

Tuning in to the Leaders

in the Profession

Ms Nancy Ng

● **ON AIR**

**What Makes a Social Work Profession /
“I Did Not Live In An Igloo”**



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Ms Ng's professional influence can be felt across the globe when she spent 5 years working with Yup'ik Eskimo communities in Alaska as a school social worker, after obtaining her Masters in Social Work. On returning home, she was involved in policy work at the Rehabilitation and Protection Division, appointed Chief Probation Officer at MSF, and subsequently became the Director of Social Welfare in 2012. Presently, she serves as the Director of Central Youth Guidance Office and paves the way for youth-at-risk services.



School to Practice



"Before taking on my NUS interns, I went to refresh my memory by looking at the NUS lectures notes, and realised what I had understood from the classroom was totally different and laughable from what I understand now being in the field. That is the woes of trying to understand social work theories without a practice reference point. Examples shared by lecturers can only bring you so far."



(from an anonymous practitioner)



HOW DO YOU ACTIVELY APPLY WHAT YOU LEARN WHEN YOU ARE IN YOUR PLACEMENTS, TO CLOSE THE GAP AND REDUCE DISCONNECT?

A HUGE ADJUSTMENT

It is important to do internships for the work experience.

- Schools will prepare graduates as best they can, but book knowledge and theory cannot replace practice
- Now, the curriculum is more structured with increased mentors/supervision

IMPORTANCE OF EXPOSURE TO OTHER DISCIPLINES

- Electives outside of social work e.g. pursued courses at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs while pursuing a Masters program in the University of Minnesota

HOPE FOR A STRONGER FIELDWORK EDUCATION IN THE LOCAL SYLLABUS

Social Work as a Profession

- When studying in university, you will not expect your courses to become a lifelong career immediately
- It is in the process of studying/working life when you will end up asking yourself whether this is the career you will stick with

Principles of Practice

- Respect the inherent dignity and worth of client
- Commitment to Clients
- Privacy and Confidentiality
- Informed Consent
- Self Determination
- Maintaining Professional Relationship



- ☒ I agree
☐ I disagree



• **Go beyond boundaries:** in your perspectives and understanding of situations

• **Commitment to clients:** to be there at their ups and downs, establishing close relationships in the process

• **Privacy/confidentiality:** challenge to be mindful of close-knit communities, where everybody knows everybody

• **Informed consent and transparency:** A very important principle, especially in recent years. There has been more movement in Singapore towards client consent in information sharing, which is encouraging

Principles of Practice (cont.)

In a small community (in Alaska), there was plenty of time for self- reflection.

TRANSLATING 5 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE ABROAD TO THE LOCAL CONTEXT:

- Bringing the ability to work with different cultures
- Openness to **diversity** of clients, learn to **respect differences**
- **Overcome being uncomfortable** in unexpected situations
- Using one's **own life experiences** (while knowing not to impose) and cultural background **as a tool** to work with people from other cultures



- Adrenaline comes from **persistence** and **seeing change** e.g. receiving cooperation from parents after initial resistance



WHAT WERE SOME OF THE ETHICAL/OTHER DILEMMAS FACED WHILE TRYING TO UPHOLD THESE PRACTICES?

! Ethical decisions are mostly made on the ground - the values you hold as a professional will influence you subtly
→ not everyone is suited to handle this responsibility

Practice to Policy

- To influence beyond a child, a youth or a family
- To tap on knowledge /perspectives beyond the social work discipline
- To break silos and build synergies
- To advocate and push boundaries



LEADERSHIP SKILLS ARE AT TIMES INSTINCTIVE

- Learning on the job - need to be willing to try a variety of things outside the field. This teaches you **creative solutioning, examining diverse angles, and builds critical attention to detail**
- Adopting different perspectives, understanding other disciplines and rationales - **Expansion of the mind and emotional space**



WHAT ENABLED YOU TO MOVE FROM A PRACTITIONER TO A POLICYMAKER'S ROLE AND DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES ON THE JOB?

Benefit of policy work over practice: a **much further reach** of influence → another level of satisfaction, though not without its frustrations at the systems

- Policy work provides the space/endorsement to advocate, and opportunities to try new things e.g. movement to recognise and support single parent families
- There needs to be mutual respect of the steadfast beliefs held by opposing groups when things don't work out despite your multiple efforts
- It is important for social policy makers to have input from social workers

Going Forward...



WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR ASPIRATIONS FOR THE PROFESSION?
WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO SEE IN THE FUTURE?

Social work is truly the profession of tomorrow: it is becoming increasingly **visible**, receiving **increased attention** and **expanding** in size



Trade-off: more independence in the early days, freedom of practice now is more structured



Should remember that social work is about doing whatever it takes to be the **agent of change**

"IN THE WORLD OF TOMORROW. IT IS NOT THE BRIDGES OR HIGHWAYS OR TALLEST BUILDING IN THE COUNTRY THAT MATTERS. BUT PEOPLES' LIVES. AND SOCIAL WORKERS ARE THE ARCHITECTS OF PEOPLES' LIVES."

Your Questions

WHAT WERE SOME COMMON THEMES AS A SOCIAL WORKER THROUGH YOUR DIVERSITY OF EXPERIENCE?

“**Strong support and encouragement** from everyone around helps you continue doing the work.”

“Social work is not easy – come in with your eyes open. It is **hard work**.”

“It is about changing lives, making changes in peoples’ lives, and helping people change for the better.”



“If you want to be an agent of change in peoples’ lives, you must be willing to take the disappointments/disrespect that sometimes comes with it. But the positive side of it is that you will eventually be able to **build strong relationships and attachments with clients**.”

HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH DISAPPOINTMENTS AND UNAPPRECIATIVE CLIENTS?

“**Social work intervention is a privilege**, to be able to enter the lives of a person or family and provide them the **support** to become **better citizens** in the community.”



Your Questions (cont.)



NOW THAT YOU SEE THE WHOLE SPECTRUM. WHAT DO YOU THINK IS REALLY NEEDED IN THE SECTOR?

“I think our sector needs to have stories out there, more **people to identify with**. Our current level of recognition did not come easily. We have come to a point where policy makers really **recognise** that our profession is **the cornerstone of our society** to improve peoples’ lives.”

“We need you, the younger generation, to be able **to share stories** and **inspire** the even younger students that social work is a profession that is **worthwhile**.”

“We need more people.”

“I did not feel superb or extraordinary as social worker. In my masters class, whenever a question was asked, 40 hands would be up fighting to offer an opinion. After a while, I also learnt to put up my hands. The lecturers would also be affirming to the students’ response. That helped me to blossom as a student, as an individual and as a social worker.”

“My philosophy is that **work is work, life is life**.
They need to be separated.

I really encourage young social workers to keep work away whenever they are home. Such mental and emotional separation is crucial in this profession.”



THROUGH YOUR YEARS OF EXPERIENCE. HOW HAVE YOU CHANGED AS A PERSON?

Mrs Ann Wee

88-YEAR OLD FOUNDING MOTHER OF SOCIAL WORK IN SINGAPORE



First of all, you have got to believe your country is behind you. In social work, you really believe your country is capable of **maximising the potential**, because very often, that's what you're doing.

You're helping people to **function more effectively** as a parent, as a student, sometimes as an employer. You have to really **believe that people are capable of change**. Not everybody is, but you have to start out believing in this capacity for change. You've got to have a certain belief in people; you've got to be able to **cope with the fact that you will have disappointments**.

But I'll tell you one secret: when you find people have changed, and it was because you were there, whoa, this is the most dangerous ego trip. But if you're in social work you will get that ego trip, because **often you help people over a hump**, and because they got over the hump, **their future is better and if you hadn't been there it wouldn't have happened**. That's I suppose one of the rewards, and also one of the dangers. But there are many occasions, that **if you hadn't been there, things wouldn't have gone right!**