Preparing for Practice: The Faith Integration Experiences of Christian Social Work Students

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Abstract

- This presentation will summarize the results of a qualitative research project which explored the experiences of Christian students related to faith integration in their social work education programs.
- These findings will be used as a springboard for a discussion of the implications for social work practice.

Research Questions

- What are the experiences of Christian students in social work programs related to faith integration?
- More specifically, what opportunities related to faith have students experienced? What challenges or obstacles related to faith have students experienced in social work education?
- For this presentation: what do these findings mean for beginning social work practice?

Literature Review

- Perception of hostile and discriminatory attitudes and actions towards Christian social workers by other social workers (Hodge & Ressler, 2005; Hodge, 2006; Hodge, 2007; Thyer & Myers, 2009).
- This perceived discrimination is tied specifically to social workers who are classified as "theologically conservative".
- Similar findings related to how Christian clients are viewed by social workers.

NACSW Feedback

- Anecdotal information collected by Rick Chamiec-Case, Executive Director, who identifies key areas of tension for Christian students in social work educational programs:
  - Admissions process
  - Internships
  - Class assignments and projects
  - Grades
  - Issues of dismissal from programs
  - Conflicts (overt and covert) with faculty
  - Comments made by faculty and students during class discussions

Other Voices

- While perception of religious discrimination doesn't guarantee that discrimination has occurred, it's difficult to ignore this growing body of literature.
- On the other hand, many Christian students survive and thrive in social work educational programs— these voices need their place in the conversation.
- Exploration of the nuances between perception and reality, obstacles and opportunities (Barker, in press).

Methodology

- Qualitative philosophy
- Focus groups (collective memories and multiple perspectives; economical and larger sample size)
- Semi-structured interview protocol
- Audio recorded, narratives transcribed and then analyzed line-by-line
- Themes emerge around research questions

Methodology

- Recruitment: Two groups at NACSW Conference in 2009 and two groups in Boston area using purposive sampling technique (n=30).
- Sample:
  - Recent graduates or current students nearing completion of BSW, MSW, or Ph.D. program, secular and/or faith-based.
  - Identify as Christian.
  - Able to identify specific experiences related to faith and faith integration.

Sample Demographics

Demographic				
Geographic Location	Northeast: 12	Midwest: 13	Southeast: 4	West: 1
Gender	Male: 7	Female: 23		
Highest Level of SW Education	BSW only: 7	MSW: 18	Ph.D.: 5	
Age Range	Youngest: 21	Oldest: 53		
Self-Ranking on Theological Scale	More liberal: 9	In the middle: 11	More conservative: 10	

Findings

- Themes related to:
  - Obstacles
  - Opportunities

Obstacles

- Limited diversity in political ideology in social work programs.
  - "Hot button" issues
  - Even an issue in faith-based settings

  - "You'd be in class, and it was assumed who you were voting for. It was assumed that everybody was on the same page about things."
  - "Do I feel comfortable to share that not every social worker will have those beliefs whether they're a person of faith or not?"

Obstacles

- Lack of acceptance of religious diversity, particularly Christianity.
  - Assumptions people make about you based on your denominational affiliation.

  - "What I look at is the use of the term diversity. The program was very strong on diversity—diversity towards this group, diversity towards that group, but except when it came to diversity towards religion."
  - "And when I left that interview [for an internship], I kindly said to him, 'I feel like you were very disrespectful. I feel like you don't know me, and you're making assumptions about my faith personally...'"

Obstacles

- Individual personalities and developmental factors impact how social work students respond to challenges.

  - "So I don't know, it was kind of an individual thing, how this individual is going to respond to someone challenging their belief system."
  - "I think being an older person and have a younger person hear me say 'It's okay. I've referred girls that talked to me about abortion. You don't have to counsel them on that but you can't deprive them of the service'."

Obstacles

- While the profession agrees that spirituality is important for social work practice, there is little purposeful dialogue or discussion in the classroom.
  - Environment doesn't feel safe for exploration.
  - Spirituality and faith is the "elephant."

  - "I saw that as an obstacle from the beginning of my program, you know, is this a safe environment to really explore academically my Christian beliefs and social work?"
  - "Here we are at a secular university that's known for it's spirituality and social work and have faculty and staff that are revered in the profession, yet there was not—it was not very open at all to you discussing your religious faith. It was kind of like the white elephant at the table."

Opportunities

- Posture toward obstacles:
  - Learning opportunities
    - "I think it helped me tremendously in getting a better understanding as to why the perceptions of the church are as they are—I think there were some shared [negative] experiences."
  - Dispel assumptions and stereotypes
    - "When one of my friends found out I was a Christian, he was confused. He didn't know what it meant to me. Being a Christian means different things to different people, but in his view it meant like a right-winger in the South, that kind of stuff. And he was confused at first."

Opportunities

- Posture toward obstacles:
  - Tension is a good thing in an academic setting
    - "You have those tensions. You talk about them, but it's on an academic level almost. You don't personalize it. You don't make it 'this is me against this person' or 'this is me against another value'."
  - "I wasn't looking for anything so I didn't find it."

Opportunities

- Developing connections and support networks with other Christians in social work.
  - Students
    - "He was really a big support throughout the program—having another person who was a Christian, and he and I had some different beliefs at times, but we could, even just sorting those through and talking about that was really helpful, talking outside of class."

Opportunities

- Faculty
  - "I did have a relationship with one professor who I was able to talk about faith with and kind of explore that and was very encouraged in that setting."
  - "My professor came up to me later and she said, 'I think you just got the respect of your peers.' She said, 'Thank you for reminding us that not all of us think the same…and that we, as a group, can be diverse and work with diverse populations without discrimination.'"

Opportunities

- Prayer support
  - "And then when some of my other friends were going through hard times—I mean, I let them know that I was praying for them. And if they needed to talk, they can, and they did. Again, we used each other as a support system."
- Internships to support faith integration
  - "One was at a Christian not-for-profit. The other was in a school social work public school setting and (through the interview) I was able to extract that faith was a part of (the supervisor's) life and that we would be able to converse on that level."

Researcher Reflections

- Some dichotomy:
  - Issues versus no issues
  - Dwell on challenges versus use challenges as opportunity
- Can't assume support for integration of faith and social work based on program affiliation.
- Importance of self-awareness in navigating obstacles and opportunities.
- Overwhelming feeling from all that social work seems to be less tolerant of Christianity than of other traditions… based in assumptions about who Christians are and what we stand for.
- Perceptions! Still haven't confirmed reality.

Implications for Practice

- What (if anything) resonates with you as Christians currently in practice? Which of these obstacles and opportunities are relevant in your practice settings?

Implications for Practice

- Remember—students are preparing for practice and are entering agency settings with some of this "baggage."
- Role of field instructors in practicum settings: may be most important mentor for faith integration support.
- Knowledge and understanding of where folks are developmentally/support around belief systems being challenged for some who will need it.

Implications for Practice

- Agency preparedness to be a safe and open space for the exploration of faith integration
    - Trainings (until quite recently, few social workers were exposed to spiritual and/or religious integration as part of their social work programs)
    - Dialogue groups ("learning opportunities" and "dispelling stereotypes" through relationships)
    - Use of supervision

The End

- Thanks for coming!

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