

# A Reply to Adams: The Delicate Balance between Private Viewpoints and Professional Duties

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## Abstract

In our second response, we reiterated that all personal values must be mediated through the Code of Ethics (Spano & Koenig, 2009). At this time, we expressed concern about Adams' unwillingness to distinguish between free speech in the public square and professional duties. We appreciate Adams' (2009) most recent response and for his willingness to engage in dialogue with us around a broad range of issues associated with our original article entitled, "What is sacred when personal and professional values collide?" (Spano & Koenig, 2007/2008). We remain concerned about Adams' continued lack of response regarding the distinction between free speech in the public square and professional duties. In this third response, we discuss the following: (1) middle ground; (2) knowledge and values in social work; and (3) the personal is always political.

**Key terms:** Code of Ethics, personal is political, ideology, virtue ethics

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### 1.0 Introduction

The Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999) is written in such a way that it allows for latitude in the translation of its principles and values into professional behavior. No Code of Ethics can be useful if it is written at a level of specificity that attempts to remove or replace individual professional judgment. It is impossible and unproductive to write a Code that attempts to prescribe specific behaviors in all practice situations due the fact that no two

situations are fully identical. However, we are not suggesting that ethical guidelines be ignored for they indeed set parameters in which professional behavior can be evaluated. The following points provide areas of agreement and disagreement with what we understand to be Adam's line of argument.

### 2.0 Middle ground

We do share an area of agreement or a middle ground with Adams. Each of us has written articles that speak to a more common view of what needs to happen in social work education and practice. The focus on developing social workers' character (virtue) through self-awareness, self-reflection and critical thinking is something we share in common with Adams (Adams, 2009; Spano & Koenig, 2003; Spano & Koenig, 2007/2008). From our perspective, the problem is that many of our students do not come into social work programs and the profession having already developed these skills necessary for using something like "virtue ethics." Their interests are often in developing mastery of techniques and strategies for implementing models. Education, in general, and specifically social work education has moved toward teaching models rather than teaching self-reflective and analytical skills necessary for critiquing and thoughtfully applying models.

We agree with Adams' assessment that although virtuous character is important in social work education, current social work educational structures may not lend themselves to cultivating this character which then can be used in the application of knowledge and values in practice behaviors. As noted above, social work education's current emphasis on the technical skills (Schön, 1983) needed for practice

make it difficult to create opportunities for fostering virtues such as perseverance, fortitude and humility. This is especially true in the current context in which resource starved agencies are barely able to meet CSWE standards for minimal supervision.

### **3.0 Knowledge and values in social work**

Adams (2009, par. 5) states that “what is alarmingly symptomatic of the social work academy is the substitution of ideology for evidence, the refusal even to look at evidence to the great detriment of those we teach and the people with whom they subsequently work.” In the social sciences, the distinction between knowledge and values is a false dichotomy. Ideology, which permeates all of the social sciences, is the combination of knowledge and values. To suggest that knowledge exists in a value-free environment, presumes that values do not shape the questions we ask, the evidence we collect, and the meaning we assign to that evidence, which in turn, informs our actions. Part of the problem with asserting that social work practice is knowledge based is that we have inadequate knowledge and what knowledge we do have is frequently conflicting. This creates difficulties in addressing practice situations which are typically complex in nature. The choice of which elements of knowledge meet the standard for “evidence” is often based on preexisting personal values. Every social worker brings personal values and perspectives to the table. What we often do is choose evidence that supports our preexisting values or beliefs. As the writers of this third response to Adams, we readily admit that we also have found evidence that bolsters opposing values and beliefs regarding the protections of marriage. For example, some literature points to evidence that married women are at greater risk for domestic violence (i.e., homicide) than women who are not married. Dugan, Nagin, & Rosenfeld (2003) state that, “because most intimate partner killings involve married couples, perhaps the most crucial factor in reducing intimate partner homicide has been the sharp drop in marriage rates among young adults during the past 25 years” (p. 22).

On the other side of the argument, Adams cites literature which supports the protective factors of traditional marriage between a woman and man (e.g., decreased child poverty; and married women as less likely to experience domestic violence). What constitutes “evidence” is shaped, in part, by the values of the people who collect and interpret the evidence. Social work practice is not solely guided by a perspective that emphasizes knowledge; it is shaped by the values held by those who produce and consume the evidence. In these instances, when there

is conflicting evidence or a lack of evidence, how do we determine our ethical obligation to clients? Our answer is that social workers should attempt to evaluate the consequences of their actions through an examination of the duties flowing from the principles in the Code of Ethics rather than acting on their own personal beliefs and values to guide their decision making. If we do not acknowledge that there is a common framework (Code of Ethics) that we agree to as a profession, then, how do we ensure that clients will not be disadvantaged based on the social worker’s translation of a particular personal point of view into professional behaviors? Our reading of the Code of Ethics is that it is about the protection of clients, not about the “rights” of social workers to use their personal values in directing their actions in practice.

The following example may be informative to help clarify our position on the role of the Code of Ethics as it relates to social justice. Adams cites one definition of social justice as getting the government “off the back of the armies of compassion” (<http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageRef=44>). We, on the other hand, have emphasized the definition of social justice as promoting the well-being of vulnerable populations (NASW, 1999, p. 5). Who gets left out and who gets served with these competing definitions of social justice? In our professional lives, what should be a guiding principle for choosing from among multiple views of social justice? There is nothing inherently, morally wrong with a definition of social justice based on compassionate conservatism designed to emphasize private charity or Marxist principles designed to emphasize big government. We challenge each group to demonstrate that their view of social justice is consistent with the Code’s emphasis on social justice for promoting the well-being of vulnerable populations.

One final illustration highlights some of the problems with only relying on a personal view of social justice in professional practice. If I’m doing community organization in social work, and I want to organize upper middle class white people to help keep African Americans from moving into their community based on their belief that it will harm their property values, am I promoting social justice as a social worker? Where would I go to look for guidance and criteria that would inform professional behavior about whether or not I can participate in such activities as a social worker?

### **4.0 The personal is always political**

In conclusion, if duties are somehow devoid of ideology, how do we arrive what is good? Every

definition of good or virtue has an ideological basis that rests on community values. There are many communities with diverse perspectives and/or ideologies. It is our position that people do not separate ideology (i.e., knowledge and values) from duty or action; these components inform each other. Whether a person is an Evangelical Christian or a radical feminist, his/her ideology informs the understanding of duty, which translates into actions. Our position is that a Code of Ethics represents the current perceptions about the duties and obligations that social work professionals adhere to in their practice. In Adams' latest response, he uses an old feminist slogan, "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." Perhaps the paraphrase of another feminist slogan might more appropriate for this discussion, "The personal is [always] political," irrespective of the ideology of the person. One's personal ideologies and perspectives will bleed through and influence professional behavior. A person can believe whatever he/she wants to believe in private life. We agree with Adams and have never said that a social worker has to pass a litmus test regarding his/her personal beliefs. However, a professional's actions flow from these personal beliefs and values and our Code of Ethics provides an important way of guiding choices that reflect the current agreements about social workers' actions or behaviors.

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