

Regional

Social work a broad, often invisible profession

A profession that impacts millions of people on a daily basis, but for which there is not really a clear public understanding, is social work. What exactly is social work, and what is it that social workers do?

"I'm fond of saying we're everywhere and we're invisible," said Kathleen Tunney, associate professor and chair of the department of social work at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "We're in correctional facilities for adults and juveniles, we're in hospitals, we're in hospice, we're in schools, we're in mental health and substance abuse agencies and we're in nursing homes. The role of a social worker has often been seen as, 'Oh you're the people who hand out money and take people's children away.' But child welfare is only one small slice of what social workers do."

A native of Cadillac, Mich., Tunney obtained her bachelor's degree in social services at Ferris State University in Michigan, her master's degree in social work from Western Michigan University and her doctorate from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She began her career as a volunteer worker at a crisis intervention center.

"Some of the paid workers that I worked with told me I had a knack for this and I should do it," she said. "I decided to let their belief in me drive some career choices, which is something very similar to what social workers do. Oftentimes we see things in clients and vulnerable people that they don't see in themselves. So I'm a living example of how that principle actually worked."

One of the courses she teaches at SIUE is human behavior theory. But what is it that makes people sometimes act extremely good and sometimes extremely bad? "It is a dance between the person and the environment," Tunney explained. "The most recent research on resilience and human behavior suggests that people have the capacity to grow and change given the right physical environment and emotional environment. I think the best available evidence suggests that how we are is about half heredity and about half environment."

As someone working in the arena of mental health, she has seen an increasing number of people being diagnosed with conditions like autism. Is there a reason to



Professor Kathleen Tunney in her office at SIUE.

Photo by Michael Nathe

believe that more people are developing it, or is it because we are getting better at diagnosing?

"The answer is yes, to both. Learning disorders and learning disabilities are not my area of specialization, but what I can say is it is another example of the person and environment construct," Tunney said. "There could be things in the physical environment that contribute to an increasing rate, but there also is the fact that our environment is more attuned to those things, so we're diagnosing at a greater

rate. That has happened with child abuse and neglect as well. As recently as 20 or 30 years ago there were no federal or state statutes that required mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect."

Something interesting about the profession of social work is that it is not practiced the same way in the United States as in European or Latin American countries. "And this is true in other helping professions," she said. "The Western model, the U.S. specifically, since that is obviously the one that I know the best, takes a more

individualized position because as a culture we tend to be more individualized. In some of the work that I did in Eastern Europe, and the travels I have been able to go on before and after that, suggest that it's a different model.

"It's more culturally, community oriented than the American model," Tunney said of the approach taken by the International Association of Social Workers. "So issues of child welfare and issues of mental health conditions are treated very differently in other countries. They are treated

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

in a less clinical psychological or psychiatric standpoint and more from the notion of improving and enhancing and enriching the environment."

Because social workers deal with people and their problems one wonders if they need to keep a distance and not get too involved. "I think what we try to do is point to our ethical code," she said. "The principles of the profession include service to the client, dignity and worth of the person, but there are some clients that are very difficult to respect, such as persons who harm others, who harm children, and persons who engage in behaviors that make them stigmatized by society. We have to come back to dignity and worth of the person and we have to emphasize the way in which that person is still a human being."

An long-time interest of Tunney in training social workers is what she calls spiritual assessment.

"A colleague of mine, myself and one of our graduate students actually wrote together an article about that some years back," she said. "And what we were looking at was what do hospice workers feel they need to know to do an adequate job of working with people from a variety of faith-based or spiritual traditions. Typically, maybe stereotypically, people think about people coming into a hospice center as somehow turning toward God or their higher power. Yet people in hospice services come from a lot of faith-based traditions and sometimes no faith tradition, so our effort was to determine what hospice workers really need to know to work with people from a Muslim tradition or people from a Jewish tradition or maybe from a spiritual tradition that is unfamiliar to them or to many in our society."

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