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TAKING UP A SOCIAL WORK IDENTITY: PREPARING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS FOR ENTRY-LEVEL GENERALIST PRACTICE

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Résumé de l'article

Les étudiants de premier cycle qui ont peu ou pas d'experience en travail social vivent un processus de socialisation complexe. On attend d'eux qu'ils absorbent une variété de connaissances et de compétences qui sont acquises dans différents cours, puis qu'ils les intègrent ensemble dans une performance authentique en tant que travailleuse sociale ou travailleur social. En outre, les étudiants sont formés pour remettre en question leurs préjugés personnels et doivent apprendre à se situer socialement et à commencer à former leur propre cadre critique pour comprendre et répondre à l'influence des discours oppressifs sur les systèmes, structures, pratiques et expériences de tous les jours. Bien que le processus de socialisation soit essentiel au développement d'une identité professionnelle en travail social, les écrits sur l'enseignement du travail social décrivent peu les expériences des étudiants dans ce processus. En utilisant une démonstration d'intervention sur vidéo comme ressource pédagogique dans le cadre d'un cours de premier cycle sur l'intervention en protection de la jeunesse, cet article présente comment les étudiants se positionnent par rapport aux interventions et aux compétences montrées dans les interactions entre la travailleuse sociale et la personne qui utilise les services présentées dans la vidéo. Pour les besoins de cette étude pilote, nous avons utilisé une analyse de contenu qualitative pour générer une analyse descriptive des réponses écrites des étudiants après qu'ils aient visionné les interactions sur la vidéo. L'analyse de ces réponses a révélé que, bien que les étudiants aient été en mesure de nommer et de discuter des interventions qu'ils ont observées lors de la démonstration vidéo, ils ont également été confrontés à des interactions démontrant le conflit, la résistance et l'utilisation manifeste du pouvoir dans la relation entre l'intervenante et la personne recevant des services. Les résultats montrent qu'il est nécessaire de mieux comprendre comment les étudiants sont socialisés dans la profession et développent leur propre identité en tant que travailleuses sociales et travailleurs sociaux.

TAKING UP A SOCIAL WORK IDENTITY: PREPARING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS FOR ENTRY-LEVEL GENERALIST PRACTICE

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Abstract: Undergraduate students who are new to the social work profession enter into a complex socialization experience. New to the profession, they are expected to absorb a variety of knowledge and skills learned in separate courses and then integrate these together into an authentic performance as a social worker. Additionally, students are trained to confront personal bias and must learn to socially locate themselves and begin to form their own critical framework for understanding and responding to the influence of oppressive discourses on everyday systems, structures, practices, and experiences. Although the socialization process is essential to the development of a social work identity, there is little description in the social work education literature about students' experiences of that process. Through using a practice demonstration video as teaching-learning resource for an undergraduate child welfare practice course, this paper presents our effort to examine how students position themselves in relation to practices and skills shown in the social worker-service-user interactions on the video. For the purposes of this pilot study, we used qualitative content analysis to generate a descriptive analysis of students' written responses to viewing the video interactions. Analyses of these responses revealed that, although students were able to name and discuss the practices they observed through the video demonstration, they were also challenged by the interactions that demonstrated conflict, client resistance, and the overt use of power in the worker-service-user

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relationship. The results demonstrate the need for greater understanding of how students become socialized into the profession and develop their own unique identities as social workers.

Keywords: professional socialization, social work identity, social work education, social work practice, students, use of self, training

Abrégé : Les étudiants de premier cycle qui ont peu ou pas d'experience en travail social vivent un processus de socialisation complexe. On attend d'eux qu'ils absorbent une variété de connaissances et de compétences qui sont acquises dans différents cours, puis qu'ils les intègrent ensemble dans une performance authentique en tant que travailleuse sociale ou travailleur social. En outre, les étudiants sont formés pour remettre en question leurs préjugés personnels et doivent apprendre à se situer socialement et à commencer à former leur propre cadre critique pour comprendre et répondre à l'influence des discours oppressifs sur les systèmes, structures, pratiques et expériences de tous les jours. Bien que le processus de socialisation soit essentiel au développement d'une identité professionnelle en travail social, les écrits sur l'enseignement du travail social décrivent peu les expériences des étudiants dans ce processus. En utilisant une démonstration d'intervention sur vidéo comme ressource pédagogique dans le cadre d'un cours de premier cycle sur l'intervention en protection de la jeunesse, cet article présente comment les étudiants se positionnent par rapport aux interventions et aux compétences montrées dans les interactions entre la travailleuse sociale et la personne qui utilise les services présentées dans la vidéo. Pour les besoins de cette étude pilote, nous avons utilisé une analyse de contenu qualitative pour générer une analyse descriptive des réponses écrites des étudiants après qu'ils aient visionné les interactions sur la vidéo. L'analyse de ces réponses a révélé que, bien que les étudiants aient été en mesure de nommer et de discuter des interventions qu'ils ont observées lors de la démonstration vidéo, ils ont également été confrontés à des interactions démontrant le conflit, la résistance et l'utilisation manifeste du pouvoir dans la relation entre l'intervenante et la personne recevant des services. Les résultats montrent qu'il est nécessaire de mieux comprendre comment les étudiants sont socialisés dans la profession et développent leur propre identité en tant que travailleuses sociales et travailleurs sociaux.

Mots-clés: socialisation professionnelle, identité professionnelle en travail social, formation en travail social, pratique du travail social, étudiants, utilisation de soi, formation

UNDERGRADUATE SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS IN CANADA are tasked with the responsibility to ensure that Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students are prepared for generalist practice, which means that they

are ready to perform roles as professional social workers with diverse client groups and across a variety of practice contexts (Bogo et al., 2013; Dall'Alba, 2009; Janssen-Noordman et al., 2006). To this end, social work curricula are designed to teach fundamental values, knowledge, and skills. Students entering these programs are expected to integrate what they learn and demonstrate appropriate skills and professional attitudes in their field education experiences and future practice (Dall'Alba, 2009; Holoskonet al., 2010; Miller, 2010; Valutis et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2004; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). The inherent difficulty in this otherwise straightforward description of knowledge and skill acquisition is that the notion of becoming a member of any profession is not a smooth process, nor is it a linear path.

Students enter professional programs with their own established ways of being and knowing, which then must be integrated with the established traditions, norms, and histories of that profession (Dall'Alba, 2009). Students are learning relational and communication skills while simultaneously being invited into critical reflection as to how such skills, when applied in interactions with those they serve, are shaped and reshaped continuously by the socio-political discourses and corresponding structures that surround such interactions. Consequently, the subjectivities of those involved are under constant negotiation (Lay & McGuire, 2009). Taking up an identity as a social worker is complex, as students enter a profession that is not well defined (Miller, 2010) and in which the self is conceptualized as the main tool used in practice (Adamowich et al., 2014; Heydt & Sherman, 2005; Knight, 2012; Reupert, 2007). Yet students receive little direction as to how they should establish their own unique portrayal of that self in practice (Heydt & Sherman, 2005), and no guidance to manage the heightened emotions and conflict that can occur in practice situations (Barlow & Hall, 2007).

Although there are theoretical descriptions of professional socialization processes (see Bates et al., 2010; Miller, 2010, 2013), the experience of this from the point of view of students is rarely presented in the social work education literature (Barretti, 2004; Miller, 2010, 2013; Valutis et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2004). This paper presents our effort to support BSW students to better understand the nature and meaning of social work practice, and also our work to examine how students position themselves in relation to these practices toward forming a professional identity along with an appreciation of its unfolding across time and experience. To augment learning in a practice seminar course, we created a practice demonstration video. The video contains recorded interactions between two experienced child welfare workers and an actor hired to portray a mother involved with the child welfare system. One of the child welfare workers identifies as Indigenous, the other as White; these identities, though possibly signified for some students, were not brought into discussion in the videos. The actor playing the role of the mother

with child welfare system involvement identifies as White; however, her character's Whiteness was not brought into discussion in the video. This may represent a missed opportunity in the development of an otherwise rich practice scenario. As we continue to work with these resources (and perhaps produce others), (im)perceptions of Whiteness might serve well as a possible access point for further critically reflective engagement with students.

For the students, the video is a visual presentation of what social work students often ask for: descriptions of what practice looks like or what to say to service users (Gelman & Tosone, 2006; Heydt & Sherman, 2005; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Todd, 2012). For us, as professors, the video represents a medium to bring practice into the classroom. In using the video with students, we wanted to know how viewing a series of interviews between two experienced social workers and a service user might both expand their understanding of how basic practice skills are used in the context of practice situations, and also deepen their personal reflections on the value judgements indicated through the use of the demonstrated skills. We were particularly interested in whether these undergraduate students might recognize how the social justice values of the profession become realized or not in these interactions. The video offers many possible interpretations. Educators making use of such a video might engage their students in critical reflections with a variety of emphases to aid them in further understanding the development of their professional sense of self and their intentions toward making social justice values manifest in their practice, particularly as it might relate to their forging of a career in child welfare. The paper reports student responses to three reflective writing assignments that were used as data to examine their individual and collective reactions to the practice portrayals on the video.

Background Literature

Entry into a particular profession requires that students fully take up identities as members of that profession (Dall'Alba, 2009; Valutis et al., 2012). Viewed as a process, professional socialization initially occurs as individuals externally adopt the requirements of their chosen profession and then internally adjust their sense of self to become that professional role (Dall'Alba, 2009; Miller, 2010). The transformation process begins when students enter university-level programs and occurs as they experience the formal curriculum (conceptual material, practice skills, and values discussions) and the informal connections that they make with each other as well as their professors and field instructors (Holosko et al., 2010; Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012). The difficulty for students is that finding an identity as a social worker is complex. There is no formula or objective way to apply in practice situations the knowledges, skills, and attitudes that they learn in their university classroom experiences.

Indeed, the inherent complexity of social work practice—in which social workers have a taken-for-granted imperative to 'engage' service-users with diverse identities and with varied and challenging life circumstances—renders inadequate the idea of standardized or manualized application of theoretical knowledges and responses (Wilson & Kelly, 2010; Valutis et al., 2012). Perhaps even more problematic for students is that they are asked to integrate what they are learning and observing into their own existing knowledges—their common-sense understanding of how to engage others and their own lived experiences—so that their portrayal of their version of becoming and being a social worker is authentic and unique to each of them (Cheung, 2016; Evans & Harris, 2004; O'Leary et al., 2012). For some students, this often means they are negotiating their professional identity through a context of practice education that is, at times, reluctant to acknowledge the signifiers of the profession's Whiteness (Badwall, 2014).

New to the profession and practice, students want to know that their performance of their chosen professional role matches some outward expectation of that role (Bates et al., 2010; Eraut, 2000; Janssen-Noordman et al., 2006; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Consequently, students are concerned with the external requirements of the role and what can be described as the 'how' of practice, including learning basic practice skills and getting practice 'right' (Gelman & Tosone, 2006; Heydt & Sherman, 2005; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Todd, 2012).

As professors, we are also concerned that students learn basic practice skills and consider themselves at least minimally competent to enter a social service agency. We are also, however, greatly concerned with the 'why' of practice, and want students to critically reflect on their practice performance and decision-making so that how they practice is consistent with—or, perhaps more precisely, in dialogue with—the larger ideals that inform the value system of the profession. To bridge the gap between students' requests to have models of what happens in practice and to satisfy our need to discuss the deeper meaning and values invoked in practice, we developed a practice portrayal video as a teaching and learning resource that includes interactions between two experienced social workers and an actor portraying two service users. In using this resource, we wanted to explore what meanings students might find in the practice portrayals and examine how viewing these practice portrayals deepened the students' understanding of practice and challenged their emerging perceptions of being a social worker. For this investigation, we asked a group of 19 students in an upper-year child welfare practice course to provide written reflections both before and after viewing the different worker–service user interactions on the videos.

Methodology

Study Design

For this pilot study, we used a qualitative case study design with a series of solicited observations. Case study designs are not characterised by the choice of methods, but a focus on a particular case and what can be learned and understood about the particular case in its real-life context (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Bergen & While, 2000; Yin, 1981). For this study, the cases under study were the students' reflections on skills (required or observed) related to the video presentations used in the classroom. The BSW students were recruited to participate as they completed a supervised field practicum and within an integrative seminar course. We selected the approach to facilitate a less intrusive engagement with potential study participants appreciating how students already may feel observed in a typical classroom experience. Situating the inquiry within this typical class setting also allowed us to: 1) examine the individual and collective ways in which this group of BSW students would align their own understanding of social work practice as they viewed a demonstration of practice skills and worker–service user interaction on the video, and 2) report on these reflections as indicative of their emergent adoption of a social work identity. Course assignments were structured to serve both as summative course evaluation instruments and data collection tools for the study. There were no additional time obligations for the students who agreed to allow selective course assignments to be included as data for the study.

Recruitment

The study protocol received approval from the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board. Student participants were recruited from an upper-year undergraduate child welfare course. The course is taken by students as they complete the hours required for either their first or second field practicum experience. On the first day of the class, all 20 students were provided with a brief description of the study. To ensure that students did not feel coerced to participate, all communication with them about the research was completed by the first author, who was not the instructor for the course. They were informed that their participation in the research was separate from their participation in the course and that the instructor for the course (the second author) would not know whether any individual student had agreed or declined to participate until after final grade submissions and related grade appeal periods.

Participants

Of the 20 students registered in the class, 19 agreed to participate and signed consent forms. Other than two students who both reported that they had over 20 years of social service practice experience, most of the

students indicated that they had no or very little experience (less than two years). The majority of these students were young (average age was 26 years, with most students between the ages of 20 and 30 years), White (four students identified as non-White), and female (16 of the 19 students were female). This demographic description is representative of students in the BSW program at this university (mostly young, White, and female, with little prior practice experience). About half of the students were completing required hours for their first practicum, while the other half were finishing their final practicum before graduation. Twelve of the 19 students were completing hours in a child welfare placement. The other seven students were placed in a variety of other settings.

Data Collection

Video. To create the video, we brought together two experienced child welfare workers and a theatre student, who was hired to portray two different mothers involved with the child welfare system. The actor based her portrayal of the two mothers on reading anonymized qualitative interview transcripts from mothers about their experiences with the child welfare system (Hughes & Chau, 2013). One worker had over 30 years of social work experience from front-line practice to supervisory positions. She had also provided competency-based training for child welfare workers. The second worker had 15 years of experience working in front-line practice directly with high-risk families and youth, and is currently a child welfare worker.

Reflective Writing Assignments. The students who agreed to take part in the study completed reflective writing assignments that all students in the class were expected to complete. The assignments were written before and after the students watched the different interactions on the video. The students were also informed that, although there are practice standards, there is no single pathway to accomplishing a meaningful and ethical interview. Students were provided the time to write these reflection assignments during class time.

Data analysis

For each video interaction, we obtained hand-written reflections that varied from about two to four pages each. One student missed a class and did not provide a written reflection for the second video interaction. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze these written responses (Cho & Lee, 2014; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This method was chosen for this pilot study to provide an analysis of the qualitative data that focused on descriptive similarities and differences in the reflections participants provided. Following an in-depth read of the students' written reflections, a table was developed that listed condensed versions of the students' reflections written before they viewed each of the video interactions in one

column and their reflections written after viewing the video interactions in a second column. Using an inductive process that allowed meaning to emerge directly from the student reflections (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Vaismoradi et al., 2013), we focussed on shifts in understanding, noting where there were commonalities and differences across the students' reflections. We provide many quotations from the students' written reflections, which demonstrates the confirmability of the analysis by maintaining a link between the raw data and our derived interpretations (Morrow, 2005).

Results

First Video Interaction and Reflection

The first video interaction presents an initial meeting between a child welfare worker assigned to follow up, post-investigation, as she engages to build a relationship with a mother whose child has come into foster care. Prior to watching this first video interaction, the students were provided with a brief intake/summary sheet. They were asked to write about the skills that they might use to engage the mother and the issues that might need to be addressed in a first interview. In their reflections before viewing the video, all 19 students described using basic practice skills, such as active listening, empathic responses, and so on. They wrote about the use of these skills largely as techniques and in a manner that suggested that the simple use of the skills themselves would bring about connection and client disclosure. The following quotes are examples:

1) *It would be appropriate to have the right balance between asking paraphrasing/probing questions, while displaying adequate sensitivity to avoid or at least respond to triggering her.*
2) *I believe that some skills of engagement that would be useful in the interview include attending, summarizing, empathy, and relationship immediacy.*
3) *Exhibiting eye contact, head nods, short responses of empathetic understanding but all with appropriate moderation as not to overwhelm her but rather let her know you are listening.*

After viewing this first interaction, students were asked to write a reflection on how their perspective shifted after watching the interaction. Saliently, but without directly naming the concept of use of self, the students observed and wrote about the particular way in which the experienced worker used herself as a tool or instrument to engage the mother as a person involved in child welfare services (Heydt & Sherman, 2005; Knight, 2012; Reupert, 2007). They described how the worker "*approached the client as if she was her friend*" or made herself "*human.*" Other students described the worker as speaking "*realistically,*" "*clearly,*" and "*positively,*" and engaging in a "*purposeful conversation.*" In contrast, the students reflected back on their own first written descriptions

characterizing their earlier perceptions as "*too formal and authoritative*" and "*serious.*" The students also noted that, in their prior reflections, they wrote about the use of basic communication and practice skills as techniques to be applied in order to do counselling 'right,' rather than as a means to connect with this particular person. The quotations below are representative of these shifts in perspective:

1) *I think that before the video I thought that my little engagement tactics would be enough to get her to spill her heart out to me … I think that the biggest change in my perspective relates to the way the worker makes herself "human" to Jenny [mother character's name]. Instead of coming in like a "professional" or with power over her she immediately cracks jokes, relates to her, and personifies some of the experiences.*

2) *My perspective on engagement has shifted because I realized my approach was too formal and authoritative … The worker in the video, however, approached the client as if she was her friend; this was reflected by her language (swearing) and body language (open posture, gently touching the client during conversation).*

3) *I viewed attending as more of a way to provide therapy then to simply notice what she [the client] may feel.*

Reflecting on the role of a child welfare worker, most of the students observed that, in their first reflection before watching the video interaction, they had planned to separate the task of engagement or relationship-building from the requirement to ask parents intrusive and difficult questions about harm to their child. After watching this video interaction, they observed that the worker was able to maintain a careful balance between connecting with the mother and asking her questions about the bruises on her daughter, as would be required by a child welfare worker. The professional identity was perceived as an amalgam of relatability, engagement, and purposeful inquiry. Further classroom discussion prompted a rich examination of this realization, the efforts necessary to refine one's own balance of such factors, and the practice required to bring one's idealized professional persona into consistent performance.

Through these observations, the students first noted the overall approach that the experienced worker maintained toward the mother, which they described as acting "*as if she was her friend,*" being "*clear, honest and transparent,*" and through displaying warmth and empathy for the mother's situation (i.e. about her child's removal). The personal qualities of 'acting like a friend', which includes giving time; being flexible, supportive, and non-judgmental; and displaying kindness, warmth, and compassion have been reported as valued qualities in research with service users (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Beresford et al., 2008). Through these observations, the students also noted the particular strategies used by the worker, including being transparent about her role as a child welfare

worker, recognizing the mother as an important source of information about what had happened to the child, creating a common goal with the mother to have the child returned to her care, and offering to provide the mother with the notes taken during the interview. The following quotation is representative:

> *What I got from this or had missed in my own anticipatory reflection was the honest and transparent way the worker sought that info. She said, 'here is what I know—I'm assuming there are pieces to the story missing—and you can help me fill those in.' This allowed the worker to be honest, [and] try to show Jenny she wants to work together, it also allowed the worker to see how willing Jenny is to participate and how much she understands about the situation and how she is feeling about it.*

Although all of the students' responses overall were similar, a smaller number of students expressed some discomfort with the experienced workers' interactions. Three students described the approach as "*too informal*" and named the use of humor and profanity as "*not professional*," as demonstrated in this quotation:

> *I did not think much about the language I would use in the interview. The worker used a lot of slang and profanity in her interactions. I see some of it as very valuable such as simply talking about when a child was 'taken away' rather than apprehended or talking about who's 'watching the child' rather than a place of safety or foster home. I think that there must be a balance between being a representation of a profession and relating with how you speak.*

Another student agreed with the necessity of asking difficult questions noting the "*additional information gained by discussing these issues*," but then the student also stated that:

> *I had prepared only to discuss things as far as the client wanted to, whereas the worker in the video pushed the client and insisted she answer questions she was not comfortable with. This did not make me shift my perspective because it is not my personality to engage a client this way.*

In essence, this student may not yet have realized how actual practice may occasionally call for a differential use of self—one which may stir inner discomfort, but one which may also serve to secure the necessary and essential information for ethical decision making.

Second Video Interaction and Reflections

This second video interaction is similar to the one described above, in that it is an interview between a mother whose child has been removed from her care and a child welfare worker attempting to develop a plan for reunification. In this second practice portrayal, the mother is portrayed as

angry and resistant to accepting the recommendations of the worker. The students were shown part of the video interaction and then the remainder of the interaction. After each viewing, they were asked to write a reflection on possible areas of tensions between the worker and the mother.

After watching the initial part of the interaction, many of the students located the source of tension as the mother's resistance or defensiveness toward the worker, her mistrust of the child welfare system, and her anger at any suggestion that she had harmed her child. In viewing this interaction, the students recognized the worker's efforts in trying to work through the mother's resistance by listening to the mother's concerns and addressing these compassionately, validating her expressions of frustration, and not engaging in conflict with her. Indeed, this identification of the mother as the source of the tension directly emerged from the students' recognition of the many strategies and attempts that the experienced worker used to gain the mother's cooperation and the mother's resistance to these efforts, as shown in these quotations:

1) *The worker seemed to be trying to be a positive resource for Maria [mother character's name] and AJ [character's name for her child] but Maria may be unable to see the good that the worker is trying to do.*

2) *This frustrated Maria because it seemed she did not understand the reasoning for the gradual re-unification, although the worker was very good at describing the reasoning behind this process.*

3) *Maria blamed the agency for taking AJ away and insinuated that if AJ was not constantly smiling and happy, she would be taken away again. While this accusation likely came from frustration, it was unreasonable and derailed the conversation by making the worker explain that Maria's statement was unrealistic and unlikely. Overall, Maria did not seem willing to work with the worker to make a plan and seemed distrustful of the worker in general.*

4) *Maria seems to be having a difficult time moving past her resentment and focusing on what's best for AJ instead of what SHE [emphasis in original] wants. So, the worker has to address each of Maria's attempts to vent and try to get her to engage with moving forward.*

The readiness of the students to perceive the mother's resistance to the child welfare worker as somehow an unwanted or intervention-thwarting response may reveal the attachment of the students to a disempowerment discourse common in social work that encourages us to perceive the professional's perspective as 'just' and 'true' and the alternative perspectives as 'resistant' (Juhila et al., 2013; Mirick, 2012).

After viewing the second portion of this interaction, many of the students' written reflections remained uniform in describing the mother's resistance as the source of tension. There were a smaller number of responses, however, that offered recognition of the mother's perspective: stating that her resistance was likely "*common,*" "*understandable,*" or

"*natural*" for a parent who has had a child removed from her care. Such responses stated that the mother's response was understandable, given that "*she is likely to view the system as punitive and insensitive.*" One student's reflection began in a similar manner as the other students in stating that the mother took a "*pessimistic approach*" and noting that "*every case planning step*" the worker made, she needed to have a strong articulated justification prepared to "*convince Maria.*" Then, the student admitted the power inherent to the social work role—especially a child welfare role—and suggested that, because of this authority and mandate, child welfare workers need to think differently about the challenges posed by service users:

> *In hindsight, this seems like something all child welfare workers should do anyways because you are making decisions that change the structure of people's lives. If you're asking someone to only have weekend visits with their child, the client has every right to ask why. I just realized I had taken the attitude of "why doesn't she just listen" with Maria, reinforcing the idea that clients should be passive recipients of a child welfare worker's decisions.*

Third Video Interaction and Reflections

The final video interaction included the same actor portraying the same mother and the same experienced worker as in the second interaction above. This interaction was also shown to the students in two parts: one that portrayed the unnecessary escalation of conflict between the worker and the mother, and a second, which portrayed the de-escalation of that conflict. After viewing the first part of this interaction (the escalation of conflict), the students were asked to write a reflection noting the social worker's reactions and how these contributed to the escalation of the conflict. They were also asked to write about the approaches they might use to de-escalate the situation. After viewing the second part of this interaction (the de-escalation of conflict), the students were asked to write a reflection to contrast the worker's approach with their own prior reflection.

    After viewing the escalation of conflict, all of the students wrote that the worker had "*over-stepped her power*" or "*exerted her authority.*" To de-escalate the situation, all but two of the students clearly stated that they would apologize to the mother. Most of the students also stated that they would then try to engage the mother by attempting to create a common goal with her to keep the child safe and work collaboratively on the case plan to have the child returned to her care. Although almost all of the students overwhelmingly agreed that the worker needed to apologize, their written responses revealed different constructions of the meaning of the apology. Six of the students noted that the experienced worker not only apologized, but she also extended the apology further by describing

how she would regain the mother's trust through addressing the mother's concern, including ensuring that she would have visits with her daughter. These students noted that this extra step of discussing how trust would be regained made the apology more "*heartfelt*" and demonstrated the worker's "*intent*" and "*accountability*" to create this promised trust. Four other students also agreed with the need for the apology, but only to the extent that the worker expressed regret for her own behavior. Through their reflections, these students expressed discomfort with how much "*power*" the worker gave up describing the worker's approach as "*too compromising*," or "*too much on the side of the mother.*" As stated by one student, "*I do not think I would have said that AJ should not have been apprehended, as I think there is value in Maria recognizing her responsibility.*" These students were uncomfortable with an apology that suggested that other child welfare workers or the system may have been wrong, as shown in these two quotations:

1) *I wonder about her comment about agreeing with Maria that AJ shouldn't have been removed in the first place. I see the value in validating a client when they feel this way but it is also important to uphold agency bottom lines and explain them more clearly.*

2) *She also stated that she did not believe the child should have been taken from Maria, which I'm not sure I agree on in a de-escalating situation because it could be challenged and it undermines other people involved in the situation.*

These statements about being too flexible or accommodating likely also reflect the child welfare discourse of harmful parents and vulnerable children identified above (Juhila et al., 2013; Mirick, 2012). These responses are also consistent with the views of new social workers, who are more likely to have a rigid attachment to rules and procedures (Bates et al., 2010; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). The second reflection above includes a consideration of how blame reassignment by the worker may have been used to reestablish a working alliance with the mother, but at some cost. This 'splitting' tactic may have allowed the child welfare worker to separate themselves from another unidentified worker who presumably apprehended the mother's child, at least in the short term. This student saw a potential problem in such an action. In this reflection, the student appears to be taking up the multiple contexts of accountability for social workers relationally.

Limitations

The findings and analyses presented have to be interpreted cautiously, as these are based on a small number of students from one course. Further, the data that we collected and analyzed came from student assignments that were submitted to an instructor for grading. The authenticity of

these reflections is not clear, in that students may have provided written responses that they thought the instructor wanted to read (in order to obtain a higher mark), rather than genuine responses. Because the class size was small (20 students) and 19 agreed to take part in the research, we were unable to report the racial identification of the non-White students—a condition required by our institution's research ethics board—as this report could potentially identify them. Further, we also did not ask the students to explore how gender, race, social class, and other differences between social workers and service users might impact these interactions. As previously identified, this was a missed opportunity for the materials examined in this pilot study. Such discussions, however, were part of other class conversations and formative assignments.

Discussion

Salient in the students' reflections to the first video interaction was their collective conclusion that the idea of engagement or relationship-building with service users involves more than just knowing or employing the right set of skills. Without naming the concept directly, all of the students noted the experienced worker's use of self, which is at once an engagement requiring the use of basic practice skills and also an invocation of the personal qualities and 'humanness' of the social worker. This notion of the self as the tool or medium through which social workers engage in practice is described as central to social work practice (Adamowich et al., 2014; Mandell, 2008) and the development of a professional social work identity (Heydt & Sherman, 2005; Reupert, 2009; Sussman et al., 2014). The term "use of self," however, is a difficult concept in that it is described differently by different authors in the social work literature, and there are few descriptions of its use in practice. Through viewing the practice portrayal, all of the students recognized the possibility of both engaging and practicing collaboratively with a parent while also being able to ask difficult questions needed to fulfil the child welfare mandate (Forrester et al., 2008; Mirick, 2012). Of interest, the students collectively identified a common set of social work skills and interventions even as they individually positioned themselves differently in relation to the performance of these practice strategies, with some students stating that they would adopt the use of the approaches, and others stating that the approaches would not fit for them.

The students' responses to the second and third video interactions revealed a greater struggle between what they viewed in the practice interactions and their own understanding of social work practice and the profession. These last two portrayals were inherently more challenging than the first one, as these interactions demonstrated resistance and conflict within the social worker–service user relationship. Although there is research that suggests that students enter the profession with

some knowledge of the costs of being a social worker, they may also bring an idealistic image to their future role as a social worker (Miller, 2013), as well as what Freund et al. (2017) describe as a "rescue fantasy" (p. 652). In the final two video interactions, the actor portraying the mother is clearly resistant to what these students noted as practice strategies that were expected to be helpful (i.e. using empathetic responses and collaborating with the service users). This portrayal not only disrupts an idealistic image of being a social worker, but also presents a challenge to the development of a new identity as a social worker, which can be reliant on external feedback from others (Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012), especially the immediate confirmation that would come from compliant and thankful service users (Loseke & Cahill, 1986).

Although we did not directly ask the students to consider how their own social location or that of the two mothers being portrayed might impact and change their understanding of the observed interaction or how the higher ideals or social justice values of the profession might be activated in the interactions, most of the students also did not intrinsically provide this discussion through their written reflections. Overall, the majority of the reflections focused on the salient level of the performance of the specific practice skills and the utility of these strategies in bringing about certain ends, such as service user engagement or obtaining needed information for a child welfare investigation. Only a small number of students recognized that many parents will be resistant and angry, and that these emotions are a normal reaction to feeling powerless and fearful that one's child will be removed (Davies et al., 2007; de Boar & Coady, 2007); just one student was able to offer an alternative understanding of resistance that views service users as having the right to advocate for themselves and to challenge the decisions of social workers (Juhila et al., 2012; Mirick, 2012, 2014). Although the students did not directly write about the social justice values of the profession (importantly, this was not a direct writing prompt for the reflections used in the study), many of them did identify the power that a social worker holds, especially a child welfare worker, after viewing the second and third video interactions in which the parent actively resists the efforts of the experienced social worker. They wrote about particular practice strategies that can contribute toward a social justice–orientated practice through reducing or mitigating some of a social worker's power, including noticing the portrayed social worker offering to share notes generated during an interview, and their asking for the mother's perspective on the reported harm to her child. For example, the students noted the use of the apology as a skill in de-escalating the conflict, but they also acknowledged and individually differed in their reasoning about the values or motivations of the worker in offering the apology.

Implications for Social Work Education and Research

The process of professional socialization is described as crucial to students adopting and maintaining identities as members of a particular professional group (Freund et al., 2017; Miller, 2010; Weiss et al., 2004). Literature on professional socialization defines a developmental or process model to describe how students become transformed into experienced practitioners. Within these models, students new to a profession are described as novices and are depicted as relying on easily mastered and straightforward theoretical models and frameworks that can be applied to all service users and reliant on opportunities to observe others in the counsellor or therapist role to provide an external model of how to be a professional (Bates et al., 2010; Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). The socialization process toward the claiming of one's professional identity may be best described as emergent phenomena for social work students—one that is contextually negotiated and subject to regular revision. It may be that a sense of one's professional self comes into view first in the mind's eye prior to professional education, is revised through colleagial exchanges in the classroom and one's own engagement with relevant literatures, and then is continually refined in the field through practice. The videos create many possible openings for classroom discussion of professional practice and professional identity, both its initial formation and the need for its continual refinement. Asking students to reflect on and describe their reactions and interpretation of the practices portrayed on the videos provides the opportunity to uncover where students are located in the socialization process from novice to professional. As described above, much of the students' written reflections tended to focus on the perceptible level of the performance of the social worker and the practice skills portrayed in the video interactions, rather than on the values positions that informed the use of practices. Such a focus is not an omission by these students; the developmental models demonstrate that this preoccupation is expected and reflects the novice position. Knowing this position is informative for social work education in providing an understanding of students' needs as early or beginning members of the profession.

Our use of this practice portrayal is similar to other teaching strategies, including the use of vignettes, case studies, student-led roles plays, and simulated service users that are used and reported in the social work education literature (see for example Robbins et al., 2016). All of these strategies are a means to provide students with some experience and familiarity with the external and observable tasks and activities that are the markers of the professional role (Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2012). For students in BSW programs and new to the profession, observing how practice skills and strategies are preformed is crucial to their early development as social workers (Bates et al., 2010; Frost et al., 2013; Tham & Lynch, 2014). This

development is only the beginning, however, as students must also learn to recognize the value judgments invoked through the use of skills and strategies in action. To adequately prepare social work students for the complexity of practice requires that students not only learn to use a core set of skills, but also become cognizant that they are making judgments based on a complex set of knowledges and values that begin in their own experiences that is expanded through exposure to the multiple realities of people's lives and situations (Bogo et al., 2011; Robbins et al., 2016).

Conclusion

As a means to understand how students would interpret the practice portrayals on the practice demonstration video, we asked a group of 19 students to provide written reflections before and after viewing a set of practice demonstrations. We wanted to understand what the students would note as social work practice skills within the video demonstrations, and how the interactions between the workers and service users would reinforce or challenge their emerging notions of social work practice and the profession. Through their written reflections to all of three of the practice demonstrations, the students demonstrated that they were able to note and write about specific strategies used by the workers to engage, mitigate resistance, and de-escalate conflict. The students were also able to recognize how the self is activated and used in practice, which is how the discrete skills read about in practice texts and personal qualities of warmth, compassion, and friendliness are brought together into an authentic practice portrayal. Collectively, the students were challenged by the portrayal of difficult practice interactions that included service user resistance, conflict, and the overt use of power. More research is clearly needed to understand the nuances by which students come to both understand and internalize the entire set of knowledges, skills, and values of the social work profession.

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