Motivations, Values, and Conflict Resolution: Students' Integration of Personal and Professional Identities

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Abstract

Edicts within the CSWE 2008 EPAS address the importance of understanding the intersection of personal and professional values. Twenty MSW students, chosen on the basis of diverse cultural and personal characteristics, were interviewed about their motivations for pursuing a MSW degree and their personal and professional values. Thematic analysis yielded an emergent model relating the intersection of multiple forms of motivation, encountering and resolving value conflicts, and integrating personal and professional identities. Implications for education and practice are: (1) The intersection of personal and professional identities should be explicit components of curriculum; (2) Strategies for managing value conflicts should be an integral part of the curriculum; (3) The relationship between identity integration and practice needs to be delineated.
The field of social work is based on a distinct set of value premises which set it apart from other professional disciplines (Abbott, 2003; Compton & Galloway, 1999; D’Aprix, Dunlap, Abel & Edwards, 2004; Reamer, 1995). This difference between social work and other helping professions is evident in the educational emphasis on multiculturalism, specifically in regards to issues of privilege and oppression, the application of person-in-environment and constructionist theories of the human experiences, and the importance of social justice as a defining value of the profession. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* (2008) explicitly delineates six core values of the profession: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These core values reflect what is “unique to the profession” (*Preamble, ¶ 4*) and are presented as fundamental guidelines of the profession.

Kelly, Alexander, and Cullinae (1986) posited that in order for an occupation to be a profession, “the members must identify with it and its mission” (p. 6). The development of a professional social work identity arises out of growing “self-awareness” and a growing identification with the roles, values, and ethics of the profession (Carpenter, & Platt, 1997). Although not intended as a prescription of global professional social work behavior, the NASW *Code of Ethics* is nonetheless meant to establish values, principles, and standards to guide social workers’ decision making and conduct (*Purpose, ¶ 3*). Even more specific are the Council on Social Work Education *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS, 2008)*, establishing in Section 2.1.1 the educational outcome, “Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly” (p. 3).
The discourse on the role of value systems in the field of social work is becoming more intense and contentious as ill-conceived notions of liberalism and conservatism straddle the socio-political fence (Fram, & Miller-Cribbs, 2008). Some researchers have suggested the social work education selection process be reformed in order to admit suitable students with “desired characteristics” (Gibbons, Bore, Monroe, & Powis, 2007, p. 211). Based on a review of the literature, Gibbons et al. found that although most admission processes focused on academic suitability, educators also felt that personal qualities and values played a role in students’ eventual success as a social work practitioner. Among those qualities deemed “undesirable” were intolerance and judgmental and opinionated attitudes (Miller & Koerin, 1998). Given the resources involved “both in class and in the field to deal appropriately with the few students who are academically able but exhibit unsuitable personal qualities or inappropriate behavior” (Gibbons, et al., p. 210), and the potential for negative impacts on other students, faculty, field instructors, agencies, and clients (Gibbons, et al.; Gray & Gibbons, 2002), the recommendation was made to focus more on the “screening in” process of selecting appropriate students instead of the “screening out” process for inappropriate students.

Bisman (2004) has suggested that the emphasis of the social work profession is on the knowledge base of the profession, supplanting a focus on the values and mission of the profession. One example is the current debate in the field over the degree of congruence between MSW students’ personal values and those of the profession, with evidence supporting claims that the personal value-bases of MSW students over the past 15 years are both divergent and convergent in relationship to the values of the profession (Abell, & McDonell, 1990; Allen-Meares, 2000; D’APrix et al., 2004). Some research findings suggest that MSW students are more interested in pursuing careers in private clinical practice than in careers focusing on
oppressed and impoverished populations, and that there is disparity between the values of contemporary students and those of the profession (D’Aprix et al.). These findings are in contrast to those of Abell and McDonell who reported that less than 25% of MSW students surveyed intended to go into private practice, and that these students remain “highly committed to the concept of involvement with the disadvantaged” (p. 5), and express ongoing commitments to serving traditional social work client groups (Butler, 1990). Limb and Organista (2006) found that students’ attitudes towards, and commitment to, social work’s mission, as evidenced though practice preferences and career motivations, were generally high and positive, and did not change much over the course of the MSW program.

Since the adoption of a set of values and their incorporation in practice are definitive of the professional social worker (Clark, 2006), these findings – more particularly those that indicate substantial and continuing value divergences – are of fundamental importance to the future of the social work profession. This incongruence raises questions about whether or not values that might be held as a part of a personal identity interfere with or even prevent the adoption and practice of values that are at the core of a social identity, such as that of “social worker.” Haynes (1999) argues that the social work profession should be “tolerant” of diverse opinions and beliefs regarding “some things, but not about its ideology” (p. 2).

Archer (2001) posits that commitment to a social identity cannot exist without the support of overlapping values and beliefs at the level of personal identity, and when applied to social work, might suggest that anyone with personal values inconsistent with social work would not pursue adoption of this professional identity. The prior research on this question suggests that the reality is more complex and indicates the need for exploration of the interactions between social and personal identities. According to Wenger (2003), social identity is partially derived
from engaging in the practice of the community to which one belongs or seeks to belong. Social identities are simultaneously developed, maintained, and constrained through participation in a community of practice. It is in the execution of practice, the learning, the mastery, and the application, that social identity is formed. It is these communities of practice (CoPs) that allow one to learn, adopt, and express a social identity through participation (Wenger, 1998).

Social work education represents a formal learning trajectory established by the larger community of practice of social work. Newcomers are brought into the community and begin a path to full membership and participation. A substantial piece of the learning trajectory, and a necessary outcome for the social work profession, is the understanding and incorporation of the values and ethics of the profession in conjunction with adequate demonstration of these same values and ethics in practice (Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), 2008).

The 2008 CSWE Educational and Policy Standards (EPAS) explicitly identify the importance of professional values, the interpretation of these values, and the role of the academic institutions in modeling, teaching, and assessing the integration of these values into social work practice. Educational Policy 1.0, Program Mission and Goals, reiterates the core values of the profession as posited by the NASW and establishes them as the foundation of both explicit and implicit curricula. Educational Policy 2.0, The Social Work Curriculum and Professional Practice, specifies several educational outcomes related to identifying personal values and resolving conflicts with professional social work values. Although the establishment of these outcomes as requisites for membership and participation in the CoP of social work is a key step in the professionalization of the discipline, there is no formalized mechanism for evaluating the relationship between these two value systems. This research explored the nature and context of motivations for participating in a social work community of practice (CoP) and the relationships
between these different forms of motivations, personal value systems, professional social work values, and identity integration.

Method

This study utilized an exploratory, qualitative design to develop an emergent understanding of the relationship between MSW students’ personal and profession value systems, the types of value conflict students experience, the methods they employ to negotiate value conflicts, and the integration of personal and professional identities.

Participants

Participants consisted of students currently enrolled in a MSW program at a private, Midwestern university. An email describing the study was sent to all MSW students, and interested students were asked to contact the researcher directly. A non-random, purposive, maximum variation sampling frame was used. Maximum variation sampling involves selecting participants who vary widely along dimensions of interest (Patton, 2001); dimensions of interest were religious affiliation, age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and family SES.

Interested students who did not identify with majority-group characteristics of being Caucasian, heterosexual, and female, were automatically selected for participation. Interested students who did identify with these majority-group demographics were further evaluated according to age and religious affiliation and enrolled based on the overall contribution to the maximum variation of the sample. Purposive recruitment attempts were made to students known to self-identify as male, non-Caucasian, and/or non-heterosexual. In line with Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) idea of theoretical sampling, active recruitment of Advanced Students was initiated when a pattern encompassing differences between foundation students, advanced standing students,
and concentration students began to emerge. Based on additional recruitment efforts, seven more participants were enrolled, yielding a total sample of 20 interviewees. A summary of participants by dimension of interested is provided in Table 1.

At the time of the study, the researcher was a doctoral student and adjunct faculty member in the social work program. Nine of the participants were known prior to their involvement in the study through enrollment in classes taught by the researcher. Students who were currently enrolled in courses taught by the researcher were not eligible for participation in the study, and the researcher was no longer an instructor at the school after the completion of the study.

[Insert Table 1]

Procedure

Participants who were selected, consented, and enrolled, were then interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researcher. Key questions addressed factors influencing the decision to pursue a MSW degree, congruence and conflict between personal values and professional social work values, and ascription to and integration of an identity as a social worker. Core questions from the interview protocol are listed in Table 2. All participants were interviewed by the researcher, on campus, in a private office. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio-taped for transcription. Interviews ranged in length from 28 minutes to 75 minutes. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the researcher.

[Insert Table 2]

Analysis
A thematic analysis strategy incorporating components of grounded theory was used in this study. Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection by first coding each individual interview and then coding for patterns across interviews. Analysis began with line-by-line open coding of the data and identifying and categorizing discreet elements such as key words and phrases (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As categories and properties were identified, patterns of codes across interviews were developed based on the discrete data identified during open coding (Johnson & Christensen).

Open coding was followed by axial coding to begin delineating the various conditions of the identified categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Patterns of codes were assessed for emergent themes which were explored and interpreted. As each theme emerged, it was integrated into a conceptual model of relationships among the themes. NVIVO 8 (QSR, 2008) computer software was used to facilitate coding and organization of interview data.

Creswell (2007) defines “validation” as a “process” to “assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (207). Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that the process of conducting a grounded theory study is, in and of itself, a form of validation, and, to use their terminology, establishes “credibility”. Glaser and Strauss contended that the credibility of the generated theory should be judged according to the strategies used for collecting, coding, analyzing and presenting data, and in the way people interpret the theory. Purposive sampling was used to maximize the diversity of experiences and perspectives in the study, and a systematic process of collecting data through audio-recording was used. Draft copies of results were sent to those participants who were directly quoted, and they were asked to consider both the context in which their words were used and the meaning and interpretation
given to those words by the researcher. Five participants responded to the author’s request for feedback, and all agreed with the context and interpretation of their words.

Results and Discussion

The roles of personal and professional value systems as motivators and educational outcomes were woven throughout the students’ stories. For most students, personal values formed the foundation on which their decision to enter a MSW program was based. Value conflicts were a common occurrence and illustrate the importance of personal values as well as the role of social work education in establishing a professional value system. Given the centrality of values in the formation of both personal and professional identities, the resolution of this conflict played a central role in identity integration. Following Miles and Huberman’s (1994) recommendation, a network display format was created to illustrate the relationships between these emergent themes (Figure 1).

Values and Motivation

Support for Archer’s (2000) beliefs about how the commitment to social action is influenced by personal identity and internal values was discovered in students’ stories of why they enrolled in a MSW program. Specifically, all students acknowledged that their personal values undergird motivation based on a desire to help others, as well as motivation based on perceived congruence with the values of the profession. Identification of personal beliefs as a primary source of motivation illustrates Archer’s theory of the importance of the internal self in relationship to the external self.

Desire to Help Others
Every single participant identified their desire to help others and make a positive contribution to society as the fundamental reason why they chose to enter the program. As one participant explained “the ability to help people and the desire to help people overrides all other things.” This finding is consistent with previous research on students’ motivations for entering social work (e.g., D’Aprix, et al., 2004) and supports Archer’s (2002) idea that “doing” develops out of “being”. “Being” is a person’s sense of his or her self; it is an individual’s core internal identity. “Doing” is how an individual manifests his or her sense of self in the social world. Entering the MSW program provided individuals whose “being” included helping others an outlet for expressing their sense of self by “doing” as a social worker.

The desire to help others seemed to stem from multiple sources. Some students identified specific events that shaped their desire to help others. These events seem to have crystallized more abstract and undefined feelings of wanting to “do something important, do something good”. For some students, the desire to help others arose out of beliefs and values rooted in religious traditions or spirituality. One young student, who considered herself devoutly religious, recalled,

My teacher said ‘social work is professional Christianity’. We believe in helping. And so for me it’s always been a very connected issue. It’s a religious part of what I believe; serving others, giving, trying and helping those who are less fortunate.

For other students, the desire to help others developed out of beliefs and values instilled in them by their families. One student described the impact her parents had on her beliefs surrounding equality and justice as,

I think both my parents are amazing people and value the same things. They just taught us life is about people and not just about material success, but about relationships with other people; that you gotta do your best to help other people.
**Professional Legitimacy**

While the desire to help others was clearly important to all participants, it did not, in and of itself, explain the decision to pursue a graduate degree. Most students made a connection between needing a graduate degree to “legitimately” engage in the practice of helping others. One participant stated, “I felt getting a MSW would open up a lot of avenues to what I want to do, to working with families and doing therapy, which you definitely need a higher degree for”. As stated by one participant “Right now I want to do social work, and I knew I had to get my MSW to anything, to do anything substantial.” These responses suggest that a graduate degree legitimizes students’ capacity and ability to help others within a professional context through credentialing. The MSW degree is a minimum qualification for most social-work specific jobs, and a prerequisite for licensure. Consistent with Wenger’s (1998) earlier work on CoPs, the MSW program, and arguably any professional graduate program, is a “learning trajectory” through which participants acquire the requisite skills and knowledge to achieve legitimate and full participation.

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe *participation* as “a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed in – the ‘culture of practice’” (p. 95). Social work education serves as a learning trajectory by which students are involved in legitimate peripheral participation as they progress through the curriculum and situated learning of their academic programs; through this process they absorb the practices associated with professional social work while simultaneously being absorbed into the structures associated with professional social work (i.e., professional organizations, job “titles”, professional licenses). The successful progression along this learning trajectory leads to full participation (Lave & Wenger).
Within the context of professional legitimacy, there was a focus on acquiring the skills and knowledge to practice competently. One participant spoke at length about how an experience, prior to entering the MSW program, with another social worker and other professionals in her agency left her feeling like she “didn’t have a voice.”

Even though I tried to talk to the social worker, she didn’t listen; I didn’t feel like I had a voice. So, I came to [school] to get a voice… I felt that if I had some credentials with the social worker who came out to work on the case, I would have been heard.

These results support Wenger et al.’s (2002) idea that one type of motivation for entering a CoP then is to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to engage in the practice and move from peripheral or non-participation to legitimate full participation.

Practicality of the MSW Degree

A small group of respondents identified the practicality of the degree as their primary motivation. Practicality was endorsed as the broader range of professional opportunities afforded by the MSW degree versus graduate degrees in similar disciplines such as counseling psychology, school psychology, and clinical psychology, and also as the amount of resources (time, effort, and cost) needed to obtain the MSW degree in comparison to graduate degrees in similar disciplines. Most students motivated by practicality were in the clinical track of the program and expressed career goals based on private, clinical practice. One of the older participants described it this way,

I researched a lot what would be the best career in the quickest amount of time to get professionally credentialed, whether it is a Master’s or professional license, that would allow me to move into the field that would provide those goals for me. In doing my research I found [a MSW degree] would give me the flexibility.
Similarly, one of the young women in the program stated, “I had to ask myself, ‘would I rather spend two years in school than five when I can do the same job?’”. The decision to enter the program was based in part on pragmatics and not inherent qualities of the social work profession.

**Value Congruity**

Participants were asked to talk about what motivated them to choose a Master’s degree in social work over other similar disciplines. The overwhelming response was that social work values were more in line with the individual’s personal values. One student, who described her career goal as clinical practice, described her decision as “applying to a MSW program as opposed to a counseling program [because] issues of multiculturalisms within oppressed populations was really meaningful to me; that’s sort of the reason I went with the MSW instead of the counseling piece.” The three things that students kept identifying as the main draw of social work over psychology were the systems approach, emphasis on social justice, and emphasis on multiculturalism.

**Impact of Learning on Value Systems**

Black et al. (1998) argue that one purpose of social work education is to “socialize” students to the profession’s value system; exposure to the professions’ value system is believed to “influence” students’ values to be more in line with those detailed in the NASW *Code of Ethics* (1999). The purpose of the current study was not to evaluate students’ value congruity on the basis of some external criteria, but to instead understand how students experience the intersection between personal and professional values within the educational process. Students were asked about their personal values and whether or not they had ever experienced incongruity or conflict between their personal values and what they were being taught. Most students
reported at least one incident where they felt conflicted between their personal values and what they were experiencing in the program, and they were asked to describe how they dealt with those feelings.

As students entered and progressed through the program, their exposure to social work values impacted both their personal value systems and their understanding and interpretation of professional values. For many students the educational process reaffirmed their personal values and strengthened their commitment to professional social work values. For some students the educational process challenged them and resulted in the desire to more fully incorporate professional values into their personal life. A third way the program impacted value systems was to reveal value incongruity.

Many students were motivated to enter the MSW program because they believed there was value congruity between their personal values and the values of the profession. These students generally reported satisfaction that this belief was realized in the program. One student described this realization as,

I always felt like it was a perfect fit for me. I ended up right where I wanted to be, where I should be. I haven’t been struggling how to integrate the values or how to accept the Code of Ethics. I feel like that was not a struggle for me at all.

Students still felt that the program impacted their value systems, even if there was a high degree of congruity to begin with. For this student, the close alignment of personal and professional values challenged her to explore her beliefs even more deeply:

In one sense I feel like this program has been a 2 year personal therapy because it’s really been about looking at myself and the ways that even I perpetuate racism without even knowing it. In another sense I don’t feel like I’ve had to shift my world view; if anything, my world view was broadened, yeah, and strengthened and reinforced at some core level.
One of the older students beautifully expressed the impact of the program on her as, “the program has made me a better me.”

A few students reported entering the program without any foreknowledge of the value base of the profession, indicating that their motivation wasn’t based on perceived value congruity. All of these students realized as they learned more about the value base of the profession that there was congruity between personal and professional values. “I wasn’t aware of the social work *Code of Ethics*, but I found out that I had been practicing them, but I didn’t know they had a label on them. So I found validation in that.” Because value congruity wasn’t a motivating factor to enter the program, the discovery of it had a powerful and positive impact on these students.

A small group of students shared experiences in which they felt their MSW education was challenging them to reevaluate and build on the personal values they came into the program with. One student described it this way: “I love the fact that I have become more open to seeing things through a different lens.” Other student felt they needed to more fully incorporate social work values into their day-to-day life. These students perceived strong congruity between personal and professional value systems but were struggling to enact some professional values in their personal life. One student shared her difficulty incorporating the value of social justice into her personal life:

I’m not good at standing up. I come from a family with verbal, racist, homophobes, so in my personal life, not so good at that; it’s exhausting. Definitely there’s some disconnect there because I choose not to struggle, to personally struggle, that will never go away.

*Value Incongruity*
As students entered and progressed through the MSW program, there were times when something they heard, read, or learned did not match with their personal values and/or their interpretation of social work values. For some students this incongruity arose when something happened within the program that they felt was in violation of social work values. One student recounted an incident that left her feeling “angry…confused…upset”. One of the topics discussed in her multiculturalism class was ageism and society’s treatment of older adults. As part of a class the professor showed a video about older adults, but the video was ended early because other students complained that it was “boring” and “dull”. The participant described her perception of other students’ attitudes as “we freaking hate old people; they’re slow”, and feeling that students like that should be expelled if they didn’t “get it [their own bias]”.

A different type of conflict arose when students felt there was incongruity between personal values and the values of the profession as they were being taught in classes. For one student, the conflict arose because,

In multicultural [class], [the professor] brought up a thought a couple of times, and it didn’t sit well with me because the way it was presented is like it was fact, and I very much don’t believe in that. I don’t believe that homosexuality is natural.

Based on religious beliefs, the student could not support issues such as same-sex marriage or adoption by same-sex partners. She described the experience of being in conflict as “difficult because sometimes I think it’s best to not be obvious by saying things. At the same time it’s hard because I don’t want anyone to think I believe those things, so it’s an internal struggle”.

It was not uncommon for students to encounter value incongruity at some point during their educational program, and they employed a variety of strategies to negotiate the incongruity.

*Negotiating Value Conflicts*
Students employed a variety of strategies for negotiating value conflicts. Students reported “resolving” the conflict in terms of progressing beyond the conflict, although this resolution did not necessarily mean that the conflict was gone. One strategy for negotiating the conflict was selective endorsement of social work values and compartmentalization of conflict. In this instance, the student would differentiate between circumstances when he or she could endorse a specific social work value and when he or she could not. For example

I feel like I’m here to get my education and do the best I can, and I’ll find the right fit for me when I’m all done. Do you know what I mean? There are some areas of social work that I won’t go into because it’s not a good fit for me according to my beliefs.

As one student asked, “If your beliefs match, that’s good, but if they don’t, who’s to say you can’t be a social worker?”

A second strategy for negotiating value conflicts was to try and remove the conflict by integrating the different value positions into a congruent whole. If the conflict could not be solved, the student moved forward with the issue set aside. For example, when faced with an incident from her multiculturalism class where the professor made the statement “people of color can’t be racist”, a student stated that she “really struggled with that. I tried to sit with it, to sit in it, but it didn’t feel right to me; it didn’t fit.” The difference between this strategy and the previous one is that in the second strategy the student acknowledged the conflict and attempted to resolve it by integrating it or rejecting it.

A third strategy for negotiating value conflicts was to view the conflict as external to the student. In this situation the student experienced conflict but not because of incongruity within themselves; instead, the student perceived conflict between social work values and the behavior and/or attitudes of others. Dealing with this type of conflict involved reaffirming the student’s
belief that his or her values were congruent with social work and that any incongruity existed with others. In some instances the student sought to resolve the conflict by educating others about the perceived incongruity between their behaviors and/or attitudes and social work values, while in other instances the student simply discounted his or her peers. The student in the story recounted above regarding the multicultural class on ageism explained her approach as “confrontational” and being willing to “call them on their stuff”; “if they don’t get it [power and privilege], they shouldn’t be here”. Another respondent said,

I really don’t think we should be allowed to practice social work without having at least some strive for social justice. That’s the main component of all the ethics; to not believe in that at all is just the opposite. That people think that’s okay is weird to me… I don’t want to have the same degree as that person.

Integration of Personal and Professional Identities

Both Archer (2000) and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) address the notion of identity integration in their works. From a critical realist perspective, Archer (2000) suggests the primacy of personal identity, and that the choice to commit to a social (i.e., professional) identity is made within the context of the individual’s personal values. Alternatively, Wenger et al. suggest that social (i.e., professional) identity develops through the process of becoming a part of a CoP. The idea of identity as both a personal construct and a professional construct was explored with students. Participants were asked to describe what these constructs meant to them and how they made sense of them in their own lives. The question “Are you a social worker?” was used to initiate a discussion about how integration occurs and is expressed.

Several students said that they hadn’t really thought about having different identities before, and they were encouraged to do so during the interview. “I hadn’t really thought of it as two separate things; I don’t know. I guess they’re the same, but maybe not.” Students’ responses
reveal glimpses of a multifaceted process of identity integration. Identity integration can yield multiple outcomes. “Integration” can be defined as the result of forming, coordinating, or blending into a functional or unified whole (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). One observed outcome was students adopting the label “social worker” to describe their professional selves; this outcome is labeled “integrated”. The second observed outcome was students not adopting the label “social worker” to describe their professional selves; this outcome is labeled “non-integrated”. The third observed outcome was students who felt they were in the process of acquiring a professional social work identity; this outcome was labeled “evolving”.

The concept of an integrated identity seemed pretty consistent for those students who fell into that category. For these students, it seemed that the professional label “fit” their self-conception of who they are and what they do. The idea of an integrated identity was expressed in an older student’s description of herself; “you know, in my spirit I think I’ve always been a social worker; I just didn’t have a name for it”. Similarly, one student stated “it’s not only the education that I can call myself a social worker, but that I’m very aligned with the ethics of social work”. Another student described how the educational process allowed her to become a social worker.

I’ve never really considered myself a social worker before I came to school here. I mean I can do social work, but am I a social worker? Helping people, changing communities, whatever. You can do that without having a social work degree. But going through the process of learning about social work and learning what all the other things are about, then I would identify, yes, this is a part of me.

The non-integrated identity outcome seemed to arise out of a variety of situations, but in each case the student was making a conscious decision to not adopt the “social worker” label. Some students believed that the title was counterproductive to the work they wanted to do, and
therefore not helpful in terms of a professional identity. One student, a young Latina woman, described it this way:

Eventually I won’t call myself a social worker, but I’ll always know I come from a social worker value system. I don’t think in my community, when I tell people I’m a social worker, they don’t get it. They think of those bastards at the welfare office. In my community it’s not something people will understand or see that way because they think of those people who have treated them like crap… If people understood the connection between activism and social work, then I would call myself a social worker; but I feel like I have to adapt anywhere I go.

A similar example shows the non-integrated identity outcome being chosen because the student did not believe the title adequately described his sense of self or his practice. This type of outcome was expressed in the story of a young, advanced standing, male student.

I have a hard time saying I’m a social worker. I don’t know what that’s about, I really don’t. Sometimes I say I work with kids with substance abuse issues and leave it at that. I really have a hard time, on the flip side of that, labeling myself as ‘this is who I am’ because of my profession. I don’t ever want to be tagged as just being a social worker. ‘I am this because I went to school for that.’

This choice to not adopt the social worker title seemed related to his own conceptualization of what it means to be a social worker. He framed it concisely when he said, “I came to this because of who I am… [but] social work is what I do, not who I am”.

A third student expressed this non-integration by also distinguishing between his personal self and his professional self. “I would say by profession I am a social worker. My training and degree will show that I’m a social worker, but I feel like I’m so much more than that.” For him, “social work” was just a name that applied to the things he cared about and believed in; the title wasn’t in and of itself relevant.
The evolving identity outcome was an option chosen by students who felt they could not integrate their personal and professional identities at the moment. This outcome appeared in two situations. The first situation involved students who felt they could not “claim” the professional identity until they completed their degree. In this sense, graduation represented, to use Wenger’s (1998) terminology, a shift from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation. A foundation year described her feelings this way:

There is a guiding set of standards that I don’t have yet. I think that I’m still in the process of coming to know myself as a social worker and learning a lot about things that sit with me or don’t sit with me. I don’t feel like I’m ready to be out in the world as a social worker. I feel like I still have a lot of training. The training is part of my MSW, so hopefully in a year I’ll feel ready.

The second situation involved a student who did not feel capable of maintaining both identities at the present time. When asked if she considered herself a social worker, she responded,

Sometimes I feel like I am; sometimes I feel like I’m not. I want to become one but I don’t feel like I’m there yet personally or professionally. When I reach a point personally where it’s doable, when I can do my personal life and professional life at the same time, when I can keep all those balls up in the air at the same time, then yes; right now I can’t.

The researcher doesn’t propose that one outcome is “better” than the other, or that one outcome should be viewed as “success” and the other as “failure”. Instead, emphasis should be placed on the dynamic process of identity integration and the agency exercised by students in choosing their own identities. Regardless of identity integration status, students expressed commitment to acting in a way that was consistent with their personal values and that was consistent with their interpretation of social work values. However, in instances when they were unable to fully integrate the two identities, their commitment to their personal values took primacy.
There are certain issues I don’t support; if I were told ‘you have to support this issue or you’ll be cut from social work,’ that would be extremely difficult. I would choose my religious belief; that’s my foundation. Being a social worker is part of who I am, but it’s not my foundation.

Cultural Contextualization

An additional question addressed in this study was how do issues of diversity and cultural identity influence students’ experiences of self, others, and the profession. Religion and spirituality played influential roles at multiple points in the identity integration model. The impact of religion and spirituality was demonstrated in multiple ways – as motivation, as value base, as conflict, as identity – and was expressed in both formal and informal ways. Religion and/or spirituality was present throughout students’ stories and is most notable as the source of students’ desire to help others, the common thread tying them all to social work. Even students who identified as atheist/agnostic or as having no specific religious affiliation evoked spirituality and the sense of connectedness to the larger world and universe as the underlying source of their desire to help others. Religion, though not spirituality, also produced value conflicts, specifically when a student felt social work values were at odds with his or her religious teachings. What is most notable here is that religion, spirituality, and social work were not viewed as antithetical, but in fact sharing many commonalities. That conflicts arise due to socially constructed and historically situated interpretations of abstract value systems should not be surprising.

The influence of other cultural identities, with the exception of age, was less well defined and instead formed a contextual lens through which students made sense of their experiences. The influence of cultural constructs like race, gender, social class, and orientation could not be delineated. Age seemed to express itself in two distinct ways. Perhaps unsurprisingly, age seemed to be of importance to older students. The use of “older” didn’t equate with a specific number but was instead used by participants to differentiate themselves from the larger group of
students who were typically single or partnered without children, under the age of 25, and had less professional experience.

Many of my peers are younger than me, and I sometimes feel that their values are less subtle. Some are becoming social workers as an "easy to get" private counseling degree and are not thinking so much about helping clients or changing the world.

Older students seemed to place different emphasis on the importance of helping others as a motivator for entering the program. Specifically, these students were all returning to school after careers in other fields, and their desire to help others within a professional context was juxtaposed against the types of jobs they’d had in the past.

I think being an older person and having a lot of my life already doing achievements and goals, and accomplishments, etc., in some respect, even though those achievements were great, they lacked a lot of inner connection with people that brings a lot of self-satisfaction. I thought what I’d like to do now, is be able to give my time and have a new more rewarding career.

Age also seemed to play a role was in identity integration. Older students revealed integrated identities, whereas younger students exhibited the range of identity types. One student stated:

You know, in my spirit I think I’ve always been a social worker; I just didn’t have a name for it. As I mentioned, I spent 27 years at [company], so I was done with that type of work. I started in this field because I was bored. I wasn’t planning on having another ‘job’ job. But when I started it really spoke to me. It … brought it full circle, brought it home to me. So, yes, at my spirit I have always been a social worker.

Discussion

This exploratory, qualitative study yielded results supporting previous research in this area, as well as suggesting a new model for understanding the complex relationships between personal and professional values, negotiating value conflicts, and integrating an identity
as a professional social worker. As depicted in Figure 1, the Personal and Professional Values Integration model can be conceptualized as three distinct but related components. The left hand side of the model, denoted “Motivation,” illustrates the different types of motivations that influenced students’ decisions to enter a MSW program. The importance of personal values and the congruence between personal and professional values as preconditions in the subscription to a social identity (i.e., social worker) are core components of Archer’s (2000/2003) social realist identity theory. That students chose to enter social work as a means of fulfilling their desire to help others is not a new finding; this study supports previous research in this area. What is new, however, is the situating of the desire to help others in a more complex constellation of motivations including the practicality of the MSW degree and the need for professional legitimacy developed through a formal learning trajectory (Wenger, 1998).

The second component of the model, “Evaluation and Negotiation,” develops out of the situated learning that occurs in the MSW program (Wenger, 1998). A substantial piece of the learning trajectory, and a necessary outcome for the social work profession, is the understanding and incorporation of the values and ethics of the profession in conjunction with adequate demonstration of these same values and ethics in practice (Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), 2008). Consistent with Archer’s (2003) theory on the primacy of personal identity over social identity, incongruence between personal and professional values must be negotiated before a student can integrate multiple identities.

The third component of the model, “Integration,” consists of the integration of personal and professional identities based on the outcomes of the previous evaluation and negotiation. Wenger et al. (2003) have suggested that the learning trajectory can result in a range of outcomes based on the CoP’s formal acceptance of the individual, which occurs with the awarding of the
MSW degree. Archer’s (2000/2003) social realist identity model suggests that integration of personal and social identity is more actively managed by the individual with social identity being remodeled as needed to match personal sense of self.

The emergent model linking motivations, value conflicts and the strategies used to negotiate them, and identity integration is original. Although it draws on the established, and presumably incongruent, theories of social realist identity development and the role of situated learning in identity formation, the model elicits new understanding by merging complementary components of these theories. The results of the study can guide the development of a typology of the different types of strategies used to negotiate value conflicts, as well as the categorization of the various identity integration outcomes.

Strengths and Limitations

Although the use of a small, purposive sample is not a limitation of the qualitative design in and of itself, it constrains the generalizability of the findings. Human experience is always culturally situated, and the potential impact of the socio-political climate of the school should be recognized even though it cannot be fully assessed from the data. While conflicts stemming from the intersection of personal and professional values are more likely to originate within the student, conflicts arising from relationships with peers, faculty, and practitioners will be shaped, and even caused, by the social environment in which they occur.

The relationships between researcher and participants may have been a strength or a weakness depending on the nature of the relationship and its effect on students’ perceptions of the research, the researcher, and themselves. The potential influence of social desirability is high, as some students may have attempted to meet the perceived expectations of the researcher.
regarding what constituted “correct” answers and/or avoid giving answers they believed would be judged as inappropriate or incorrect and consequently reflecting negatively on them. It is also a defensible claim that established relationships built on mutual trust and respect positively influenced students’ willingness to talk about their personal values and experiences in the program. Both implicit and explicit methods were used to assuage students’ concerns over confidentiality and privacy, negative outcomes, and academic repercussions.

Implications

Participants at the 2010 Social Work Congress voted on the key imperatives for developing “the next generation of social workers” and addressing “issues that challenge the fast-growing social work profession” (¶ 1). Under the imperative “recruitment”, goals include informing potential social workers about the social and economic value of the profession and promoting social work as a career option across the life span. Both of these goals are supported by the current research, which found that positively impacting society was a major draw to the profession, and that age and previous careers did not hinder older adults from entering the profession. It may be in the interest of the field to further assess the role of practicality in students’ decision to enter a MSW program. From a recruitment standpoint, attracting students because of the structure of the MSW program (i.e., only a 2-year program) and the flexibility of the degree may be a benefit to educational institutions seeking to increase enrollment and financial security. What is not known is if there is a relationship between practicality motivation and student outcomes. The research doesn’t address this issue, and, if judged to be an issue of interest, programs will need to measure this in some way.
The discourse on the role of value systems in the field of social work is becoming more intense and contentious. In an editorial in the *Washington Post*, George Will, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, accused schools of social work education of “indoctrination” because, “such programs mandate an ideological orthodoxy to which students must subscribe concerning ‘social justice’ and ‘oppression’ (10/14/07, p. B07); Will goes on to criticize social work programs for their “vocabulary of ‘progressive’ cant” and questions the legality of requiring students to adhere to the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) *Code of Ethics*. A handful of lawsuits over the past few years further illustrates the controversial nature of incongruent personal and professional values in social work (for more information see *Felkner vs. RIC; Brooks vs. Missouri State University; Keeton vs. Anderson-Wiley;* etc.), and groups like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE, [www.thefire.org](http://www.thefire.org)) and the National Association of Scholars (NAS, [www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org)) challenge the ethical guidelines of the profession.

The study reported in this article was neither designed nor analyzed and interpreted with the intent of establishing criteria for discerning students appropriate for social work practice from those who are not appropriate. The researcher doesn’t propose that one outcome is “better” than the other, or that one outcome should be viewed as “success” and the other as “failure”. Instead, emphasis should be placed on the dynamic process of identity integration and the agency exercised by students in choosing their own identities. The task accomplished in this study was revealing that encountering value incongruity was a common experience for students, and their strategies for navigating these conflicts may not always result in the development, demonstration, and promotion of social work values. Social work programs are encouraged to continue addressing the intersection of personal and professional values through the educational process, but also to consider the different types of value incongruity experienced by students, the
multiple strategies for resolving those conflicts, and the impact on students’ learning and future practice.

Numerous edicts within the CSWE 2008 EPAS address the importance of understanding the intersection of personal and professional values. By means of a social work education, students are meant to become practitioners who “recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice” (p.4). Curriculum that stops at recognition of personal values only addresses part of the educational goal. Strategies for managing value conflicts should be an integral part of any academic exploration of value systems. As revealed in the data from the current study, students are engaged in a dynamic process of both value and identity integration. Teaching and guiding students in the development of effective and appropriate strategies for handling conflicts are as important as teaching them to recognize these conflicts.

The field of social work is also collectively challenged to further explore the importance and role of professional identities in education and practice. The CSWE EPAS clearly highlights the adoption of the professional social worker identity as a desirable educational outcome. What does it mean to identify as a professional social worker? The results suggest that students differentiate between “being” a social worker and “doing” social work, and that there isn’t always overlap between the two. For example, is the student who will not support the goal of equal rights and economic and social justice for marginalized groups a “social worker”? Is he or she “doing” social work? Is there a field of practice that is unique to social work, and if so, what roles do personal and professional identities play?

Obtaining the MSW does not mean that a student will choose to identify as a social worker. Similarly, obtaining the MSW does not mean that a student supports and promotes the
values of the profession in his or her practice. Only by linking educational outcomes to practice outcomes can the field legitimately claim the title of “a value based profession” where the “constellation of core values reflects what is unique to the social work profession” (NASW, 1999, p. 1).

Areas for continued research include further exploration of the sources of value conflicts students experience and the types of strategies they use to negotiate these conflicts. A more complete understanding of the meaning of a “professional social worker identity” is necessary, including how the phrase is used in the CSWE EPAS, and how students, faculty, and practitioners interpret it for themselves. Educational outcome assessment in regards to practice is sorely needed; the current study doesn’t provide enough information about the role and impact of progress through the education process on conflict negotiation and identity integration. The flexibility of the EPAS should encourage social work educators to develop new and insightful methods for teaching and evaluating ability to recognize AND manage personal values.


NVIVO 8 qualitative data analysis program. QSR International Pty Ltd., Version 8.0.2, 2008.


Table 1

*Maximum Variation Sampling Frame*

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Table 2

*Semi-Structured Interview Protocol*

- Why are you pursuing a degree in social work?
- What is it about social work that attracted you in the first place?
- How would you describe the values of professional social work? Where do you think these values come from?
- How would you describe your personal values? Where do you think these values come from?
- Describe a situation in which you felt conflicted over a social work related decision you made.
- Describe a situation in which something you observed in the program conflicted with your personal values.
- Describe the political and social climate of your school. Do you believe your values are more similar to your peers or more different from them? Why?
- In what ways do you see your own values portrayed in your social work practice?
- In what ways do you see social work values portrayed in your day-to-day life?
- Define what each of these values means to you. Which of these values is most important to you? Why?
  - service
  - social justice
  - dignity and worth of the person
  - importance of human relationships
  - integrity
  - competence