

# Guest Editorial: A response to Paul Adams. The code of ethics and the clash of orthodoxies.

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### **Introduction**

We want to express our thanks to Professor Paul Adams for his response to our recent article, “What is sacred when personal and professional values collide?” It was our hope that we could generate ongoing dialogue on what we believe to be longstanding and important challenges to each of us as social work professionals. We believe that the profession benefits from thoughtful critiques that engage differing positions rather than in retreating from difficult challenges. Perhaps these exchanges signal an opportunity to those of us who are interested in exploring values and ethics—to find additional avenues to exchange our thinking.

### **Reclarification of our position on the relationship between personal and professional values**

In order to respond to Adams, we think it is important to first delineate major assumptions that support the ethical decision-making framework as described in our article. We are choosing to re-emphasize these assumptions because some of Adams’ criticisms are based on misunderstandings of our position.

- People have fully formed personal worldviews, drawn from many different sources (including religion, philosophy, and political science) that they bring to the social work profession. We know and accept this reality and only challenge personal worldviews as they relate to the operationalization of professional social work responsibilities.
- Adams’ interpretation is that our position is anti-Evangelical Christian when, in fact, we use this religious position as only one example of the kinds of conflicts that may exist between personal worldviews (e.g., radical feminist, radical Marxist, pro-Democrat) and professional mandates.

- It does not matter what the personal worldview is; it needs to be mediated by the social work profession through examination of the *Code of Ethics* using professional literature as a basis for interpretation.
- At no point does Adams acknowledge the inherent power differentials in professional relationships (e.g., worker and client; supervisor and supervisee; instructor and student). This power differential, inherent in any fiduciary relationship, necessitates limits or constraints on people's professional behavior to ensure the protection of less powerful persons. With privileges and the exercise of special rights inherent in professional status come certain responsibilities that govern and restrict behavior, e.g., having sex with clients is never acceptable professional behavior.

### **Specific responses to Adams' critique**

- We have no issue with Adams' right to hold his thoroughly articulated definition of marriage; however, Adams fails to recognize that his definition of marriage creates inequities in access to resources and services connected to a legal status of being married. His line of argument would exclude major portions of the world's population who do not fit his definition of marriage.
- We agree with Adams that there are instances in which social work faculty have violated the Code of Ethics and that those violations need to be addressed. However, those violations do not rest on a free speech argument put forward by Adams and NAS. Our framework does not address free speech in the public square (which we fully support). However, in professional relationships in which there are power differentials, we are granted certain rights, and with those rights come responsibilities and limits on our behavior.
- We find it troublesome that Adams dismisses Keith-Lucas' legacy in the social work literature. Keith-Lucas, whose prolific work on the relationship between Christianity and social work and who founded the National Association for Christian Social Workers, is dismissed out of hand as irrelevant to the discussion of the central issues in our paper. Instead, Adams substitutes the work of George (2001), who "treats theologically liberal Christians and Jews who share these positions with their nonreligious allies as part of the secularist camp" (p. 6). Adams dismisses major elements of Christian communities who are not orthodox. The very accusation he levels at our work claiming we are imposing our orthodoxy on others is blatantly demonstrated in his own argument. Further, his lengthy discussion of marriage and abortion is framed in a broad social context with no specific ties to professional social work relationships. Adams' use of George's differentiation appears intentionally polarizing—excluding even one of the authors from membership in the Christian community.
- Both NAS and Adams argue that free speech must somehow be protected. For example, Adams notes that there are differing views of social justice in professional literature (e.g., Rawls, 1971; Nozick, 1974; MacIntyre, 1984, 1999). We support the notion that these differing views of social justice should be presented in the social work classroom. However, as professionals, these ideas must be examined as to their consequences relevant to our social work professional responsibilities (NASW Code

of Ethics, 1999). One can argue social justice based on equality or equity (e.g., social justice in the job market could be based on the equal treatment of those seeking a job; or based on people being treated equitably as a result of special circumstances that might include the underlying argument for affirmative action). However, the choice for a particular definition of social justice should be understood as it mitigates oppression. Social work's *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1999) mandates that professionals address "oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion and mental or physical disability" (p. 9). Therefore, in order to be consistent with the *Code of Ethics*, the argument for social justice based on equity would take precedence over the argument based on equality.

- Further, we do not believe that every interpretation of the *Code of Ethics* or of ethical principles and values should be treated equally. Indeed, we think it is critical to ask questions such as "Who seeks to gain and lose from a particular interpretation of the *Code* that marginalizes people such as women or those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?" In effect, social work's history has been about supporting and helping marginalized groups to gain power and resources. How could this interpretation of the *Code* (i.e., to discriminate against sexually different groups) ever be acceptable in the social work profession?

## Summary

In summary, we are trying to draw social workers' attention away from broadly couched discussions of rights to free speech and respect for diverse perspectives held by professionals – back to the *Code's* primary purpose, which is to protect clients. The acknowledgement of power differentials between clients and social workers in professional relationships necessitates certain restrictions on professionals' rights for the purpose of ensuring that clients' best interests are served, which is the responsibility we accept when we enter the social work profession. If professionals are allowed to reinterpret the Code based on personal worldviews, there is no protection afforded clients, nor are there standards for care that can be expected when seeking services from members of the profession.

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