



**MORAL ENTANGLEMENTS FOR CHRISTIAN STUDENTS ENTERING
FIELD EDUCATION**

By: Alex D. Colvin and Angela N. Bullock

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ABSTRACT

As a part of the social work curriculum, students are required to complete field internships in a social services type setting. At times however their Christian morals, values, and beliefs may come into conflict with specific client populations served or the policies and practices of the placement agency. Consequently, the student may struggle with how to balance their faith with their profession obligations of service to client populations. This paper will explore potential conflicts for Christian students when personal morals, values, and beliefs collide with social work practice values when entering social work field education settings.

Keywords: Christian, Field Education, Practicum, Social Work

Moral and Value Entanglements for Christian Students entering Field Education

Introduction

Social work is a profession that requires the integration of knowledge, skills and values in a way that promotes individual, familial, community, and social well-being. The knowledge base of social work is complex and comes from multiple disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, and law among others. Within the study of social work, field education is arguably the most significant component of the social work curriculum in preparing competent, effective, and ethical social workers (Bogo, 2015). This is evidenced by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) designating field education as the “signature pedagogy,” affirming its importance and pivotal role in preparing the next generation of social workers (Bogo, 2015; Council on Social Work Education, 2015). As the signature pedagogy, field education is the component of social work education where students are able to practice social work skills through educationally focused service experiences in agency and community settings (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). Organizations that participate in social work education by providing internships are called field placements and are by definition, the settings in which student’s complete agency-based experience to meet the requirements for their social work program (Birkenmaier & Berg-Weger, 2017). Field education plays a vital role because it allows students to become socialized to think and act like social workers (Bogo, 2015).

Social work is also rooted in core values and principles which the profession has an obligation to articulate. These core values include service, social justice for all, dignity and worth of the individual, the importance of the human relationship, integrity, and competence (Worker, N.A., 2008). Specifically, social workers' primary goal is to those in need, marginalized, at-risk, and disenfranchised along with addressing social problems. Matthew

20:26- 28 is a key passage supporting Christian service and connects with social workers' goal to help people in need. In this passage Jesus Christ states that even He came to serve and not to be served. As such, some individuals who enter the field of social work feel the call to the profession because of the harmony it provides between their religious convictions and social work ideals (Dessel, Jacobsen, Levy, McCarty-Caplan, Lewis, & Kaplan, 2017). Thus, it can be argued that many students as well decided on the social work profession because they feel a sense of responsibility to help others and improve the world in which they live.

Although, the social work educational experience provides students with the opportunity to explore their personal and professional values as well as understand how these values impact their ethical decision-making (Council on Social Work Education, 2015), when entering field education, students begin to, among other things, understand how their values and beliefs impact future service provisions to clients. Challenges may arise however when the students' strongly held principles of faith collide with professional social work values (Wilkinson, 2012). For some students, issues may arise with placing their own religious beliefs over their professional obligations to clients. This may cause some social work students to experience internal conflicts and trepidations regarding their personal religious beliefs and the professional values and ethics when serving individuals of varying faiths, sexual orientations, lifestyles, and beliefs, various groups and different communities. When these beliefs conflict with professional values, the tension produced may lead to ambivalence about how to proceed and may potentially lead to unethical practice (Dessel, et. al., 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore potential conflicts students with Christian morals, values, and beliefs face when entering field education settings. Additionally, strategies to aid students grappling with such dilemmas will be discussed.

Brief History of Social Work and Religious Institutions

Social work has a religious foundation (Sheridan, 2011). Social work values are congruent with many religious belief systems, including Christianity (Canda & Furman, 2010; Lee & O’Gorman, 2005). The roots of the profession include significant contributions by persons of faith, congregations and religious-affiliated organizations (RAO’s), all of which have been consistent providers of community services throughout social service history (Yancey & Garland, 2014). Involvement of the church as a context for social work practice was historically enacted through affiliations with denominational and adjudicatory agencies and associations (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016). Concurrently, the church, which has historically been an institution that responds to human needs, has acknowledged the importance of professionally trained social workers for delivering effective human services (Yancey & Garland, 2014).

The social work profession’s original efforts are rooted in the Judeo-Christian heritage of providing charity to persons experiencing problems of poverty and pauperism to help them in lead more productive lives (Bolwes, Clayton, & Hopps, 2017; Reamer, 1999). Furthermore, a close association existed during the 1800’s between religion and social work. The early Charity Organization Society (COS) focused on help beyond the limited government assistance and later directed thought and analysis to casework with individuals and families (Bolwes, Clayton, & Hopps, 2017). In many cases, referrals by workers in social service organizations, were made to the church, specifically for food, clothing, and financial assistance (Garland, 1992). Following closely behind the COS was the Settlement House Movement, which focused on integrating communities of the poor and rich and organized social welfare efforts to provide services to the poor. Settlement Houses and the COS’s were the major deliverers of aid and their approach to those in need included a heavy dispensation of morality, virtue, and good character (Bolwes,

Clayton, & Hopps, 2017). The moral focus that led to the creation of the COS and Settlement House Movement serves as the foundation for the chief social work ideologies of individual worth and dignity and service to humanity (Judd, 2013).

In the 1900's, the focus of the profession turned toward the scientific method and positivist models, even as the church continued to provide a safety net of social services (Sherr & Wolfer, 2003). In 1942, the National Conference of Catholic Charities began publishing a series of monographs which focused on casework practice in Catholic social services agencies. The term "parish work" was used by Martin Ferm (1962), to describe the context of practice for a social worker who was on staff of Lutheran Congregations. Still more, writings by Moore and Collins (2002), addressed the importance of social work services in African American churches and recommendation that field placements in these settings would provide students with experiences with diversity.

Description and Purpose of the Practicum

The practicum is where the social work student begins to learn how to exercise knowledge, skills and values in a social service environment and in highly contextualized situations. A practicum internship gives the student an opportunity to reflect with his/her field instructor on what appears to be useful and what does not. Together, the student and field instructor affirm or reject strategies that appear to work or not work, and develop new approaches aimed at education success. They then test the new ideas in the workplace. For this reason, it is important for social work educators to know how social work internship experiences inform preparation and practice for work with various individuals, groups, communities, and organizations (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016).

The practicum is arranged and completed within specific academic terms, in a human service agency, under the supervision of social worker as an agency field instructor.

Additionally, social work students typically, participate in an orientation to the mission of the organization and preparation for the social work role and responsibilities (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016). Students may work 32 to 40 hours/week for a specified number of weeks in the selected agency. The purpose of the practicum is to provide the student the practical experience of functioning in a position of a social worker. Two main objectives for the student are to: (1) broaden and deepen his/her practical knowledge and skills required at the above mentioned entry level and; (2) to proceed in the process of understanding how to integrate and connect theory to practice.

Social Work's Stance on Religion and Spirituality

The National Association of Social Work (NASW) recognizes religion and spirituality as components of cultural diversity (NASW, 2007, p.4). The NASW (2008) Code of Ethics provides very specific guidelines for understanding diversity and oppression. Specifically, social workers are to be sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice (NASW, 2008, section 1.05). Yet, the integration of religious and spiritual interventions in social work has over time been heavily debated. The social work profession historically adheres to a set of professional values, including self-determination, for clients (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016). To impose religious beliefs onto clients, however well intended, violates a client's right to self-determination (Reamer, 2013, NASW, 2008, Standard 1.02). This value dilemma has resulted in concern that the social worker will use their position of influence in the helping process to impose their values onto the client. Many scholars have noted that the field of social work has been unwelcoming

toward religion, especially toward people who are overtly proud of their religiosity (Hodge, 2002, 2003).

For a period in social work education, there was a prescriptive separation of the social worker's faith and practice. Social work students were taught that their faith and beliefs and those of the client were off limits in the helping process (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016). The clear separation between social work education and religious beliefs and practices remains a key tenet in many social work programs, although the recent emphasis on spirituality and the inclusion of religion as part of culture has begun to have on-going dialogue and new opportunities for social work educators to address this through competency based educational experiences (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016).

The Council on Social Work Education has recognized the role of spirituality although they did not include the term spirituality as part of assessment or intervention until the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). The 2008 standards required that schools of social work provide students with the ability to develop biopsychosocial spiritual assessments and interventions. In particular, Core Competence Educational Policy 2.1.7 and 3.1 states:

Social workers are knowledgeable about human behavior across the life course, the range of social systems in which people live, and the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being. Social workers apply theory and knowledge from the liberal arts to understand biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p.6).

Challenges for Christian Social Work Internship Students

Social work students who identify as Christians or “persons of faith” may not choose to attend faith-affiliated schools or complete internships at faith-based organization. However, many students in state, public social work education programs report faith affiliations and religious values that impact their social work practice (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016). These students may struggle with how to integrate their religious faith into practice many times, with no help or preparation from their educational programs (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016).

Furness and Gilligan (2012) found that some social work students face potential dilemmas such as their incompatibility of beliefs with agency policies in relation to suicide, same-sex relationships, drug and alcohol use, contraception and termination of pregnancy. According to Streets (2009), social work educators also encounter students whose religious values conflict with professional social work ethics and values. Consequently, students who hold highly religious values and beliefs may choose their religious values over those of the social work profession when making decisions in practice situations where their social work and religious values conflict. The challenge for schools of social work is to address the concern around imposition of values and role definition with the opportunity that social work knowledge and skills offers in settings that routinely provide resources, counseling, and community development services (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016).

Another challenge is that many students study in programs where they may not be prepared for the ethical integration of religious faith and professional practice (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016). Although research shows that social workers’ personal viewpoints strongly impact on decision-making regarding spiritually based interventions, social work programs infrequently teach students how to balance their religious beliefs with professional ethics (Dessel, et. al., 2017). Therefore, a need exists for social work educators to give greater priority

to exploring the potential significance of religious and spiritual beliefs in training social work student.

Strategies for Addressing Challenges with Moral Entanglements

As professionals, social workers have duties and obligations that differ from other members of society (Reamer, 2014). Social workers are obligated to not cause harm and to ameliorate harm caused by others. Therefore, social workers have a responsibility to understand the factors that may cause, increase, reduce, or relieve harm (Dessel, et. al., 2017). One helpful strategy for students experiencing moral or ethical entanglements when entering field could include exploring the integration of a self-awareness assessment, which helps the student to examine their own worldviews and understand how their personal biases could influence practice (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016). Self-awareness assessment can help students understand their own value system and corresponding religious beliefs (Lun, 2015).

In addition to self-awareness assessments, reflective practice can help students identify previously unrecognized similarities in beliefs, values, and perspectives. Social work students can use these similarities to develop a working alliance based on mutual respect, humility, and client-centered growth (Teyber & McClure, 2011; Miller & Garran, 2008). Self-assessment and reflecting on personal values and beliefs does not mean having to abandon one's values and beliefs. It does however mean seeking an in-depth understanding of beliefs and how those beliefs may impact others (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016). Continuous reflection and openness can encourage students to determine how their spirituality influences their work with clients. In the context of social work education, the goal is not to strip students of their religious beliefs and moral values systems, but rather to create an environment for students to examine the way in

which personal beliefs, values, biases can have the potential to harm work with individuals (Chonody, Woodford, Smith, & Silverschanz, 2014).

Another strategy for assisting students' struggling with moral and value entanglements may include integrating the use of a cultural diversity assessment tool. One such diversity assessment instrument which could be the use is the Multicultural Experience Inventory (MEI). The MEI is designed to draw on the individual's life history and examine how this history has shaped their views of the world including diverse groups (Ramirez, 1998). Through the use of this assessment tool, individuals explore and become more aware of the extent to which their early and current life experiences have shaped the views of diverse groups. The MEI helps the individual gain valuable insights, particularly with respect to barriers that impede his or her multicultural development (Ramirez, 1998).

Incorporating religious topics into social work education is another necessary strategy for preparing students for professional practice. Social work programs can incorporate spirituality into the curriculum. By doing so, this acknowledges the importance religion has on the social work field and helps prepare students to integrate their faith into their practice competently and ethically (Lun 2015). For instance, in courses that focus on multicultural/multiethnic practice, cultural simulation activities can be used to focus on understanding how prejudices, oppression, and social injustice impact various individuals, groups, and communities. These exercises will help students identify prejudices, discriminations, and/or social injustices they and others might encounter. The goal is to explore the impact of various types of prejudices, discriminations and social injustices on individuals, groups, and communities, and to facilitate discussion on their own beliefs and how to overcoming their entanglements. It is the hope that these activities will also educate students and

develop practice skills for engaging different groups (Furness & Gilligan, 2014). Along with cultural simulation activities, providing assignments that address personal reflection on diversity can also be integrated which afford students with a great opportunities to understand the need to be culturally competent. These approaches can be further reinforced by social work supervisors in field education by assisting students with developing appropriate responses and approaches when their personal values may conflict with professional values.

Conclusion

It is important to explore what the social work profession's core values are and which ones overlap with the student's religious values. Social work students who strongly identify with religious traditions can call on these core values as they try to understand themselves and their professional responsibilities (Harris, Yancey, & Myers, 2016). In working through one's tensions and ambivalence about how to help work with certain individuals, groups, or communities, it may be helpful for students to reflect on one's own beliefs, values, and culture, and how one has been socialized (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Shulman (2005), asserts that emotional investment in the field experience, even when it includes anxiety, is necessary to learning. This component is part of what elevates field education to critical importance (Lyter, 2012).

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