



Episode 919: Social Work: Good, Bad, or Ugly?

Guest: Patrick Gann

WOODS: I think I've known one other person in social work who's had some libertarian leanings, so this is very interesting to me. I know a guy — I don't know if I should mention his name. I don't think he's care — Josh McCabe, who is in sociology, which of course is a totally different field. But all the same, it's another field where there aren't a lot of people sympathetic to our point of view, but he's totally hardcore libertarian, so it makes me happy to know that he exists. Well, I'm happy to know that you exist and I want to talk about your chosen field, which you chose for good reason. And I want to know the strengths of it, and then I want to know what some of the pitfalls are. So tell me about your educational background and what led you to social work.

GANN: Well, it's a long, winding route to how I got into social work, but I'll tell you one of the things for me was, you know, I'm in my early 30s, and as I was trying to find my way in life, I remember you had said in many interviews, Tom, people come to you and say, All right, I agree with libertarianism and the economic point of view of the Austrian school. What should I do with it? And you're like, Don't be me. Don't just run for office like Ron Paul did. There are places everywhere for different people.

I have a family history of mental health issues, and I myself have struggled with depression, and so I looked into psychology and I thought, no, there were some issues there where I felt — and I don't mean to offend people that work in psychology, but there was a lot of the old, Freudian "humans become objects to be studied," and I'm not into that. So one of the nice things about social work and what eventually led me there was social work is a value-laden profession, and it comes with this code of ethics that everyone agrees to if you want to jump in. I know that sounds kind of creepy, like it's like its credo or something, but it's not exactly.

But one of its chief values is what we call client self-determination, so that means when you're working with another person, you respect what they believe, you respect what they stand for, and to any extent that they're looking to better themselves, you're just getting onboard with helping them get to where they want and reach their goals, and it's not me telling you you need to be this way or you need to be that way. And I felt like that really jived with the individualism that comes with a libertarian philosophy.

WOODS: All right, so what are the career possibilities for somebody in social work? I think a lot of people assume that you go and work for some government agency.

GANN: Yeah, and I don't know the exact numbers, but there are a lot of government or public opportunities available for social workers, and if you're a staunch libertarian, that's probably not where you want to be. But the range of where social workers can be spans a lot of different fields, including education, health care, the criminal justice system, child and youth and family, and then of course mental health and substance abuse. For all of those areas, though, while public entity exists, maybe in the exception of criminal justice, there are also private entities that exist. There are also public-private partnerships, which to me sometimes I see that as sort of the worst of the worst. But a private entity, if you lean that way, is an option for a social worker, and that's especially so in the realm of mental health and also education and health care.

WOODS: So what is – are you allowed to say something about your own work?

GANN: Yeah, yeah, sure. I work for an organization that does – well, they do a lot of different behavioral health and educational services for children and adolescents. My personal job, I'm a mobile therapist, which is kind of like, if you remember back in the old days where doctors would come to the home and visit with that black bag with all their tools and stuff, it's kind of like that, but you're coming and doing therapy. And that therapy can be talk therapy, or it can be something more hands-on, especially for the younger kids who aren't as verbal. And you're working with children, often coming out of difficult situations; a lot of them are coming in from the foster care scenario; neglect and abuse is common with the kind of kids that I work with.

But my agency is a private agency. Now, they do take Medicaid as one of their primary forms of insurance. They also take private insurance. So again, from a values perspective, if you're a libertarian and a social worker, you've got to figure out for yourself how much you want to engage with the system or how much you want to be separate from it. For myself, I've determined that I'm going to try and make a change where I can. And because I'm not advocating for wide-scale reform of how the health care system or how taxation works in this country, I'm just trying to help other people in the way that I best know how and in a way that agrees with my worldview, which includes a libertarian philosophy and Austrian economics.

WOODS: All right, now before we get into some of the pitfalls and difficulties in this field, what makes you different from a psychologist?

GANN: So there are a lot of similarities. We work with similar what we would call treatment modalities, which means basically you meet a person and you find out what their issues are and determine a diagnosis, and then you would determine what treatment you might use, whether it's cognitive behavioral therapy or dialectical behavioral therapy or motivational interviewing – there's a ton of sort of inside baseball on that.

But again, the key difference there between a psychologist and a social worker is that the social worker, while they're doing therapy, is primarily concerned with the client's real and perceived sense of self-determination, that they see themselves as wanting to get better and that they are getting better. If I'm trying to proscribe to them, This is what you need to do to get better, my concern is that that would be sort of a violation of who they are. Now, that gets tricky, and we actually do have a clause in our code of

ethics if someone's at imminent risk of harming themselves or harming others. That's sort of the only time that we take action and would get the police, authorities involved.

But other than that, I think the difference between a psychologist and a social worker is primarily the value placed and the emphasis placed on the other person. Psychologists will often call the person they're seeing a patient, whereas we will call them a client, and I don't know if that language matters at all, but to me, I can see a difference.

WOODS: All right, now let's talk about what I think most people think when they hear "social worker." I knew plenty of people at the Columbia School of Social Work, and they basically all had extremely left-wing views about pretty much everything. Now, it's one thing if an engineer has left-wing views. That has no effect on anybody. There are certain laws of science he has to observe and that's not going to change. But these people influence the lives of others, and so, number one, I'm sure you don't dispute that there's a left-wing bias through it, but what are the practical consequences of this left-wing worldview that would actually be evident in the way they do their social work?

GANN: Well, I have a – I have a couple thoughts about this. I think probably one of the most important things – and this is something that you taught me and I actually brought to the classroom when I was going through my graduate studies program, the notion of the politically correct 3x5 card, which I think you got as a subtitle in your latest book. That notion that there's only certain opinions that are considered allowed. So you can have radical left opinions that people sort of shutter at and go, Um, that doesn't fit the card. And what I like about that, even though I don't actually agree with some of those specific stances – for example, wanting a much stronger centralized government than we already have. I would say decentralize. And I like to talk about the Old Left views. I talk about "small is beautiful" to my peers.

But I think that at the level of direct practice, when you're working with an individual client, you're supposed to keep your political views out of it. I don't know to what extent people do or don't. For myself as a mobile therapist, I took the political bumper stickers off my car just as sort of a professional thing, so that when I pull up into someone's driveway, they don't have a colored view of who I am.

But I will say there are social workers that do work on the level of macro-advocacy, which means that they are involved in the political process. We have lobbyists in the world of social work, and they are primarily leftist in their viewpoints. I don't mean to disparage them, because they're my colleagues, but you would look at them as typically bleeding heart liberals who want to do the right thing. But then in my opinion they're doing it in the wrong way, because it all comes in through government funds, and if that's not through taxation, then it's through the Federal Reserve and fractional reserve banking, which –

WOODS: All right, but what about things like family life? There are cases where kids are going to be taken away from the parents, and in some cases, I wonder if there could be a bias against certain kinds of people and certain kinds of families where they believe certain kinds of things and it runs very much counter to the social worker's

own point of view. Especially given that the modern left has so much trouble imagining that there could be, for example, a Trump voter who has reasons for being a Trump voter. So therefore, if I run into a family that has those values, these people don't even have a right to exist. What hesitation would I have taking their kids away?

GANN: Yeah, and you know, that's actually one of the most common negative views of social workers, is we are sometimes called baby snatchers. And in the child and youth system, it is true that in cases of severe abuse or neglect, social workers do go in and on behalf of the state, pull the child out with the goal of hopefully either reunifying them with the parent once they've dealt with whatever their issue is, whether it's a drug issue or – if it's physical or sexual abuse then that usually rules them out because the parent will be going to prison.

And I think this is a really difficult issue, but Tom, what I would propose is if we were in a fully anarchocapitalist system, I think we would want very similar mechanisms in place. I don't like the idea that the state would be raising the child, per se. They're the legal guardian until someone adopts the child or until they're reunified with a parent or another kin, like a grandparent. But you know, some of the stuff that we see can be very horrifying. Now –

WOODS: Oh yeah, by the way, I don't mean to dispute that. I'm sure there are horrible situations, and I'm not saying that the decision is always made badly. I'm just saying that if I saw something that I had a concern about but I wanted just a dispassionate, impartial person to go in there and look at it, I'm not sure I'd want to call these people in.

GANN: Yeah, that's a tough call, and there are people that are distrustful of child and youth agencies all around the country, and to a certain extent, I don't blame them. Child and youth agencies are bureaucracies to the hilt. It's a complicated mess of a system. If you work in it – I have friends who work in it, and the possibility for abuse, I would say, is there. Now, I've never personally heard a story along what you would say. What we tend to find is if a child is pulled out of the family and there doesn't seem to be a good reason for it, yeah, there's a court battle.

But I'd like to think that in the example that you posed – you know, you'd meet some person who voted for Trump who, they and their family doesn't fit the culture of the 3x5 card – We have this term, cultural competence and cultural humility as part of our practice, which means the beliefs that people hold and the way that their household is run, as long as it isn't a direct detriment to the child, you respect the way they live. So that goes whether it's someone who's really into the Second Amendment and owns a lot of guns or whether it's someone who is a single mom living on the welfare and entitlement system in full. Neither of those are reasons to pull a child out, regardless of what we as individual social workers might think of their lifestyle.

WOODS: All right, well, tell me when you were doing your studies for social work, were there any topics or books or arguments that just made you roll your eyes and say, Ugh, here's just typical statist mythology?

GANN: Yeah. We had six credits worth of classes on policy, and I felt like I was basically in a political science class with some economics mixed in, and I think the

hardest thing for me was – and again, we were graduate student level, but you know, most of us aren't economists, so when a professor gives a brief overview, they basically give the Keynesian point of view. And I raise my hand and I say, There are different views, right? And they say, Oh yeah, well, the polar opposite of course is the Chicago school.

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah, of course. Yeah, sure.

GANN: And I'm thinking, No, no, that's middle of the road. That's milquetoast. Do you know who Ludwig von Mises is? *No, I don't.* [laughing] So, you know. And I've heard in your own talks and talking with other students at the Mises Institute, that's kind of a common occurrence on college campuses. Well, it happens in grad school as well, and it happens in a field that loves to claim diversity and loves to say, When we say "diversity," we don't just mean the poor and we don't just mean the groups that the left typically favor. We claim to mean everyone. And I'm seen that in action. Social work at its best actually does that, and I really like that. But social work at its worst will claim diversity, but when it comes to diversity of thought, they will hold a statist and leftist position.

WOODS: So give me an example of a policy that 99% of social work people support but you don't. And secondly, did you ever get in trouble for this, or did you keep your mouth shut about it, or what?

GANN: Yeah, so this one's really hard. I did debate this once. And again, it's theoretical because I believe in civil rights, and this is basically the same thing that I think five years ago maybe Rand Paul got railroaded by Rachel Maddow on this. And it was about the civil rights bill and the clause about private businesses having to serve all customers.

WOODS: Yeah, I would keep my mouth shut about that too.

GANN: Right. Now, of course my opinion on it comes from something of a theoretical and abstract, because, well, it's been 50 years. I was born long after it happened. But I argue that from, if you want to be consistently moral and ethical, does the government have the right to tell a private entity what to do in these instances? Of course the part of it that talked about public institutions, if you have discrimination or bias publicly or in the government, yeah, you have every right to change that in the law and I think that's a good thing. And I also believe exactly what Rand Paul said, that as people woke up – it was a hearts-and-minds issue more than it was a law issue. I think even though Martin Luther King was happy to see the laws change, I think to a certain extent he understood that no laws would change until hearts and minds were changed. And so if hearts and minds are changed, then you don't need that level of regulation over private institutions. That's my opinion.

And I actually did speak up about it, and I wasn't *called* a racist, but I was told that what I said was racist. So small distinction. But it was a dangerous move on my part to do it. But I will say, that was another student who said it, and actually, my professor, who is definitely left-leaning, she totally took it in stride and acknowledged the point that hearts and minds changing is in some ways a lot more important than the laws

changing, and it generally goes that hearts and minds change before anyone changes laws anyway.

WOODS: All right, tell me what else. What else makes you – I mean, here you are in a field where you're totally outnumbered, where most people don't think the way you do, and you believe that you have something to contribute to it and that it does have some merits. But on the other hand, there's an awful lot about it that bothers you and annoys you. So tell me what else I'm missing here.

GANN: Well, I think the key here is that there's really a lot that I do love about social work, both as what I'm doing in my day job and as a profession at large. And I love the idea that I can make a change. Now, there's a lot of debate within our field about whether it's better to do what we call micro or direct practice, or whether to go into macro or advocacy. I like direct practice and it goes back to the old Mother Teresa starfish thing. I don't know if you know the old anecdote about throwing starfish into the ocean to save them, and some guy comes along and says, Why are you throwing all the starfish in the ocean? You can't save all of them. And you pick up that starfish and you say, I saved that one. Well, for me, working with a teenager who might be suicidal, that's positive to me. That's something that I'm happy to work on.

But also, Tom, being able to work in a field that is dominantly left-liberal and to be able to say things like, Well, have you ever really thought about taxation as involuntary and thus as possibly bad? You know, social contract? No, you can't say that. But I can make a point like – and this is not original. I've read this elsewhere. But you know, what is sex without consent? Rape. What is me taking stuff from you without consent? It would be a gift if you wanted me to have it, but otherwise it's theft. Okay, so what is me giving money to the government without consent?

The left is so big on consent they've got it down to a science, especially in the case of sex after all of the college campus rape stories that have come out. That's sort of become a big thing. And I'm in favor of it. I think education on that front is important. But if they're going to talk about how important consent is, [laughing] you get to the issue of taxes, and especially with the federal government – and I talk a lot about size as well. You know, each senator represents 300-some thousand people and each U.S. House of Representatives represents, I don't know, like 40,000 or something. I mean, it's so absurd. And again, I think I'm quoting you when I'm saying all this. But the size and the scale of it at this point, it's not a representative democracy, and I think that's just an important thing for people to understand.

And so in the realm of social work, where we consider ourselves change agents that are trying to do good in this world, if I can talk to those fellow movers and shakers and say, Have you really thought about it this way before?, I think that sometimes is throwing another starfish into the ocean too.

WOODS: I guess if you were a typical social worker who had the usual ideology, you would think that one of the ways you can help people is to make sure that they are signed up for all the programs they qualify for. So there would be a bias, I would think, in social work toward expansion of the state, getting more clients – and by that I mean more clients for the state, where there'd be a relationship of dependency on the state. And I wonder if there's any sense of this is obviously not a long-term

solution and it would not be in their long-term best interest to be dependent on this stuff, so we'll check up on them in a few years and make sure they've weaned themselves off. Is that how it really goes?

GANN: So that's how everyone hopes it goes, and that's — and plenty of studies have already demonstrated this — that's not how it has gone. Why social workers currently believe that's the case has a lot to do with everything other than economics, everything other than the welfare state and the entitlement system. They see bias towards racial and ethnic minorities and what we call the school-to-prison pipeline. You have kids that misbehave in school and it eventually leads to them being imprisoned. And actually, just the criminal justice system at large is something that social workers are really sort of hell-bent on changing, and I think that would be — personally, I think that would be a good thing for a number of reasons. We incarcerate people for a lot of reasons that don't really require incarceration.

WOODS: All right, so how do they feel about the drug war by and large?

GANN: Yeah, that's actually another reason I like social work. The whole strange bedfellows thing with the Ron Paul revolution in '08 — and this is what attracted me to Ron Paul in '08 myself — was he said drugs need to be decriminalized. It's a medical issue and not a criminal justice issue. And largely among the social workers that I speak to, they're largely antiwar. And so you yourself coedited the book, *We Who Dared to Say No to War*, and I've actually lent that to two people in the program that I just graduated from. So those are areas where we easily agree. Classical libertarians and civil libertarians look at these issues and say, Yeah, we're doing this wrong. So on that front, again, I would say they've already got it right.

I did want to say something real quick, though, when you talked about the whole dependency on the state. There's this term I've been trying to throw around that's sort of a spin on Bastiat's broken window fallacy that I like to call the broken spirit fallacy, which is that — and this has to do with a term that social workers and social scientists call intergenerational poverty. And it's a known thing and it would make sense: if you have no wealth to inherit from your parents and you have no social status in society, it's harder to move up. Upward mobility is harder. It doesn't mean it's impossible. I know your own story. I know your father was a blue-collar worker. But I think the broken spirit fallacy for social workers is that people keep getting hurt by "the system," whatever that means, the same system that we end up supporting because we get in bed with them. And as a result, the intergenerational poverty is something that we end up participating in. And that's really ugly.

One of the good things, though, is that, again, in my own field that's been acknowledged as a blind spot by some. It's not well known, but there's a book from the '90s called *Unfaithful Angels* that's about how social workers can sometimes get caught up in the system and just keep using entitlements as band aids to keep people going and never really taking the harder steps to move up and out and away, which is — again, it's incredibly hard, and at the end of the day, it falls on everyone. It falls on me as the social worker, it falls on the community around the person, and of course it falls primarily on the individuals themselves to make that hard decision to move up and out. And I don't know what it's like to be them, but I imagine it is tough. But I'm not going to give up on them, because I want to see a positive change in my country

and, more importantly, in my community because – you know, I don't think of our country as one, big, homogenous blob, because you helped me understand that, so thank you [laughing].

WOODS: Well, I appreciate that very much, Patrick, and interesting to get a glimpse inside this discipline in which you are a lonely figure. But you're doing everything anyone could conceivably ask you to do in this situation, and so I appreciate that you're doing that and that you took the time to reach out to me and to share this with the audience today. Thanks so much.

GANN: Thank you, Tom.