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Andrea Newberry-Koroluk

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School of Social Work
University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue
Windsor, Ont.
Canada N9B 3P4
Email: cswedit@uwindsor.ca

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Hitting the Ground Running: Neo-Conservatism and First-Year Canadian Social Workers

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Andrea M. Newberry- Koroluk¹

¹University of Calgary

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Abstract

This paper explores how the popular use of the expression “hitting the ground running” in reference to beginning social work practice draws upon military imagery and reflects neo-conservative expectations of first-year social workers. Discussion of the international and Canadian definitions of social work, key social work values, the neo-conservative paradigm, and the role of language in understanding human experiences provides context to this analysis. Ultimately, it is argued that it is in the best interests of the social work profession for the phrase hitting the ground running to be abandoned (or used critically) when making reference to first-year social workers, and a new metaphor is suggested that could take its place in the social work lexicon.

Keywords: first-year social workers, neo-conservative, figurative language, social work discourse, military metaphors

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Our client is looking for a qualified social worker for an ASAP start in a busy duty and assessment team The hiring manager is particularly keen to meet with candidates that have strong court skills, and are able to *hit the ground running* [emphasis added] and work at speed (Synarbor Plc., 2012).

The preceding excerpt from an online recruitment advertisement for a social worker in London, England, is representative of many contemporary job announcements for British social workers; employers are seeking social workers that can enter busy and under-staffed social services teams and “hit the ground running”—that is, assume full work responsibilities immediately upon starting with minimal support or training required from the organization. Social work scholars have also made use of this expression, and two recent books targeted at first-year social workers use this phrase in the title (c.f. Donnellan & Jack, 2010; Galpin, Bigmore, & Parker, 2012). The wider significance of the repeated, casual use of this evocative figure of speech in social work has not been thoroughly interrogated. What does this expression really mean for social work, and what are the implications when it is applied to first-year social workers?

In this paper, I explore how the use of the expression hitting the ground running draws upon military imagery and reflects neo-conservative expectations of first-year social workers. I begin by defining social work, outlining some key social work values, and discussing neo-conservatism as a paradigm influencing social work. I then take up the role of language in understanding human experiences, the use of military metaphors in social work more generally, and the use of the phrase hitting the ground running as applied to first-year social workers in particular. Ultimately, I argue that it is in the best interests of the social work profession for the phrase hitting the ground running to be abandoned (or used critically) when making reference to first-year social workers, and I suggest a new metaphor that could take its place in the social work lexicon.

Social Work and Social Welfare

Social Work Defined

Social work involves the application of helping skills, knowledge, and humanitarian and democratic values in support of the well-being of individuals, communities, and the larger global society. Professional acceptance of a shared and explicit value base facilitates social workers’ activism for social justice. Social justice involves respect for human rights and the fundamental dignity of the human person, as well as fair distribution of, and access to, the material and social resources required for full expression of human potential.

The functions and practice setting of social work are diverse, with social workers employed in government programs, private practice, not-for-profit agencies, international non-governmental organizations, and private sector companies (Carniol, 1995; International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). Social workers respond to a variety of social needs at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels and employ a range of intervention techniques across settings (policy work, counselling, administration of social services, etc.) (Connolly & Harms, 2012). The International Federation of Social Workers (2000) defined social work in the following way:

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The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (para. 1).

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (2012) endorsed a similar definition of social work:

Social work is a profession concerned with helping individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance their individual and collective well-being. It aims to help people develop their skills and their ability to use their own resources and those of the community to resolve problems

Human rights and social justice are the philosophical underpinnings of social work practice. The uniqueness of social work practice is in the blend of some particular values, knowledge and skills, including the use of relationship as the basis of all interventions and respect for the client's choice and involvement (para. 1–2).

While both the international and the Canadian definitions of social work describe social work as addressing human well-being at the nexus of person and environment, as well as human rights and social justice, the International Federation of Social Workers (2000) definition also includes a focus on social change.

The title “social worker” is legally protected in most Canadian provinces and requires completion of an accredited social work program (usually a Bachelor or Master of Social Work, although a diploma is acceptable in some provinces), commitment to adhere to an ethical code, and registration with the appropriate provincial or territorial regulatory body (Newberry, 2011). This legal title protection does not limit who can provide social services to the public, but it does limit who can use the title of social worker.

Social Work in Context

Social work is a constructed (and contested) activity (Payne, 2005) consisting of multiple perspectives rather than a homogenous professional culture. Although social workers are unified by a shared definition of social work and general commitment to principles of social justice, there are also multiple, competing viewpoints within and about the profession. Furthermore, there are national and regional differences in the roles that social workers are expected to fulfill. While social workers are increasingly influenced by the growing globalization of social problems, such as armed conflict, natural disasters, forced migration, pandemic disease, poverty, and inequality, they often respond to these phenomena in the context of their regional and national systems of emergency aid and social welfare (Lyons, Manion, & Carlsen, 2006). Connolly and Harms (2012) identified social work as a “global endeavour in terms of disciplinary vision, values and concerns. Yet it is also intensely local in its application, responding necessarily to unique cultural contexts” (p. xii). Governments and agencies that employ social workers add further complexity to understanding social work in context—political

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and employer (governmental and non-governmental) views on social welfare and social work are not always congruent with those espoused by members of the social work profession.

Doing work that is often considered low status (Barretti, 2004), social workers operate at the boundaries of multiple, and sometimes competing, systems such as private/public and state/market domains. Social work is a self-conscious and conflicted profession, alternately positioned as in partnership with the poor and marginalized and as a social control agent for the state (Lorenzetti, as cited in Galad, 2012). Ultimately, social work is a social, relational, and political construct. These larger socio-political tensions in social work at the macro level inevitably influence the experiences of new social work practitioners.

Perspectives on Social Welfare and the Role of Social Work

The multiple perspectives involved in social work influence conceptualizations of the cause, nature, and appropriate resolution of personal and social problems; the roles of family, community, the government, and the private sector in the provision of social welfare; and the appropriate role and focus of social workers. In this section, I describe and situate Mullaly's (1997) explication of the neo-conservative paradigm.

Neo-Conservatism. Neo-conservatism became a major force in Canadian politics in the 1980s (Finkel, 2008); cutbacks to social welfare programs in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Quebec were followed by gradual and often stealthy reductions to federal social welfare programs, particularly unemployment benefits (Banting, 1992). The 1990s marked a major retrenchment of social services in Canada (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

Marking a move away from collectivist values, the social beliefs associated with the neo-conservative paradigm include a focus on personal freedom, individualism, and acceptance of inequality (Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2012; Mullaly, 1997). Inequality is accepted as a necessary consequence of differences in human ability, character, and work ethic and is seen as a positive source of motivation for individual efforts (Mullaly, 1997). Returning to a laissez-faire economic ideal, the basis of neo-conservative economic policy includes an unrestrained market economy, competitive capitalism, and private ownership (Graham et al., 2012; Mullaly, 1997). Law, order, stability, and paternalism towards those unable to care for themselves through no fault of their own are key components of neo-conservative political policy (Mullaly, 1997).

Neo-conservatives are fundamentally opposed to a comprehensive system of social welfare, tending to believe social welfare increases breakdowns in traditional family and social values; decreases individual and family responsibility; undermines the effectiveness of the free market economy; and even causes social problems by encouraging, facilitating, or reducing the hardships associated with perceived immoral social circumstances such as single motherhood and unemployment (Mullaly, 1997). Neo-conservatives typically support a residual model of social welfare in which government aid is provided only when the resources of the self, family, community, market, and religious and charitable institutions are exhausted or unavailable (Graham et al., 2012). Social welfare under the residual model is typically temporary, minimal, means tested, stigmatizing to the recipient, and dependent on the recipient's compliance with requirements set out as conditions of receiving assistance.

In this paradigm, the perceived causes of social problems are essentially individual and involve pathologies and weaknesses in both individuals and family systems; larger structural causes of personal and social difficulties are invalidated (Mullaly, 1997). Consequently, the appropriate role of social workers is to control pathological and dependent behaviour—using influence and coercion, investigation, monitoring for abuse of the social welfare system, and separation of the “deserving” from the “undeserving” among potential service users (Mullaly, 1997). The neo-conservative paradigm is often the most problematic for social workers to negotiate without violating key principles of social justice, such as empowerment and fair access to the resources needed to maximize human potential.

Language and Human Experience

According to Gadamer (1960/1989), language is the medium of interpretation, and what comes to us as tradition comes to us through language: “It is not just something left over, to be investigated and interpreted as a remnant of the past. What has come down to us by way of verbal tradition is not left over but given to us” (p. 391). Language therefore does not become new each time it is used, but carries with it the history and tradition embedded in language (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Language also supersedes the subjectivity of the individual speaker or writer; Gadamer wrote, “The claim of language can never be reduced to what an individual subjectively intends. It belongs to the way of being of language . . . that *we* and not just one of us but indeed all of us are the ones who are speaking” (1970/2007, p. 105). Furthermore, words carry multiple meanings that transcend the context of their use—“the word is never completely separated from the multiple meanings it has in itself, even when the context has made clear the meaning it possesses in this particular context” (Gadamer, 1970/2007, p. 106).

In addition to carrying with it tradition and history, language is also generative. As a form of symbolic communication, human language does not merely reflect pre-existing social realities; rather, language creates social realities that did not previously exist (Mead, 1962). From this viewpoint, discourse about social work not only reflects the lived realities of social workers, but also helps to shape and create them.

A metaphor is “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Metaphors are a particularly powerful form of human language and shape our understanding of situations by comparing them to other well-known and powerful images. The use of metaphors is inevitable in “human thought, discourse, and theory, including that concerning careers” (Inkson, 2002, p. 98). Metaphors reflect collective and historical understandings of phenomena; our interest in metaphors therefore extends beyond the intended meaning of an individual speaker or writer who makes use of them. As Gadamer (1960/1989) philosophized, language carries the force of tradition with it.

First-Year Social Workers

The number of students graduating from Bachelor and Master of Social Work programs in Canada is steadily increasing. In 2003, 2,874 students graduated with bachelor or master degrees in social work from 34 schools across Canada; in 2009 the number was 3,475 (Canadian

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Institute for Health Information, 2010)—an increase of 21% over six years. The need for social workers in Canada has increased as “the demand for social services has both diversified and intensified” (Service Canada, 2012, para. 14); furthermore, the “trend toward sharp employment growth” (Service Canada, 2012, para. 5) in social work is expected to continue. Despite the increasing numbers of social workers entering the Canadian workforce yearly, there is scant empirical evidence concerning the workplace entry and experiences of first-year Canadian social workers (Newberry, 2011). Nonetheless, due to the increasing need for social work services in Canada, it is reasonable to speculate that first-year social workers are expected to assume full responsibilities in the organizations they enter quickly—in colloquial terms, to hit the ground running.

Military Metaphors and Social Work

The use of military metaphors in social work generally is remarkable (e.g., “front lines,” “in the trenches”). Beckett (2003) found the language of British social workers to be embedded with military metaphors, which he termed the “language of siege” (p. 625). Beckett identified multiple examples of official and colloquial social work language related to intake, intervention, and case management with military references or connotations, including strategy, operations, field, duty, front line, going in, and bombardment.

Ultimately, Beckett (2003) found evidence in social worker speech to support the metaphors that “human crises are explosives” (p. 636), “social workers are soldiers under attack” (p. 636), “clients are enemies” (p. 637), and “requests for help are explosive shells” (p. 637). Beckett explained that these disturbing metaphors for social work activity are based in the realities of social worker conflict with clients and that:

when demands are made on human beings that they cannot meet, a normal reaction is to begin to feel *attacked* . . . the demands that are made on child and family social workers by their service-users and by society at large are far in excess of what they can deliver, not only for resource reasons, but also because of limits to what is possible in principle in the complex and unpredictable environment of the “social” itself. (2003, p. 637)

Military metaphors have become a way for social workers to make their social reality visible by appealing to images that have wider cultural and emotional meaning (Beckett, 2003). Here we might differentiate between the use of military metaphors by direct-care social workers to express their workplace experiences and the use of military metaphor as part of a management structure that emphasizes expectations for social workers’ performance.

Burns (2011) also found the use of military and penal metaphors to be prevalent in discourse about career pathways for new social workers in child welfare. Expressions used included “serve your time” (Burns, 2011, p. 10), “your stint” (Burns, 2011, p. 13), and “earn your stripes” (Burns, 2011, p. 13). One social worker even invoked the idea of a tour of duty to a conflict zone to describe early-career social work in child protection:

You were very much told that [while at university] it was like Beirut, you do a year in child protection and then you get out and you need to do it because no one will take you

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seriously and really you were kind of frightened into it. (Burns, 2011, p. 15)

This use of military and penal metaphors in the context of understanding early-career social work in child welfare highlights an understanding of child welfare work as dangerous, undesirable, and even frightening.

Hitting the Ground Running and First-Year Social Workers

The metaphor of hitting the ground running is prevalent in discourse about first-year social workers in particular—and in relation to novice professionals and new employees more generally. Two new books aimed at new social workers use the phrase in their titles (c.f. Donnellan & Jack, 2010; Galpin et al., 2012). Neither book returns to the use of the hitting the ground running metaphor as a military image within its pages. Instead, both books invoke sports images to describe aspects of being a new social worker: warming up, jumping the hurdles, and going the distance (Donnellan & Jack, 2010); and finding your feet (Galpin et al., 2012), all suggesting a track-and-field analogy.

The phrase “hit the ground running” means to “start something and proceed at a fast pace with enthusiasm” (Sieftring, 2004, p. 144), “to make a quick and eager start; not waste time” (Wentworth & Flexner, 2007, p. 262), and “to seize an opportunity at the earliest possible moment” (Ammer, 2011, p. 207). Its meaning in reference to first-year social workers has often been stated in terms of a criticism of higher education—the perceived failure of which to “produce graduates fit for practice . . . is commonly expressed through the military metaphor of ‘not hitting the ground running’” (Bellinger, 2010, p. 601).

Hit the ground running entered common usage and achieved cliché status in either the 1970s or 1990s, depending on the source (Ammer, 2011; Sieftring, 2004), but it is thought to have emerged either during World War II (Ammer, 2011) or with the United States Marine Corps in the 1950s (Wentworth & Flexner, 2007). The expression is believed to reference “military personnel disembarking rapidly from a helicopter” (Sieftring, 2004, p. 144) although its exact origins are not known. Alternately, it may refer to the instructions given to World War II paratroopers, soldiers dropped into a combat zone, or naval personnel debarking on a beach (Ammer, 2011). Ammer (2011) asserted the phrase is “undoubtedly American” (p. 207). Alternate origins proposed for this figure of speech include non-paying passengers jumping off a train before it enters the station to avoid arrest, and two equestrian references: changing horses quickly in the Pony Express to save time or running quickly away from a horse after being thrown in a rodeo to avoid injury (Ammer, 2011).

The strong military connotations of hitting the ground running, particularly the idea of paratroopers, soldiers, or naval personnel being launched into combat zones, is suggestive of danger, the need to be prepared, and the requirement to act without thinking. If one is hitting the ground running, one is launched immediately into action; in this situation, taking the time to reflect, consider options, or study the physical and social geography is inconceivable and could actually be deadly. To do so would be to risk neglecting orders, injury to oneself and one’s team, and strategic losses. The idea that military ground personnel hit the ground running also assumes a command-and-control culture in which strategic planning is handled at a higher level and the

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duty of paratroopers, soldiers, and naval personnel is a combination of following orders, responding to immediate action in the proximate environment, and maintaining constant vigilance to further the mission's objectives and prevent negative effects. Furthermore, the response to entering an arena of war is action—always action—rather than reflection.

Use of the military metaphor hitting the ground running suggests that social services teams are not equipped to support new graduates. Entering social work is likened to entering a combat zone, where new graduates are launched into dangerous environments, ready to assume full duties in whatever arena of war they find themselves (Newberry, 2011). Like the military use of the phrase, the expectation is immediate action in the new social worker's proximate environment, rather than reflective action or gradual, supported entry.

Hitting the Ground Running as a Neo-Conservative Metaphor

In this section, I will explore the implications of adopting a military metaphor for first-year social workers and argue that, in this context, the idea of hitting the ground running reflects a neo-conservative agenda for social services. This is not to assert that social work writers using this phrase are operating from a neo-conservative worldview. Rather, the identification of this metaphor as reflecting neo-conservative ideals is intended to draw our collective professional attention to the realities of our social welfare systems, their politics, and the stealthy creep of neo-conservative ideas into our expectations of first-year social workers. While the changing reality of social work is acknowledged by many (especially in the United Kingdom context), interpretation of the common use of a military metaphor to capture what is expected of first-year social workers is a powerful tool to stimulate discussion, not just within academia, but—to use another military metaphor—among social work's rank and file.

New Social Workers as Soldier Recruits

Beckett (2003) found evidence of an underlying conceptual metaphor that social workers are soldiers. In considering the fit between an explicit military metaphor and first-year social workers, I am first compelled to ask whether first-year social workers are like soldier recruits. There are certainly some positive similarities between soldiers and social workers—for example, solidarity with one's team and country and a concern for justice. However, some of the primary responsibilities of soldiers seem incongruent with social work, such as the requirement to follow and give orders, assume a position in a hierarchical culture, enter dangerous terrains, and use force to achieve objectives. The idea that social workers ought to assume a position in the social services hierarchy reflects neo-conservative values.

Some consideration must be given to the state of the social work field if a soldier is considered the best metaphor for a first-year social worker. It is true that many agencies that employ social workers are hierarchical, that the work of social workers often places them at risk of violence, and that social workers do not always use cooperative methods to achieve their objectives. However, I would argue that we should challenge, rather than accept, hierarchy in social work workplaces; advocate for safer conditions for workers; and maximize our use of facilitative, cooperative, and partnership strategies to achieve the objectives of our organizations. Entering hierarchical workplaces is often a challenge for first-year social workers. Social

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workers are socialized during their educational programs to adopt more egalitarian norms of decision making, creating a potential contradiction between professional and organizational values.

Social Welfare as an Arena of War

Beckett (2003) identified an underlying metaphor of social work agencies as armies. If first-year social workers are understood to be like soldier recruits, then social service agencies and the communities they serve may be understood to be like arenas of war. Complex, dangerous, and strategic initiatives like those carried out in a war zone typically require centralized, command-and-control administration and limited tolerance for independent thought and action “on the ground.” This is reflected in the shift towards the new managerialism, defined by Mullaly (1997) as:

The belief that all that is needed to make organizations (including social services organizations) more effective and efficient is a generic set of business and entrepreneurial skills. Hence, social services managers do not need to know anything about social work practice or the nature of social services. (p. 13)

The new managerialism is generally seen as a threat to good social work practice and social service delivery (Mullaly, 1997). It leads to decreased judgement by social workers and increased powers for senior administrators (Carniol, 1995). It is in diametric opposition to non-hierarchical models of social services administration, and is a neo-conservative movement.

Social Problems as the Enemy

If social services are arenas of war, how are we to understanding social problems and the needs of service users? Are requests for help from service users perceived as explosive shells, as Beckett (2003) suggested? As previously noted, Beckett found evidence in social worker discourse for the view that clients and/or their requests for help are sometimes perceived as attacks on the social worker. He noted that the natural human response to having demands placed upon oneself over an extended period of time that cannot reasonably be met is to feel attacked. Viewing social problems and requests for help as threats to be managed, and social workers as managers (and gatekeepers) of these problems and needs, is consistent with the neo-conservative worldview.

Social Workers as Technocrats

If new social workers are expected to hit the ground running—that is, assume full practice responsibilities immediately—the implication is that they are equipped to do so. This creates a de-professionalization of social work, a move away from understanding first-year social workers as reflective practitioners and towards understanding them as technocrats with an arsenal of generic skills, ready for immediate “deployment” in the workforce. This expectation reflects the emergence of a competency-based approach to managing the social welfare workforce—and service-based professions in general—that has been influential in Canada since the 1990s (Mullaly, 1997). The neo-conservative underpinnings of this model may not be

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immediately obvious, but the competency movement leads away from value- and relationship-based practice, which is messy and difficult to measure, and towards a business model of administrating services. Furthermore, as Mullaly (1997) asserted:

In a competency-based job market there would be no need for extended professional education for social work students as they would not have to learn about the social and political context of their work, critical or social analysis, social and cultural diversity, innovative alternatives, and so on. (p. 14)

If this model of practice is taken to its extreme, social workers become technicians rather than practitioners, their interest in challenging systems that are not responsive to human need is neutralized, and their ability to speak as professionals on behalf of the vulnerable persons they serve is compromised. Mullaly (1997) noted this type of system leaves social workers open to control and regulation.

Expecting immediate proficiency from new social workers also removes the requirement for social work employers to provide induction and support to new workers, shifting the responsibility entirely to educational institutions. As providing support, induction, and managed or gradual caseloads for first-year social workers takes financial and other resources, avoiding or displacing this requirement in favour of efficiency is consistent with a neo-conservative agenda. Even agencies that would like to provide this support are challenged in a context of government fiscal restraint and the resultant expectation that more services are provided to more clients with increasing accountability for proving the effectiveness of services.

Calling for Western social workers to reclaim their political and moral heritage Chu, Tsui, and Yan (2009) declared, “social work practitioners cannot be technocrats, they must be moral actors” (p. 290). This requires combining technical skills with sensitivity to what “constitutes the ‘good’ for a particular client in an individual and collective context” (Chu et al., 2009, p. 290). A technocrat is a “technical expert, especially one exercising managerial authority” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In a criticism of the future of social workers as technocrats, Chu et al. offered this chilling potential: social workers as “cheap therapists whose primary concern is value-for-money solutions to the problem of human suffering” (p. 295). This constitutes a “call to action” for those who would have social work maintain its political, moral, and social justice orientation—and a strong incentive to avoid (or use deliberately and critically) metaphors that position first-year social workers as technocrats.

First-Year Social Workers—A New Metaphor

If hitting the ground running is an inappropriate (or least non-progressive) metaphor for first-year social workers, is there another metaphor that would better express social work’s reasonable hopes and aspirations for our newest colleagues?

I view social workers as facilitators of human growth and social well-being, social welfare as a contested ground for the realization of human aspirations, personal and social problems as complex webs of structural and personal meanings, and new social workers as

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vulnerable and idealistic partners in realizing social work's objectives. In this framework, understanding new social workers could draw on ideas of navigation and travel.

An alternative metaphor for first-year social workers could be new travelers on a long journey. New travelers do not hit the ground running, but they do come prepared with a map and a compass—the map representing knowledge about the nature of social problems, social welfare, and social work interventions; and the compass representing a strong sense of social work ethics and values. Each new social worker walks a slightly different path, but all rely on the wisdom of social workers who have come before to make decisions on the journey, particularly when there are challenging conditions or obstacles in the way; experienced social workers are guides to new social workers.

Inkson (2004) proposed nine archetypal metaphors for careers, all of which have some resonance for understanding a career in social work. Two of the archetypal metaphors seem particularly relevant to an imagining of first-year social workers as new travelers on a long journey: “Path metaphor: Career as journey” (p. 103), and “Network metaphor: Career as encounters and relationships” (p. 103).

Inkson (2004) identified two perspectives on the metaphor of career as journey: “the behavior of the traveler (micro-behavior), and the overall route, form, and terrain of the journey traveled (macro-structure)” (p. 103). I have tried to capture the macro-structure of the social work journey in this paper; research is needed on how first-year social workers make meaning of and respond to their first-year professional experiences (micro-structure). The network metaphor of a career as encounters and relationships reflects the “embeddedness of the career within a series of overlapping social systems” (Inkson, 2004, p. 103). Career experiences are social and political (Inkson, 2004). Furthermore, “if a career is a journey, it is a social rather than a solo journey” (Inkson, 2004, p. 104). The need to support first-year social workers and the metaphor of experienced social workers as guides is consistent with this idea of a social journey. Additionally, the journey of the first-year social worker occurs in a political and social context.

Conclusion

Hitting the ground running is a fertile metaphor for exploration in the context of its application to first-year social workers. When used in this context, hitting the ground running means to make a quick and enthusiastic start to social work practice in one's first social work job. While such a metaphor may be used naïvely and considered only in light of the intended meaning of the speaker/writer employing it, another approach is to consider more deeply the history and tradition invoked with its use. This phrase carries with it a military history and connotations that are far less benign than its currently accepted meaning of starting quickly and enthusiastically. Additionally, it is used to imply not just an enthusiastic start but also an ability to start work without induction (see, for example, the job advertisement at the beginning of this paper). When used in recruitment discourse by agencies with limited resources to support and train new social workers, hitting the ground running may also be organizational code for “first-year social workers not welcome.”

I have argued in this paper that the metaphor of hitting the ground running is suggestive

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of new social workers as soldier recruits and/or technocrats, social welfare as an arena of war, and social problems as the enemy. I have also contended that this metaphor undermines the support and induction needs of first-year social workers. The implications of this metaphor are also reflective of a neo-conservative paradigm of social work and social welfare—a paradigm that I have demonstrated is problematic for the full realization of social work values. Based on my analysis it is my recommendation that the metaphor hitting the ground running be dropped from the lexicon of progressive social work practitioners and scholars (or be taken up intentionally and critically). I have proposed an alternate metaphor for first-year social workers: that of new travelers on a long journey, prepared with maps and compasses, and relying on social workers who have come before as guides to help navigate the terrain, especially in the face of difficulties.

Nelson Mandela expressed his life and career journey in the title of his biography using the image “Long Walk to Freedom” (Inkson, 2002). Mandela’s description of a long walk for his own emancipation and social well-being and that of his fellow citizens resonates with me as an image reflecting the ideal work of social workers—the journey is long but rewarding and requires both endurance and time for reflection while moving constantly towards the greater good that one envisions:

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk has not yet ended (Mandela, 1994, p. 751, as cited in Inkson, 2002, p. 99).

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