A Place at the Table: The Struggle for Spiritual Diversity

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The social work profession has repeatedly expanded its understanding of diversity throughout its history. The incorporation of underrepresented voices, however, has not been without struggle. In this narrative, the author relates some of his efforts to foster the inclusion of spiritual and religious perspectives as well as the guiding principles that inform his efforts in this area. He also chronicles some of the resistance his attempts to widen the profession's understanding of diversity have sparked. The article concludes with reflections on the topic of spiritual inclusion, as well as suggestions that may be useful for other advocates of spiritual and religious diversity.

Social work has an important history of expanding its understanding of diversity to include populations that are underrepresented in the profession. While remaining focused upon people who are poor, the profession has successively stretched its understanding of reality to incorporate diverse voices, including those related to race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

The emphasis upon inclusion is important for a number of inter-related reasons associated with factors such as pedagogy, service provision, and social justice. Exposing students to the reality constructions of various populations is part of the educational process, helping to acclimatize them to an increasingly diverse society (Van Soest & Garcia, 2003). Effective service provision is generally predicated upon developing an understanding and appreciation of a population's narratives, preferably narratives written by members of the population (Ginsberg, 1999). As the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (2001) suggest, it is difficult to work with a particular group if one doesn't understand its norms and values. Similarly, the profession's belief in collaboration and participatory decision making suggests that, as a matter of social justice, voiceless groups should be actively sought and included in the profession's conversation (Wambach & Van Soest, 1997).

In effect, social work has successively pulled up a number of new chairs to the table, allowing previously voiceless populations an opportunity to share their perspectives and to participate in the construction of the profession's discourse. The ideal toward which we are striving, as Haynes and White (1999) stated, is a profession that represents the nation's underlying demographics. In other words, the demographics in the profession, including its administrative personnel, faculty, and students, should correspond with the demographics of the country.

As Wambach and Van Soest (1997) observed, however, attempts to expand diversity by including new voices are often met with resistance. The process of pulling new chairs up to the table often entails moving existing chairs to make room for new voices who may see the world differently. Since adding new groups to the discussion brings with it the potential of disrupting present power dynamics, opposition to the inclusion of new perspectives often develops (Guzzetta, 1996).

In this paper, I chronicle some of the resistance I have encountered in my own attempts to widen the profession's understanding of diversity in the area of spirituality and religion. My scholarship has been multidimensional, covering an array of issues ranging from measurement to substance use, from social justice to community practice.

A key component of my work, however, has been my efforts to underscore the need to incorporate the voices of spiritual minorities into the profession's discourse.

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge that my own work is built upon the pioneering efforts of numerous other academics. I am indebted to other scholars such as Amato-von Hemert (1994), Canda (1988), Cnaan (1997), Derezotes (1995), Sherdian and Bullis (1991), and many others. In many cases, these individuals have also faced significant resistance for their attempts to raise the profession's understanding of diversity to the next level. My story is possible only because theirs preceded mine in time.

Beginnings

My decision to focus on spirituality and religion was largely accidental, driven by unanticipated events that transpired during my MSW program. When I entered my master's program, I had no intention of pursuing an academic career. Like many others, my goal was to enter some form of direct practice, preferably serving disenfranchised populations.

During the course of my MSW program, however, a number of key instructors encouraged me to consider academia as an option. Spirituality and religion were woven into the fabric of the predominantly Hispanic culture that surrounded my university. At the micro level, clients raised spiritually related issues in counseling settings. At the macro level, federally funded drug prevention agencies employed spiritual interventions at the community level to reduce substance use.

In contrast to the rich spiritual vibrancy I encountered in the field, my textbooks were relatively devoid of spiritual and religious content. As my studies progressed, I increasingly wrestled with the intersection between social work and spirituality. Building upon whatever pre-existing work I could find, I attempted to develop new frameworks for

integrating spirituality and religion into social work practice in a manner that was respectful of the lived reality that existed in lives of individuals in the surrounding community.

A number of instructors commented positively upon these initial efforts. Perhaps due to my status as a first-born, their encouragement to continue my graduate studies played an instrumental role in my decision to pursue an academic career. With the help of often invaluable mentors, I refined my ideas during subsequent graduate and post-graduate work and sought to disseminate them in the larger social work arena.

Guiding Principles

Seeking to be as ethically grounded as possible, my work in the area of spiritual inclusion is based upon, and reflects, three primary sources: 1) the ethical principles enunciated in the *NASW Code of Ethics* (1999); 2) the constitutional rights listed in the *United States Constitution;* and 3) the human rights delineated in the United Nations (1948/1998) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Since these sources form the foundation for my work in the area of spiritual diversity, I will briefly review the relevant ethical principles and rights.

The NASW *Code of Ethics* (1999) lists four standards that explicitly mention religion (1.05c, 2.01b, 4.02 and 6.04d) and at least two standards that implicitly refer to religion (1.05a, 1.05b). In brief, the *Code of Ethics* calls on social workers to develop the necessary knowledge to engage in culturally competent, strengths-based practice, with people from different religious cultures (1.05a,b). Social workers are also enjoined to educate themselves about religious diversity and the oppression that religious groups experience (1.05c). In addition, the *Code* mandates a pro-active stance that reflects a commitment to social justice on behalf of people of faith. More specifically, social workers are instructed to work toward

preventing and eliminating religious discrimination against both individuals and faith groups (2.01b, 4.04, 6.04d).

The ethical principles discussed above are congruent with the rights delineated in the first amendment of the *United States Constitution*. Two clauses are perhaps most pertinent—the establishment clause, which prevents government from establishing a state-sponsored church or religion, and the free exercise clause, which prohibits laws designed to hinder the free exercise of religion. These clauses function to protect people of faith from various forms of discrimination by guaranteeing their rights to express their spirituality in an array of settings (Clinton, 1995; Esbeck, 1998; French, 2002; Hamburger, 2002; Paige, 2003). The establishment clause, for instance, ensures that instructors in state educational forums cannot impose a particular religion upon students. Similarly, the free exercise clause ensures that instructors cannot discriminate against content that contains spiritual themes.

At the international level, the United Nations (1948/1998) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* provides similar protections Although the *Declaration* addresses religion in a number of areas, the most relevant section is Article 18. Much like the free exercise clause provides a positive affirmation of the rights of spiritual believers, Article 18 sketches the contours of the concept of religious freedom. This article states that "everyone has the right to freedom of . . . religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance" (United Nations, 1948/1998, p. 18).

Working Toward Spiritual Inclusion

The fundamental point of my work in the area of spiritual inclusion is that the profession should treat people of faith in a manner that is consistent with the *Code of Ethics* and in keeping with the basic human rights listed in the *U.S. Constitution* and the United Nation's *Universal Declaration*. The Code of Ethics naturally serves as the primary basis for my work as a social worker. As implied above, however, my work is informed by other sources such as the free exercise clause and the *Declaration*. This stand is consistent with professional practice.

NASW (2003), for example, endorses the rights delineated in the *Declaration*. In addition, as an expression of social justice, NASW calls upon social workers to ensure that the basic rights delineated in the *Declaration* are respected across the globe. The *Declaration,* as well as the free exercise clause, assists social workers in understanding the parameters of human rights in the area of religion. These documents help social workers know what religious discrimination looks like as they seek to implement, for example, their social justice mandate to prevent and eliminate religious discrimination at local, national, and global levels (NASW Code of Ethics, 1999: 6.04).

Drawing from these documents, and the *Code of Ethics* in particular, I and other supporters of inclusion have called for an expansion of the profession's conceptualization of diversity. Key themes have included the importance of respecting client autonomy, including under-represented spiritual minorities in the profession, exposing practitioners to strengths-based narratives of various faith groups so that social workers can work with clients from those groups in a culturally competent manner, and eschewing religious discrimination manifested in, for example, attempts to exclude people based upon their religious beliefs.

Perhaps my most controversial work in this vein was inspired by a well-received article written by McMahon and Allen-Meares (1992) that appeared in *Social Work* entitled, "Is Social Work Racist? A Content

Analysis of Recent Literature." The content analysis conducted by these respected authors suggested that the profession still had room to grow in its treatment of racial minorities.

This article served as a rough template for my own article entitled, "Does Social Work Oppress Evangelical Christians? A New Class Analysis of Society and Social Work" (Hodge, 2002). Evangelical Christians, a term widely used to refer to Protestants who affirm traditional Christian beliefs, are the largest spiritual minority in the United States. Since some empirical data is available about this cultural group due its size, I used this population as a proxy for an array of likely under-represented faith groups for whom far less data exists. Standard, widely used, analytical tools were employed, such as a content analysis, neo-Marxist analysis of systematic power differentials between groups, and so forth. Theoretical frames and empirical data were used to illustrate that the profession had significant room to grow in its treatment of spiritual minorities. In other words, the article took the same basic analytical frameworks used in other areas of diversity (race and gender) and applied them in the area of spirituality and religion.

The key themes listed above were the central points of the article. For example, recognizing the importance of including narratives related to race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, I called for similar treatment for the narratives of people of faith.

I concluded the article by suggesting that social work had the potential to play a unique role in the face of an increasingly multicultural and conflicted society. More specifically, I called for the profession to become "a broker for peace" by modeling a milieu "in which all cultures can coexist in an atmosphere of mutual respect" (Hodge, 2002, p. 411).
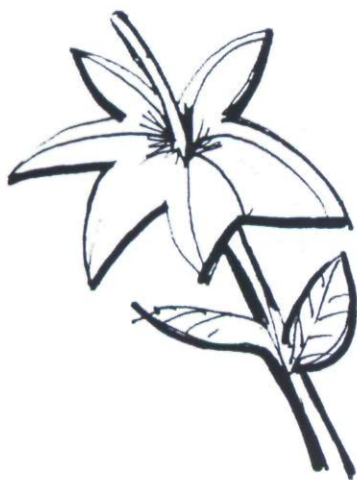
Encountering Resistance

Sadly, my articulation of these themes in various professional contexts has sparked significant opposition. It is also important to note that this opposition has by no means been uniform. Since entering the profession, I have continually encountered individuals who are sincerely committed to diversity. Indeed, I have had outstanding mentors, excellent instructors, and enjoyed many rich and rewarding relationships with my peers. Clearly, many if not most social workers are dedicated to an inclusive profession.

Concurrently, theory suggests that some with institutional power are likely to resist the inclusion of new voices. Wambach and Van Soest (1997) delineate a number of strategies that those with power use in an attempt to convince nonaligned actors that groups seeking a place at the table are unworthy of inclusion. Various strategies include humiliation, stereotyping, marginalization, and, where sufficient power exists, exclusion.

As various observers have noted, the dynamics are often subtle (Edelman, 1990; Gilligan, 1993; Gouldner, 1979; Kuhn, 1970). In many cases, actors do not consciously employ the strategies discussed above. Gilligan's (1993) work, for instance, illustrates how the exclusion of common female constructions of reality was not necessarily intentional. Rather the exclusion of female voices was the inevitable consequence of an academic environment dominated by males and their worldview.

If particular groups are not present at the table, then discourse is easily constructed in a manner that is unfavorable to those absent from the conversation. Without members of a group present to correct misperceptions, stereotypes, and other types of biases are easily formed and propagated, even by well-meaning people. Those in positions of power are often unaware of discriminatory patterns that become embedded in professionally dominant narratives.

Even in instances where actors consciously employ strategies designed to exclude, similar dynamics often exist (Edelman, 1990). In many instances, individuals sincerely believe they are doing the appropriate, morally correct action. As implied above, worldviews tend to be constructed to serve the interests of those in positions of power. The values of those with power are framed positively while the values of those without access to power are either ignored or framed negatively. These negative conceptualizations can become so widespread among dominant groups that they are mistaken for the "way things are." Widespread rationalizations, which serve to justify the exclusion of subordinate groups, develop. Individuals sincerely believe they are acting in the interests of some greater moral good while simultaneously employing strategies to disenfranchise minority voices.

As is the case with many others, I have experienced these strategies as I have attempted to expand the scope of diversity. Private communication has been publicly disseminated without my permission in an attempt to embarrass me. Similarly, some colleagues have refused to talk with me or to even acknowledge my salutations. Others have misrepresented my work, attempted to censor my views, and employed ad hominem attacks. Various efforts have been employed to sabotage my academic career, including pressuring administration personnel to rescind a job offer after I had accepted the position and begun to make plans to join the school.

One of the most powerful mechanisms for disenfranchising voices is to associate individuals and their work with disreputable groups and/or ideologies (Sayyid, 1997; Wambach & Van Soest, 1997). This strategy implicitly conveys the message that the minority voice is outside the bounds of legitimate discourse. Consequently, one is morally justified in excluding such minorities from participation at the table.

This approach was employed with the above-mentioned article I wrote, which called for the profession to act as a broker for peace by modeling the inclusion of all major cultural groups (Hodge, 2002). One academic, for example, took my support for a more open, inclusive profession and suggested to my Dean that I was advocating for fascism and "courses in the techniques of interrogation and social strategies for crushing dissent" (Personal email communication sent to my Dean, another faculty member, and me on 5/2/03). One educator wrote to *Social Work* to associate the theory I used with Hitler's *Mein Kampf* while another social worker suggested that the way to address the lack of inclusion I underscored was by creating a new DSM-IV classification and the subsequent administration of antipsychotic medication. In these latter two instances, the editors at *Social Work* decided to edit the letters in an attempt to raise the level of discourse. Nevertheless, I find it sadly ironic that an article contending some social workers lack sensitivity toward people of faith would engender such insensitive comments.

Since the academic literature plays an important role in shaping the profession's discourse (Cnaan, Wineburg & Boddie, 1999; Epstein, 2004), power is often exercised by members of dominant groups to suppress narratives that raise questions about the status quo and current power dynamics (Gouldner, 1979). As Wambach and Van Soest (1997) imply, various strategies are used to maintain invisibility, including exclusion, ghettoization, and tokenism. Exclusion refers to the process whereby disconfirming voices that question the presence of inequitable relationships are excluded from influential forums. Ghettoization refers to the process whereby disconfirming voices are relegated to separate, non-mainstream forums. Tokenism refers to the process in which disconfirming voices are allowed to appear occasionally in mainstream

forums. This token presence allows dominant groups to claim that alternative voices are included in the profession's discourse, thereby freeing them from having to address the underlying structural issues that perpetuate the ongoing exclusion.

Again, it is important to emphasize that these three processes—exclusion, ghettoization, and tokenism—are not necessary employed in an intentional manner. Perspectives that are congruent with dominant narratives tend to strike editors and reviewers as objective and reasonable (Gartner, 1996). Concurrently, minority perspectives that are unfamiliar are more likely to seem partial and ideological in tone (Kuhn, 1970). Research questions that reflect the interests of the dominant groups tend to be seen as important and valuable contributions, while research questions that reflect minority concerns tend to be seen as inconsequential and irrelevant to the advancement of the scientific project (Smith, 2000).

As might be expected, at least one study has found that some social workers unconsciously discriminate when assessing potential abstracts for publication, rating vignettes containing under-represented spiritual perspectives more unfavorably (Neumann, Thompson, & Woolley, 1992). Since I write widely on a number of issues, I have seen this dynamic played out repeatedly in the comments I receive from reviewers. When I submit manuscripts that address issues related to the inclusion of people of faith, reviewers often seem to evaluate my writing, methodological, and statistical skills less favorably. While I am the first to admit that my spelling and grammatical skills are not what they should be, it is interesting how these limitations seem to stand out to many reviewers when my manuscript addresses themes related to spiritual inclusion.

I have also experienced various instances of ghettoization, tokenism, and exclusion, although again, typically only when I address the issue of spiritual inclusion. Occasionally, I have been told that my work is inappropriate for mainstream social work journals and I should re-submit to non-mainstream specialty journals (ghettoization). On other occasions, I have been told that my research adds nothing to the literature since the subject has already been adequately addressed (tokenism). Sometimes reviewers even cite my own work as evidence that no further research on the subject is needed, even though my own work typically notes the limited scope of the existing research and emphasizes the need for more empirical work on the subject. Alternatively, I have had reviewers suggest that my research adds nothing to the literature because a vast amount of pre-existing work exists on the subject, although no studies are mentioned (a form of exclusion). Misrepresentations are common, as are methodology critiques. In one instance, reviewers simply refused to assess the manuscript after holding on to it for almost a year, even after receiving promptings from the editor.

Concurrently, I want to acknowledge that these experiences have not been universal. In numerous instances, I have had very positive interactions with reviewers and editors. Many reviewers have assessed my manuscripts fairly and provided helpful, constructive feedback. Indeed, I am deeply appreciative of the openness and support I have encountered among many editors and reviewers.

Reflections and Implications

From a quantitative perspective, it is essentially impossible to draw any conclusions based upon a sample size of one. Quantitative approaches, however, make a number of assumptions about the nature of reality that may not always be accurate (Lincoln & Guda, 2003; Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999). Qualitative approaches are based upon a different set of assumptions, which, in turn, often allow us to understand reality in a new light. Sometimes personal experience can be

instructive because it provides a new window through which to see the world in a way that quantitative methods are unable to offer. In keeping with this understanding, I sketch some reflections on the topic of spiritual inclusion and then offer some suggestions designed to foster a more inclusive professional milieu based upon my own experiences and relevant literature.

Is a Spiritually Inclusive Profession Possible?

Some have suggested to me that fostering a more inclusive profession is essentially impossible. According to this line of thought, expanding the scope of diversity is unlikely since groups with positions at the table often use their power to prevent or hinder the inclusion of new groups (Guzzetta, 1996). Those with power will not allow those who see the world differently to be seated at the table. Consequently, while ghettoization, and perhaps some degree of tokenism may be achievable or sustainable, full inclusion with the ability to participate in and shape discourse as an equal partner is not a feasible option. Those with the keys to the club simply won't let you in the door, let alone join the club as a full member with all the associated privileges.

In concert with theory, a number of voices support this perspective (Mohan, 2001; Ressler & Hodge, 1999; Ressler & Hodge, 2003). For instance, Mohan (2001) encountered significant harassment for his unsuccessful efforts to fight informal policies that excluded Jewish faculty candidates in one school of social work, including a ransacking of his office and threatening phone calls. Another faculty member at a different school informed me that prospective students who affirmed traditional religious beliefs were typically eliminated from the applicant pool under previous administrations. Similarly, Ressler (1998) chronicles the case of another school that implemented official policies which functioned to screen out prospective students

from a wide array of faith traditions based upon their religious beliefs. Although the efforts of the ACLU and other civil rights advocates were successful in overturning the policy (Ressler, 1998), it is difficult to calculate the costs in human suffering of such illegal policies.

In comparison to many individuals, I believe that my experience has been relatively positive. Nevertheless, my sojourn in the profession has not been without costs. Although growing up as an ethnic minority left me with some mental defenses against actions and remarks that are intended to be injurious, the ad hominem attacks, caustic remarks, and belittling comments have often left emotional wounds. The emotional scars, in tandem with the professional and personal losses, have often left me struggling with depression, at times so severe that I have been unable to communicate with my spouse or daughter. At a minimum, it seems likely that those that seek to advocate for inclusion will pay some type of professional or emotional costs.

Concurrently, I believe that reasons for hope exist. First, the profession has successfully wrestled with issues of inclusion before. If the profession can address unequal power relationships in the area of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, then there is reason to believe it can do so again in the area of spirituality and religion. In short, a successful track record of expanding diversity exists, which in turn portents hope for the future.

Related to this factor is the fact that social work is populated with many individuals who are committed to the diversity described in the *Code of Ethics* and affirm constitutional and human rights. Indeed, I have been encouraged by interactions I have had with numerous individuals over issues related to spiritual inclusion and discrimination. Even in situations where differences in perspectives exist, I have had many mutually respectful, intellectually stimulating conversations. These interactions help engender a sense of

optimism that it may be possible to develop a more inclusive profession.

In addition, growing recognition also exists that spirituality and religion are often fundamental dimensions of existence. For many individuals, spirituality functions in a manner analogous to race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation (Haynes, 2001). Consequently, the rationales for expanding diversity in these latter areas, which I mentioned in the introduction to this paper, also apply to spirituality and religion. For instance, in a society that includes increasing numbers of Muslims (Hodge, 2004a), and Hindus (Hodge, 2004b), it is critical to familiarize practitioners with the narratives of these groups (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice, 2001).

This latter point brings up perhaps the primary reward I have experienced. While those who advocate for inclusion will likely encounter some degree of hostility from dominant groups in the profession, it is also important to note that such efforts may also entail positive experiences. More specifically, I have received a number of letters from members of various faith groups expressing appreciation for giving voice to their concerns, for articulating their narratives in an unbiased manner. For example, one individual wrote to thank me for my article on Hinduism, noting that the manuscript was refreshingly free of western bias. Receiving feedback that I may be, at least in some small way, helping to create space in professional discourse for those who have been previously voiceless has been a significant source of encouragement.

Fostering a Spiritually Inclusive Profession

As society has become more diverse, I believe that it is critical that efforts be made to foster a more inclusive, representative profession. Perhaps the most important implication I have drawn as I have reflected upon the barriers that hinder the realization of

this goal is the central role that power plays in exclusion. Power has been referred to as the secular equivalent of the Christian concept of sin (Bowpitt, 2000), although I would be hesitant to posit that power is intrinsically oppressive. Power differentials between groups, however, do tend to foster oppression toward those with less access to power (Hamilton & Sharma, 1997). This tendency is particularly pronounced when a power differential is combined with some type of difference between the two groups in perspectives, worldviews, or some other type of identifying characteristic.

Equalizing power relationships is a key precept of anti-oppressive social work (Hamilton & Sharma, 1997). Until steps have been taken to equalize power disparities in the profession, it will be difficult to identify the full scope of the extant bias underrepresented faith groups experience (Wambach & Van Soest, 1997). As long as faith groups are underrepresented, then various strategies can be employed to silence or marginalize their voices.

Lack of appreciation for power differentials can lead to criticizing proponents of spiritual inclusion for failing to provide adequate empirical documentation of discrimination (Clark, 1994; Liechty, 2003). Such criticisms presume an equality of power relationships between various groups. They assume that underrepresented groups will have little difficulty making their voices heard in professional forums. As someone who has tried to document the bias people of faith encounter, I am well aware of the difficulties getting this type of research into mainstream forums. As Gilligan's (1993) work illustrates, until populations have a place at the table, appeals to academic research have little validity and can even reinforce discriminatory patterns in cases where the research is conducted by members of dominant groups.

Consequently, social workers might consider steps designed to equalize power

differentials in their spheres of respective influence. Although many methods can be employed to achieve this goal, priority might be given to demographics, since people actively construct the institutional structures that foster discriminatory dynamics. Ideally, in keeping with Haynes and White's (1999) comments, the demographics of our agencies, professional associations and faculties. should correspond to the appropriate demographic area. In other words, a local agency tasked with serving a particular geographic region should aim towards reflecting the spiritual/ religious demographics of that region. Similarly, a national professional association should aim to reflect the nation's demographics.

I believe that implementing these ideas will go a long ways toward creating a place at the table for faith groups. Building a more inclusive profession will be work. But for those of us committed to an inclusive profession in which diverse populations can sit down, learn from each other, and grow together, it is a goal worth striving for.

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