

The NASW Code of Ethics under Attack: A Manifestation of the Culture War Within the Profession of Social Work

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Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 7, Number 2 (2010)
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Abstract

A review of a sample (n = 55) of professional Codes of Ethics reveals that the profession of social work is unique in taking the stance that social and political action are in the realm of professional responsibility. Recent criticism of the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* is framed as part of the culture war going on in society and this paper raises questions about the profession's role in perpetuating or perhaps ending the battle.

Key words: Culture war, code of ethics, social work, discrimination

1. Introduction

The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) *Code of Ethics* has recently come under fire as the means for "partisan declarations" within debates about policy (National Association of Scholars [NAS], n.d.) and as the articulation of the NASW's "surreptitious

political agenda" (Will, 2007). The critique is that the NASW Code of Ethics is "ideologically loaded and mandating political advocacy and action" (NAS, n.d.). Hunter's (1991) distinction between two worldviews at war, the culture war, is used to examine the attacks on the NASW Code of Ethics as part of what is going on in our broader society. This distinction is also used to clarify the profession of social work's position amongst the cultural battlefields and what the profession's next move should be.

Hunter (1991) describes two polarizing "impulses" or worldviews, orthodoxy and progressivism. Each has different visions of what is moral, good, right, and true. The orthodox worldview ascribes to a "transcendent moral authority," which defines an "unchangeable measure of value" (Hunter, 1991, p. 44). Hunter (1991) points out that even the voices of different faiths resonate in a commonality of the belief that the moral authority comes from above and for all time. The progressive worldview ascribes to the "spirit of the modern age, rationalism, and

subjectivism” (Hunter, 1991, p.44). The truth is viewed as a process and reality, ever unfolding (Hunter, 1991). Regarding moral or social issues, those who embrace the orthodox worldview tend toward political conservatism and those who embrace the progressive worldview lean toward the liberal agenda (Hunter, 1991).

2. Individual and Collective Worldviews of Social Workers

According to one study, social workers affirm a progressive worldview (Hodge, 2003). Further supporting this contention, another study found that although political diversity is welcomed, the more liberal a social worker’s ideology, the more they feel a part of the profession (Rosenwald, 2006). This study also found that the more conservative political ideologies were associated with a weaker belief in the NASW Code of Ethics. Collectively the profession is viewed as always having had a clear progressive orientation (Hunter, 1991; Hodge, 2003). Individually, social workers, as with the general public, hold views that fall on the continuum of beliefs or worldviews and may be more or less liberal than the collective of social workers represented by the NASW (Hodge, 2003; Rosenwald, 2006).

3. The NASW Code of Ethics and a Profession on the Progressive Side of the Culture War

Critics of the NASW Code of Ethics highlight the profession's commitment to social justice, expectations that social workers take social and political action and that action is based upon a single partisan view (NAS, n.d.; Will, 2007). The NASW

Code of Ethics articulates ethical principles based on social work’s core values. So does the NASW Code of Ethics align the profession to be exclusively on the progressive side? First, consider how diversity is defined by the identification of individuals or groups of individuals that are oppressed or vulnerable to discrimination. At present, the NASW Code of Ethics identifies twelve characteristics or attributes that have been and have the potential to be the basis of discrimination. These are race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability (NASW, 1999). Second, under the section titled Social And Political Action, Section 6.04c, “Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability (NASW, 1999). Third, under the same section, “Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice” (NASW, 1999, section 604). The very inclusion of this section projects the viewpoint that the world needs changing and that even in the United States, there remain people and groups that are “oppressed, dominated, or exploited.” Furthermore, targeting policy and legislation for change is used to argue the

view that these are in fact mechanisms for oppression and discrimination (Will, 2007). An example of the progressive worldview of the social work profession as articulated by the NASW Code of Ethics can be provided by looking to the code for guidance to address a battle currently being fought in the United States. Consider the debate over legislation that grants rights to domestic partnerships. According to the NASW Code of Ethics, social workers should take political action to change policy to not discriminate or oppress individuals based upon their sexual orientation. Would any other profession take on such a bold position?

4. Method

This study sought to answer the question: *Is the profession of social work unique in its definition of diversity or recommendations for political and social activism as articulated in the NASW Code of Ethics?*

4.1 Sample

With the assistance of The Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions (CSEP, n.d.), Index of Codes, the author conducted an online review of approximately 700 professional Codes of Ethics. Of these, 55 were selected for more in-depth review. The sample selection was based upon the profession's status as having direct contact in a helping or instructional capacity with diverse and potentially vulnerable populations. Additional professional codes were found conducting searches of this data base using the key terms, social justice, diversity, and discrimination. These included professions in health,

dental, and mental health care fields and professions in the field of education.

4.2 Data Collection

The following questions were used for the in-depth review:

- 1) Does the professional code make a statement of non-discrimination?
 - a) If yes, which specific forms of diversity that should be the basis of non-discrimination are identified?
- 2) Does the professional code make a statement regarding the profession's commitment to social justice?
- 3) Does the professional code make a statement regarding the profession's obligation to social or political activism?
 - a) If yes, what type of activism on behalf of whom?

5. Results

Of the 55 codes of ethics, 16 used the words non-discrimination or discriminate. A total of 43 (78%) made statements to the effect that care should not be refused based on certain attributes or statements calling for sensitivity or respect for diverse service recipients. Of these, 27 (49%) specify the basis of non-discrimination. There were three that stated that discrimination for any reason is unethical. The codes vary with respect to what they specify, however, race was specified for every code. Sex or gender was specified for most (24, 44%) and religion, spiritual beliefs or preference was specified for 22. Sexual orientation was specified on 19 (35%). Age was specified on 18 (33%). Disability was specified on 16 (29%), but only the NASW

and the Canadian Nurses Association specify both mental and physical disability (NASW, 1999; CSEP, n.d.). There were 12 (22%) that list socioeconomic status, 11 (20%) who listed culture, 10 (18%) listed national origin, 10 (18%) listed color, 9 (16%) listed marital status, 8 (15%) listed creed, 6 (11%) listed language, and 4 (7%) listed gender identity or expression. There were only 4 (7%), like the NASW Code of Ethics, that listed political beliefs or affiliation. Numerous characteristics were listed once or twice. These include: immigrant status, special needs, health status, life style, ability to pay, nature of health problems, status or behavior of parents, contribution to society, appearance, moral, social and religious standards, status, reproduction status, inclination, circumstance, and feelings. Four listed other legal, unjustifiable, or irrelevant reason.

According to this review, four other professions make mention of obligations toward social justice. The Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals' Vision Rehabilitation Therapy Code of Ethics states vision rehabilitation therapists "advocate for policies and legislation that promote access, inclusion, social justice, equal opportunity and informed choice for people with visual impairments" (CSEP, n.d.). The American Society of Addiction Medicine, the American Psychoanalytic Association, and the American Psychiatric Association make statements in reference to civil disobedience in protest against social injustices and that said actions might not necessarily constitute unethical behavior (CSEP). The American Society of Addiction Medicine acknowledges society's response to alcoholism and other drug dependencies as reflecting a history

of prejudice and stigma, and how that affects treatment of addiction. With this acknowledgement comes the charge of the addictionist to advocate for changes in policy to improve treatment and protect the rights of patients and families. The Canadian Nurses Association states that nurses are obliged to uphold equity and fairness... in promoting social justice (CSEP, n.d.).

Of the 21 professional codes that make a statement about the profession's obligation towards social or political activism, 10 (48%) are in reference to patient or client access to the type of services offered by the profession, 4 (19%) make general statements about improving the community, and 8 (24%) make general statements about promoting the best interest, growth or development of the client, consumer, or patient. The National Society of Genetic Counselors "promote policies that aim to prevent discrimination" and take part in "activities to bring socially responsible change" (CSEP, n.d.). The Canadian Nurses Association states that nurses should "intervene if others fail to respect the dignity of persons in care" (CSEP, n.d.). The International Council of Nurses (CSEP, n.d.), suggests, "Nurses can work individually as citizens or collectively through political action to bring about social change" regarding health related socio-cultural issues such as human rights.

6. Discussion

The NASW Code of Ethics is unique in the articulation of ethical responsibilities in regard to social justice and social activism. Based on this review, social work has the only code of ethics that explicitly states

that the professional “should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice” (NASW, 1999).

Furthermore, social work is the only profession that articulates within a code of ethics a commitment to challenging discrimination with a list of specific vulnerable and oppressed persons or groups and carries this responsibility beyond the realm of professional practice to the realm of society. The ethical standard, Social, and Political Action (NASW, 1999, 6.04d) states, “Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political beliefs, religion, or mental or physical disability.” In comparison to other professions, for social workers it is not simply a matter of ensuring access to social work services or for ensuring culturally competent practice; it is about changing the context in which services and practice occur.

6.1 How the Culture War Hurts

The culture war hurts when the rights of one group of people are seen as a violation or attack on another group of persons.

Take, for example, the debate of domestic partner legislation. This legislation is viewed under the orthodox worldview as an effort to redefine the family and is therefore seen as an attack on Christianity, because it diverts from the “traditional, biblical family and marriage ideal” (Hunter, 1991, p.4). Whereas a gay couple may have no intention of infringing or changing anything about a Christian family’s lifestyle, by virtue of their differences, they are placed in the position of adversary. Having been discriminated against and oppressed, the person who is gay may take offense against those who would block legislation to grant them partnerships. A bitter seemingly irresolvable debate ensues, and when it comes down to it, the social work profession is juxtaposed to advocate for both sides (NASW, 1999). Considering the Christian’s view as Hunter (1991) explains it, the social worker should not oppress or discriminate based on religious beliefs. To put forward this legislation asks some Christians or persons of the Orthodox camp to change their definition of what is moral and what is good, their world view. It asks them to accept a different definition of what is right and true.

Would most social workers side with gay couples who would benefit from such legislation? If we make the argument that blocking domestic partnerships is a form of discrimination based upon sexual orientation, then the Code of Ethics informs us that we should act to prevent this discrimination. Can the argument be made that this legislation is a form of discrimination against Christians based upon religious beliefs? Does asking a person of faith to accept a different worldview in order to support policy and legislation exploit, dominate, oppress, or

discriminate against them? Some would argue it does set the stage for oppression and domination of people of faith (NAS, n. d.).

The culture war hurts when conflicts in worldviews combined with a power differential lead to discrimination. The theory is that conflicting worldviews in tandem with unequal power relations foster discrimination especially if the differences are unacknowledged (Hodge, 2003; Wambach & Van Soest, 1997). Bias is something that is embedded in a person's worldview and it precludes discrimination. Given the power differential, which is present between a social worker and client, bias must be managed in the context of the helping relationship so as to not lead to discrimination (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). One might argue that a person who is racist, ageist, heterosexist, or sexist, for example, would not make a good social worker. When it comes to the potential harm or discrimination of our clients or for mistreatment of colleagues, this is a possibility. Bias and prejudice occur on a continuum, and we all have them to some degree. There is the social worker who holds strong prejudices and the social worker who, through naiveté or ignorance, does not realize where he or she is on that continuum of prejudice. Either can do harm. The first step toward doing no harm is awareness of personal prejudice or bias and awareness of how that prejudice or bias has the potential to harm the very persons we aim to help (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007).

The culture war hurts when a profession such as social work is associated with one side, and the worldview association is conceptualized as an absolute. Persons with a progressive worldview may feel a

better fit with the profession of social work despite the acceptance of political (Rosenwald, 2006) and religious diversity (NASW, 1999). Our values and principles are not meant to be used to exclude persons of the orthodox or conservative camp from entering the profession. It has been argued that religious discrimination exists within the social work education system (Hodge, 2006). It was accusations of religious discrimination in social work education that added fuel to the fire of the National Association of Scholars' report, "The Scandal of Social Work Education" (n. d.). Perhaps anecdotal and not at all representative to the population of social work educators, the case histories, none the less, consist of students who refused to participate in social and political activism concerning "homosexual foster homes and adoption," "abortion," and "homosexual marriage" (NAS, n. d.). The grounds for refusal in all cases were the conflict such actions would present with the students' religious beliefs and is therefore discriminatory.

7. Implications

As social workers, we strive for social justice, and this means accepting those to the profession who may not have a liberal perspective or a progressive worldview. There are probably some bad or ineffective social workers out there, and whether or not they choose to take political action on behalf of every one of the 12 different sources of diversity identified in the NASW *Code of Ethics* does not necessarily have anything to do with it. It is conceivable that a social worker could have an entire career practicing social work, adhering to the standards of non-discrimination, and yet never take a

political action beyond voting. They may be very effective and help many people. If a social worker is in the position to advocate for a client who is oppressed, regardless of their differences, the social worker may or may not be able to do this. If a social worker's worldview differs from that presented in our professional code, perhaps it is not too much to ask that the social worker take steps to avoid the act of discrimination. Just as a social worker might recognize an inability to help a certain client and refer that client to someone else, they may do so in this circumstance.

Furthermore, it may not be realistic to expect every social worker to be working as an activist for all individuals or groups at once. It might make sense to expect social workers to pick and choose their causes or battles. This is not to suggest any oppressed individual or group is more or less worthy or that a social worker could avoid taking social action altogether. Nor does it mean that social workers should neglect circumstances of discrimination when they become aware of them. The profession as a collective whole can take care and advocate for all individuals regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability. If social workers find their beliefs in conflict with the political agenda of the NASW, then they still have choices. They can choose to not be a member or to speak out and enter a dialogue with the membership.

The profession as a collective of social workers has articulated its position within the *NASW Code of Ethics*, and whereas most may agree with this position (Hodge, 2003; Rosenwald, 2006), there is and

should be a wide variation of individual positions. Our diversity makes us better and stronger. The worldview of one social worker might make him or her better suited to work with and to advocate for certain clients. Individual social workers can find their ideal niche within the profession. If we did not have conflicting views from time to time, we might just take our position for granted and allow it to go untested. Having differences within the profession prompts us to continuously review and to reflect so as to reaffirm or revise our position as need be. As Graff (1992) put it, we can turn our "conflicts into community." He was speaking of university communities but this notion can be expanded to the notion of a community of social workers. By listening to differing viewpoints we learn from each other and we enrich our practice, our own viewpoints and our lives. A perfect way to become attuned to our own biases is to have dialogues with persons who have differing viewpoints (Bender & Leone, 1999).

8. Conclusion

Social work is the only profession that articulates within a code of ethics a commitment to challenging discrimination with a list of specific vulnerable and oppressed persons or groups and that carries this responsibility beyond the realm of professional practice to the realm of society. This is a profession to set examples for other professions with a code of ethics that reflects values that can work toward putting an end to this culture war. Do we have room within the profession for both sides of the culture war? Absolutely. We need individuals from diverse backgrounds and worldviews to work to prevent and eliminate social injustices.

Isn't that what we have been saying all along?

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