

## Withstanding "Friendly Fire": A Frontline Reply to O'Hare

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I feel the need to respond to Thomas O'Hare's article, "Court-Ordered versus Voluntary Clients: Problem Differences and Readiness for Change" (July 1996, pp. 417-422). It is not his research that prompts my reply but the misleading statements about court-mandated clients and the pessimistic tone of his positions.

O'Hare reported that court-ordered treatment "may undermine the effectiveness and morale of social workers, do little to improve the lot of the offender, and promise unachievable benefits to the general public" (p. 418). He decried offender rehabilitation as an effort that does not deliver. He stopped short of making this a factual claim—a good thing, as it is seriously misleading and if taken as fact is erroneous. I felt a strong sense of déjà vu when I read this statement; in 1974 Martinson sent shock waves through the criminal justice field by reporting offender rehabilitation was a failure with the now infamous line "nothing works." Martinson (1979) later recanted, and Canadian researcher Gendreau (1996) listed scores of published literature reviews on offender treatment outcomes that attest to the success and potency of work with this population. All are readily accessible.

As a practitioner who serves court-mandated clients, I experienced several of O'Hare's statements much like "friendly fire" that falls on frontline troops from an unwitting rear echelon. O'Hare spoke of the social work profession providing court-mandated interventions: "We may be unintentionally participating in a system that at best provides a more humane diversion from punishment or at worst colludes with an oppressive social structure" (p. 421). How sad and reductive it would be if field workers chose to accept this acrid view. To be fair, O'Hare's pessimism is a matter of course after he allowed the first premise that offender rehabilitation is a "do-little" enterprise.

O'Hare attempts to throw stones at a field that has always had to wrestle with role conflict. He does so by invoking the *NASW Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1993), which, he cited, "enjoins practitioners to foster maximum self-determination" (p. 421). Why does he single out one practice area when all practitioners face this issue regardless of the population they serve? Let us face a hard fact: Anyone who works in a change agent role must take a position along a continuum of threat to client self-determination. Pincus and Minahan (1973) spoke of this threat: "It is impossible to structure a change effort which is totally free of manipulation or imposition of values. . . . [The social worker] is confronted with a value dilemma that is built into the social worker's role" (p. 43). O'Hare picks up stones where glass houses abound.

Much can be found in how the author chose to excerpt the ethical principal of client self-determination. He may have been self-serving when he chose not to circumscribe the full text of the *Code*, which includes the words "make every effort" to foster maximum self-determination. A pity he chose to bypass the very words that assist field practice in allowing advancement in the face of "muddled" treatment issues with court-mandated clients. This ethic calls for a professional effort with reflection and examination. It does not call for perfection.

He warned that social work "risks participating in a muddled enterprise" (p. 421), and I get a feeling O'Hare is attempting a call for expulsion, or "practice cleansing," because my field lacks the clinical clarity (read "purity") of work with more voluntary clients. A historical review by Lindner (1994) found that the first groups in the 19th century to work with court-mandated clients were police and volunteers. Both were quickly purged in favor of social workers. Work with this needy population

was taking place well before our field coalesced into a true profession. Has social work now evolved (mutated) to the point that this work is to be abandoned?

O'Hare's warning of the "risk" to the profession could not come at a more injurious time for the clients I serve. In Michigan the NASW chapter must contend with a sitting governor who proclaims the need for a "punk prison" system. Much more than due punishment can befall a person convicted of a crime when pejorative labels of "punk" or "predator" are applied. I am not only frustrated by the statements O'Hare made but also by the pessimism attached. It seems that while many social workers in the field work hard to "light a candle rather than curse the darkness," our university-based colleague seems intent on plumbing the darkness. There is much happening in direct field practice with court-mandated clients that is cause for optimism and further study. As I listen in support circles with other direct practitioners, I hear many who find that the philosophy and approach of strengths-based practice (Saleebey, 1994) and the solution-focused methods as outlined by Berg (1995) have great utility in working with court-mandated clients. Adopting a strengths-based practice has been a tremendous personal and career renewal for me. Few would negate experiential learning and the practice wisdom that is derived from day-to-day effort and trial.

I applaud O'Hare's belief that "social work practitioners and researchers must collaborate in practice-based qualitative and quantitative research to obtain both a deeper and more systematic understanding of our role in providing mandated treatment" (p. 422). I would be happy to join him in this important inquiry, if only the gloom and cynicism could be jettisoned. With a smile of good intentions, I would ask O'Hare to remember the phrase, "If you keep on saying things are going to be bad, you have a good chance of being a prophet." ■

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