions that we had while we are in class. So I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about your work and about your study concerning this population. I conducted a mixed method study of women who left welfare for employment.

[00:04:00] There was a study of TANF leavers and one of the unanticipated findings of this study was that a number of these women who had left welfare for employment in Connecticut were being employed with their either within the same agency or within another social service agency in the community. That's a little bit of the background. I'll tell you a little bit about the study as I said it was a mixed message study the qualitative piece was in-depth interviews with 12 Connecticut women who had left TANF between 1999 and 2005 and the collect data through a brief questionnaire and then an in-depth interview. And so as through that process which was part of a larger study we found that many of these women were being employed with their former agencies.

And so we went back and took a look at a nationally representative to be to set the panel study of income dynamics which is a nationally representative longitudinal study of all types of data related to income and employment and found that trend was also followed in the national study. And so you know we found out that many women who left welfare for employment were in fact being employed in the social service industry. And so we explored a number of themes that were related to the findings that we found in Connecticut. So for instance in the Connecticut study two thirds of the women who left welfare were being employed in their former agencies. We didn't find as many international study but we found a really substantial percentage we found 20 percent of national studies so those were women who had left welfare for employment during or between 1999 and 2005 were working in the social service sector. So a large number of very large number of women.

[00:05:51] And then what we found that was interesting in terms of some of the important trends were that half of the American sample of the women who were working social service agencies were still living in poverty even with those jobs. And nationally 67 percent of those women were making an income below the poverty threshold. We also found that in the Connecticut sample that 60 percent of those Tannis leavers were receiving state subsidized health care and 14 percent had no coverage. And these were women who were working in social service agencies nationally. 25 percent were receiving subsidized healthcare and 13 percent had no health insurance whatsoever are reporting no health insurance whatsoever. The National the data indicated that the women were working at hours that were sort of full time and did not receive benefits. So this was an issue which we call the Wal-Mart ization of social services. And this mirrors the manner in which Wal-Mart then widely criticized for treating lower wage workers. So those were some of the key findings from all the studies. And then further with the Connecticut sample those were in-depth interviews and a number of themes regarding other ethical dilemmas that emerged from hiring former clients. As I listened to you it sounds like there were two major areas of concern that I hear one of those is the ethical implications of actually hiring. What were former of that agency services as well as what happens with them afterwards said the notion and this idea that how they're compensated for their work. So it sounds like there are two major things there.

[00:07:38] One is if we could address them both as I read more I got really very interested in this because I know a number of programs are now looking at bringing individuals who are previous recipients into their agencies as as employees or as peer representative peer paraprofessionals someone if we could talk about the ethical issues and then talk a little bit about the actual compensation kind of issues that you've highlighted earlier. Sure when you're thinking about the ethical issues what kinds of things that you find that you discover were most salient in the work that you did there essentially are two concerns one is what is called a conflict of interest and the other is called dual relationships and within the NASW code of ethics the discussion of dual relationships appears in the same section as the issue of conflict of interest so I think one of the first questions is what are the same and what are different between something called conflicts of interest and something called dual relationships an issue with a conflict of interest is that it is a broader construct than the notion of dual relationships. It can be a conflict of interest can be impersonal it does not necessarily require a relationship or even knowing the other party or even the relation. The potential conflict with the relationship with the client in contrast to what's called a dual relationship which is much more focused and requires some kind of face to face contact or some kind of face to face activity a conflict of interest involves a social workers obligation to treat their client as the primary focus of concern. And there is a conflict any time a social worker would have an interest in something else that would be affected by their relationship with the client.

[00:09:28] So for example if a social worker asked a client to provide them with some assistance they hired them to do something they have a broken computer and the client happened the social worker knows that the client is very good with computers and so asks the client if the client would would take a look at their computer and figure out what's wrong with it and perhaps even go so far

as to ask the client to repair the computer. That is considered a conflict of interest because it's not known whether or not the client would be making a free choice to engage in that activity and even if the client said Oh I'd be happy to do that I would like to do that for you. There is always an implicit concern because many many clients in fact many argue that all clients have a built in tendency to want to please their worker and so their decision is to do something for the worker might not necessarily be really fully voluntary or a complete exercise of free will since clients want to please workers with the concept of conflicts of interest there is something called dual relationships and the code of ethics speaks to the fact that code that dual relationships almost always in fact. Others would argue always have negative consequences for clients because there is always the potential of some kind of negative repercussion of having a relationship with the client in the helping context and then also a relationship in another context.

[00:11:17] For example if you have a client and a member of your family marries to the same family or the family pardon me of your client at family gatherings you are going to have a social worker who knows a great deal about a family member and a client who is always vulnerable to the fact that the social worker might slip and say something that had been shared with the social worker in confidence. So a dual relationship is one the social worker has a second role or a relationship with a client or most importantly with a former client. The NASW code of ethics requirement that one manage and prevent dual relationships also includes former clients. Because again there is a power differential in the relationship itself and is that a power relationship endures even after the professional relationship has been terminated because the social worker always knows things about the client that the client would not necessarily have shared with others. The issue in terms of having panic if leavers working in agencies with is there the worker with whom they work when they were on TANF presents all kinds of dual relationships and potential conflict of interest concerns. I see. Do you have thoughts about other kinds of individuals who might be working in that agency who might I'm thinking of individuals who people maybe they're not necessarily employees but individuals who are held up as role models or stars or success stories to them seeing more and more of that kind of utilization also. Does that same sinking or that's the same concept transferred to those or move to those. Would that be applicable in those kinds of settings or situations in certain circumstances it can't. And what we're talking about in this in this regard are instances in which some of our values and some of our hopes are working at cross purposes. And let me give you a for instance.

[00:13:37] I think that it's very useful to have clients who are served by social service agencies on the boards of agencies. Now having said that board members have all kinds of access to all kinds of information about social workers in the agency that clients would never have access to. So if one is going to accomplish the good of adding clients to decision making authority one is going to have to offset that good by paying attention to the fact that it's very possible that things about a particular worker will be revealed to clients even though that is a former relationship obviously and one has to think about how to sort that out. The other thing is that with ethics they are not cut and dry. There's not a right answer under all circumstances one has to figure out what are the implications of these arrangements and how does one protect everyone who is in who's involved and could potentially be hurt by this. The other issue that you that you raised Chass you know the notion of people who are held up as role models or people who are stars and Dr Carlson has some examples of people's making notice just that phenomenon. In her study which was part of what brought our attention to this as well and there are real pitfalls and that kind of process because what if you stumble. What if what if something happens what if you are not able to be a star and when this first emerged I remembered as a very young social worker many many many years ago I worked in adoption.

[00:15:23] It was my second year field placement and at that time the myth of the chosen child was how adoptive parents were told to explain to kids that they were adopted that they were chosen and lots of studies in the mid 60s came to show that Chosen Children were insecure children because

they were very afraid of what would happen if the parents chose differently. Now when the kids misbehaved. So putting people in these special categories has real downsides to it. It has good sides too because people feel very good to have been chosen to be a star but they also have a lot of psychological cost of what happens if they lose that and I don't know. You may want to Dr Carlson may want to share one of those stories. I was just getting ready to ask her if she'd like to weigh in. Let me go to that and then talk a little bit about it. This was from one of the interview as my manager was constantly telling me that you are an amazing real life example. And I'm sitting right next to her now but not at the same program but we're working there and she refers to me her clients all the time so I can find out some of them and she tells me all the time. I can't believe where you are where you're sitting. And every time she thinks about it she tells me how proud of me.

[00:16:43] So a real direct example of that being you know being elevated to a bar and then and we saw these kinds of this is one example of a theme that came up over and over again and then talking about the nexus that Dr. Humphreys referred to some of them but also some negative comes in the way that some of these stars than treat other clients and some of the cases where some of these people were elevated were getting all kinds of special treatment to work by their case workers help them in ways that the others. And so then another thing that emerged was that their clients are having unrealistic expectations. I was able to get here. Why can't you sometimes not necessarily seeing some of the special treatment they may have received for whatever reason. I'd like to take this opportunity to shift a little bit because you kind of answered my second question and that was what would be the impact on the clients of people who have been elevated to this new role of worker and how that might impact them. Any thoughts about that. Well there's one thing there's one thing we haven't talked about at all and that is the issue of privacy and confidentiality because if you elevate one client who is part of a group of clients then how do you protect the privacy rights of the other clients who have not been elevated. And I think one of the reasons that we became concerned about this and one of the things that really needs to be the focus of these kinds of discussions and considerations is what are you doing in order to protect the rights of everybody who is involved.

[00:18:20] So what are these agencies doing to ensure that a client which we came to call a client any worker that is a client who is now a worker does not have inappropriate access to the private information of other clients with whom they used to share a peer relationship and now they don't anymore because that the one client is now working for the organization from which other clients continue to receive services. There are ways to protect people such as making sure certain that all clients with whom we're cly you're a former client who is now your worker would have had any contact making sure that they never have access to their files or never have access to their information. But it requires a very systematic and conscious effort to protect the rights of everyone who is a party to to these interactions. And what we have found and I think others have found as well is that there tends to be a kind of a lackadaisical attitude about this that people don't necessarily understand the nuance or the difficulties that these kinds of situations propose and so there is no real plan to address these issues and to protect the rights of others most especially the rights of other clients would not want their former client colleague or client peer to have access to their information. As I hear you talking explaining the way to manage this I find myself thinking of the term risk management as a term I use sometimes I'm I'm talking in class or in class we're talking about thinking about managing risk in situations in ethical situations. This feels like very much the same kind of thinking it is. And I think that people in the field who write about these kinds of issues particularly Frederick rímur speak about a third of risk management as being the only thing that is a possible way to cope with these kinds of situations. And you know ideally one avoids dual relationships period.

[00:20:39] But in all instances that isn't always possible and in these instances where people Hanife leavers have been hired by the agencies that they receive services from. There are obviously some

great advantages to them being hired. They have a job. These clients reported to Dr. Carlson that they enjoyed their work. But there are also downsides that people were generally just ignoring and the antithesis of assertive risk management is ignoring the issue. And so what has to happen is people have to pay attention to this and put in place processes that protect the rights of everybody. And generally speaking that's not happening. Dr. Humphrey and I when we presented this were two other groups of social workers who definitely wanted to assert that some of these jobs are very good jobs and do provide some things that other types of jobs that are welfare recipients definitely something that they wouldn't be getting in other employment sectors. But the issues are serious and they they can't be ignored. I see. I'd like to take this time to kind of shift gears a little bit and talk about that second issue that I was mentioning earlier. And the idea of there seems to be entirely sure research seems to show that you had some concerns concerning compensation or or pay and I was wondering if you could speak a little bit more about that but you had a term that you thought might be one to help us think about how individuals who are coming to this kind of work the differentials in compensation.

[00:22:12] Dr. Carlson Well I think that what you're referring to is the Wal-Mart sizing of social services which have term that Dr. Humphrey coined I think brilliantly summed up some of what we saw was happening because they said while these jobs were good jobs in many ways what we found was that a large percentage were not receiving a wage that was that would raise their families above the poverty threshold. And also did not provide healthcare. And so these jobs were pretty close to full time but yet still did not provide healthcare. And in fact the large percentage were receiving state subsidized health care or some didn't have health care. And so again this is an area where the retailer Lawler had been criticized and that they do this with their low wage workers and it was very striking that this is happening in social service agencies also. And because these findings were of both nationally and the Connecticut sample were all women who were working in the social service sector. So we're seeing that mirrored which was a very surprising finding. I think I would add to that Charles that this data was collected about three years ago and Wal-Mart has made a significant shift in the last 18 months around supporting public healthcare for example and national health care in part because there was a national effort to expose the fact that the lack of coverage for health care for Wal-Mart employees which was substantially less than comparable organizations such as Target or Sears or Kmart. I mean there was data nationally. I don't happen to have that at my fingertips but it would be easy to obtain that Wal-Mart was instead shifting the burden of the health care costs from their payroll to the public programs Huskie program or the Children's Health Initiative.

[00:24:06] And in state after state there was data produced as to the percentage of Wal-Mart employees whose health care for their children was coming from the Medicaid program. So Wal-Mart undertook a rather effective and assertive strategy of having television ads people talking about how happy they are to work for Wal-Mart and how they now and how they have health insurance and so forth. But it was a phenomenon that came to be called you know that people talked about Wal-Mart. You know the Wal-Mart upsizing. And so it seemed that we found the same pattern in these agencies. And another thing to take account of is that I think that it's probably worse now because these agencies are providing welfare to work services through contracts with public agencies that administer the Tanev program and they are all being cut and slashed because of the crisis of federal and state financing. So my guess is that is that there are fewer people getting health insurance today in these contracted agencies as employees than there were even perhaps with the times the data for this study was was collected. Very interesting. I'm wondering you both have found some very interesting findings as a result of your study. I'm wondering what do we do now. How do we use this or how do we move this forward into the practice arena for agencies who may find themselves after hearing this podcast maybe rethinking their position or rethinking how they're going to move forward with individuals who are employed by their agency or for agencies who might be thinking that is a part of moving forward with enough that they might want to be involved in bringing individuals who were formerly recipients of services into their agencies to become

employees.

[00:26:07] You say that in your classes you discuss the risk management around these kinds of issues. There is no magic bullet for any of this. There is no magic solution to any of this. I think people have to approach these issues and these situations as being instances in which harm can occur unless one consciously pragmatically thinks through. How can you protect the interests of everybody. I don't think either of us and we're in the process of preparing a paper at the moment neither of us want to advance the notion that this should not happen. That's not the issue at all but rather it should happen with a very conscious plan in place and a plan that respects the rights and the situation of every person in the process. You know one of the things we've heard from people as we presented this is well you're talking about professional social work ethics. Many of these agencies are not staffed by social workers that at least at the frontline. And that's generally from any of these case managers are not educated social workers. On the other hand if there is any are there if there are any social workers employed in that organization. Ignorance is not a defense for unethical behavior. And I think that we could collectively come out come up with some very creative strategies for addressing all of these issues. I think we're quite capable of doing that but we'll only do it if we pay attention. If we kind of expose this as an issue and then address it as an issue.

[00:27:46] Dr Carl Levin has looked at some instances in terms of the substance abuse field and we're trying to sort out there while much of it is self-help and not professional help. What are the things that have been done there that work and protect the interests of all parties. But I think we can figure those things out. But it may be the first step is to make these things evident and clear and conscious and then ask people to address them as interesting ethical dilemmas where everyone will have some contribution to make as to the appropriate remedy being ethical is not following a set of rules. It's implementing a process that says we are attending to the various ethical issues that are involved in this situation unfold ethical decision making. And it's it's not necessarily practiced so much in the world as it should be. The substance abuse field is starting to as it's becoming more and more professionalized as also finding itself rubbing up against some of the very concerns both of you are talking about at this point in time. So I think your work be very helpful moving forward. Dr Carlson do you have any comments that you would like to make regarding the other face of this coin. The compensation face just echoing what Dr. Humphrey said about understanding that this is a dual relationship and understanding what that means is well-defined in the code of ethics and so the conversation piece speaks to making sure that people are paid a fair living wage. I mean I think that something it's a difficult thing but it's something we certainly need to be thinking about.

[00:29:24] Certainly social workers who are in a management position needing to make sure that they know that any person coming through the door being hired would be paid a fair wage and that certainly someone that wasn't that was in a position that had to take a job since the current welfare program really mandates work that that that's not being exploited because we would know a lot more if this person was a former client we would know a lot more about their history. So in terms of the compensation is this really that that also ties into the into the ethical piece that that compensation and benefit are made available to the full time job that the way that the job be given to the person agencies struggle with with this notion of costing and trying to garner contracts and I think sometimes we have to just say we have an obligation a social contract with our employees about how we're going to compensate them for their work and we think that providing these other higher salaries are aware that the higher salaries or health insurance or whatever that is we think that that's important because it makes a statement in doing that because also I found instances where these women that were working were then not able to they felt unable to seek assistance at food pantries they needed because they were working and they said they couldn't go back. It was hard to admit. And so we are sort of they are hiring people in not paying them a living wage. They may also be internally blocking them from getting other services which they may need to bring this to a close. But I do have one question before I let you both go. I know you talk to the women who are previous

recipients.

[00:31:02] I was wondering if you had the opportunity or if there was any thought about talking to the professionals or to the workers who are actually in the agencies about the impact of bringing former recipients into them into the agency and as peers almost we didn't in this study and you know dissertation or defined studies. And if that would be an interesting issue I do I know that this is not the first time that these kinds of issues have been tried. They were tried in the 60s and there was a literature in the 60s that looked at some of the impact of hiring former clients in social service organizations and the experiences were fairly mixed. There were people who were very happy and who fought it added to the agency. There were also instances in which as Dr. Carlson says the attitudes of the clients became very harsh in terms of other clients and I did this why can't you. And and so forth so I think it is a kind of mixed picture. I think if we were to collect the success stories if we were to undertake to do that and that's certainly something at some point we might consider doing that would be very interesting because it would give people some kind of a menu of things that they can think about and maybe even do to enhance the value of having a former clients as part of your inside the agency family because they can bring a very important perspective that is often neglected and needed but to have the perspective and then have the rights of clients. Compromise is obviously a very problematic tradeoff. Yes I would agree. Thank you. As we close I was wondering if either or both have any parting comments for our listening audience.

[00:32:51] Well I think whatever perspective someone is listening from I think that being very conscious of these subtleties of these kinds of situations and of the importance of treating them as issues that need to be thought through rather than just trying to ignore the problems that are attendant to these kinds of arrangements. And I agree with that. As we've mentioned earlier the the literature on this doesn't sit so much in social work. Literature doesn't mean though that this is not something I think that when I talk to people about this it's not something that they think about. In this way it's I think the most important thing is to understand again that it's a dual relationship. And then to attend to those very nuanced issues in dealing with this. Well thank you I appreciate you being with us on this podcast and I'd like to thank doctors. Nancy Humphreys and Patricia Carlson for their insights and thoughts on the issue that is certainly going to be in the mindset as we move forward with bringing individuals into practice who were former recipients. Thank you. OK. Thanks Charles. You've been listening to Dr. Patricia Carlson and Nancy Humphreys discuss the impact of moving from welfare to work at social service agencies and the ethical implications that arise. Thanks for listening. And join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and dean at University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast.

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