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# Identifying and Challenging Social Work Students' Biases

Elizabeth A. Wahler

*All students have individual biases that can affect their judgment and ability to utilize professional values when interacting with marginalized groups in social work practice. While traditional cultural diversity courses often address racial/ethnic or sexual minorities, many students are biased against other groups that may not be included in social work curricula designed to address prejudice. This manuscript describes a four-step teaching method designed to provide students individualized assistance with self-identifying and challenging prejudicial beliefs and value systems. Steps include consciousness raising and identification of the targeted group, education, exposure, and self-reflection.*

*Keywords: Ethics and Values; Prejudice; Bias; Stereotype; Social Work Education; Teaching Professional Values*

## Introduction

Social workers interact regularly with people from a variety of backgrounds, life experiences, and cultures. It is the social worker's obligation to understand the client, despite differences in beliefs, values, or choices, and to empower them to make the best decisions for themselves. Sometimes, however, personal values can conflict with clients' lifestyles and problematic behaviors. In many cases, prejudicial beliefs are so ingrained that they are subconscious (Nicotera and Kang, 2009), and bringing them to consciousness is necessary to make objective decisions in practice. How do we help students examine their stereotypes and misconceptions about groups with whom they will be working?

The core values of social work, as stated in the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008), include respect for the dignity and worth of all people as demonstrated by awareness of diversity and honoring clients' right to self-determination based on their own personal needs and values. This social work core

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value is not specific to the United States, and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) *Statement of Principles* reflects similar values, also emphasizing social work's responsibility to 'respect and promote people's right to make their own choices and decisions, irrespective of their values and life decisions' (IFSW, 2004, §4.1). Although self-determination is limited in certain circumstances when clients are a serious danger to themselves or others, the profession is generally charged with respecting individuals' rights to make choices for themselves, even when they differ from the social workers' personal values and opinions.

Teaching students to reflect these professional core values is an important component of any social work undergraduate or graduate program. The accrediting body for US social work educational programs, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), emphasizes these same values throughout the required core competencies delineated in the *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (2010). The CSWE specifically requires the instruction of social work values and students' assimilation to them, stating in Educational Policy 2.1.2 that social workers should 'recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice' (CSWE, 2010, p. 4).

This is easier said than done, however, since all social work students come into the field with their own set of biases, prejudicial beliefs, and opinions as a result of upbringing and cultural or familial values. Many times these biases are not conscious, requiring students' self-awareness to uncover. This too is a goal of social work education, reflected in CSWE EPAS Policy 2.1.1 which requires social workers to 'practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development' (CSWE, 2010, p. 3).

This author teaches graduate-level social work courses at a large, public university in the southern United States. Recently, after discussing the core values of the profession in an introductory social work class, an in-class activity was assigned asking students to consider whether there were certain groups with whom their personal values might prevent them from reflecting social work values. The class was made up of students who were primarily female (89%) and White (83% White, 11% Black, and 6% Hispanic). Interestingly, all students except one identified at least one group with whom they would have difficulty working, and with the exception of gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) clients, *none of the groups identified were populations traditionally considered in cultural diversity curriculum*. Identified groups included addicts/alcoholics, domestic violence victims, women who had abortions or were considering abortions, and criminal offenders. The students indicated that their discomfort with the populations identified was due to ignorance about the social problems experienced by the group. They often misunderstood the 'choices' made by that particular group (i.e. domestic violence victims) without considering the various factors that prevent many clients from making better choices. Students also had religious, political, or familial beliefs that someone was doing something sinful or wrong (i.e. women considering abortions, criminal offenders, or substance abusers) that impacted their biases about these specific groups.

Many of the populations identified by the class will be frequent consumers of the social work services these students will provide after graduation. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to assist social work students with identifying and challenging personal prejudicial beliefs in a way that enables them to see each client as an individual and provide services to them without their personal values interfering. This paper will examine previous ways of intervening with prejudicial beliefs and values in social work, and will outline an innovative teaching approach to be implemented in social work education.

## Theoretical Approaches to Discrimination and Prejudice

There are many factors that impact prejudice and discrimination, including physical differences, established patterns and norms of interaction between various groups, media portrayal of groups, and direct exposure to one another (Oskamp, 2000). One common theoretical approach for understanding prejudice is social learning theory (Bandura, 1969). Bandura theorized that people learn because of environmental influences, and develop particular attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors as a result of modeling of those same attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors by someone close to them or images they have seen. Simply put, we learn what we see. Social learning is passive and happens without the learner necessarily being aware of it; feelings and thoughts from others are internalized after repeated exposure. This theory explains why many people have similar beliefs as their families of origin and friends, why students sometimes develop new attitudes and beliefs after being exposed to new influences, and also why perceptions of groups can be influenced by the portrayal of group members in the media (Bandura, 1969; Miller, 2010).

Intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998), another theoretical approach for understanding prejudice and discrimination, suggests that increased contact with individuals in other groups, more personalized relationships with individuals in other groups, and a view of the 'out group' as being relatively equal in status to the 'in group', can lower the level of prejudice toward members of minority groups (Pettigrew, 1998; Oskamp, 2000). This theory explains why people who have had personal relationships or friendships with people in different groups show less discrimination and bias towards members of those groups.

Traditional interventions for the reduction of prejudice have included attempting to influence social norms through organizational change and portrayal of intergroup relationships in mass media, and attempting to influence thoughts about minority groups through educational programs in workplaces and schools. Active processes, such as activities where interactions between groups are facilitated, tend to be more successful in promoting long-term attitudinal changes than passive processes, such as simply disseminating information about minority groups (Oskamp, 2000).

## Approaches to Reducing Discrimination in Social Work

Curricula in social work programs have been designed for challenging bias and stereotypes and addressing discrimination toward race/ethnicity, sexual orientation,

and mental illness, by improving overall awareness, understanding, and acceptance of diversity and individuals affected by social problems, such as substance abuse. Previous studies have explored the effectiveness of various teaching techniques to assist students with attitudinal and value changes. Some models have recommended a didactic approach (Bassett and Day, 2003) where information is provided during class, or an exposure approach (Eack and Newhill, 2008) where students' values and beliefs are challenged through interactions with people from populations they are biased against. Another experiential approach involves students participating in activities and assignments that encourage them to feel what it would be like to be in the targeted minority group (Caldwell, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2009; Loya and Cuevas, 2010). Some approaches combine several of these components into a single model to help students learn about specific minority groups as well as enabling them to meet actual people from those groups (Chonody *et al.*, 2009). One approach, the SOAP (Self and Other Awareness Project) model (Colvin-Burque *et al.*, 2007), incorporates an additional self-analysis component at the beginning and end of the model, while also including information and exposure.

Changing attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities have been examined more than attitudes toward any other specific groups in social work literature. Colvin-Burque *et al.*'s (2007) SOAP model was effective at increasing social work students' knowledge of white privilege and racial issues. Lee *et al.* (2009) found that a role-playing exercise helped students become more sympathetic and understanding of issues of power and privilege related to race. Loya and Cuevas (2010) used experiential activities to help students raise awareness of personal culture, and learn and reflect on social and racial inequality.

Social work students often have prejudices and biases against specific social problems as well as racial or ethnic minorities. Caldwell (2007) found that experiential activities helped students develop a more understanding and less judgmental attitude toward substance abusers. Students reflected on personal use of mood-altering activities and substances, including activities for enjoyment or relaxation, and abstained from those activities for a period of time to understand some of the dynamics of substance abuse and challenges faced by people with alcohol and drug problems (Caldwell, 2007).

Studies have also examined students' attitudes toward particular groups based on previous experiences, relationships, knowledge, and opinion of individuals in those groups. For instance, Swank and Raiz (2007) demonstrated that social work students reporting GLBT peers and friends, having friends not prejudiced against GLBT people, and believing that homosexuality was not a choice, were more likely to feel comfortable around GLBT individuals. Interestingly, learning about homosexuality in class was not associated with increased acceptance or decreased fear (Swank and Raiz, 2007). This seems to suggest that personal relationships with people different than the student are more important than information learned about those different groups.

Since values and beliefs are often implicit and escape self-examination, students often have difficulty identifying them unless they are challenged. Steiner *et al.* (2003)

indicate that a 'structured controversy' approach might be useful to teach students about minority issues. They discuss assigning students into groups debating controversial issues, such as interracial adoption, legalizing gay marriage, or providing bilingual Spanish/English classes in public schools, and requiring them to research and debate one side of the argument before switching sides to debate the other viewpoint. Almost all of the students indicated that these assignments increased knowledge and sensitivity toward minority groups (Steiner *et al.*, 2003), providing support for a combination informational/experiential model's potential effectiveness for reducing prejudice and discrimination.

Personal experiences with minority groups tend to be impactful. In a qualitative study by Petrovich and Lowe (2005) examining MSW students' and alumni's learning of cultural competence while in school, participants reported that they learned the most about groups of 'others' by exposure and relationship-building with members of the minority groups, or hearing their personal stories and experiences. Getting to know people different from themselves had one of the biggest perceived impacts on knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity toward other cultures or groups (Petrovich and Lowe, 2005). Eack and Newhill (2008) examined social work students' attitudes toward people with schizophrenia and found that contact with these individuals was the most important factor in students' comfort level with and knowledge about persons with severe mental illness.

A review of the extant literature on reducing discrimination and prejudice in social work indicates that all previous interventions used at the collegiate level incorporate didactic and exposure components into class structure to examine an assigned group/population. No methods presented in the literature asked students to actively self-reflect on issues or populations about which they may be biased, and none required students to think about social work values and analyze personal 'hot spots' where they would have difficulty reflecting social work values because of personal values, prejudices, or biases. Since self-reflection has had a positive impact on social work students' examination of values-based ethical issues (Swindell and Watson, 2006), this author proposes that self-reflection is also important for challenging bias and prejudice in general. This active process of self-reflection and consideration of specific groups or populations for each individual student could have a significant impact on changing beliefs, biases, and attitudes toward people different than them.

Another limitation of much of the existing literature was that the methods for addressing bias were used primarily in cultural diversity or elective courses, rather than foundation courses that all social work students are required to take. This author agrees with an assertion of Nicotera and Kang (2009) stating that activities designed to increase critical consciousness and awareness of implicit biases should be incorporated throughout social work educational programs and not just limited to cultural diversity or elective courses. All students should be exposed to coursework that challenges their existing biases and allows them to confront their own assumptions.

The following teaching method was developed to address these limitations, incorporating an active method to assist students' identification of groups with whom they hold the strongest biases; it also provides a model that can be integrated into

social work practice courses. This model fuses information, exposure, and experiential methods established to be useful in other studies with a self-reflection step. While originally devised for use in a practice course, the following four-step model is flexible enough for use in a variety of other courses such as cultural diversity or a social work ethics and values course.

**Teaching Method to Identify and Challenge Biases**

Social work programs need to help students identify values and reduce stereotyping or prejudice as early as possible, allowing them to work toward changing ideas and beliefs throughout the entire social work curriculum and identify potential biases that could affect practice before being placed in a practicum site. The proposed model includes four steps: (1) consciousness-raising in the beginning of the course; (2) information gathering; (3) exposure to the targeted group; and (4) a final self-reflection step at the end of the course.

Throughout the course structure, students are encouraged to discuss views with others who hold different opinions in order to critically examine thoughts and determine whether opinions are supported by facts and data or are based on assumptions (Osmo and Landau, 2001). A non-threatening, open environment should be created to allow for the exploration of personal values (Comerford, 2003), and instructors should encourage critical thinking and discussion of controversial issues (Fleck-Henderson and Melendez, 2009). When asked to fill out an anonymous evaluative survey mid-semester, students reported that 'very comfortable dynamics', and 'openness and nonjudgmental/respectful conversations' were the most positive aspects of the course and helped to facilitate learning. When asked what they thought was going particularly well, they stated 'I enjoy the open discussions during class because I have learned different viewpoints from you and classmates', and 'I love the discussions that we have in class. I think the best way to learn is just listening to other people and their viewpoints'. The continuing dialogue in class each week about values proved to be very beneficial for assisting students to identify and explore their beliefs.

Instructors need to be aware that while extremely constructive and applicable to real-world social work practice, conversations about diversity and differences can be threatening to students and emotionally laden, and should thus be handled cautiously and sensitively (Comerford, 2003). It can also be difficult for the instructor when students are expressing beliefs or opinions about groups of which the instructor might be a part (Nicotera and Kang, 2009), but allowing such discussion is necessary to assist students with understanding their biases and sources of those beliefs.

*Consciousness Raising*

Consciousness-raising is the most important step in this model, since it helps students identify the groups about whom they hold prejudiced beliefs. Consciousness of one's beliefs is the first step in changing values, beliefs, and subsequent behaviors, and reflection is particularly important when examining beliefs about human nature,

diversity, and behavior (Osmo, 2001; Comerford, 2003) to avoid discriminatory beliefs from affecting social workers' interventions with clients. Because social workers have the power to impact peoples' lives, it is of the utmost importance that beliefs, values, and opinions that guide actions are explicitly identified and critically examined to reduce the chances of acting out of prejudice or incorrect assumptions (Osmo and Landau, 2001).

Students should have opportunities throughout the educational process to explore personal experiences of privilege and oppression and to understand how those issues contribute to social problems on a regular basis (Nicotera and Kang, 2009). Students should also explore family and peer group influences on their values and beliefs (Comerford, 2003). Recognizing and identifying these implicit beliefs is key to being able to change them.

*Activities for step one*

To aid in consciousness-raising, students should identify a group(s) with which they are uncomfortable or fearful. First, to garner information about each student's specific group, instructors should ask students to identify groups with whom they might find professional values conflicting with their own personal values. If they identify more than one group, they should choose the one with which they are most uncomfortable. The group identified by the student will be referred to as the targeted group, and is the focus of the rest of the course activities. Students will write a brief statement of approximately one page, indicating the group they have chosen and the reasons why they would feel uncomfortable working with this group, and turn this in to the instructor.

The instructor then creates a composite list of all identified groups and hands it out to the class in the next meeting session. During this session, the class should spend approximately 30–45 minutes exploring stereotypes about each identified group as well as the basis and accuracy of these stereotypes. If there is not sufficient time to review stereotypes of all identified groups, the groups that the most students identified could be discussed. This activity enables students to begin to develop awareness about their own prejudicial beliefs, and also assists them in exploring stereotypes and assumptions about other groups they may not have readily identified. Because of the diverse nature of student groups, while some will naturally believe and 'buy into' some of the stereotypes, others present in the group will not. As students begin to challenge prejudicial beliefs, students holding those biases will ideally begin to question the validity of their personal opinions.

To prepare for the next step, students should complete a brief, out-of-class, self-reflective assignment to explore their family of origin and peer group's values, beliefs, and stereotypes regarding the targeted group, and note any differences or similarities between their social circle's ideas of the group and their own. For this exercise, students should answer questions similar to the following:

1. Think about your family of origin's influence on your personal values and beliefs about the targeted group. What beliefs about this group (religious, political, cultural, etc.) do you have in common with your family and what beliefs differ from them?
2. Now think about your friends' influence on your personal values and beliefs about this group. Do most of your friends have similar values and beliefs, or are they very different?
3. Think of stereotypes your family members or friends have about other types of people. Can you see the influence of these stereotypes on your own beliefs, and if so, how? If not, how did you avoid adopting those same stereotypes and beliefs or what influences changed those stereotypes or beliefs for you?

This activity allows students to think about the influence of familial, social, religious, and cultural beliefs on the ideas, thoughts, and beliefs they have about their targeted group. Approximately 15 minutes should be spent in the beginning of the third class session discussing what students learned about themselves during this activity.

*Information Gathering*

After each student has chosen their targeted group, they should be given several assignments to gather information about the population of interest. As established in the extant literature, information alone is not usually sufficient to change beliefs and opinions (Oskamp, 2000); however, information can be helpful to assist students with better understanding the experiences and oppression of the targeted group, as well as factors that contribute to development or sustainment of social problems for that particular group (Steiner *et al.*, 2003; Nicotera and Kang, 2009). Students may also begin to learn that because of discrimination, oppression, and social injustice, some individuals do not have the same level of choice that the students first thought. With GLBT populations, prejudice and discrimination decreased when choice to be GLBT was no longer attributed to the individual (Swank and Raiz, 2007), and this may carry over into other populations as well. When students look at information objectively, they will see that nobody 'chooses' to be an addict, to become pregnant and have an abortion, or to repeatedly be a victim of domestic violence, and there are other factors that impact members of these groups. Students also may learn that there are aspects of their own lives similar to those in the targeted group, such as when Caldwell (2007) assigned students to give up all mood-altering substances and behaviors, including activities they used for relaxation or social connection, as a way for students to understand similarities in their own lives to those of alcoholics and addicts. Understanding common experiences with someone in another group can help students begin to reduce discriminatory beliefs (Oskamp, 2000).

*Activities for step two*
In this step a literature review is assigned so that students can explore the various biopsychosocial factors that contribute to the development of, or the sustainment of,

social problems for the particular group. For example, if students identify GLBT individuals as their targeted group, then they will explore the existing research about biological explanations of homosexuality, the psychological effects of prejudice against homosexuality on GLBT individuals, and social factors that impact the group. While this is not meant to be a full literature review, students should examine at least five journal articles to begin to develop a sense of the complicated factors impacting individuals that are members of the targeted groups.

A second information-gathering assignment for this step involves students interviewing a social worker in an agency that serves the targeted group. The students should ask questions about the social worker's experience with the group, oppression or social issues that impact the group's ability to function at the optimum level, social stigma attached to the group, and the social worker's opinions about whether the stigma or public perception is justified. Although additional questions could be added to suit the needs of the class, they should include:

1. What type of population does this person work with?
2. Is the population they currently work with stigmatized in society in any way? If so, how?
3. What is the common perception of this population, and how does this social worker think the population differs from this perception? How is this population similar to the common perception?
4. What do the social workers wish they had known before beginning the job they have? Is there anything that would have helped them be better prepared for this job or this population?

After completing the interview assignment, students should turn in a two–three page summary of the interview. As part of this assignment, students should reflect on what they learned from this social worker, specifically discussing whether there were new or surprising facts they learned about the population. Learning about the targeted group through the eyes of a sympathetic and experienced social worker can help expand the students' knowledge of the social problems faced by group members. For instance, after interviewing a social worker providing substance abuse counseling to ex-offenders, one student stated:

> the more I learn about addiction and how most individuals who use drugs and alcohol are looking for a coping mechanism for some type of traumatic life event that they have been through, it gives me a whole other perspective when looking at this population.

The reflection assignment at the end of the information gathering step is also helpful for students to gain self-awareness about the basis of their belief systems. While interviewing a gerontological social worker and reflecting on what was learned, one student realized that her personal discomfort, fear, and prejudice toward elderly people stemmed from the unresolved loss of one of her grandparents.

*Exposure to Targeted Population*

The third step in the model is for students to be exposed to individuals in the targeted group. Previous studies have suggested that exposure to and engagement with different types of individuals can reduce bias and prejudice (Comerford, 2003; Swank and Raiz, 2007; Eack and Newhill, 2008; Chonody *et al.*, 2009). Exposure to the population and their social problem(s) can expand students' knowledge, elicit a compassionate response, and help them relate to people in the targeted group. While individuals in the targeted group might be different from them in some ways, there will be similarities that can be observed. It is easy to be judgmental and hold prejudicial beliefs when there is no personal experience with someone in the particular group.

*Activities for step three*

In this step, students visit an agency or group that provides services to the targeted population and interact with individuals served there. For example, if the targeted group is individuals with substance abuse problems, then students would observe a 12-step meeting or visit a treatment center. If allowed by school policy, this is not meant to be a passive visit; students should be encouraged to interview several individuals in the targeted group about their lives and experiences as a member of the targeted group and about the stigma or prejudice they have encountered.

Guest speakers may also be invited to class to discuss their personal experiences being in the specific groups. For example, a woman who has been a victim of domestic violence might come to class to discuss her personal history, how the relationship began, thoughts and perceptions while she was in the relationship, the attitudes of others while she was in the relationship, and her attempts to leave the relationship.

While some of these activities might be limited due to the amount of time available in the class, students should have at least one opportunity to interact with someone in their targeted group. Reflections of this interaction should be written in a one-page summary and turned in to the instructor.

*Final Self-Reflection*

Since this teaching method utilizes an active learning model, students must review what they have learned at the end of the semester. Not only should they reflect on lessons learned about the targeted population, but also things they have learned about themselves. Students should reflect on previously held values and beliefs, consider knowledge gained about the specific minority population, and ponder changes in their own attitudes toward the population.

*Activity for step four*

During the last week of class, students are asked to reflect on similarities or differences between their thoughts at the beginning of the course and thoughts at the end.

Students should consider changes made, differences in attitudes or opinions, knowledge learned, and specific aspects of what was learned that impacted their beliefs about the targeted group. Students should also reflect on attitudes or beliefs about other groups that may have changed as a result of hearing classmates sharing about their learning experiences. Overall, students have been receptive to the values examination that occurs in this class, and one student commented in an evaluation, 'If the purpose of this class is to challenge pre-conceived notions, that's definitely going well'.

### Conclusion

Prejudice and bias are dangerous if unidentified and unchecked in social work practice. While needing further study to evaluate its effectiveness, anecdotal evidence suggests that this teaching method does assist students with identifying and changing biased beliefs. Although there is currently no empirical evidence, shifts in student attitudes toward stigmatized groups were noted throughout the semester. For example, two students who held negative opinions of individuals with substance abuse problems at the beginning of the semester inquired about potential practicum opportunities in alcohol and drug treatment centers at the end of the semester because of interest in learning more about people with addictions. This suggests that these students developed a greater openness to understanding and working with addicts/alcoholics throughout the course, potentially as a result of the activities assigned. Also, all students were able to identify six biopsychosocial factors that contributed to the development or continuation of intimate partner victimization (IPV) at the end of the semester, as evidenced by their answers on a short writing assignment given on the last day of class. While IPV victims were the targeted group for only two students, the entire class appeared to gain a better understanding of this population as a result of the class discussion.

Although promising, this teaching method has several limitations. One is the time needed to adequately follow this pedagogical approach. While important to include material challenging prejudice throughout social work curricula, most courses have little room for additional assignments. While this method assists students with developing competency in two of the 10 areas required by CSWE, there are many other competencies for social work programs to address in limited time. Also, this method is lacking empirical data regarding effectiveness, and research needs to be conducted to examine outcomes and make comparisons with approaches already utilized in social work education. Lastly, even if this method is successful in changing some students' attitudes and biases, it is possible that all students will not benefit from this approach. Students who hold the strongest biases may be resistant to suggested activities, or may make little progress despite full participation in assigned activities and group discussion. Despite these limitations, this approach holds promise for helping students to self-reflect and lessen the influence of prejudicial beliefs.

Once students are aware of biases, understand issues affecting particular groups more fully, recognize effects of injustice and oppression, and experience personal

stories or relationships with people in the targeted groups, beliefs can change. Through the use of this teaching method, students learn how to monitor personal reactions to groups of people different from their own reference group. The activities associated with this model teach students that professional values must be examined and are essential to practice as a social worker. They are also shown how to self-correct and address problematic beliefs and values that allow for success in working with oppressed and disenfranchised groups—this ability will not only be helpful in their own practice but may help them later when they become supervisors of others.

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