Joy in Social Work

Baylor School of Social Work
Field Brown Bag Lunch

David Pooler, PhD, LCSW
September 18, 2013
There may be some professions where a man or woman can be of use who does not draw joy from work, but certainly social work is not such a profession.

—Richard C. Cabot, MD (1919)
Fast forward, 94 years later…
Trends in Workforce Research

- Impaired Practice
  - Depression
  - Distress
  - Substance abuse
  - Compassion fatigue
  - Burnout
- Worker well-being:
  - Compassion satisfaction
  - Subjective well-being
What if we focused on what gives life to our work?

What could we learn from social workers who find great joy in their work?
And set out to investigate…
Our Questions

Do some social workers find joy in their work?
If so, how?
Inspired by:

Joy in Social Work

Appreciative Inquiry  Narrative Therapy  Positive Psychology  Strengths Perspective
Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry
A Positive Revolution in Change

An introduction to today's hottest new change management approach—written by two award-winning pioneers in the field

David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney
Appreciate Inquiry

- It combines the element of appreciation—including recognition, valuing, and gratitude—with inquiry—including exploration and discovery.

- “Positive imagery evokes positive emotions and positive emotions move people toward a choice for positive actions” (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003, p. 11).
Positive Psychology

A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being

Flourish

Martin E. P. Seligman

"A compelling view of a positive human future, for individuals, corporations, and nations, brilliantly told."

Tony Hsieh, author of Delivering Happiness and CEO of Zappos.com, Inc.
Positive Psychology

- is concerned with individual, organizational, community and societal experiences of well-being, contentment, satisfaction, flow, happiness, hope and optimism (e.g., Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2009).

- It focuses on what makes life worth living, how individuals make meaning and purpose out of their lives, and how institutions, including workplaces, foster positivity among their members.
“Joyful social workers” nominated by students and participants (snowball sample; n=26)
- Columbia, SC
- Asheville, NC
- Waco, TX

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews (about 45-75 minutes each)

Interview transcripts

Collaborative grounded theory analysis
Sample questions:

Tell me about a recent time when you found great joy in your work.

As you reflect back on your experience as a social worker overall:

- In what do you find the most joy?
- Where do you find joy?
- With whom do you find joy?
Sample questions (cont.):

- How has your experience of joy in your work changed since you began your social work career?
- We’re especially curious about the process involved:
  - How do you find joy at work?
  - How did you learn to find joy at work?
  - How would you tell a new social worker to find joy?
- What could you do to experience more joy at work?
Making a Difference
Making Meaning
Making a Life
Making Connections
Making Connections

- Connecting: Clients 44
- Being present 22
- Being heard 17
- Finding like-minded people 15
Making Connections

- Connecting: Clients: deep, authentic engagement with a client

“it was a deep feeling of, connectedness to some-one that I knew, that, I knew that our connectedness had really helped her through that time” (P4:73)

“But any day that I am connected with the client makes it a good day” (P8:118)
Being present: accompanying a person in distress

“As a social worker sometimes it gives me an opportunity to be there with the parents who might be in distress. I can’t fix any of the medical circumstances of the day but I can be there for the families. When they are having a bad day or they’re celebrating the fact that their baby took his first bottle” (P12:48)
Making Connections

Being present: accompanying a person in distress

“Even when I worked for hospice there was joy in someone allowing me to come into their home and help them experience the challenge of allowing their loved one to die with dignity. It’s a very sad, tough situation. But there was still joy. How awesome is it for a family to take home someone and allow them do that?” (P17:247)
Making a Difference

Making a Life

Making Meaning

Making Connections
Making a Difference

- Making a difference 63
- Witnessing client change 42
- Receiving gratitude: Work 32
- Seeing fruits of your labor 27
- Facilitating client change 20
Making a Difference (cont.)

- Facilitating client belonging 17
- Relieving client distress 13
- Appreciation: Receiving 12
- Facilitating supervisee growth 12
- Making a difference: Facilitating system change 12
- Making a difference: Influencing programmatic change 11
Making a difference: positive effect in clients’ lives

“I don’t get joy from saying these fancy words and doing these fancy things. I get joy when somebody is changed, or when somebody is grateful” (P4:167)

“There are days when I’m frustrated and I want pull my hair out but at the same time there’s still this passion and joy in the fact that I’m involved here and at some level or another it’s making a difference in people’s lives” (P16:326)
Facilitating client change: contributing to client growth and change

“Where he was when I first met him and to where he is now, it’s just been an almost complete turn around. And I’d like to think maybe I had a little bit to do with that, but I would say I find a lot of joy from that child” (P10:47)
Making a Difference

Seeing fruits of your labor: observing long-term results of one’s efforts
“things bring me joy when I can see things come to conclusion because a lot of times with social work you don’t see things, you just see things started but you don’t see things finished . . . It’s just a joyful experience” (P25:10)
Receiving gratitude: acknowledgement and appreciation by clients

“I was so happy to see him, I forgot I was a social worker, a professional. I’m like, ‘Oh my god,’ like he’s my child, you know? I hugged him tight . . . And he says ‘Ms. M___, hey’ and he said his name and he started crying. He said, ‘Everything you ever done for me, I have never forgotten’” (P7:151)
Innovating at work: creative problem-solving on the job (23)

“find something that excites, and that you’re passionate about, and do it, and not let yourself be put in a box. Even if you take a job because there’s a job description and a check with it, there’s something about that that can elicit a passion . . . in most cases you can go beyond the job description” (P16:384)
Making a Difference

Making a Life

Making Connections

Making Meaning
Making Meaning

- Finding fit in work 31
- Doing what you’re good at 17
- Doing for others 16
- Loving/liking what I do 15
- Finding meaning in work 12
- Finding purpose 12
Making Meaning

Finding fit in work: interests/skills apt for job/field
“what makes me happy and gratified and is paying my soul back is that I found the right fit for me. So I think that people who are burned out may not have found their best fit, the best work venue” (P7:219)

“there are aspects of my job that suit me, that I love. I think those suiting me as a person helps me find joy in them” (P13:212)
Making a Life

- Gaining perspective 31
- Managing expectations 18
- Rejoicing in little things 14
- Maturing 13
- Learning continually 11

“Never get so busy making a living that you forget to make a life.”
Gaining perspective: recognizing what’s important, abandoning illusions

“sometimes, you know, [social work] is very depressing. There is no question about it. But all that has a tendency to make my life in perspective and make me happier” (P4:143)

“all of the clients, all of the experiences, have taught me so much about myself. And have taught me so much about life, and what is really important” (P4:159)
What if finding joy were a part of SW practice skills?
- Contagious
- Social worker agency, self-efficacy, and initiative
- Role and primacy of interpersonal relationship
- Value of EBP in SW
- Recruitment for potential SWers
- Connection with vulnerability
Making Connections

- Primacy of field education and the relationship with the field instructor
- Renewed emphasis on relationship and “use of self”
- Meet students “where they are”
- Even without measurable outcomes, relationships are important
Making Connections

- Primacy of field education and the relationship with the field instructor
- Renewed emphasis on relationship and “use of self”
- Meet students “where they are”
- Even without measurable outcomes, relationships are important

Teachers and Instructors

- We must model with our students what we wish them to do with their clients
- Nurturing relationships with students/interns
Making a Difference

- Not dismissing desire to help people
- Relationship at the core of effectiveness
- Benefit of formally evaluating practice
Making a Difference

- Not dismissing desire to help people
- Relationship at the core of effectiveness
- Benefit of formally evaluating practice

Teachers/Field Instructors:
- Making a difference with students: building relationships/rapport with students is the parallel process of teaching students to relate with clients
Making Meaning

- Validate relationship between joy and sense of calling or purpose
- Promote reflection on choice of social work
- Promote reflection on practice experiences
- Affirming purpose and meaning in difficulties, stress, or pain
Making Meaning

- Validate relationship between joy and sense of calling or purpose
- Promote reflection on choice of social work
- Promote reflection on practice experiences
- Affirming purpose in difficulties

Teachers/Field Instructors

- Consider the legacy of your own work
- Reflect on why we chose social work and education
Making a Life

- Who we “are” is more important than what we “do”
- Finding joy in work related to how we live “outside” of work
- Nurturing relationships in and out of work
- Balanced life
Making a Life (cont.)

- Keep perspective and appreciate small gains
- Realistic expectations and acceptance while taking initiative to change what we can (Serenity Prayer)
- Practice “gratitude”
- Lifelong learning—never have it all figured out
Making a Life (cont.)

- Keep perspective and appreciate small gains
- Realistic expectations and acceptance while taking initiative to change what we can (Serenity Prayer)
- Practice “gratitude”
- Lifelong learning—never have it all figured out
- Teachers
- All apply . . .
Making a Life (cont.)

- Keep perspective and appreciate small gains
- Realistic expectations and acceptance while taking initiative to change what we can (Serenity Prayer)
- Practice “gratitude”
- Lifelong learning—never have it all figured out

Teachers
- All apply . . .
- What we teach students now, and how we relate with students now may influence their capacity for joy and ability to have a satisfying sustainable career
Gatekeeping

When evaluating statements and applications, meet people where they are by valuing their religious or philosophical language, their sense of “calling”, and choice of social work to find meaning and purpose for their lives.
Learning Culture

- Use positive perspectives
  - In classroom/In agencies
  - When evaluating students
  - To identify what is going well in field and in educational program
- Model the process of finding joy
- Calling out the best in people and in processes
Assignments

- Interview a social worker: Ask about sources of joy
- Learning logs: Talk about a joyful experience in field
- Discuss what students appreciate in field settings
Now it’s your turn…. Write 6-10 words about finding joy in your practice

And we will share with each other. . . .
A Joy
28-Day Plan to Happiness

- Take the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire: [www.appreciativeliving.com](http://www.appreciativeliving.com)
- Daily Appreciation List: “Three things I am grateful for…”
- Daily Question: “What one thing could I do today, no matter how small, that would increase my joy?”
- Weekly Visioning: “This is my ideal, joy-filled life.” (15-minute writing)
Meditation
(Luskin & Pelletier, 2005)

- Meditate or spend a few minutes of deep breathing and quiet reflection on something that made you happy.
- Consider what you can do to achieve that happiness again.
Daily Relaxation List
(Luskin & Pelletier, 2005)

- Construct a list of all activities and experiences that relax and rejuvenate you. Use items from this list to manage your daily stress.
- For example:
  - Exercise
  - Reading
  - Socializing
  - Gardening
  - Pets
Finding Happiness
(Luskin & Pelletier, 2005)

- Keep a daily gratitude journal
- Perform a meditation practice, or simply a few minutes of deep breathing and quiet reflection on something that made you happy. Consider what you can do to achieve that happiness again.
- Make a habit of sharing the highlights of your day with someone close to you.
- Practice forgiveness routinely.
- Construct a list of all activities and experiences that relax and rejuvenate you. Use items from this list to manage your daily stress.
Building Momentum
(Emmons, n.d.)

1. Keep a daily journal of three things you are thankful for...either first thing in the morning or before you go to bed at night.

2. Make it a practice to tell a spouse, partner or friend something you appreciate about them every day.

3. Look in the mirror when you are brushing your teeth, and think about something you have done well recently or something you like about yourself.
Thanks for coming!
David Pooler, PhD, LCSW
School of Social Work
Baylor University
david_pooler@baylor.edu