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Virtues and Character in Social Work Practice

Cheryl Brandsen & Terry A. Wolfer (Eds.). (2015). Botsford, CT: North American Association of Christians in Social Work.

Virtues and Character in Social Work Practice is a re-publication of the combined Summer and Fall 2014 special issue of *Social Work & Christianity*. Terry A. Wolfer and Cheryl Brandsen served as the editors for this collection of articles by many Christian social work educators. The work is set up first to assist the reader in understanding virtue ethics. It then goes on to analyze various virtues and how each virtue fits with nurturing the development of a social work student or practitioner. The final two chapters are resources to the Christian social work educator with practical uses of virtue ethics in teaching and further resources for continued study regarding this topic.

The first article, written by Jill C. Schreiber, Ruth E. Groenhout and Cheryl Brandsen, dives into the framework for virtue ethics and how it can be utilized in Christian social work education. The authors compare various ethical theories and ultimately provide a case for utilizing virtue-based ethical theories. Virtue-based ethical theories pay attention to the person, or agent, and what type of person that he or she is. All actions are viewed in light of the character of that person. "The evaluation of character and an account of actions derived from character traits that are conducive to being a good social worker or to living an emotional and social healthy life forms the centerpiece of virtue ethics approach" (p. 9).

The authors discuss how the social work profession is rooted in a code of ethics with clear values, but currently the competency-based education does not provide a framework for how one would build or nurture those values within a social worker. The authors argue, "Paying attention to virtue has the potential to enrich and deepen social work practice" (p. 10). Additionally, virtue ethics provides a more holistic approach to social work education and is more true to our role as Christian social work educators. The implication is that there is a void created by solely focusing on competencies and behaviors.

The five virtues that are explored by the individual chapter authors in chapters two through six are charity, faith, gratitude, generosity, and justice. The editors do not claim these are the only five virtues that can be explored, nor do they argue that they are the most important. But rather, these virtues were of interest to the authors and fit with social work values.

Of practical use to the social work educator is the seventh chapter, which consists of strategies for Christian social work educators to develop

character in their students. This chapter challenges social work educators to provide more to students than a “do no harm” approach to integration faith and practices. Rather, Christian social workers should work to utilize faith as an asset. For example, they should utilize contemplative practice together with mindfulness, meditation, and other spiritual practices that would enhance the students’ self-care skills.

One potential critique of this anthology is that the discussion of competency-based education is based on the 2008 Council on Social Work Education standards, and since the edited volume was published, there are revised educational policy and accreditation standards. While the new standards resemble the 2008 standards, there are some notable additions. One change from 2008 to 2015 is the expansion of identified skills from being solely knowledge, values, and skills. In the 2015 standards, a holistic view of competence is more prevalent, with knowledge, values, and skills being supplemented with cognitive and affective processes that include the social worker’s critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgment (2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards). The reader may question whether there is still a void, when accounting for the expanded 2015 standards. However, because the 2015 standards still focus heavily on student learning outcomes and do not provide guidance on how to provide a more holistic view of competence, one could argue that a focus on virtues is still warranted.

Ultimately this analysis and discussion of what role virtue ethics should play in social work education is an important addition to Christian social work education. It assists the reader in critiquing the void that a competency-based only education would provide and gives practical ideas for supplementing that education to include a more holistic view of educating and nurturing Christian social work individuals that go beyond simply evaluating learning outcomes. ❖

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Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World

Alexia Salvatierra, & Peter Heltzel. (2014). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Faith-Rooted Organizing contributes to the burgeoning knowledge base of faith-based community organizing with a fresh spiritual paradigm. The authors of the book, Pastor Salvatierra and Professor Heltzel, present