

Reflections on Teaching Orthodox Jewish Social Work Students from an Asian Educator

Donna S. Wang

Abstract: Many fundamental religious beliefs are often posited to be contrary to social work values and ethics. Although work has been done to develop acceptable balance and boundaries, mostly within the Christian faith, less conceptualization has been done with Orthodox Jewish social workers. My reflection describes both experiences and cognitive processes faced by me as an Asian social work educator teaching Orthodox Jews. Internal conflicts—as well as strategies for trust-building and honoring diversity—are discussed, with implications for social work education and practice offered.

Keywords: diversity, inclusion, religion, social work education, values

My first full-time academic appointment was with a Jewish-sponsored institution in New York City. Although the college was quite diverse, it largely served individuals who were Orthodox Jewish. Being from the Philadelphia area, I grew up with many people that were Jewish. I had several friends that were Jewish, I had been to synagogue and Jewish holiday celebrations and, at the time, I was in a seven-year-long relationship with a person who was Jewish. However, I had absolutely no exposure to or knowledge of Orthodox Judaism (not even in the movies!). It was a whole other “ball of wax” for me. When I took this job, many of my Jewish friends took time to explain aspects of Orthodox Judaism to me. I remember learning at that time that married women wore wigs or had their hair otherwise covered. I was quickly educated about the importance of certain Jewish holidays, the community, and the multifaceted role of the rabbi. For example, some people requested permission from their rabbis to attend college. I was very unfamiliar with many traditions, customs, and practices, but I found that I quickly adapted to working with them.

One thing I didn’t foresee was that I often found myself educating other people about my work. When friends and family found out that a large majority of my social work students were Orthodox Jewish, they were immediately intrigued. They asked several questions about my experiences: How do you handle (x)? What have you learned? How does this differ from teaching other students? Do they consider you an outsider? How do you earn their trust? These questions—and how often I was asked them by both non-observant Jews and others—are what prompted me to write this reflection, so that I may share my experiences with a larger audience. I hope that it is helpful to those working with individuals that are Orthodox or with other groups that may be culturally different from one’s self.

When I say “different,” I suppose I should describe where I come from first. I am second-generation American, with immigrant parents from Taiwan. I would categorize myself as liberal, both politically and personally. And although I strongly believe in universal interconnectedness, I highly value self-determination and individualization in terms of expression and choice. Some of these values and characteristics can highly conflict with Jewish

law. Abortion and homosexuality are not allowed within Orthodox communities. There are highly defined gender roles, norms, and expectations within Orthodox Jewish communities that may be perceived as limiting self-determination and free will. For example, generally, women and men are expected to marry at a very young age and immediately produce large families. And while legal, divorce can be frowned upon and difficult to obtain, especially if the husband does not approve.

It should be noted that some of these tenets are certainly not exclusive to Orthodox Jews and there are many other groups that also hold common values. Working with students with conservative views is not uncommon in social work, but perhaps more magnified with a population such as Orthodox Jews, especially since practitioners can be visibly identified.

Something guided me whenever I felt unsure or nervous about approaching a situation: a statement from a dear friend and colleague of mine, who happens to be an Orthodox Jew. He stated, “As humans, there are more commonalities that bind us than make us different.” The depth of the human experience is rich. We all inherently want to be happy, be loved, and do the right thing. With that as a basic foundation and understanding of human behavior, we can find various ways to relate to those we perceive as “different” and “separate” from us, recognizing that nothing is further from the truth.

Going In...

With any culture you are unfamiliar with, you want to get as much information as you can and try to prepare ahead of time. I asked numerous questions of my incoming colleagues regarding what was acceptable and what wasn't. I was receptive to any tips and suggestions that would help build trusting relationships. I was advised to not send emails on Friday night or Saturday due to the Sabbath. Though not required, I always wore clothing that covered my shoulders and my knees. Interestingly, this did not go unnoticed. I remember a parent of a student coming up to me after graduation to thank me, and to acknowledge that I always dressed in a way that was respectful to their culture (and I always earned points whenever they found out I make matzo ball soup on a regular basis!!).

Teaching has similarities with social work practice. It has been noted that some Orthodox women have expressed distrust of non-Orthodox social workers, while others have stated they would be willing to see one if that social worker was knowledgeable and sensitive to their lifestyles and values (Ringel, 2007). Thinking back, maybe they were accepting of me because I made many attempts to show that I respected and cared about their beliefs. Although I think I was successful in creating a trust that I respected their customs and values, I don't think I was (nor did I expect to be) fully “accepted.”

I recall one time I brought in pastries for the end of the semester. Although I could have just gone with some packaged baked goods from the grocery store with the Parve or Kosher symbols, I went out of my way to a special kosher bakery within the Orthodox community. (This, of course, cost more money and more time—even more so considering I didn't have a car then.) On the bakery package was a sticker indicating approval from certain rabbis. When I brought in the

pastries, many students just happily took from the box. There was one student, however, who wanted to check the sticker. In total honesty, I had several immediate internal reactions to this, most notably to take it personally that she did not trust me—*Does she think I'm stupid? Does she know how much work I went through to get these this morning?* This, of course, was most likely not the reality: She just felt the need to be reassured. From a social work standpoint, it was actually a way of building trust and, as a social worker, I should be relieved that I was able to meet her needs. This was my final assessment of the situation. The truth is, I would never fully understand Orthodox Jewish culture without growing up in it or being immersed in it. And although I respected their values and beliefs, I wouldn't choose some of them for myself (more on this later). So, I tried to be realistic about—and satisfied with—this semi-acceptance that would be sufficient to achieve our teaching and learning goals.

Getting Used to Culture

“There are some things you don't know, but you don't know it.” This is how I felt when I was working with an Orthodox student on her topic of “at-risk youth.” With my background as a juvenile probation officer, to me this meant youth who may be truant, abused, using substances, or involved in criminal activity. In conversing with this student, I approached her and her topic from this definition in mind. She kept looking at me strangely. After several minutes of a conversation that neither one of us was following, she finally stated: “When we say at-risk, we mean at-risk for leaving the community, which may include some of those behaviors, but not always.” I would call this a lightbulb moment for me, and it is one experience that really made me question my assumptions. I bit my tongue to not explain to her what the social work definition and literature was around at-risk youth, but instead silently agreed to share this term with her.

I was constantly surprised by some behaviors and hoped that I did not show it. For example, on a very hot day, I walked into the classroom to find one of the students standing on a windowsill trying to open a window. I laughed and said, “It certainly is a hot one today.” This student, who seemed to be on the less-conservative side, responded, “Oh, yes, it makes you want to make sure you are wearing as little clothes as possible.” I was somewhat intrigued to hear this, as Orthodox women wear long sleeves and pantyhose all year round and have their hair covered. My gut reaction was that her wish would be granted if she wasn't Orthodox, and I then read into it slightly: *Is she trying to tell me that she wishes that she wasn't Orthodox?* Reflecting on this, I realize that these were all my biases, and just an example of what I mentioned earlier: Some of their customs and traditions would not be what I would choose for myself.

As we know, it is all about exposure. Those growing up in New York City are quite familiar with Orthodox Jews. For me growing up outside of Philadelphia, seeing Amish people was common. I was very used to their dress and seeing their horse and buggies. I recall a few years ago a person newly exposed to the Amish commented, “They really dress differently, don't they?” Because I was so used to it, I never thought about it that way. I realized that this is also how it was for me with Orthodox Jews. At first, to me it was very “foreign,” however if I had been exposed to their way of dress at a younger age as I was the Amish, it would have been more in my frame of reference. I know this sounds simplistic, but for some reason this was a

profound realization for me.

Dealing with Sensitive Topics

When addressing sensitive topics, it is important to incorporate a value-sensitive approach. For example, I reassured students that I was not there to change their minds about certain issues, such as homosexuality. There were always signs of relief in the room when they realized that there was not going to be a philosophical debate or challenge. It was not about personal beliefs, but rather the profession's stance on the issues and how the students were required to suspend personal beliefs in order to show up for the client. Like all social workers, we must all check ourselves at the door and suspend any of our biases to work effectively with clients. This is the goal, and the competency that we need to work towards. Competency is also a core value of the profession's code of ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2017), and we need to ensure not that the students align with certain beliefs, but have skills to competently work with clients. This idea has been reinforced working with other conservative perspectives, such as the message to Christians to "love the sinner, hate the sin" (Chonody et al., 2013). Now, these value conflicts between personal and professional self are not exclusive to religious social workers. I can imagine, for example, that there are doctors who may experience some conflict between the medical code of ethics and their own values when treating a terminal patient. We must continue to teach students how to make ethical decisions based on ethical decision-making models.

With clients engaged in behaviors I might not necessarily agree with, one of my jobs is to educate the client, outlining the pros and cons and the consequences of said behaviors. However, ultimately, it is up to them to make the choice (remember, I value self-determination) and face any possible repercussions. For example, as social workers, it is our job to educate parents about the laws and norms of this country regarding corporal punishment and to provide alternate ways of parenting and parent education. We also try to work with the children to ensure a safety plan and coping mechanisms. However, if the parent does not accept this, barring any immediate harm, it is not the social worker's responsibility. Using ethno-cultural-religious factors as part of the therapeutic process is a value-sensitive approach (Sweifach & Heft-LaPorte, 2007). We need to acknowledge cultural norms. We need to respect that everyone around the client may have certain values or act in a certain way, and that going contrary to that way may result in challenges. From an ethical standpoint, we examine relevant personal, societal, agency, client, and professional values (Congress, 2000). For example, if a person was in a domestic violence situation, but did not want to disclose it because of expected shame from the community—like encouragement to stay in the relationship at all costs—the social worker would need to weigh the competing interests to determine the course of action. In a situation where domestic violence is disclosed by a client who is Orthodox, the social worker may consider the community's strong desire to keep the family together, but also must incorporate social work values and ethics to ensure safety and confidentiality. The social worker might need to address different issues than if the client was not Orthodox. When considering all dimensions involved, there may or may not be an ethical dilemma. I don't think that ethical dilemmas differ for this group, but there are different contexts and cultural factors to weigh.

As tough as this kind of realization is sometimes for social workers, this value-sensitive

approach ensures that the social worker does not attempt to promote change that is contrary to the client's beliefs, values, and community (Grodner & Sweifach, 2004). Further, it may actually help to strengthen their identity and belonging to their community (Grodner & Sweifach, 2004) in a way that is empowering. A person's values, religion, and beliefs can be a strength that social workers need to embrace and enhance.

Although value-sensitive approaches are necessary, we still want all social workers to engage in critical thinking and anti-oppressive practices. This presents a challenge for educators. Our goal of consciousness-raising, necessary for anti-oppressive practice, often comes into conflict with fundamentalist beliefs and values which demand adherence to strict guidelines that do not invite critical thinking (Todd & Coholic, 2007). This is perhaps one of the biggest challenges for all involved. I believe that this is why extreme Orthodox need permission from their rabbis to pursue a secular education: The rabbi wants to ensure that a person is strongly rooted enough in their faith to not possibly be swayed by alternative ways of thinking or processing information. To balance this, my approach has always been to leave the thinking to the student. I may introduce them to a concept or a topic—but I never personalize it. I made it external to them: “What if a client...?” Within these approaches and ways of thinking, the students were able to view the situations objectively. The critical thinking was left to them. If we engage students/clients in a process of reflection and questioning instead of telling them what to think, they are more likely to integrate anti-oppressive theory with their lives and practice (Todd & Coholic, 2007). For example, as a field liaison, I remember talking with a student who was placed in a school setting. She couldn't get past the idea that “children should be with their mothers.” I asked her, “What if this wasn't the safest place for them?” I believe she understood my point; I could see her struggle with the answer and I let her do so. I explored with her what it meant for her that families stay together at all costs. I didn't ask her for her final answer, but rather let it all germinate. I don't think she changed her mind that “children need their mothers,” but I do believe she was at least aware that there are other options. To me, this was progress. I believe the seed was planted; although she may not fully believe alternative solutions were acceptable, she learned that, at times, these solutions were at least an option.

So, this is where I leave it. I no longer live in New York City nor directly work with students that are Orthodox Jewish, but I am so grateful that I had this opportunity. I know there is so much more to do and so much more for me to develop in terms of my own teaching and cultural competence, and so these valuable experiences and lessons will serve me for the rest of my career. It ultimately made me a better educator with a deeper understanding of inclusion and more awareness and appreciation of cultural and religious diversity. But my ultimate lesson and realization from this experience is different than what I thought going in, which was that *this group is so different from me*. I learned my first day of my Human Behavior in the Social Environment course during my own MSW program that there is no difference between us and our clients. There are no “others.” I'd like to believe that the students I taught also learned more about who they might consider an “outsider” or an “other” through our classroom experience.

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About the Author: Donna S. Wang, PhD, LCSW is Professor, Springfield College, Springfield, MA (413-748-3054, dr.donnawang@gmail.com).