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# Editorial: Censorship at NASW?

by Diane S. Falk, Ph.D. Member, JSWVE Editorial Board

Twenty pages of the December 2006 issue of the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* are devoted to the discussion of a controversy that arose after James Midgley, formerly Dean of the University of California at Berkeley School of Social Work and well-known authority on social development and international social work, was invited by Jorge Delva, the Editor of *Social Work*, to write a guest editorial. That editorial, "International Social Work, Globalization and the Challenge of a Unipolar World," was reviewed by NASW administrative staff who, in consultation with the NASW attorney, concluded that the names of governmental officials needed to be removed prior to publication. Dr. Midgley refused to do so and withdrew the editorial. Dr. Delva had not been consulted on this decision and protested, to no avail. Dr. Midgley then approached several members of the NASW National Board, asking them to intervene. The Board upheld the staff decision.

The *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* published Dr. Midgley's editorial in its entirety (2006). It also published an editorial by its editor, Robert D. Leighninger, Jr., and several letters to the editor from current and former editors of social work journals, including the former editor-in-chief of *Social Work*, Stanley L. Witkin. The final letter was from Elizabeth J. Clark (2006), NASW Executive Director. All of the current and former journal editors concurred that NASW erred in allowing administrative censorship of scholarly writing. Dr. Clark argued that, as a 501 (c) (6) tax-exempt organization, NASW is constrained to act "in appropriate ways and within legal and regulatory requirements" and therefore could not publish Dr. Midgley's editorial without removing certain names (2006).

The issue could be framed, as suggested by Dr. Clark, as one of protecting NASW from any difficulties that might arise as the result of lapses in meeting legal and regulatory guidelines. As a former member of the NASW Board of Directors, I have some understanding of the concerns of the Board. During my term on the NASW Board, I had an opportunity to gain some perspective on the challenges facing that organization. NASW has been sued a number of times, and each lawsuit has drained the resources of the organization. Avoiding future lawsuits is an important consideration. In addition, NASW has been attacked from both sides of the political spectrum for the positions it has taken on issues. When NASW advocates on behalf of oppressed groups, its

credibility with other groups suffers. In addition, NASW is continually in an uphill battle to gain recognition for the profession from a society that assigns low status to a human services field whose ranks are populated mainly by women. In order to advance the profession, NASW has undertaken a major public education campaign, the aim of which is to gain greater public acceptance and appreciation for the profession. From this vantage point, the decision is clear: assure that nothing is published that might lead to legal or regulatory problems.

There are other considerations, however. As a founding board member of the *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, I suggest that the issue be framed as an ethical dilemma. On the one hand, the *Code of Ethics* appears to lend support to the position taken by Dr. Clark and the NASW Board. “Social workers should be diligent stewards of the resources of their employing organizations, wisely conserving funds where appropriate...” [Standard 3.09 (g)]. Keeping NASW out of legal and regulatory trouble -- and thereby conserving funds and protecting the association from threats to its effectiveness in advancing the profession and advocating on behalf of clients -- is certainly one of the responsibilities of its executive director and board of directors. On the other hand, however, the *Code of Ethics* also states:

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice (Standard 6.01).

...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. [Standard 6.04 (a)]

This is exactly what Dr. Midgley was doing in his editorial. This issue was also a predominant theme of social work’s two international conferences last summer, where social workers from around the world gathered to consider, among other things, how our profession could address some of the negative aspects of global political and economic shifts.

It appears then that, in addition to freedom of speech issues, there is a compelling ethical reason to encourage social work scholars who have engaged in depth with complex political and economic issues to speak out freely to expose the ways that they believe social and economic

policies are eroding human rights and creating oppressive and destructive social conditions for a significant proportion of the world's population. To say that scholars can name policies but not name names is simply silly. Every informed social worker who would read a censored version of Dr. Midgley's editorial would know who was behind the policies being critiqued.

The vigorous critique of a society that has lost its moral compass is the most compelling choice for a social worker faced with the ethical dilemma described above. If we strive too hard to avoid vague possible problems with government regulators, we run the risk of becoming part of the problem instead of part of the solution. In a democracy such as ours, we need to allow for the full expression of diverse opinion. As John Stuart Mill (1859) said,

...the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

Our profession, as well as our democracy, will be best served by vigorous public debates on issues of such importance.

Diane S. Falk, Ph.D. Member, Editorial Board

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*Note: This Opinion is being published in place of the Journal's regular "Editorial Comment." We welcome other views on this issue. Please send responses to this Opinion to [Steve Marson](#).*

## Response to “Licensing Social Work Faculty: An Issue of Ethics?”

Dr. Stephen Marson, senior editor of the *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, in a recent editorial comment stated that he was puzzled by the question, “Should social workers who are faculty be required to be state licensed/certified in their jurisdictions?” He argues that faculty who are members of other professions such as law and medicine are overwhelmingly licensed and that we as social workers should be, as well. He also suggests that some social work faculty may not have actually practiced their profession for many years and consequently may be out of touch with current practices. He further suggests that if we attend to our ethical guidelines related to professional competence, we should become licensed in order to demonstrate our competence, and states that if we don’t become licensed or certified we potentially become “an embarrassment to the entire profession.”

There are several interesting issues related to whether or not the licensing of social work faculty is truly an ethical issue. The first of those is that Dr. Marson does not seem to differentiate between social work faculty who are teaching direct practice (or “micro”) classes related to social work with individuals, families, and groups and faculty who are primarily teaching human behavior in the social environment, practice with organizations and communities, social policy, and/or research. If one argues that social work faculty should be licensed, does that apply to faculty teaching across all areas or only to those who are teaching direct practice classes?

The second issue is whether or not licensure is a valid measure of competence. More than a decade ago, I was a member of a statewide (California) NASW “Practice Committee” that spent a year grappling with whether or not there should be a non-clinical license in addition to the clinical license available in California, or whether there should simply be one license that included all post-MSW social workers, even those in non- “clinical” areas of practice, or alternatively multi-level licensure that would also include BSW level workers. As of this date there is only one social work license in California, and it is still called a “clinical” license. Much of this committee’s discussion revolved around the purpose of licensure and whether or not passing a license examination demonstrated competence or was simply a way of potentially limiting harm to the public and providing a method for dealing with those professionals who did harm the public (i.e., revoking licenses). California recently eliminated the oral interview component of its licensing exam

because of concerns with examiner (all licensed social workers) subjectivity and inter-rater reliability issues. So, at this time the state of California licenses clinical social workers who depend heavily on the tools of listening and talking without an assessment of listening and talking. I believe the evidence is still out on whether or not a license really measures competence.

Dr. Marson also comments on social work faculty who have limited practice experience and/or fail to keep up with current trends in social work practice. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires that social work faculty have two years of post-MSW practice experience before they teach direct practice courses in accredited programs. As I get very close to 30 years post-MSW experience, the two years of experience required for teaching direct practice or independent (“private”) social work practice in many states seems like only a brief introduction into professional practice and I wonder how much I would have had to offer MSW students after only two years of practice experience. One very well-regarded professor in the MSW program I attended told a group of us as we neared graduation that she thought it took about five years of post-MSW practice to become a “good social worker.” Many of us thought that it wouldn’t take us five years to become “good,” but we might have different views of that assessment now. How much post-MSW practice experience should a faculty member have before teaching direct practice classes?

Is two years of practice in one agency and in one community nearly enough direct experience to draw on as one begins what may be a 20-year career in teaching practice classes? If two years is too little, then how many years of direct practice experience should be required? Is there a relationship between the number of years of practice experience and the effective teaching of social work practice? As I ponder these questions, I am struck by a comment made a year or two ago by a local social service agency staffer who was sitting next to me in a meeting as we jointly planned a case management conference for our community. As names for potential workshop leaders were suggested, she heard several faculty members mentioned and said to the group, “Let’s be careful not to get too many faculty members as presenters because these workshops need to be useful to the people who attend.”

In a fascinating debate on the general issue of potentially requiring the licensure of social work faculty who teach direct practice, Professor Fredrick Seidl says, “what we have in social work today is a dialogue between two cultures: the academic culture and the professional culture,” and I could not agree more (Thyer & Seidl, 2000). As a faculty member who is going “up for

tenure” this year, it has become increasingly apparent to me that there is a process of re-professionalization that is supposed to occur in which a doctoral level professional social worker hired by a university as a faculty member in a tenure track position is supposed to evolve into something called an “academic.” As one becomes an academic, one apparently needs to leave the direct practice world behind, according to Professor Seidl, because faculty who are too close to direct practice risk having their teaching become “particularistic, isomorphic, and ideographic and bound in the here-and- now.” In fact, according to Seidl, among practice teachers there is a “deplorable lack of scholarship” and “practice teachers who can survive a tenure muster are rare and cherished” (Thyer & Seidl, 2000, p. 187). It does not seem to occur to Professor Seidl that the “tenure muster” model itself may be a major part of the problem of recruiting and retaining direct practice faculty, because tenure requirements may be incongruent in some important ways with the professional identities, values, and opportunities of faculty who see themselves first as social work practitioners and secondly or even concurrently as academics.

In his editorial comment, Dr. Marson identified a narrow question of ethics related to whether social work faculty should be licensed or credentialed, but the real question is a broader one of values. Do social work schools place sufficient value on the years and substance of pre-teaching practice experience, ongoing practice experience while teaching, familiarity with current and developing practice models, professional interaction with the direct practice community, and licenses and certifications to the extent they value more traditional academic measures of productivity and competence such as research and publication in scholarly journals? Simply requiring practice faculty to have a license or obtain a license will not guarantee competence in matters related to practice, although it might be a good beginning standard. Licensed faculty members teaching direct practice classes can still fail to keep “current,” and the unevenness across the country in continuing education standards makes it very difficult to claim that simply accumulating required numbers of continuing education units is a measure of keeping “current” or staying competent. The real issue is professional identity and culture. Professor Seidl says that a regulation requiring direct practice faculty to have or obtain licenses would simply “provide a bit more job security for people with otherwise thin academic qualifications” (Thyer & Seidl, 2000, p. 187). Of course, the counter point to Professor Seidl’s argument is that not requiring licensure for direct practice faculty provides more job security for people with otherwise thin practice qualifications.

The debate on requiring licensure for social work faculty is not as much a question of ethics as it is a question of values and a clash between what two sometimes very different cultures are. Rather than simply requiring licensure for faculty who teach direct practice social work classes, it may be more important to develop a culture within schools and departments of social work that truly values the experiences and contributions of direct practitioners who find their way into the academy and to develop a professional community that values the perspectives and contributions of academics who find themselves at times out of the ivory tower and on the ground or in the trenches.

Ray E. Liles, DSW, LCSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker) Assistant Professor Social Work  
California State University, San Bernardino

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## Letters to the Editors Spring 2007

Editor:

I truly applaud Steve Marson's comments in the Fall 2006 Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics. I support his assertion that professional licensure (or registration) of social work faculty represents a matter for ethical consideration. This issue has been discussed briefly in some of our professional venues but seems largely opposed under the guise of representing undue governmental influence and control over academic freedoms. Other long-time faculty have been discouraged by their ineligibility for the "advanced clinical" recognition due to a dearth of recent and requisite, direct clinical practice. On a personal level, I imagine we can all identify logical excuses not to participate in state regulation. And while each of our individual rationalizations may have merit, this issue must be examined for its overarching impact upon the profession as well as the greater society. This isn't about you and me. It's about us. I propose that professional licensure upholds social accountability much as paying taxes, voting, respecting traffic regulations, and attending to jury duty.

Professional values and ethics must not be solely defined by legislation. I'm uncertain whether any state presently requires social work educators to maintain a professional license. And this is not an issue most state legislatures are likely to pursue, as in pure numbers, it involves only a small portion of the population. I propose, however, that it is a clear measure of our professional values that we each voluntarily seek and maintain professional licensure or certification.

I would suggest several specific items for us to consider in this discussion:

- Flawed legislation should not be an excuse for our avoidance of regulation. Where there are deficiencies with the form and/or function of state professional licensing or registration statutes, social work faculty should be in the forefront of professionals seeking to inform and influence legislators to amend the statutes. This is what social workers do. Our credibility is reflected in our commitments and actions as well as our credentials.
- What is the mixed message we give to our students about the importance and value of professional licensure in assuring quality of service and protecting vulnerable populations, when we don't have the license ourselves?
- Many faculty participate in elective conferences related to social work education like the APM & BPD. But generally, they are not required to participate in continuing education regarding direct practice issues. How do they remain current in the field? Or do they? (*We are* a practice profession, aren't we?) Most state licensure laws include a requirement to document annually an established number of continuing education hours, often with clear expectations of ethics content and in the case of "clinical" social workers, content on diagnosis & treatment. Are we perhaps pitching the importance of "lifelong learning" while avoiding any personal measure of accountability?

- Perhaps the ACSW or one of the other NASW specialty recognitions may reasonably serve as an alternative to a particular state's recognition.
- Does the failure to obtain and maintain a license perhaps limit one's opportunities for civic engagement or to otherwise contribute professionally to the community? As an example, social work faculty who recently volunteered with the Red Cross to provide disaster mental health services were turned away from those specific functions, as they had no state licenses. (In fairness, many of them did go on to serve valuably in other “non-professional” roles.)
- What about instances where faculty clearly and flagrantly violate (even multiple) standards established in the NASW Code of Ethics? I suppose we've all seen this happen, either as teachers or students. Yet the NASW only has the authority to remediate with or sanction current members. Without NASW membership or a state regulatory board's authority, there is no other transparent venue for accountability. Except gossip. Former and current employers will most often refuse to disclose or even acknowledge anything related to “personnel matters” out of their fear of litigation. I know of one "social work faculty" who has physically assaulted and threatened colleagues, repeatedly and egregiously violated multiple NASW COE standards, lied about academic qualifications and credentials, and still succeeded in attaining faculty appointments. At successive institutions no less! So much for professional transparency.

I encourage all social work faculty to raise these questions with their colleagues. Please, look beyond your own measure of personal comfort. Consider the wider issue of the profession's accountability and responsibility. If you are a student, please understand this: You have a right and obligation to ask your faculty about their credentials and certifications, and you have a right to clear and logical explanations. Such is how we all grow.

Gary E. Bachman MSSW, LSCSW, Associate Professor & Field Director Park University –  
Department of Social Work, Parkville, Missouri

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Editor:

Good for you! I've long been frustrated by how many of my academic colleagues don't see the need as a professional or as a model for students to become licensed.

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Editor:

GREAT EDITORIAL!!!!!! We identify ourselves as social workers, therefore, we are credentialed. (period)

Joel R. Ambelang, Associate Professor, Social Work Concordia University Wisconsin

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Dear Dr. Marson:

I am a retired social work practitioner and educator who has been conducting research on how licensed mental health practitioners use the Internet to share information with each other in a variety of electronic forums. In addition, the goal of my organization, Psych journey, is to build a bridge between health seekers and health providers, including social workers.

I have covered a number of ethical issues on our Web sites, including the ethics of online discussion of patients on open discussion groups and listservs and the ethics of calling for boycotts of managed care organizations with its antitrust implications. I noticed that I have interviewed at least a couple of members of your board, including Dr. Frederic Reamer on more than one occasion and also Linda Grobman, who has a written Q&A interview in progress.

Judith M. Unger, ACSW, LCSW

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In a very short time, we plan to launch our newest Web site, The Insider's Guide to Law and Ethics in Mental Health. One section of this site will be devoted exclusively to attorneys and another to experts on ethics. I would be very interested in interviewing you on your publication and what you may consider the important ethical issues of the day for social work and other mental health practitioners.

There is a bit of irony here. While I heard of your journal from Dr. Susan Sarnoff, who I interviewed a couple of years back, your journal recently came to my attention through a posting of one of your editorials, "Licensing of Social Work Faculty: An Issue of Ethics?" on an Internet discussion group for psychotherapists. I am not sure what your reprint policy may be or if the poster asked or obtained your permission to disseminate your editorial to hundreds of people, but one of the legal/ethical issues we are exploring for our new Web site is intellectual property. We have observed that mental health professionals (and social workers seem to be in the forefront) think nothing of cutting and pasting entire articles from news sources and journals to these discussion groups that are then archived indefinitely. This, of course, saves the members the price of a subscription, but it also raises some interesting ethical as well as legal questions. And sadly, for me as a social worker myself, this practice makes all social workers look bad.

For your review I have included below some initial articles on intellectual property that I have on my Newsvine blog. Eventually these articles, along with several others, will be on our new Web site. I also included the cut and paste of the editorial from your journal. If such a practice is in keeping with your policy or if you granted permission to disseminate, please disregard. If it was taken without your permission and against your reprint policy, you may wish to address it with the poster and or Yahoo Groups.

I do hope you will consent to an interview and I thank you for your consideration.  
Sincerely,

John A. Riolo, PhD

# Announcement: Term Paper Contest Deadline Approaching

*The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics (JSWVE)* and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) are sponsoring a term paper contest. The term papers will be collected by the JSWVE editorial board and judged by ASWB staff.

Details for the contest are listed below.

1. Must have a central theme of social work values or social work ethics
2. Must be written as an MSW or BSW student (student may have graduated)
3. Must be nominated by a faculty member
4. Must follow the general manuscript submission guidelines found at <http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/content/view/4/27/>
5. Must be in APA citation style
6. Deadline for submission: May 15, 2007
7. Paper must be submitted by e-mail to [smarson@nc.rr.com](mailto:smarson@nc.rr.com) with a copy sent to [finnj@u.washington.edu](mailto:finnj@u.washington.edu) (Students from UNCP must send their entries to [finnj@u.washington.edu](mailto:finnj@u.washington.edu), while students from University of Washington must send their entries to [smarson@nc.rr.com](mailto:smarson@nc.rr.com))
8. Winning term papers will be published in *The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*
9. Judges will be the staff at the Association of Social Work Boards
10. Judging criteria will include:
  - Knowledge of Material
  - Relevance of Citations on the Central Theme
  - Coverage of the Topic
  - Number and Appropriateness of Citations
  - Organization – flow of ideas
  - Quality of writing – spelling, grammar, coherence
  - Originality of the presentation

# Announcement: Council on Social Work Education call for papers on values and ethics

## 2007 APM Values and Ethics Track Description

Information about submissions can be found at:

<http://www.cswe.org/CSWE/meetings/annualmeeting/APM07+Call+for+Proposals.htm>

All other questions related to the submission and review process should be sent to [apm@cswe.org](mailto:apm@cswe.org). For technical assistance with the online submission system, please refer to the technical support contact information related on that site.

Track: Values and Ethics

Chair: Steve Marson, [steve.marson@uncp.edu](mailto:steve.marson@uncp.edu) Co-Chair: Judy Krysik, [Judy.Krysik@asu.edu](mailto:Judy.Krysik@asu.edu)

The track addresses ethical and value issues that encompass the full range of social problems and issues that entry-level social workers (BSW and MSW) encounter. Emphasis is placed on the examination of (values and ethics) issues that impact and that are interwoven with social work practice, research and theory development. Submissions (presentations, workshops or panel discussions) should address the utility of ethical principles in social work practice by proposing both essential and progressive elements of the values that reflect the profession's commitment to the diversity inherent in the dual perspective of the individual and the broader society. Broad areas of focus would include:

- Development of models for analyzing and resolving value and ethical conflicts.
- Discussion of ethical and value dilemmas related to the development of new technologies.
- Research studies on the influence of values and ethics in social work practice decision-making and in agency program development.
- Examples of good practice that clearly highlight ethical and value considerations.
- Theoretical presentations that explain the origin, development, and evolution of social work values and ethics.
- Values and ethics as they influence and are influenced by increasing globalization.

# Your Philosophy of Social Work: Your Philosophy of Social Work: Developing a Personal and Professional Definition to Guide Thought and Practice (CE Article)

Paul Force-Emery Mackie, MSW, Ph.D.,  
Minnesota State University

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Abstract

Social work as a discipline focuses on theoretical and philosophical positions such as social justice, equality, and empowerment. Whereas these can be described as “philosophies of social work,” we should ask ourselves, “What is our philosophy of social work?” This paper provides a personal interpretation of a personal philosophy of social work, how it was constructed, and why social workers should engage in this exercise. The final goal of this paper is to provide a thoughtful discussion that encourages other social workers to investigate their own philosophy of social work and define what a “philosophy of social work” means to them.

**Key Words:** Philosophy of social work, personal, professional, definition

## Introduction

Recently the question, “What is your personal philosophy of social work?” was raised, and I was asked to provide a response. It seemed an interesting query, and one that I was surprised to find ill-prepared to readily answer. I contemplated the predictable and logical responses--my philosophy of social work has something to do with systems theory, person- in-environment, and professional and personal ethics. Given my professional commitment to macro social work, it would also be laden with community organization theories and concepts. Being a student of Foucault’s (1980, 1994) and Gutierrez’s (1994) works, my philosophy would include a discussion about issues associated with power differentials and empowerment. These are always a part of my thought processes and weigh heavily in how I interpret the dynamics of human interactions. I am also a supporter of Foucault’s concept of “Fearless Speech” (2001), both as an applicable

instrument and set of techniques useful to facilitate social change. Regardless of how much I thought about the question, it became immediately clear that my responses were as fragmented in my mind as they appear in this paper. My response was, sadly, “I think I know, but I don’t know how to articulate it.”

This question stimulated thoughts of what comprises a “personal philosophy of social work” and what this meant to me, even if I was unable to sufficiently articulate my response. I asked myself--are these in fact “philosophies of social work” or theories and concepts that guide the field, actions, and behaviors? There is more than a subtle difference between concepts. I concluded that ultimately this was a question of definition – how do I define the fragmented concepts that seem piled up on each other without any real order? Being a deconstructionist by nature, I decided to begin with investigating and identifying definitions of the terms that had emerged.

I sought the counsel of a colleague, and an important discovery was made. We hold degrees in social work, but readily lack a functional, personal definition of what it means to us. We could, jokingly, discuss at great length what the degrees we hold *do not* mean – taking classes, writing term papers, practicum, and paying tuition again. More seriously, a contemplative expression crossed our faces. What is *our* philosophy? We have an education that implies that we should know. Facing this conundrum, I challenged myself to define my philosophy.

After an exhaustive review of the many definitions available, I settled on two that captured how I interpret the term *philosophy*. The first states that philosophy is “The study of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, or conduct” (Quartz Hill School of Theology, n.d.). The second defines the term as “a belief (or system of beliefs) accepted as authoritative by some group or school” (Princeton University WordNet, n.d.). Applying these definitions, it is clear that the concept of “philosophy” is grounded in the understanding that there are truths and principles of our existence and that these truths are accepted by us as well as others. Given this information, we can have a set of truths and principles that guide us in how we conduct ourselves and define what we expect from others. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that as social workers, we have a responsibility to be able to define our “philosophy of social work” and not deny ourselves the opportunity to engage in a spirited pursuit of how we define what we perceive as “philosophy.”

## Literature Review

Conducting a literature review on this topic proved challenging. A variety of information about philosophy and social work was identified, but little was found addressing the question of defining ones' own philosophy of social work. Two searches were conducted. The first was among scholarly books on the topic of philosophy of social work, and the second centered on publications in social work and social welfare-focused professional journals.

The searches for texts addressing "philosophy of social work" were found to focus largely on social work theory (Elliott, 1999; Payne, 1997). While informative, most discussed the variety of theories applied to social work and human welfare concerns, but theories of social work differ from the philosophy of social work. The *philosophy of social work* resides deeper in the consciousness of the social worker. While much of the literature focuses on theory, Timms and Watson (1978) present several essays discussing philosophical positions that guide social work practice and to a lesser degree, research. The topics of *moral principles, rights and duties* of the social worker, and *non-judgmental attitudes* are discussed. While these are important elements within the philosophy of social work, little is made available to encourage individuals to develop their own philosophy of social work.

In *The Philosophical Foundations of Social Work*, Reamer (1993) goes into considerable depth discussing political and moral philosophy as well as logic as it applies to social work. The author presents an arrangement of compelling arguments showing how social work is grounded in a set of deep-seated, philosophical issues such as distributive justice and the duty to provide aid. However, it would be difficult for the reader to be able to tease out a sense of what *their* philosophy might be, based on the information presented. Although these scholars present definitions about the philosophy of social work, none focus on developing a philosophy of social work by and for the individual. This appears to be an area in which social workers can strive to enhance their own understanding of themselves and their philosophical position.

A review of the professional literature using the databases *Social Science Abstracts*, *PsycINFO* and *Sociological Abstracts*, and using the keywords *social work, philosophy, personal, professional*, and *conceptual* revealed nominal information. Among the peer-reviewed journal articles located; one discussed the conceptual framework used in a course focused on the history of philosophy of social work (Desai, 2000). This paper outlines the emergence of social work philosophy from a historical perspective. Desai defines the term *philosophy* as "a study that seeks

to understand the mysteries of existence...and examines the relationship between humanity and nature and between the individual and society” (224-225). The author addresses the history of the philosophy of social work first from the medieval time period to the era of industrialization to post-modernism. The argument follows that to adequately understand the philosophy of social work, we must first understand how oppression and systemic marginalization evolved from hunter-gatherer societies of the past to the post-modern societies of today and understand how discrimination and biases we observe today are interconnected with perceptions still lingering from the past.

The next paper addressed the philosophical nature of social work from a historically religious perspective (Cnaan, Boddie, & Danzig, 2005). The authors explain that religion has been unnecessarily removed from the philosophy of social work and encourage social workers to consider the contributions made to the discipline by religious thought and the tenets of caring for others as prescribed by different spiritual viewpoints. While I found this interesting, I couldn't help but conclude that this may be an effective way to interpret one's philosophy of social work provided that the person also holds a religious belief system. However, because this does not include all people, I felt I must look elsewhere for more inclusive understandings. In another article, Vijayalakshni (2004) addressed issues pertaining to indigenous social work knowledge, arguing that the social work profession has failed to develop a knowledge base around the philosophy of social work by not including an understanding of all human lifeways. This piece supported my questions associated with the Cnaan et al. (2005) paper but moved me no closer to the goal of defining my philosophy of social work.

An article was located that shares some similarities with the question of “what is a social worker's philosophy of social work.” Towle (1930) discussed the nature of those identified as “adequate” providing care for societal members considered “inadequate” and therefore, paternal. The author discusses how over time, the philosophy of social work writ large shifted from the notion of differentiating between deserving and undeserving receivers of social welfare services and the responsibility to care for others. However, it is recognized that across time there has been considerable vacillation between more conservative and more liberal approaches to caring for others.

Based on the information found, it seems reasonably safe to state that at least in the literature, the question “what is your philosophy of social work” has yet to be adequately

investigated. Therefore, this paper serves to present an example of a statement of philosophy of social work from an individual perspective. Ultimately the goal is to offer an example of a statement, not as a template but as a guide.

## **Statement of Philosophy of Social Work**

What is the essence of my philosophy of social work? Is it well or poorly defined? Is it flexible or rigid? Does it rest within definitions provided by others, something I read once and thought “I agree with that,” or is it unique to me and how I perceive the world?

My philosophy of social work is grounded upon the concepts of social justice, empowerment, and equal access to all societal members. I often hear statements similar to this – the “I want to promote social justice and equality for all” claim we as social workers universally make. But what does this really mean? Do we *hope* for justice and equality, or are we *working* toward justice and equality? In accordance with my philosophical position, I *work* toward justice, empowerment, and equal access. But to do so, I need to employ effective knowledge, techniques, and strategies.

To help process and understand these concepts, I am guided by John Rawls’ (1971) theory of justice, specifically, the concept of the *veil of ignorance*, Askheim’s (2003) discussion on empowerment, and the works of Michel Foucault (2001), especially his discussions pertaining to *parrhesia*. These works are applied based on my personal beliefs, interpretations, and ultimately, my philosophy. Whereas other philosophical influences could be infused, these three concepts represent the core foundation for where my philosophy rests.

### **Rawls’ Theory of Justice**

Beginning with Rawls’ justice theory, the veil of ignorance argues that we should make moral decisions affecting the lives of others without owning the properties of knowledge of others or ourselves. Because we know no discriminating information from under the veil, we would choose two central principles of justice – that all people are entitled to basic rights, and it is unjust to maintain inequalities between people. Therefore, without the knowledge of an individual’s personal characteristics (ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, or disability), we as moral agents would choose “justice for all” by default, as this is the minimum expectation of any agent who might have the same decision imposed upon them. Clearly, this is easier said than done. I cannot deny the reality that justice does not appear to apply to all, and the veil of ignorance has not been broadly cast or evenly distributed across our society. In fact, the place where the veil is

most needed is often where it is least likely to be found. Those who hold power over others are the same people who both need to deploy the veil, and all too often, do not. The worst reality is that the application of the veil would create a level plane for diverse societal members, if only those who oppress would apply it.

If we as moral agents individually and collectively will not or cannot apply the veil uniformly, then this is where I feel I must begin my work. I labor to maintain a philosophical code that incorporates the veil in such a way as to be socially moral and responsible behavior. I ask myself, what would be a socially just approach to meeting the needs of people worst-off among us? How do I create equality? How do I foster understanding and acceptance?

Abstractly, I work to incorporate the concepts of justice and equality into my works from a position of thought. I then work to incorporate these ideals into practice from a position of action. At this praxis intersection, I am now free to claim that some actions are unacceptable and ought not to be tolerated. Here, oppression, discrimination, and hate toward others can be faced directly, and solutions formulated. But having a sense of what social justice is and how to promote it still fails to provide those in need of a mechanism to facilitate power within and among them. There needs to be a process whereby action can be taken.

### **Askheim's Empowerment**

Askheim (2003) raised the question, "What is empowerment?" Given the common use of the term, it seems that this is a reasonable question to address, especially among those who apply the concept into their philosophy. One definition of the term comes from Gutierrez (1994), who define empowerment as the "process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations" (202). However, other social scientists have concluded that given the complexity and abstractness of the concept, it may be easier defining what empowerment is *not* rather than what it *is* (Rappaport, 1984). Askheim states that although empowerment is a main objective for social welfare policy and practice, it is also a complicated mix of granting power to service consumers and at the same time, retaining power as service providers.

To understand empowerment is to understand that to empower is to relinquish power. According to Askheim (2003), "The empowerment philosophy challenges the profession's traditional authority and power. Professionals who want to follow the principles of empowerment must redefine their traditional role" (p. 235). Social workers are sometimes criticized for being

both *social advocates* and *social controllers*. As advocates, we focus on power issues and argue that social problems are largely borne out of inequitable distributions of authority. We see the lack of power as the culprit of oppression. As controllers, we focus on deviance and seek to maintain harmony between groups in society, thereby enforcing power we maintain (DuBois & Miley, 2005). Given that the issues of power seem to be embedded in both societies at large and the profession, how do we relinquish power when we recognize that sometimes, service consumers are unable to manage power granted to them? Addressing this paradox, Askheim (2003) suggests that social workers must recognize that they hold power and that sometimes it must be retained – granting full power to consumers is neither reasonable nor possible. The author states:

The users' right to self-determination has to be balanced against securing them against risks and dangers and their right to have an optimal quality of life. Service users will always in different degrees be aware of the consequences of their choices and the consequences of what they are selecting... It is important to emphasize that empowerment must not have as a consequence that their problems are covered over and made invisible in the name of user involvement or user control. Empowerment then must not mean that the professions renounce their competence (p. 237-238).

Given these observations, Askheim clearly states that there is conflict between how to retain power, and how much to empower. Applying this interpretation into my own philosophy of social work requires me to sort through what I feel is important about empowerment. To empower, I must first identify what my level of power is and how I apply it. I then must understand that I hold a bias toward retaining power I should consider relinquishing to the consumer. Finally, I must recognize that to empower is not an absolute concept. Over-empowering is a possibility, and when it occurs, damage can result, which could eventually lead to disempowerment of others, including myself.

### **Foucault's Parrhesia**

Foucault's concept of *parrhesia* focuses on the question of who among us has the right, duty, and courage to speak the truth. I argue that fundamentally we all do, but because of the negative effects of human power differentials, many do not concretely recognize this as their right. Therefore, we as social workers are bound to the duty to speak out for people not otherwise empowered to speak for themselves. Foucault (2001) explains that "if you do not have the right of free speech, you are unable to exercise any kind of power" (p. 29). He continues to state that without *parrhesia*, you cannot oppose power structures that confine you. How can social work be

effective if people cannot exercise their right to parrhesiatic speech? I argue that we as social workers are responsible to educate those who are oppressed in the action of parrhesia. Without it, the concepts of justice, empowerment, and equality remain just that, concepts – and lack concrete application to real-world problems. To accomplish this goal, we must then embrace *education* as a tool to achieve the goals of moving the positive forces of justice and equality forward.

From this position, social work is viewed as education, and education becomes power. I do not “tell” a consumer (either in the micro or macro sense) what to do. I inform, empower, and educate. Attempting to “tell” instead of empowering and teach them is an instrument of oppression and disempowerment. It strips their right to self-determination and social justice. It stops the forward motion generated by parrhesia. But empowering is hard work. My observation of attempting to empower is that while the intention is good, the process often fails. To educate and empower means you are engaging in a long-term commitment. People become disempowered over long periods of time; therefore, it is unreasonable to believe they will become empowered immediately or without much effort.

To answer the questions I first posed, I draw my philosophical boundaries around what I have learned from others. I then work from that place and stretch out to reach deeper understandings based on these works. I have gained much from the works of Rawls and Foucault but cannot in good conscience rest upon their laurels. I recognize that my philosophical interpretations are in constant flux and growth, but this does not imply that the philosophy is adrift aboard an abandoned ship. I have set for myself criteria by which I will hold myself accountable. I promote the broad concepts of social justice, empowerment, and equal access by combining the abstract concepts with the concrete actions of the veil of ignorance and parrhesia. The veil protects from biases, and parrhesia grants the power to bring injustices to light for critical evaluation.

## **Conclusion**

Given the complexity of the question presented here, it is unlikely that anyone could produce a thoughtful discussion around the question without recognizing that we hold several philosophies of social work. In its simplest form, there is the understanding of systems theory and person-in-environment. Beneath these concepts we find discussions about ethics and why we do what we do. But beneath the ethics, we find that we do have a philosophy of social work that is intimate and personal as well as professional. Here is where I believe we can truly identify the real philosophy, the personal philosophy that then influences our public philosophy. This is the space

where we must begin to “flesh-out” our position with clarity so as to have a clearer understanding of all that rests upon it.

Being able to apply Rawls’ veil of ignorance is important to the well being of others as well as for the person applying it. Here is where I can protect against both known and unknown biases I may hold. Given the nature of preconceived notions and beliefs, there is always the problem of not being able to recognize bias within oneself. Therefore, the application of the veil serves to guard against making decisions about others one would not otherwise want to be made about oneself. This concept is closely related to Askheim’s *empowerment*. To make the statement that I will strive to empower others is too simplistic. I must recognize that I may be retaining my power for my own good and not for the good of others. I must at the same time recognize that there is a need to retain power that is too great to be employed by some others. Both approaches and understandings are acceptable at appropriate levels, but as Askheim (2003) put it, the problem described here is “an act of balancing on a slack rope” (p. 239). Foucault’s *parrhesia* provides a practical guide as to how one can empower and promote social justice. The power of speech can be at the same time enormous and crushing. Here, too, one must beware of potential pitfalls. Fearless speech implies that one has the power to be “fearless.” To have this as a component of my philosophy of social work implies that I understand the power of fearless speech and the possible ramifications of applying this philosophical tool.

The three tenets of my philosophy of social work described here reach into the depths of what social work means to me, and how I apply my knowledge and conduct my practice. However, the investigation of the question shed light on a new level of understanding of the question. Now that I have deconstructed the concepts *the veil of ignorance*, *Askheim’s empowerment*, and *Foucault’s parrhesia*, I am able to fully view my philosophy and reconstruct what this philosophy means to me. From here, I can be more confident in my philosophical position and have a better understanding of conceptual underpinnings of the philosophy.

The process for me was refreshing and educational. When asked, I can now provide a thoughtful response to the question, “What is your personal philosophy of social work?” I am also more comfortable with the possibility that part of the response is, “I am not sure,” because at the same time I know that I am working on the questions at a sufficiently deep level as to effectively investigate the meanings of the concepts. Over time, I am certain that my philosophy will mature

and become more developed and sophisticated. To know that this change is likely is to know that I now have a starting point and benchmark to measure future forward motion.

In the end, I return to the beginning – to understand my philosophy of social work, I must promote and espouse the concepts I value with the understanding that to have a philosophy is not enough. I must also have a plan of action. Only after these elements are brought together can I satisfy my philosophy of social work, which is committed to fighting for and alongside the worst-off members of our society.

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# Ethical Delegates in the Social Work Classroom: A Creative Pedagogical Approach

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## **Abstract**

Social work literature clearly demonstrates that ethics play a central role in defining and developing the profession. The purpose of this paper is to describe a pedagogical framework that supports students in becoming ethical delegates through creative classroom assignments. This framework reflects a personal perspective and provides the reader with a starting place to explore innovative teaching techniques within the classroom in order to foster a creative and safe place for students to enjoy learning about authentic ethical dilemmas.

*Key Words:* Creative pedagogy, ethical delegate, social work, ethics

## **Introduction**

Within the social work classroom, effective and innovative teaching strategies are being used to enhance the interest and motivation of students in the area of ethics, including the application of the Council on Social Work Education's curriculum policy on ethics integration and the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (CSWE, 1994; NASW, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to describe a pedagogical framework that supports students in becoming ethical delegates. The authors, in collaboration with previous students, developed the concept of students as ethical delegates after several classroom discussions surrounding ethical practice within the profession. The authors define ethical delegates as those who are able to see ethics as something they are, not merely as something they are required to follow according to educational and professional policy. As a result of this understanding, delegates develop the knowledge and ability to function and navigate their way through the intricate, unclear, and changing landscapes of ethical social work practice as well as everyday life.

To date, several research studies focusing on unethical practices of social workers have been conducted (Dziech & Weiner, 1990; Jacobs, 1991; Singer, 1994; Strom-Gottfried, 1999). Most notable have been studies on inappropriate sexual relationships (Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994; Mittendorf & Schroeder, 2005; Reamer, 1984, 1992, 1994, 1995), academician/teacher as

therapist (Borys & Pope, 1989; Roberts, Murrell, Thomas, & Claxton, 1982; Stout, 1987), and other forms of dual relationship violations (DuMez & Reamer, 2003; Freud & Krug, 2002; Gripton & Valentich, 2003; Mayer, 2005; Reamer, 2003) . A trend toward increasing unethical practices within the profession has led to guidelines being developed to help practitioners negotiate issues and risks that they encounter (NASW, 2000; Reamer, 2003). CSWE also mandates that ethics and values be integrated throughout the curriculum (CSWE, 1994) and NASW's *Code of Ethics* (2000) applies ethical standards to instructors as well as students. This article further expands the application of the NASW *Code of Ethics* by focusing on competent educational practices within the classroom, specifically incorporating the practice of ethical standards: "(4.01a) competent practice; (4.01b) becoming and remaining proficient in professional practice...through critical examination and keeping current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work....and review the professional literature; and (4.01c) basing my practice on recognized knowledge, including empirically based knowledge relevant to social work and social work ethics" (NASW, 2000, p. 22).

Most practitioners and educators would agree that ethics are lived and practiced in every moment of social work and are therefore one of the most important, if not the most important, aspects of social work education. Many also would agree that creativity is an essential element of ethical social work practice. That is, ethical social work practice involves a synergy of humanly involved compassion, empathy, sincerity, critical consciousness, and creativity. There is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach to social work practice. Throughout our careers, social workers find ways to create resources, networks, and support systems for our clients as well as ourselves. Academicians should also hold themselves to the same standard of competent practice by identifying new and creative resources for our students by keeping current with emerging knowledge, reviewing relevant literature on effective pedagogical practices, and then basing the classroom practice on that knowledge.

Preparing social work students for ethical practice begins in the classroom. Introducing students to ethical dilemmas often begins in courses such as Research Methods, Understanding Human Behavior and the Environment, Introduction to Social Work, and Social Work with At-Risk Populations. Topics covered in these courses include client rights, confidentiality, informed consent, boundary issues, documentation, fraud, termination of services, and service delivery. Boland-Prom & Anderson (2005) point out that "while progress has been made in social work

education and training on ethics, more effort is needed” (p. 495). In Dodd and Jansson’s (2004) review of social work ethics curricula, they discovered two key findings: 1) while social work students are trained in how to recognize ethical dilemmas, they are not fully invited to participate in the process as equals, and 2) while the training they received did relate to their awareness and desire to participate in the ethical resolution process, they had not been trained in how to engage themselves in the resolution process.

A number of theoretical and empirical studies have validated the call for the individualization of ethics. These studies show that an individual’s moral identity and the concerns that stem from that moral identity are the best predictors of a person’s loyalty to morality (Damon & Gregory, 1997). A person’s moral identity embraces both the personal -- what a person considers to be right or wrong--and the rationale--why she or he is obligated to follow through with a specific course of action (Damon, 1999). Damon explains that it is a person’s code of morality that makes ethical negotiation and consensus possible, not the other way around. Colby and Damon’s (1992) research also indicate that sustained moral dedication requires a merging of both self and morality and that the education process of morality and ethics must fundamentally focus on the development of the moral identity (Damon, 1999). Ifor students to develop an awareness of their moral identity, critical analysis and application of who they are and where they have come from must take place.

To engage in the process of critical thought, students must step back from themselves, an extremely difficult task for first year social work students and commence the process of "thinking." Although this "thinking" can be transformative, it does not always engage the student’s sense of self. Rather, the focus is more on the cognitive processes of moral judgment and reflection. However, as Bauman (1993) explains,

Unless moral responsibility arises from the heart (and is) somehow rooted in the very way we humans are -- it would never be conjured up at a later stage by no matter how high-minded or high-handed an effort. When competing moral demands arise in the moment, it is the moral self that moves, feels, and acts in the context of that ambiguity, and no moral impulse can implement itself unless the moral actor feels compelled to stretch the effort to the limit (p. 34).

Based on this understanding of ethics as a deeply personal and private process that is lived in the complexity of everyday social work practice, the challenge becomes that of developing a pedagogy that supports students in becoming ethical delegates within both their personal and professional lives. The goal for the student is to see ethics not as a code to follow, but as something

they are, and to develop the knowledge and ability to live in, and navigate their way through the intricate, unclear, and ever-changing environment of ethical social work practice.

In reflecting on this challenge, it occurred to us that what is required from instructors is to find ways to develop the students' creative side within the classroom experience. That is, if social work students are supposed to be able to live in the ever-changing environment of ethical social work, they needed the ability to create and re-create themselves and their responses within the moment. Similarly, if they are to learn to be creative, they need a pedagogy that supports this learning framework. In order to practice competently and ethically in the classroom, instructors must constantly review current research on classroom pedagogy and innovative instructional strategies. The majority of this research indicates an increased need for inclusion of creativity and critical thinking within the class curriculum. In reviewing this research, teaching philosophies of instructors may evolve in order to assimilate this new information. Instructors may begin to use a myriad of instructional methods, incorporating innovative ideas and theories to help students creatively apply ethics in both their personal and professional lives. This ongoing learning and transformation may help instructors see that social work, in essence, is a creative process and that a pedagogy that emphasizes the development of creativity is fundamental within the classroom. A caring and critical pedagogy that fosters creativity, a component sometimes lacking in social work education, provides a comprehensive learning experience for students while also encouraging critical thought, application, creativity, and ethical awareness.

### **Creative Pedagogy Defined**

Creative pedagogy actively engages the student in an enjoyable learning and application process through the use of different activities, varied lecture formats, innovative classroom activities, and assorted homework activities. "The principal premise of creative pedagogy is that learning should be fun. The joy of education is, for the most part, related to its creative nature, to pleasure achieved through problem solving. This does not mean that all the education should be creative only" (Zlotin & Zusman, 1999, p. 10). Freire (1974) points out that conventional pedagogy (i.e., lecture-listen) is obviously not fun; it fosters a passive reception of information and the acquisition of knowledge that has little, if any, application to the social problems that social workers encounter today. This one-way exchange, combined with hypothetical case studies, often distances students from the applied nature of ethical resolution (Freire, 1974).

Freire (1974) also emphasizes the importance of creativity in the development of critical analysis and perspective within the critical pedagogy. He explores the notion that "correct thinking" should have elements of curiosity, creativity, and re-creativity. We agree with Freire that creative thought is essential. However, becoming and developing an identity as an ethical delegate requires moving beyond a level of cognition. Students must also be enthusiastically engaged in the creative process of self and knowledge development. The first author (hereafter referred to as Marian), therefore, sought to develop a pedagogy that would inspire social work students to tap into and use their creative, imaginative power to revise, adapt, expand, and alter themselves and their knowledgeable practice while also providing an enjoyable learning experience.

### **Teaching Ethical Resolution through Creativity**

May (1975) suggests that creativity is part of our everyday experience. It not only serves as a significant part within our lives, but also has remarkable and immeasurable consequences for the surrounding social world (Runco & Albert, 1990). Each person views creativity in its own context, and rarely, outside of the arts, do professionals feel comfortable engaging their creative processes. Additionally, to approach the area of ethics creatively often seems inappropriate and at times frightening. Something is either wrong or it is right; it is black, or it is white. Finding grays, blues, and reds between the black and white lines of ethics is often not the most popular approach to exploring and resolving ethical problems. Therefore, as Marian worked to develop a pedagogy that would support the development of creative ethical practice, four objectives guided her work. First, an approach to teaching ethics needed to be developed that would spark students' moral imagination. Second, learning process infusing the self and the lived experiences of the students would also need to be developed. Third, recognizing that ethics are lived in the everyday real world, it seemed important that the pedagogy should somehow include a critical focus to highlight hidden values and assumptions shaping students and the ethical situations they experience, as well as foster development of their critical thinking skills. Finally, since social work ethics are a somewhat ambiguous and challenging terrain, it was vital that the teaching/guiding process involve itself in the real-world drama of everyday practice, as it is often ambiguous and challenging.

Marian's intent as a social work academician was not only to promote conscious awareness of her students' values, their stereotypes, and practices, but also to promote the development of their creativity. Feldman (1999) asserts that creativity is essentially a matter of development. He posits that we are all born with the ability to create, but how that ability is manifested depends on

our own unique life experiences. As one develops and matures, creative expression either flourishes or is neglected while simultaneously being influenced and affected by the social world around us. Feldman's research (1999) explains that depending on the professional field of practice, creative expression can be nurtured or rejected. With this in mind, Marian's primary goal was to provide a learning environment in which students felt free to play and to use their imagination and their senses to bring creative form to their learning. As they gained more awareness of themselves by looking at their everyday decision-making processes, they were asked to consider if the awareness and knowledge they had gained was helping them become a better student or practitioner as well as a new and improved version of their former selves.

### **An Example: The Classroom Experience**

Based on the desire to foster creative expression in the classroom, Marian introduced a different approach to ethical problem solving into the classroom. Essentially, Marian's goal was to provide opportunities for student engagement in self-analysis, so they would question their existing moral and ethical code, as well as understand how to assimilate the three. This self-analysis was done through asking them to call on their own life experiences. This way, as students examined a broad range of theory and knowledge, they did so in a deeply, personal, and individual manner.

The following brief example provides an overview of several creative teaching techniques used in the classroom to engage students in the application of critical thought. To arouse student interest immediately at the onset of the course, they were provided with an authentic student paper from a previous HBSE class. All identifying information had been removed, and the final grade marked on the paper was an "F" that was due to the commission of direct plagiarism. The second the paper was distributed; their attention was focused.

Students were instructed to write down their immediate thoughts, feelings, and reactions from a student perspective about the failing grade on the paper and the word "plagiarism" written across the title page in bold red highlighter. They were then instructed to write their feelings, thoughts, and reactions from an instructor perspective. The second assignment proved to be more difficult. No student had any prior experience as an instructor or educator and therefore had no true perspective from which to draw. The third stage of the assignment was for each student to write a letter to the Department Chair from the student perspective, explaining the reasons for plagiarism and pleading their case for non- suspension from the social work program. The fourth stage involved each student developing a written plan of action from an instructor perspective on

possible ways to handle the situation. This task proved difficult, as well, as many students were unfamiliar with existing protocols to handle academic misconduct. The fifth stage of the assignment included each student reviewing the NASW *Code of Ethics* and identifying which ethical standards the student had violated and explain in his or her own words why plagiarism was unethical. Students were also informed that proper citation of the NASW *Code* was required, so they themselves would not be guilty of plagiarizing on this assignment. Students were also informed that as this was a learning experience, if plagiarism did occur, no action was going to be taken. The final stage of the assignment was for each student to participate in classroom discussion focusing on differing points of view, approaches to resolving the dilemma, assumptions made regarding possible problem resolution strategies, examining factual data provided in the example, shared concepts and ideas about the original ethical problem, and implications and consequences of the actions of both the student and the instructor.

The purpose of this exercise was five-fold: 1) help students empathize with the writer of the plagiarized paper, 2) help students empathize with the instructor, 3) help them understand that they themselves could be guilty of plagiarizing without direct knowledge of exactly what plagiarism constitutes, 4) help develop critical thinking skills, and 5) become familiar with the NASW *Code of Ethics*. Reactions from students at the conclusion of class were on target. They were able to identify possible reasons for student plagiarism, understand the reaction of the instructor, and understand that ethical resolution does not involve “judging” others, but rather assessing actions. They were also able to apply critical problem-solving skills to determine possible courses of actions.

### **Teaching Focus, Trust, and Letting Go**

Hart (1998) posits that creativity begins with focus. One's focus often emerges out of conscious and deliberate intent. As described above, the overriding focus of Marian's classroom experience is one of nurturing creativity and its ability. This focus requires intention, direction, and a continuous connection with herself and with her students. Hart (1998) also describes the importance of trust within the creative process. Only through trust will knowing and learning take place. Fundamentally, most students “know” and “think,” but to practice ethically, they must critically think about “how” they know and this critical analysis begins with introspection. To open up to such a process requires deep trust in the instructor, other students, and in the life process in general. In the previously discussed example, students learned to trust that the classroom was a

safe experience and that the purpose of every reading, task, and assignment was to help them work toward becoming a more effective and ethical practitioner, not to judge them on the “rightness” or “wrongness” of their learning experience.

After students learned to trust other students, the instructor, and their life experiences, the next step in the learning experience was “letting go.” Both the instructor and the student had to allow the “letting go” of the normal classroom regulations, fostering an atmosphere of genuine discussion, introspection, critical analysis, and open two-way communication. It is ironic that we must actively make an effort to “let go.” In the example provided above, many students found it difficult to talk openly about plagiarism because plagiarism was so widespread on the campus at that time. Students explained that that they themselves had probably committed a form of plagiarism in their academic careers but had been fortunate because they had not been caught. Moving past this feeling of guilt and into genuine discussion and introspection often led to an honest discussion on lack of writing skills, lack of interest in subject matter, lack of concern over being caught and found guilty, and lack of concern about long-term ramifications of plagiarism and their academic careers. On a positive note, discussions usually progressed toward the perspective of the instructor on the subject. Students were able to identify feelings of anger, disrespect, frustration, and disappointment from the instructor’s perspective. This letting go and thinking like an instructor often empowered students to see the issue from two perspectives, and provided an “aha” moment for many. This discovery, though, is only encouraged through a safe and trusting environment in which both instructor and student work toward authentic and open discussion.

### **Student Feedback**

Students hesitated originally when asked to explain reasons for term paper plagiarism. Students explained that if they were able to answer the question, then the instructor might assume they had plagiarized on a paper in the past and therefore knew how to do it, get away with it, and attempt it in this course. They also explained that they did not want me to think poorly of them on the first day of class. Most students found the idea of discussing plagiarism a very daunting task. Students explained that they had actually known other students who had been found guilty of term paper plagiarism and felt sorry for them. However, after the completion of these assignments, most students reported being less sympathetic toward the student and more empathetic toward the instructor.

Initial discomfort about the topic was voiced in a number of ways. Reasons for the discomfort included “jinxing themselves” when talking about being caught plagiarizing and openly admitting to other classmates a lack of understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. In most cases, this initial apprehension gave way to a more positive perspective on the topic as soon as the assignment began. After the first few minutes, students reported understanding some of the frustration felt by academicians in cases of plagiarism. Students also reported that the class discussion after the review of the *Code of Ethics* helped solidify their knowledge base on ethical standards and their applicable situations. Students also clarified other discussion topics that focused on disclosure, judging versus non-judging, learning from past mistakes, and values and ethics, both personally and professionally helped them understand the direction of the profession, why we have the *Code*, and how we are to interact with our clients. Students also enjoyed the responsibility of becoming an “ethical delegate” during this course, explaining that it personalized their learning experiences, encouraged them to think outside the box, and increased their understanding of the ethics resolution process. They were able to explain that, if in the beginning of their academic career they had been introduced to the concept of becoming an ethical delegate, they may have taken their studies more seriously and applied themselves more actively in the classroom.

At the conclusion of the semester, most students emerged with a positive view of the experience. Some found the ethics exercise difficult and challenging. A few, having already been found guilty of plagiarism on term papers, simply agonized with it, explaining that the exercise almost made them relive the event. Most students reported that they felt the exercise was important to do for them to really “get into” talking about ethics. Many also reported that they never have looked at plagiarism through the eyes of their instructors. Students also remembered and wrote about this exercise on student evaluations, pointing out that it was an invaluable exercise that contributed to their understanding of ethical dilemmas and resolution.

It does seem that the ethics exercise and subsequent discussion encouraged independent thinking and taking an active approach to learning in the classroom. From an instructor perspective, this exercise provided invaluable feedback on reasons for student plagiarism, what they are thinking, and their personal reactions to the event. The downside, of course, was the extra workload that came during the next class session, as students requested a mini lecture on avoiding plagiarism. More importantly though, it provided an opportunity to observe social work student

majors responding to ethical decision making. This observation also allowed the instructor to determine if those majors possessed critical thinking skills to resolve ethical dilemmas as well as examine their attitude regarding the event. In the past three years, since incorporating this exercise, roughly four social work majors out of 60 have exhibited apathy for the plagiarizing student, suggesting no review of the *NASW Code*, no follow-up discussion with the student, solely immediate expulsion from the University. Twelve majors out of 60 also explained that plagiarism was “really no big deal” and that no action of any type should be taken.

### **Conclusion**

There are those who question the need for professional ethics. Some argue that common sense or practice wisdom is all a social worker needs to make the “right” decision, even when facing the most complicated dilemma. The importance of common sense and practice wisdom should not be underrated, but every social worker can recall times when these were not enough. Despite the fact that many social workers face ethical problems daily, many are unable or unwilling to think through the ethical issue critically or creatively. Anyone who has practiced social work knows that social workers do not have time for drawn-out theoretical debates. Ethical decisions, though, need not take a long time. Because we have so little time, social workers need help in making correct, informed, and educated choices. Similarly, every social worker knows that each case is unique and different, but that there are important commonalities. For them and for others, a code of ethics provides a helpful guideline for arriving at ethical resolution.

Davies (2000) explored teacher-student influences within the classroom and found that teachers influence students more with their behavior than by anything else. Social work practitioners are taught to “start where the client is.” Academicians are taught to “start where the student is.” The use of ineffective instructional methods that lack inspiration, creativity, and motivation are an injustice not only to the profession, but also to higher education, and the populations that we serve. It is Marian's charge, as a social work academician, to provide a learning environment for students that engages their creativity as well as their analytical abilities. Within her classroom, students were challenged to let go, learn, and find creative ways to assist populations-at-risk as well resolve ethical dilemmas. Most of these students did thrive in this learning environment, because they were exploring themselves as both competent practitioners and ethical delegates. The term “ethical delegate” was chosen to use in this course, because social workers are indeed delegates for ethical practice with children, women, families, men, teenagers,

elderly, single mothers, single fathers, widowers, the disabled, the meek, and other struggling populations. Students also seem to like this term and have no problem explaining what it is to other students on our campus. The term belongs to them, and as such, they feel responsible in living up to its expectations.

Through the provision of a safe, creative, learning environment in which students are able to explore ethical issues without fear of criticism or legal and professional penalty, our hope is to cultivate a more educated and informed student, a more compassionate practitioner, a more zealous advocate, and a more ethical humanitarian. Anything less is unethical.

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# Ethical Issues in Online Social Work Research

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## Abstract

Human subject's protection issues for online research are identified and applied to social work researchers, organized around the three broad principles of the Belmont Report and NASW's Code of Ethics. Social work specific concerns include sensitivity to differences in philosophical approaches to ethics, social justice/equity issues, and technological competence. Recommendations for ethical online research are offered.

*Key Words:* Online research, ethics, social work research, institutional review board, Internet

## Introduction

The Internet has been called “a passing fancy that will eventually find its way to the same cultural dump as hula hoops,” or in contrast, “. . . a panacea for society's problems” (Karger & Levine, 1999, p. xv). Vallee (2003) described French cyberneticist de Rosnay's view that the use of computers for human interaction may lead to “. . . a cold and personal social reality in which human contact would be minimized” (p. 37), but Vallee believes that the Internet can create “electronic grapevines” that can further creativity and enhance culture. Despite conflicting views, Internet use has grown exponentially since its inception.

What about use of the Internet in social science research? For example, a social work researcher wishes to study the biopsychosocial issues addressed in online hospice support groups. She intends to use postings from an online discussion group for data. While she knows that all human subjects research must be authorized by her university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), she wonders if the persons using the site are considered “human subjects.” If so, what are the salient ethical issues? Consent? Anonymity? Confidentiality? Other kinds of harm?

The purpose of this article is to articulate ethical issues related to the protection of human subjects when using computer based online data and identify issues that relate specifically to *social work* research. Knowledge of these issues can help social work researchers address the concerns of their IRB, better protect their research subjects, and participate in setting research related policy.

Research questions include: Are cyberspace researchers accessing information provided by individual human beings in a way that involves the need for human subjects' protection? Do ethical principles related to face to face or traditional research translate directly to online research? How do you address these issues in an IRB protocol? And in the case of online *social work* research, is there is a need to go beyond these basic ethical requirements in order to reflect the profession's emphasis on the values of the right to self-determination and the promotion of social justice and equity?

## **A History of Internet Research Ethics**

### **Emergence of the Internet**

Because most current research using computers involves the Internet, some history is presented for context. The Internet arose from the need for communication networking among computer scientists. Early efforts during the 1960's was funded by the Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Administration (Marson, 1997). This initial research evolved to a current monthly home Internet use of more than 205,133,043 persons (as of May 2006) (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2006).

Whereas the Internet has been the domain of commerce, academic institutions have shaped its conceptualization and growth (Jones, 1999). In particular, the fields of social and behavioral sciences, including social work, have found computer mediated communication to be full of research opportunities (Waskul, 1996). Internet based research includes qualitative and quantitative methods such as surveys, content analysis, grounded theory, virtual ethnography, and narrative analyses (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2003). Data sources include e-mail, listservs, newsgroups, discussion groups, chat groups, games, and Internet Web pages (Ess & AoIR, 2002).

### **Internet Research Ethics**

By the 1980s the field of computer ethics emerged in philosophy. This branch of applied ethics deals with traditional philosophical theories as they relate to the use of computers as well as practical ethical topics such as codes of conduct and public policy. Several organizations such as the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), and the Computer Ethics Institute (a branch of The Brookings Institute) began formulating formal codes of ethics (Bynum, 2001; Computer Ethics Institute, 1992). While these were a start in defining ethical issues in computer related data collection, the generalities presented

in these efforts did not specifically address using Internet material for academic research with human subjects.

In 1999, a collaborative effort of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the federal Office for Protection from Research Risks (OPRR) yielded a report that outlined relevant issues in human subjects' online research (Frankel & Siang, 1999). The intended audience included online researchers as well as members of IRBs. Using the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), the report identified issues and made recommendations for a research and education agenda. In a similar report, Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (2002) published a set of ethical guidelines for online research intended for researchers, ethicists, students, IRBs, and those in academic societies.

These efforts laid the groundwork for identifying the general ethical issues related to doing Internet research, but which of these issues are particularly salient for social work research? For those social work researchers at academic universities, are their current IRBs knowledgeable about differences in the ethical issues related to Internet research in order to protect human subjects? Looking beyond the IRB, are there issues more relevant to social work values and ethics that need to be addressed when doing online research that relate to the larger issue of responsible conduct of research?

### **Use of the Internet and Social Work**

Concern regarding use of computer technology in social work practice and research grew during the first wave. Reamer (1986) was one of the first to point out the potential for ethical violations such as privacy issues. Cwikel and Cnaan (1991) provided an early warning that use of technology could interfere with providing humane and competent social work practice, and Giffords (1998) noted that “. . . this electronic frontier [also] may be dangerous” (p. 244).

Social workers' use of computer technology can be characterized as having three waves. Cwikel and Cnaan (1991) described the first two. Wave one involved the use of computers for administrative purposes such as word processing, developing simple databases, and statistics. The second wave, starting in the late 1980s, focused on social work practice and involved the use of games and other programs for therapeutic benefit, ability to store more information concerning clients in advanced databases, and the use of communication tools such as e-mail.

The current third wave of computer technology in social work involves the increased use of computers for educational purposes, such as use of online databases, WebCT, and Blackboard in the classroom (e.g., Biggerstaff, 2005; Bolen, 2006; Cascio & Gasker, 2001; McNutt, 2000), electronic advocacy, practice purposes such as online support groups, aftercare support for at risk teens, and therapy provided online (e.g., Finn, 1999; Hick & McNutt, 2002; Pacifici, White, Cummings, & Nelson, 2005; Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, & Wessel, 1996).

Examples of uses of online data in social work research include a study of an online group of sexual abuse survivors by Finn and Lavitt (1994), and a study of computer use of foster children and families by Finn, Kerman, and Lecornec (2005). Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, and Wessel (1996) reported on the use of a bulletin board for women with breast cancer; Marziali, Donahue, and Crossin (2005) studied virtual group process with caregivers of those with a neurodegenerative disease; and Opalinski (2001) used online survey research to study older adults and the digital divide.

These social work pioneers using online data were breaking ethical ground for future Internet researchers. However, as Marson and Brackin (2000) asked, "How do I examine and analyze ethical issues with no clear guidelines?" (p. 4). Finn and Lavitt (1997) have been criticized by a number of authors who targeted their study and used it as an example of a violation of informed consent and anonymity (Frankel & Siang, 1999; King, 1996; Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). King (1996) notes that while this article is an ". . . excellent analysis of a cyberspace self-help group" (p. 4), the reporting of the name of the actual group, as well as the exact date and times of the quoted notes, ". . . is a potential nightmare" (p. 4).

While other researchers note in methodology sections that they obtained informed consent prior to use of data, this is not reported in all studies. Online surveys are a good example of inconsistency in use of methods to ensure human subjects protection. These are becoming increasingly common using Web-based sites like Survey Monkey (see <http://www.surveymonkey.com>). On sites such as <http://psych.hanover.edu/research/exponnet.html>, one can participate in any number of social science-related surveys. A sample of these surveys shows a wide variety of ways that informed consent is used, such as linking the survey to a statement that the participant has read the consent and agrees to the conditions of participation. Others have some language about voluntary participation and anonymity but have no link to the survey, and some sites have no informed consent at all (see Web site for examples; surveys are added on a regular basis). It should be noted

that there is no way for the researchers to know if those participating have read the consent, even with appropriate links. Many survey sites also hope to increase motivation by use of drawings for money. Participants must leave their e-mail addresses in this case, allowing the researchers access to respondent identity.

The above examples raise ethical issues that are not found in face-to-face research.

## **Ethical Framework for Social Work Online Research**

The organization, responsibilities, and ethical decision-making of IRBs in the U.S. are spelled out in CFR 45.46 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, 2001). The ethical foundation of this law is the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) -- the final report of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, established in 1974. According to the Belmont Report, ethical protection of human subjects in research devolves to general principles that should instruct how humans are to be treated, including in the research setting. These principles are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The IRB may only authorize research for which the potential benefits of the research outweigh the potential costs to the subjects, taking into account the above principles. Thus, the final IRB decision is a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. In contrast, the deontological approach used in Europe considers foundational human rights that may supersede any amount of potential benefits from proposed research. This “line-drawing” approach deriving from the Nuremberg Code and the Declaration of Helsinki has been criticized as being inappropriately inflexible (Kopelman, 2000). Even in a U.S. IRB, the belief systems of the members might weight certain human rights so heavily that it amounts to deontologically-based ethical decision making.

There are other approaches to ethical decision making, such as an “ethics of care” perspective. It has been compared to the “ethics of justice” perspective (Botes, 2000), linked to social justice (Caputo, 2002), and discussed among academics in nursing, education, and health care settings. Gilligan (1994) is credited with developing a feminine ethic of care model based on her work in women’s developmental theory. Social work scholars have called for the use of this model in order to “. . . take social work out of the mothering mode and assign it to a rational field of inquiry” (Freedberg, 1993, p. 539). It is increasingly used as a foundation for social work practice (e.g., see Caputo, 2002; Furman, Downey, & Jackson, 2004). Characteristics of this

perspective include a holistic rather than reductionistic view, use of social context, and an emphasis on empathy and relationship (Botes, 2000).

When applied to Internet research, a utilitarian approach would weigh the risks of research participants in the online support group against the benefits that the research would provide to the group and the scientific community. A deontological approach would protect the rights of those posting on the site regardless of the possible benefits of the research. An ethics of care approach would emphasize the researcher's ability to see the posters as human subjects rather than just narrative. The researcher must consider which of these approaches best fits his or her own belief system and understand the perspectives taken by that of his/her university's IRB. If an IRB includes members with a deontological approach, a researcher whose philosophy is strictly utilitarian, or ethics of care may have to deal with unexpected issues in an Internet-based research project. The social work profession has a value system that emphasizes human rights and may have a better fit with a hybrid approach that is based primarily on an ethics of care with deontological and utilitarian aspects when appropriate.

The following sections address pertinent issues of doing online research within the context of social work values using the basic ethical principles of the Belmont Report. Table 1 lists the Belmont Report's principles and their related applications with corresponding National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics' values and standards.

### **Respect for Persons and Beneficence**

The first two basic principles, "Respect for Persons" and "Beneficence," address the overlapping applications of autonomy, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. "Respect for Persons" refers to: "at least two ethical convictions: first, that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection" (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) -- a seemingly simple, but extraordinarily important concern--a research participant's right to choose voluntarily whether he or she wants to participate in the research after being adequately informed of what it entails (see Table 1).

**Table 1. The Belmont Report and NASW Code of Ethics**

<u>The Belmont Report Principles and Related Applications</u>	<u>Related NASW Code of Ethics: Core Values, Ethical Principles, and Ethical Standards</u>
I. Respect for Persons	Core Social Work Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person Ethical Principle: Social workers respect the dignity and worth of the person Ethical Standard 1: Social Workers' Ethical Responsibility to Clients
A. Autonomy 1) Right to self determination	Ethical Standards: 1.02 Self-Determination 1.03 Informed Consent 1.07 Privacy and Confidentiality 5.02 Evaluation and Research Sections e, f, g, and h
B. Informed consent 1) Information 2) Comprehension 3) Voluntariness	Ethical Standards: 5.02 Evaluation and Research Sections d, j, and l
II. Beneficence	Core Social Work Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person Ethical Principle: Social workers respect the dignity and worth of the person
A. Risk versus benefits 1) Types of harm a) Psychological b) Physical c) Legal d) Social e) Economic	Ethical Standards: 1.4 Competence (Section c) 5.02 Evaluation and Research Sections d and j
III. Justice	Core Social Work Value: Social Justice Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice
A. Selection of subjects 1) Social justice a) role of social, racial, sexual, cultural biases	Ethical Standards: 5.02 Evaluation and Research Section d 6.04 Social and Political Action Sections a, b, c, and d

(NASW, 1999; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979)

Research participants' autonomy and informed consent fall under this heading. The NASW *Code of Ethics* addresses these as well under social work's core values of the "Dignity and Worth of the Person," the Ethical Principle: "Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person," and Ethical Standards 1.02, 1.03, 1.07, and 5.02 (sections d, e, f, g, h, j, and l) (see <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp> for copy of *Code*).

The Belmont Report defines an autonomous person as: “. . . an individual capable of deliberation about personal goals and of acting under the direction of such deliberation.” This addresses a person’s right to self-determination, which is echoed in NASW Ethical Standard 1.02. In addition, these principles address the protection of those who are not capable of self-determination and are unable to make autonomous decisions for themselves.

The second principle, beneficence, refers to: (a) “do no harm” and (b) “maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms.” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The NASW *Code of Ethics* also addresses beneficence specifically in Ethical Standard 5.02(j) which states: “Social workers engaged in evaluation or research should protect participants from unwarranted physical or mental distress, harm, danger, or deprivation.” (NASW, 1999).

All psychological and social research has the potential to harm participants (Labott & Johnson, 2004). Psychological risks include depression, anxiety, guilt, shame, embarrassment, frustration, inconvenience, getting information about oneself that is unpleasant and may cause alterations in self-concept, fear, an increase in mistrust of others, or at a minimum, inconvenience. Social risks may include issues related to stigma or effects of participation on those in the participant’s social network (Sieber, 2000).

In the IRB cost/benefit analysis of research, there are two areas of risk to consider: harm from direct participation and harm from a breach of confidentiality (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). Kraut et al. (2004) believe that participants’ potential risk in online research is low and may, in some instances, be less risky than face-to-face studies. Possible risks remain essentially the same; however, the ability of researchers to determine if a subject is being harmed is reduced in an online venue.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

These terms are often confused. Anonymity in a research study refers to ensuring that data used cannot be traced back to a particular individual or other unit of analysis. A research participant is anonymous when: “. . . the researcher cannot identify a given response with a given respondent” (Rubin & Babbie, 2005, p. 78). Confidentiality refers to the process of protecting a research subject’s identity during and after the study. A research participant’s data are confidential when: “. . . the researcher is able to identify a given person’s responses but essentially promises not to do so publicly” (Rubin & Babbie, 2005, p. 79). The NASW *Code of Ethics* addresses anonymity and

confidentiality related to research and evaluation specifically in Ethical Standard 5.02 (l) and (m) (NASW, 1999).

Online research has unique anonymity and confidentiality issues. Kraut et al. (2004) state that “. . . the greatest risk associated with online research centers on breaches of confidentiality, in which private, identifiable information is disclosed outside of the research context” (p. 112). Breaches of confidentiality include linking subjects’ responses to an identifier, use of direct quotations that may allow for identification of the poster (including those using pseudonyms), ability to trace a poster’s e-mail address and/or identity, and lack of security, which could result in unauthorized viewing of data (Flicker, Haans, & Skinner, 2004; Frankel & Siang, 1999). Legally, online postings may be considered public domain, but the broader issues of what constitutes ethical and responsible use of someone’s posting should be weighed. Online researchers cannot be 100% sure that text used cannot be traced back to the originator (Kling et al., 1999) and should not make claims to the contrary. The confidentiality of online data, like all research data, exists to the “limit of the law” and could be breached by a legal subpoena. Researchers have no protection from litigation related to these issues.

King (1996) cautions that it is crucial to protect the anonymity of those connected to the material being used to prevent feelings of violation, a reduction in intimacy and safety of that site, and impairment of the interpersonal dynamics of the group. Other ways to promote anonymity and confidentiality include contacting a site’s moderator for information, building procedures into the research design that decrease the risks of participant identification, such as stripping e-mail addresses, using a chain remailing service to disguise IP addresses, and/or changing names and pseudonyms. Flicker, Haans, and Skinner (2004) included a link to their online project’s privacy statement that explained the research and what was done with data. Posters selected an online nickname and were never asked for their real names. Researchers monitored sites on a daily basis and edited messages that might contain a possible identifier, such as last name or e-mail addresses. Data were stored in a locked office. Finally, all data were password protected and only available to the research team.

Social workers are no strangers to vulnerable populations and have skills that can help identify possible vulnerability in those with whom they work. However, this becomes more difficult without face-to-face contact. Examples of ways to address possible online vulnerability include using language in an informed consent that clearly specifies possible risks to participation,

assessing the level of vulnerability of the group topic as well as group members prior to its use, weighing the benefits versus the risks before using the data, and being aware of and including available resources if needed for a referral to services (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Flicker, et al., 2004).

### **Autonomy and Informed Consent**

Informed consent involves the ability of persons to choose what they want to happen to them to the best of their capabilities. There are three necessary elements for informed consent: (a) information to ensure an understanding of what is involved in the research, which includes disclosure of possible risks involved, (b) comprehension of the information that is presented, and (c) voluntariness where there is no coercion and/or undue influence to participate (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). A research participant's autonomy is diminished without adequate informed consent.

NASW's *Code of Ethics* addresses autonomy and informed consent under Ethical Standards 1.02, 1.03, and 1.07, and 5.02 (sections e, f, g, and h), as well as under the core social work value of dignity and worth of the person and Ethical Principle "Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person" (NASW, 1999).

Online research has the same issues as traditional research in these two areas. However, because researcher and participant are not face to face, consent issues on the Internet are more complex and include: (a) Is informed consent required? (b) How can it be obtained? and (c) How can it be validated? (Frankel & Siang, 1999, p. 7).

The first question requires distinguishing between the public and the private domains. Postings on discussion boards, listservs, or chat rooms are available to anyone who chooses to access that particular site. Those who participate in that online group are usually aware of the public nature of their postings via warnings from the server agency (Finn, 1999). IRB's may use this argument and may not require informed consent. However, those participating in forums which focus on sensitive topics may have an expectation of anonymity and privacy and suffer greater costs if these are violated. For example, perceived anonymity is often mentioned as an attractive feature of "cybersex" activities (Binik, Mah, & Kiesler, 1999; Griffiths, 2001). If there is an expectation of privacy due to a particular site's posted membership policies or the sensitivity of the group's topic(s), this may be a reason for an IRB to require informed consent.

If a discussion group participant reads his or her words in a published article, or if that group can be identified from quotes used without permission (such as in Finn and Lavitt, 1994), there is a risk of harm, especially when the forum involves a sensitive topic such as HIV or mental illness. A researcher's presence can damage the trust formed in a group (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004) and actually contribute to the forum's demise (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; King, 1996; Reid, 2003). Online group members may not be comfortable knowing that a researcher is lurking in their group and may have responses such as feeling intruded upon, feeling as if the researcher is being voyeuristic, and that their online environment is no longer safe (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

Finally, if a researcher joins a discussion group to mine data, and does not meet the posted profile of users of the group, this is an act of deception and violates the autonomy and dignity of persons in that group. From the utilitarian perspective, this must be considered among the costs of the research. From the deontological and an ethics of care perspective, it might be argued that such deception is not acceptable. The responsible conduct of research goes beyond these perspectives and needs to be considered when deciding methodology.

Online surveys also present issues related to informed consent, as well as anonymity and confidentiality. As noted in the "Use of the Internet and Social Work" section, online surveys have a number of ways they can deal with informed consent. However, there is no way to tell for sure whether survey respondents read and understand the online consent, use the resource referrals provided if there is a problem, or actually meet the study criteria. Some researchers provide a code to those who want to participate through a different medium such as e-mail and are better able to obtain informed consent prior to respondents taking the survey.

Ways to ensure that research subjects are protected include: (a) using an informed consent prior to collecting data; (b) getting permission to enter the group from the site administrator and/or participants; (c) being vigilant of possible issues and intervening (e.g., referral to resources such as an agency, organization, or Web site) as soon as possible; (d) getting consent from the poster to use quotes; (e) removing all possible identifiers, such as the communication's headers and signatures, names, and pseudonyms; (f) making no reference to the type of communication, the location or type of forum; and (g) storing data in a safe manner (King, 1996; Sharf, 1999).

### **Justice/Social Justice**

The third ethical principle found in The Belmont Report is "Justice." This principle can be found in social work's core value of social justice, the Ethical Principle that "Social workers

challenge social injustice,” and Ethical Standards 5.02 (section d), and 6.04 (sections a, b, c, and d) (NASW, 1999).

In *The Belmont Report*, examples of research done on prisoners in Nazi concentration camps and the Tuskegee syphilis study illustrate how the burden of the research fell on the most vulnerable while the benefits of improved medical care went to those more advantaged (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Issues related to applying the justice principle to online research include being able to identify risks and benefits of the research, anonymity of those participating, making it difficult to distribute the rewards (e.g., cash or other incentives), and the constant turnover among users of the site (Frankel & Siang, 1999).

The “digital divide” in which computer access is dependent on socioeconomic and environmental resources (Krumme, n.d.) has been a topic of discussion since the Internet began. It can be argued that most people in the United States have access to the Internet in their households, libraries, and schools (Martin, 2003). However, the digital divide may be more aptly termed “digital inequality” meaning there is a difference between those who have full access and have been educated in use of the Internet, and those who have only recently acquired limited access (Hargittai, 2003). In fact, many living persons in the U.S., such as older adults, will never go online. These issues make it difficult to know to whom and where the overall rewards of the research will go.

Consideration of justice invokes issues of *exclusion* as well as *inclusion* of a research participant. The notorious Tuskegee syphilis study (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) of non-treated indigent participants that generated knowledge benefiting the health of more affluent individuals is an example of unjust inclusion. However, CRF 45.46 requires justification of exclusion of certain groups. In a region with a substantial minority of disadvantaged non-English readers, is it just to administer an English-only survey to gauge adequate access to social services? Would an online survey yield an appropriate estimate of use of pre-natal care by disadvantaged women?

This principle may be salient for social work researchers, depending on their need to generalize findings beyond the online community they are studying. Care must be taken to design online research that does not violate the values of social justice, equity, and equality. Many persons served by social workers do not have equal access to the Internet. While there is merit to using

online data for particular populations, caution should be used when discussing the generalizability of the findings to such populations and biases should be acknowledged.

### **Competence in Social Work Practice**

Practice competence is a core social work value, ethical principle, and ethical standard in the NASW *Code of Ethics* (Ethical Standard 1.04(c), NASW, 1999). Social workers have been called technology phobic, unskilled in computer use, and behind the times regarding information technology (Giffords, 1998). However, social work researchers must be well grounded in Internet technology as well as Internet related policy to do research in this area (Marson & Brackin, 2000). Without an understanding of the technical components as well as limits of Internet technology, an online researcher will not have the knowledge needed to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and reduce risks to research subjects.

### **Conclusions**

The three basic ethical principles of the Belmont Report and the ethical standards and values of the NASW *Code of Ethics* have been applied to online research. Investigators need to consider possible differences in philosophy between an IRB committee and the researcher (utilitarian vs. deontological vs. ethics of care), issues of social justice and equity, and technological competence.

As Internet technology continues to evolve and as the numbers using the Internet increase worldwide, opportunities for online research will multiply. The third wave of information technology brings more complex privacy issues. These include concepts such as online identity, the public versus the private, the objectification of words on a screen, use of deception, and perceived anonymity. Training is crucial for those who desire to do research using online data. All players involved in this type of study who are responsible for conducting ethical research need to be aware of these and the continuing technological challenges.

The following recommendations are presented for those using online data:

- Recognize that you are conducting human subjects research and that you have an ethical responsibility to protect your research participants. This includes getting informed consent as needed.
- Be aware of your own approach/perspective of ethical decision making. If your perspective is more of an ethics of care approach and your IRB is strongly utilitarian, integrating these two approaches may facilitate approval from the Committee.
- Be aware of the aspects of your research that affect the potential for harm, such as:
  - ■ The source of Internet data

- ▪ The rules of the site
- ▪ The level of vulnerability of group participants
- ▪ The level of intrusiveness of the researcher's involvement
- ▪ The number of members of the group being studied (Eysenbach & Till, 2001)
  
- Be knowledgeable of ways you can reduce the threat of harm to your research subjects, such as:
  - ▪ When doing a survey or experimental research online, do not ask for identifying information (Kraut, et al., 2004).
  - ▪ If personal identifiers are necessary, record and store separately from research data (Kraut, et al., 2004).
  - ▪ Remove all identifying information within e-mail messages before storing data (e.g., names, pseudonyms, list names, names of newsgroups).
  - ▪ Make protection of privacy and anonymity a priority when storing data to ensure validity and reliability; change pseudonyms and disguise quoted materials (Kraut, et al., 2004; Sixsmith & Murray, 2001).
  - ▪ When debriefing is required, link materials to exiting of the site used (Kraut, et al., 2004).
  - ▪ Use data encryption when available for data transmission (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002).
- Be knowledgeable of your server design for data security and make changes to ensure data is not vulnerable to outside access (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenward, 2002).
- Weigh the risks versus the benefits of researcher disclosure when entering certain online venues, such as chat rooms and online groups, to reduce risks to the group itself as well as group process (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004; Reid, 2004).
- Be sure that online communication is the best source of data for your study. In particular, be sensitive to the social justice issues of equality and equity.
- Be knowledgeable about the Internet technology that you are using and the ways it can both harm and protect your research participants.

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# Social Work and Female Genital Cutting (CE Article)

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## Abstract

This article examines the practice of female genital cutting (FGC) in the context of social work values and ethics. The article argues that, in spite of social work's respect for cultural diversity, the profession has a responsibility to work toward the elimination of harmful practices such as FGC, even when such practices are valued by a given society. A rationale for this change effort is put forward, as are bases for the development of effective interventions.

Key Words: Values and ethics, female genital cutting, female genital mutilation, women, health

## Introduction

The profession of social work has historically allied itself with the poor and the dispossessed and has consistently supported policy initiatives designed to protect the rights of the oppressed. Similarly, social workers have advocated for the expansion of political rights to various oppressed groups through their support of progressive social legislation. This belief in the individual's right to self-determination is based on the profession's respect for persons regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religious or political beliefs.

Support for such efforts is enshrined in the ethical codes of both national and international social work organizations. For example, the National Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1999), states:

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people.... These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

The joint statement of ethical principles of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (2004) uses similar language, stating: “The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being,” adding that, “principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.”

However, respect for individual rights and for diverse cultural practices may create an ethical tension that is difficult to resolve. Such is the case that occurs when a practice that is valued by a given culture is injurious to and oppressive of individuals and individual groups within that culture.

This paper seeks to address the practice of female genital cutting within the context of this tension between social work’s advocacy on behalf of the oppressed on the one hand, and its commitment to cultural diversity on the other. The first section describes the practice of female genital cutting, in terms of methods, scope, and cultural significance. There follows the presentation of a rationale for action for those who wish to eliminate the practice. This section includes an analysis of the cultural relativist and universalist positions on the question of human rights that have thus far framed the debate concerning the issue, as well as a discussion of how feminist theory sheds light on the problem. The paper concludes with a set of guiding principles designed to assist in the development of positive approaches to the change process.

### **What is Female Genital Cutting (FGC)?**

Every year, nearly 2 million girls across the world are at risk of FGC, and more than 130 million women and girls have already undergone the practice (Population Reference Bureau, 2001). According to Slack (1988), the practice has occurred for nearly 2,500 years, and began prior to the development of either Islam or Christianity. Although the geographic and cultural beginnings of the practice are unknown, infibulation, the most radical form of the surgery, has been traced to ancient Egypt, through the examination of Egyptian mummies (Slack, 1988). There is little additional information as to the origins of the procedure, although its practice in societies in different geographic locations and among different cultures indicates that it began independently among different groups.

### **Forms of Genital Cutting**

Female Genital Cutting occurs mainly in Africa and some parts of the Middle East and Asia (van de Kwaak, 1992), although it has occurred in western countries (Slack, 1988). Van de

Kwaak (1992) describes three forms of genital cutting, including (a) Sunna: the removal of a small part of the clitoris; (b) Clitoridectomy: removal of the entire clitoris, along with all or part of the labia minora; and (c) Infibulation: removal of the clitoris, the labia minora, and the labia majora. In addition, adult women are often reinfibulated after giving birth. Although the type varies from culture to culture and country to country, about 85% of genital cuttings worldwide involve clitoridectomy, with infibulation accounting for about 15% (Lane and Rubinstein, 1996).

Genital cutting is performed with a variety of instruments, including “knives, old razor blades, broken glass, and sharp stones” (Slack, 1988, p. 442). The instruments are rarely sterilized, and the use of anesthesia is uncommon. The girl is simply held down by several women while the incision(s) are made. The operation is usually carried out by elderly women within the village, or midwives, on a mat outside or on the floor. Wounds resulting from the procedure are often treated with animal dung to prevent hemorrhaging.

### **The Impacts of Genital Cutting**

FGC often results in serious medical problems for victims. Infections are common, as are later complications, including hemorrhaging, difficulty in urinating, septicemia, problems with menstruation, and obstructed labor, which can be life threatening (Lane and Rubinstein, 1996). Slack (1988) describes three types of health problems associated with the procedures (primarily excision and infibulation). These include (a) immediate and short-term complications, (b) long-term complications, and (c) psychological trauma. Immediate results include many of those mentioned above, as well as “damage to and bleeding from adjacent internal organs and tissue (including the rectum and urethra), and even death” (p. 451). Physicians in Sudan have estimated that the number of fatalities resulting from genital cutting, especially infibulation, is “approximately one third of all girls in areas where antibiotics are not available” (p. 451). Additionally, the highest rates of infant mortality worldwide “correspond closely” to countries in which genital cutting is widely practiced, such as Somalia.

Long-term complications may include chronic problems with infection, especially among infibulated women. Further, localized infections can lead to incontinence, pain on urination, infection of other organs, such as the kidneys, and finally sterility. Other problems include menstrual complication, scarring, and vaginal abscesses.

Psychological trauma may include anxiety regarding the event (genital cutting), irritability, depressive symptoms, or psychosis. Women can also come to fear sex, because of the pain

associated with the act. Certainly, pleasurable sensations are reduced. Van de Kwaak (1992) points to psychosomatic, psychosexual, and social complications that sometimes result, as well.

### **Cultural Justifications**

In the societies where genital cutting is widely practiced, it is generally not regarded as mutilation, as it is sometimes referred to in the west (Lane & Rubinstein, 1996). There are various cultural bases for the procedure. Essentially, these fall into four categories: (a) sexual control of women, (b) religion, (c) cultural myths; and (d) tradition (Slack, 1988).

The belief that genital cutting prevents pre-marital and extra-marital sex on the part of women is a continuing theme. Robertson (1996) states that, although both boys and girls in Kenya underwent genital cutting as a part of initiation rites signifying their passage into adulthood, the process differed when it came to sexual matters. While the initiation process did include information concerning “socially permissible forms of petting” (p. 621), or ng- weko, “for girls, the element of control over sexuality...went beyond...self-restraint and was paramount, along with induction into the service of men” (p. 622). In fact, the purpose of the procedure, in this case clitoridectomy, was to prevent girls from experiencing sexual arousal from clitoral stimulation. At the same time, “competitive masturbation” for boys was allowed, while any form of masturbation among girls was met with disapproval.

According to Cutner (1985), in Islamic countries there is a belief that women are inherently sexually irresponsible, and that some form of control by men is therefore necessary. In clitoridectomy, this end is achieved through alteration of the woman’s genitalia, reducing her sensitivity, pleasurable sensations, and thereby the desire for intercourse. Infibulation is thought to guarantee the virginity of a bride, and to discourage/prevent sexual promiscuity by married women, which is why they are often re-infibulated after giving birth. Narrowing of the vaginal opening is also justified in terms of enhanced sexual pleasure for the husband.

According to van der Kwaak (1992), sexual purity and control of female sexuality are intimately linked with women’s cultural identity. In fact, genital cutting is normally a prerequisite for marital suitability, and subsequent motherhood, the two roles through which women in such societies derive their identity and status. In these societies, marriage is also often the only economic resource available to women. Genital cutting is also a means of maintaining purity in young girls and fidelity in married women. In some countries, Somalia, for example, the entire family is shamed if the girl’s virginity is lost before marriage.

Members of societies in which genital cutting is practiced often cite religious beliefs as the basis for the procedure. Regardless of the fact that the practice is not specified in the teachings of any formal religion, Slack (1988) notes that it has been carried out by “Christians (Catholics, Protestants, and Copts), Muslims, Jews, Animists, and atheists” (p. 446).

Although the majority of Muslims worldwide do not practice it, many Muslims believe that female genital cutting is required by the teachings of the Koran. According to Lane and Rubinstein (1996), however, most Islamic scholars do not believe that genital cutting is required for females. It is not mentioned in the Koran but is reportedly referred to by the Prophet (Muhammad) in the Hadith, a compendium of his sayings and actions during his lifetime, although some scholars reject even the historical accuracy of this reference.

Christians in Egypt also engaged in the practice at one time, although Roman Catholic missionaries forbade it in the 17th century. Because the female children of their converts could not find husbands, however, the church later decided to allow the practice (Lane & Rubinstein, 1996).

There are other beliefs cited as justifications for female genital cutting, which Slack (1988) refers to as “myths.” These include the beliefs that (a) the clitoris will grow to the size of a penis if not circumcised, (b) excision is essential for fertility, and (c) the procedure cleanses the female genitalia and improves its aesthetic condition. Van der Kwaak (1992) points out that infibulation is believed to be necessary “for reasons of health, cleanliness, and beauty” (p. 781). Indeed, in some cultures, the uncircumcised female genitalia is viewed as both ugly and unclean. Van der Kwaak (1992) also adds that many Somalis believe that infibulation increases fertility.

Finally, there are widespread beliefs that female genital cutting should be continued because it is a tradition of long standing, a belief held by both men and women (Slack, 1988). Why is tradition so important? There are various arguments. One is that traditions accepted by almost everyone in a society function to bind the society together. When such traditions are threatened, members of the groups fear the collapse of social structures. Hence, they may accept practices that they question privately. In regard to infibulation, the procedure is viewed as a rite of passage into adulthood, a change of status. In fact, many girls look forward to it, and spend days preparing for the event, although they often “feel shocked afterward” (van der Kwaak, 1992).

### **Social Work and Genital Cutting: A Rationale for Action**

Why is the issue of female genital cutting of importance to social workers? Given the profession’s explicit commitment to the doctrine of cultural diversity, this question is not an easy

one to resolve: Is female genital cutting a cultural practice that must be accepted as valid within the context of the cultures in which it is employed, and one on which the profession as a whole has no inherent right to pass judgment, or does it violate the profession's ethical base and require social workers to take action to eliminate its practice?

The former analysis would provide a simple answer, but perhaps a simplistic one. Social work, both in its professional codes, and in its history of and continuing advocacy in support of oppressed groups, requires action on behalf of those it perceives to be victims of oppression. Further, while embracing groups of diverse cultural backgrounds and beliefs, social work has strong ties to the women's movement in western countries, which has been in the forefront of efforts to eliminate female genital cutting. These factors, along with reevaluations regarding the definition and meaning of culture, provide a rationale for action for social workers who believe that the practice should be ended. The following discussion will therefore focus on (a) the social work profession's "official" position on the practice, as promulgated by prominent professional organizations; (b) the relationship between feminist ideology, social work, and female genital cutting; and (c) the reinterpretation of culture, as bases for action.

### **Professional Social Work and Female Genital Cutting**

Professional social work organizations both internationally and in the United States specifically oppose FGC. In a statement of "Areas of Critical Concern for Social Work," the IFSW affirmed the position at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, which included "genital mutilation" as a discriminatory practice against girls that can affect their "health and well-being" and "have a devastating effect on women's lives" (IFSW, 1999).

NASW has taken a similar position, asserting that:

The profession...endorses the treaties and conventions as they have evolved that establish that the rights of people take precedence over social customs when those customs infringe on human rights. Ritual genital mutilation is a case in point. NASW endorses the U.N. resolution that women's rights are human rights, no longer simply to be considered civil and political rights (Tessitore & Woolfson, 1997; United Nations, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, as cited in [NASW, 1999](#)).

### **Feminist Analysis and Female Genital Cutting**

The pursuit by many feminist groups of the elimination of female genital cutting has drawn the ire of members of the societies in which the practice continues, including women. Denouncing

feminism as a western construct not applicable to cultures with different value systems, they perceive a paternalistic bent to the feminist agenda. Indeed, at various international conferences concerning women, the debate has raged, with feminists usually succeeding in incorporating their language into the final versions of formal documents. According to Brems (1997), at the 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, the “Vienna Declaration and Program of Action” explicitly affirmed rights of women and the “girl-child” as an “inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of universal human rights” (p. 151). The document also refers to the elimination of “traditional or customary practices” that may impinge on the rights of women, and urges member states to “remove customs and practices which discriminate against and cause harm to the girl child” (p. 151). Similarly, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo spoke of “harmful” cultural practices, such as forced marriage, child marriage, and female genital cutting. And at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, the eradication of “harmful cultural practices,” with specific reference to female genital cutting, was called for in the “Platform for Action.”

Despite such controversies, however, feminist analysis, which has informed social work theory and practice in regard to many women’s issues, provides significant insight into the possible dynamics of female genital cutting. Specifically, a feminist analysis sheds light on oppressive social structures that perpetuate the continuance of the procedure. Feminist thought, through its concern with the particularities of experience, also leads to an analysis that contextualizes the problem. It focuses on the specific, concrete situation in which women and girls find themselves, a very different point of view from the abstraction of “human rights.”

### **The Rethinking of Culture**

Cultural relativism, as propounded by the American Anthropological Association in 1947, holds that “rights,” as defined by western societies, are in fact a form of cultural imperialism when applied to societies with different cultural patterns, especially those in the developing world. Initiating a debate that has been ongoing for decades (Edgerton, 1992; Kluge, 1993; Spiro, 1986), the argument of cultural relativist argument essentially holds that western style “rights” are culturally derived phenomena, rather than universal truths to be applied to humankind as a whole. Thus, cultural relativists believe that documents such as the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights (1948) simply enshrine a western belief system, rather than an objective set of ethical principles that can be applied to all societies.

Certainly, such concepts as social justice, self-determination, and self-actualization derive at least in part from the western emphasis on the rights of the individual, a concept somewhat foreign to many cultures. While those in the west take for granted the “fact” that each individual has certain “inalienable rights,” the “universalist” position, in other societies the needs of the group, or the collective, may often take precedence. In some cultures, for instance, it may be assumed that if individual rights conflict with the good of the society as a whole, they should be limited.

This cultural relativist-universalist standoff essentially forces one to choose between acceptance of practices considered to be harmful to certain individuals and groups in a society, and intervening in societies other than one’s own, implicitly “violating” multiculturalist doctrine.

According to Preis (1996), however, the concept of culture is being reconsidered, and this reconsideration may lead to a break in the standoff between the cultural relativist and universalist positions. Essentially, culture has been viewed as static, “a homogenous, integral and coherent unity” (p. 288-289). Recent analysis, however, focuses on the particularities of culture, as a “network of perspectives.” Essential to this perspective is the specific context in which the individual finds herself. Realities are culturally constructed, but the “cultural construction of reality springs not from one source, and is not of one piece” (Barth, 1989). Therefore, cultures are not monolithic, and everyone within a given culture cannot be assumed to have the same needs, beliefs, and constructions of reality. Cultures evolve.

### **Principles for Action**

Given the preceding analysis, it is clear that social work values mandate that social workers pursue efforts to eliminate the practice of female genital cutting in order to secure the physical, emotional, and psychological well being of women in societies where it is carried out. It is also evident that there is a valid rationale for precipitating cultural change that is consistent with social work values and ethics.

However, neither the ethical codes of NASW or IFSW provide social workers with a means of resolving the ethical tension between respect for cultural diversity and the commitment to the individual’s right to self-determination. Indeed, NASW specifically states that its code does not provide such guidance:

The *Code* offers a set of values, principles, and standards to guide decision making and conduct when ethical issues arise. It does not provide a set of rules that prescribe how social workers should act in all situations. Specific applications of

the Code must take into account the context in which it is being considered and the possibility of conflicts among the Code's values, principles, and standards. Ethical responsibilities flow from all human relationships, from the personal and familial to the social and professional (NASW, 1999).

Given the absence of concrete guidance, what follows is a set of guiding principles that it is felt will be helpful in developing culturally specific interventions designed to eliminate or reduce the incidence of female genital cutting. While few interventive approaches have been discussed in the social work literature, the reader may consult Krenawi & Graham (1999) for additional approaches.

### **Demonstrate respect for and value the culture, its society, and its members**

Behavior, rhetoric, or attitudes that reflect a condescending, “we know better than you do” belief system will be met with resistance, perhaps even by those who are initially open to outside intervention. Further, those who brook no debate on the issue--who insist that they are right and that the “other” is wrong--will run into stiff opposition. An example is found in an article by Thiam (1983): “... the purpose of these practices, whether it is admitted or not [emphasis added], is to control female sexuality” (p. 750). Such a statement errs in at least two ways. First, it assumes that there is no other valid point of view on the issue. Second, it ignores other aspects of the practice, which may constructively inform interventive efforts; namely, that female genital cutting is a valued rite of initiation in many of the societies in which it is practiced.

A similar example, from the same source, illustrates a negative assumption made about indigenous peoples who oppose intervention, or do not see FGC as a primary problem, focusing instead on the material needs of their societies:

They appeal for aid from the wealthy countries, pretending to be unaware that asking for and accepting such aid means playing the same game as neo-colonialists and imperialists of every kind. Because of this it was felt...that certain collusion existed between bourgeois African women and neo-colonialism (Thiam, 1983, p. 752).

Certainly, this statement indicates not only a disdain for the views of others in the debate, but also a complete lack of recognition of the wishes and aspirations of the people who make up the society in which the practice takes place.

### **Include indigenous peoples in change efforts**

Without the support of individuals and groups within the society that is the focus of change, efforts to abolish female genital cutting will have limited, if any, success. As Lane & Rubinstein

(1996) state: “Pragmatically...indigenous activists may more correctly judge when a given strategy will succeed...[while] western efforts, unguided by detailed cultural knowledge, may...inspire a backlash in which custom is viewed as intrinsic to the group’s now threatened identity” (p. 38).

### **Frame the change effort in concrete terms**

Appeals to the health risks will be more likely to at least get people to listen than will abstract discussions of human rights. Talking with someone about a problem that is meaningful to them, that they have experienced, or that they can visualize, is a potent way to get their attention. “Although activities designed to educate both men and women about the health consequences of female genital cutting have been initiated only recently, they are the most effective campaigns so far” (Slack, 1988, p. 479).

### **Focus on the individual**

Akin to the discussion of concreteness, the particularizing of the individual contexts in which the practice occurs may be a useful strategy. “Introducing specificity in an individual rights approach makes it possible to value a concrete person’s communal ties, not those that the dominant forces inside the community would like to attribute to him or her” (Brems, 1997, p. 163). Hence, feminist concerns regarding oppression of women as a group can be taken into account when focusing on the individual in the context of the cultural environment in which she lives.

### **Listen**

Embedded in all of the points above is the necessity of being open to the feelings, viewpoints and wishes of others. Certainly, social workers know how to listen, and respectful attention to the viewpoints of others is a necessary prerequisite for the establishment of the trusting, constructive relationship that will be required to effect change on such a sensitive issue. This does not mean that we have to agree, as when an abusing parent rationalizes her/his behavior. It simply means that listening is a starting point for dialogue.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Social work**

Female genital cutting is a practice that carries with it demonstrated health risks to women. Further, as it occurs primarily in societies characterized by the subordination of women, it is part of a system of gender-based oppression. While some may argue from the point of view of cultural relativism that western societies have no right to dictate to those in other areas of the world what is permissible in their communities, others see in social work’s history and ethical code a strong commitment to defending those who cannot defend themselves from harmful practices perpetrated

against them by those in positions of power. Cultural relativism can go only so far in informing such a debate. For example, many southerners in the United States during the Jim Crow era defended the practice of apartheid and oppression of African Americans as the “southern way of life,” essentially a separate culture. Did this mean that those from other areas of the country had no basis for intervention on behalf of African Americans? Did it mean that this “culture” included all members of the region? Certainly, the answer to both questions is “no.” Hence, there are times when efforts to effect change in other societies and cultures can be justified and are in fact necessary. This paper has attempted to describe a practice, female genital cutting, which many, both inside and outside the cultures in which it is prevalent, view as a harmful tradition that must be abolished. I have attempted to construct a rationale and framework for the development of interventions to eliminate the practice; namely, social work’s history of advocacy on behalf of the oppressed, its strong support of women’s rights, and the breaking down of the static concepts of culture that in the past have led many to stereotype and essentialize those within a given society. Principles for action have also been put forth, principles that are based on and are consistent with social work’s mission, history, values and ethics. Social work is a unique profession, which has the potential to significantly add to the debate concerning this practice. I encourage others to join in the dialogue.

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## Book Review

Reamer, Frederic G. (2006). *Social Work Values and Ethics, Third Edition*. New York: Columbia University Press. Reviewed by Donna DeAngelis, MSW, LCSW, Executive Director, Association of Social Work Boards

With the tension increasing between the values of social work and the values of society and organizations, the third edition of *Social Work Ethics and Values* provides sage and timely guidance for responsible and ethical social work practice. Dr. Reamer's classic work has been updated to address the *NASW Code of Ethics* revisions of 1999. This book provides an overview of the history of the *Code of Ethics* for the social work profession and relates the changes in the code to changes in social work philosophy and practice. He identifies and describes core social work values, relates them to ethical principles, and gives case examples to demonstrate values in action. There is an excellent discussion of potentially conflicting values and the professional struggle to reconcile these conflicts.

Dr. Reamer discusses ethical dilemmas and provides a decision-making framework for addressing ethical dilemmas in direct and indirect practice, again complete with illuminating examples. Finally, he discusses ethics as they relate to risk management and the occurrence of ethical misconduct.

If there is only one book that you ever read (and hopefully you will read many) on social work ethics, this should be it.