A Professor's Reflection: What the Pandemic is Teaching Us About the Importance of Deconstructing Professionalism

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Abstract: This narrative is an account of my experiences as a professor, teaching remotely during a pandemic. It addresses the impacts that COVID-19 has had on students, shifting how we prepare students to enter the helping professions. I incorporate my personal experiences of how I modified my teaching practices to support students, and in doing so, realized that the ways in which we have historically prepared students to enter the helping professions may no longer be applicable. This narrative examines professionalism and its usefulness for the social work profession, and how the pandemic has challenged us to consider the role of professionalism and how it may contribute to the inhibition of authentic engagement. This is a critical turning point for helping professions to examine outdated practices and explore incorporating inclusive practices that promote authenticity. This narrative discusses the need to deconstruct professionalism and promote the importance of authentic engagement.

Keywords: authentic engagement, helping professions, social work education, social work practice, use of self

The field practicum is a critical component of social work education. Through the practicum experience, students have the opportunity to apply learning, receive support and training, and enhance skills prior to entering the helping profession. In the fall of 2020, many students entered field practicums at a critical juncture as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to, course preparation focused primarily on face-to-face engagement. The ways in which students had been instructed to practice were no longer feasible due to the shift to virtual practice. None of the students received instruction on how to navigate sitting in the comfort of their home, gathering personal information from a client, and having their child, partner, family members, or pet roaming in sight. These students were looking forward to the hands-on practical experience of being in an office setting, or out in the community, shadowing other professionals and applying skills. They certainly were not anticipating that they would be navigating how to use practice skills in a remote environment, sitting in front of a computer screen, oftentimes without the guidance or support of their field practicum supervisor. During synchronous class sessions students expressed experiences of cognitive dissonance when attempting to maintain standards of professionalism and engage in the ways in which they had been taught. The engagement strategies of tuning into the physical space, paying attention to body language, and sensing what is occurring during the exchange were difficult for students to apply. They were confused by how much they should share about their own functioning and limited capacity. They recognized that they were significantly impacted by the effects of COVID, yet they had been trained to maintain a professional stance. Some students were able to pick up on the nuances of how to adjust in a remote setting, with the support of professors who were willing to name what was occurring, demonstrate vulnerability, and be transparent about the collective impact of COVID, rather than adhere to the status quo of maintaining distance between themselves and students. These experiences raised questions about how we as social work educators and practitioners are

teaching the next generation of helping professionals to engage in practice in a world that has forever been transformed by the effects of the pandemic.

It is a very challenging time to be entering the helping professions, while the world is experiencing collective trauma. This is a distinct experience that will significantly shape the next generation of helping professionals: those who are dedicated to being of service and committed to working with individuals, groups, families, communities, and organizations.

As a professor teaching the practice sequence of social work courses focused on individuals and families, groups, and communities and organizations, I had to adjust my teaching practices to incorporate the current experiences of students by modifying course content to take into consideration the importance of social work practice in the midst of a pandemic. I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to reflect on adjustments to my teaching practices while I am still in the process of shifting. I have found moments of solitude to reflect on how the pandemic is significantly changing the field of social work in particular and the helping professions in general. It is apparent that the pandemic has further illuminated some of the significant challenges within the profession of social work, one being the emphasis on professionalism. Remote learning is yet another example that highlights tensions that exist within the social work profession, beckoning us to seriously examine the implications of professionalism.

From a historical perspective, this is one of the few times in modern history that the "professional" and the "client" have been simultaneously impacted by a massive crisis, specifically COVID-19, creating conditions that are outside of their control, and significantly impacting their environment and way of life because the "professional" and the "client" are not able to escape the reality of COVID. Although the degree of impact may vary, it is felt collectively nonetheless. This raises a critical question. Does professionalism prevent students from engaging in deeper work and has professionalism been used as a mechanism for differentiating roles and maintaining distance? These are thoughts that I pondered as a professor, as I witnessed students grapple with what it means to be a social worker during a pandemic and the role that professionalism plays during such challenging times.

Over the past few decades there have been many calls to reform and or abolish social work, citing concerns regarding sustainability of the profession given its current path of professionalization and the challenges with carrying out its stated core standards and principles (see Maylea, 2021). One of the ongoing concerns is the professionalization of social work. Professionalism has various meanings and interpretations. In the United States, professionalism is usually accepted as a set of standards in which one is expected to act. However, these standards are often perceived as a function of the dominant culture that lack an understanding and integration of diverse perspectives, both for those providing and receiving services. Professionalism at its core is rooted in Whiteness. Reisch (2013) asserts that the master narrative of social work as a profession requires that experts establish control, while devaluing the wisdom of clients and constituents. This perspective reinforces a hierarchal approach to engagement that has been accepted as the norm and embedded within the culture of social work practice, and completely ignores alternative perspectives, such as communal and egalitarian approaches. The master narrative contributes to the profession's ideas about values, conceptions

of service users, and a process for including or excluding ideas, beliefs, and assumptions (Reisch, 2013). Dominelli (1996) notes that as social work shifted to embrace the ideals of professionalization, many social workers sought user-friendly and empowering forms of practice rooted in non-elitist professionalism. This master narrative has long been a concern for social workers. How does the way in which professionalism functions take into consideration cultural differences? What does it mean to be professional? Are there universal standards and principles? Who determines what is professional? What happens if you do not operate in a professional manner? These are all questions that I considered as a social work student, then practitioner, and once again as an educator preparing the next generation of social workers to enter the field.

During my time as a student, the concept of professionalism never resonated with me. The principles were never clearly defined, and I never fully understood its purpose. It is absolutely important for each profession, especially helping professions, to have ethical standards and principles for practice, but professionalism is more nuanced. There are subtle implications that are often open to the interpretation of those involved in an interaction. We filter our interactions and experiences through our worldview, applying our understanding and meaning to experiences. With professionalism rooted in Whiteness, there is an explicit exclusion of other perspectives of engagement.

Early on in my career, I encountered internal challenges as I established my identity as a Black social worker. There were times when I doubted myself, questioned my skills, and overcompensated by code switching and attempting to adhere to the dominant culture's standards of practice. My understanding of professionalism translated to being on time, dressing in a particular manner (looking presentable), being mindful of my hairstyle (at times questioning wearing an afro), being prepared, minimizing emotional reactions and human connection (particularly with colleagues), carefully selecting my words, and essentially denying aspects of my being.

My interpretation of professionalism was that it was always code for "acting White"—espousing linear and individualistic concepts that were in direct opposition to my circular and communal worldview and cultural norms (see Stewart, 2022). My style of engagement as a practitioner was consistent with how Black social workers practiced prior to the establishment of social work as a profession. Many Black social workers lived in the same communities as the people they served (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017). This proximity was considered an advantage as it allowed Black social workers to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges experienced by members of their community. Bent-Goodley et al. (2017) indicate that historically "the social, physical, and economic distance between the workers and the clients was often minimal" in the Black community (p. 22). Unfortunately, this approach to social work practice is not widely embraced, and many students are never exposed to other approaches, and instead are encouraged to adhere to the dominant culture's standards of practice.

As a Black woman, I understood the implications of this construct, and that inevitably I would encounter experiences of professionalism as a form of gatekeeping once I entered the field of social work. As I gained more experience and confidence in my skills, I began to push back on standards of practice that were not culturally responsive and speak out about equity, bringing

these matters to the attention of administrators and engaging in dialogue about how to improve practices. I also took risks.

As a new employee at an organization I was asked to consider a special assignment due to my prior skills, with the agreement of a modified caseload. I quickly realized that I was duplicating work. I brought this to the attention of my supervisor, who applauded my efforts, but overlooked my concern that the assignment was not sustainable. After much debate, I decided that I was not willing to sacrifice my mental wellness and submitted my letter of resignation. There was an urgent meeting called with the director of the department and after much negotiation, I agreed to remain in my role, while being relieved of the duties of the special assignment.

This experience was a critical turning point for me. I felt empowered. I had initiated the change by taking a stance to address the situation and either way, the outcome would have been in my favor. I realized that I had been hesitant to speak up for myself. I was more concerned with being an efficient worker and proving that I could handle the assignment—after all, I had the skills to do so. I had suppressed my needs, compromised the quality of my work, and jeopardized my authentic self. These approaches did not support me in practicing in an authentic manner and I was not interested in dehumanizing myself for the sake of appearing professional or maintaining a position. I felt like I was being asked to choose between authenticity and professionalism. I chose authenticity.

There is definitely a distinction between professionalism and maintaining healthy boundaries when working with individuals, families, and communities. As a professor I have observed that some students get stuck trying to enact standards of professionalism. They strive to adhere to a script rather than allowing natural exchanges to occur in their interactions or embracing an authentic expression of themselves. I see students minimizing their personality, which often leads to them appearing stoic and disingenuous. It is a very confusing message to send to helping professionals who work primarily with people and are heavily influenced by human behaviors and patterns. Although I was conscious of not adhering to standards of professionalism in the ways in which I was taught as a social work student, or the ways in which I interpreted its meaning, there was still a subconscious narrative (the master narrative) unfolding for me and my role as a professor. A subtle narrative of me versus them, a sort of distancing that I perceived as necessary based on my role and what I had been conditioned to believe about the exchange between the professor and the student. Although the opposite experience was modeled through my interactions with my professors as an undergraduate student at a Historically Black University, I was still heavily influenced by the dominant narrative. The act of distancing allowed me to function in a way that felt comfortable and less vulnerable.

In relation to social work practice, Dominelli (1996) highlights a similar notion of detachment, as a seemingly favorable approach for the professionalism of the practitioner. I did not become consciously aware of the subtle influences of professionalism until the pandemic disrupted my flow of teaching, prompting me to examine my style of engagement with students and dismantle the subtleties of professionalism that I had previously maintained.

It was an expedited shift that occurred without much thought. So many of us, professors and students, made a quick transition during the onset of the pandemic. Although the crisis has proven to be more long-term than initially understood, extending beyond a year of remote learning for many institutions, there have been moments to reflect on the current impacts of the crisis and the potential long-term effects.

What I learned in spring 2020 is that my perception of me (professor) versus them (students) was false. This perception suddenly morphed into the collective we. Seemingly overnight my household, my family, and my personal life were thrust into the classroom. This initially felt very uncomfortable, as my process of deciding when and how I introduced aspects of myself collided with the loss of the physical classroom. I quickly learned that the notion of distance would be a barrier if I continued to resist the opportunity to explore other ways of engagement. I decided to embrace a communal approach, similar to what felt more natural when I was a social work student. This shift was necessary, and I no longer worried about maintaining professionalism or engaging in acts such as minimizing interruptions, shushing my children while I was teaching class, strategically positioning myself in my house where students could not see into my home, or worrying about maintaining a certain energy level to perform well.

This shift was not only specific to my engagement with students, but also colleagues and community partners. I had to question what was driving those automatic responses that were creating more stress and anxiety. There was an aspect of wanting to present as if I had it all together, that I knew what I was doing, and that I had everything under control. Once again, I examined the programming of professionalism.

I draw from my own experiences as examples of how those of us in the helping professions can begin to critique how we train students to engage with others and question the role and usefulness of professionalism. I continue to ponder the messages we send to students.

It is definitely time to deconstruct professionalism and examine whether it serves a constructive purpose in the helping professions. We teach students skills to conduct assessments, gathering the most personal information from others, asking others to trust us and be vulnerable with intimate aspects of their lives, yet we also teach students to limit what they offer of themselves in return. All for the sake of maintaining a professional stance. I often share with students that individuals are equally skilled at reading us and our energy. In essence, they are assessing us too. Genuineness, authenticity, and trustworthiness are often qualities that are being evaluated. Individuals who have prior history interfacing with helping professionals may have experiences of not getting their needs met or feeling deceived, and these are times when individuals should be met with authenticity and trustworthiness, not professionalism. I encourage students to share more of themselves, taking into consideration the importance of discretion, and ensuring that what they share is helpful for the client and the relationship, and not serving their individual needs. Although most individuals are engaging with helping professionals to address a need or receive a service, there is also value in acknowledging shared experiences.

Since spring 2020, I have also seen the shattering of professionalism among colleagues in the helping professions. The shift from in-person to remote engagement has impacted people on

varying levels. It has been interesting to observe the adjustment. Some seem more lax and at ease, while others appear to struggle with embracing a shift in communication and engagement styles. On some level there has been some recognition of how adaptability looks differently for everyone, and as a result, there has been more emphasis on the importance of being comfortable, and less evaluation of how people show up. This sends a message of not having to be "on," which is often associated with professionalism.

I am also cognizant that for others, as a result of factors such as racism, sexism, and classism, the stakes remain high and there may be a need to maintain aspects of professionalism for one's own sense of safety and comfort. It may be risky for some to engage as their authentic selves, especially in environments where professionalism is the norm, and it is unclear whether one is explicitly or implicitly being evaluated by standards of professionalism. There is so much that we have gained from our collective pivot as a result of the pandemic.

There is also the realization that the ways in which we have previously functioned will never be the same. Although there may be a strong desire to go back to business as usual, and there are those who will attempt to maintain this status in the midst of a crisis, we cannot dismiss the massive impacts of COVID-19. So much has been lost, yet in our ability to adapt, new perspectives are emerging. These are perspectives that may not have been made possible had we not experienced this collective shift. "How can helping professions maintain their core values, principles, and the integrity of the profession while massive change is occurring?" is the question. I propose that we consider authentic engagement.

During the initial transition from in-person to remote teaching, I struggled with wanting to deliver course content efficiently. I had never taught remotely, and like so many other professors, I did not receive any training on how to do so. I was forced into a new environment, expected to excel, without any support. There was not a transitional phase. In that moment I had to figure it all out.

I found my anxiety increasing as time passed. I experienced psychosomatic symptoms and difficulty sleeping on nights prior to teaching classes. I was exhausted and needed to change my approach, or I would not be able to sustain through the year. I decided to share with students how difficult it was for me to show up week after week.

Students were surprised by my confession. Some noted how I seemed to have it all together, more so than other professors. Hooks (1994) asserts that it is often productive when professors take the first risk, such as sharing confessional narratives to academic discussions, to demonstrate how experiences can enhance the understanding of academic material. In this case, my confession was an illustration of a shared experience within an academic setting as a result of the pandemic. I shared some of my self-care practices such as breathing techniques, chants, and the use of aromatherapy to help clear my mind and center myself prior to logging on for class. It was important for me to display vulnerability and candidness about my experiences. I felt relieved that I was no longer holding this tension or self-imposing unrealistic expectations. I was still attempting to maintain a high standard of teaching without extending myself any grace.

I invited students into my space and shared my internal struggles, which helped to humanize my experiences.

In retrospect, I was learning how to transgress the boundaries of teaching. hooks (1994) emphasizes the importance of self-actualization and the promotion of well-being in order to teach in a manner that empowers students. My moment of self-actualization was releasing the standards and ideals attached to the professionalization of teaching.

These are the lessons learned that have supported my decision to move away from professionalism and embrace authentic engagement:

1) Showing up as I am in the moment. This is essential during times when I may not meet a deadline, be able to acknowledge the need for assistance, or give myself permission to process what is or is not working and make different choices without punishing myself for not being able to adhere to past work ethics or standards.

2) Being open to expressing my authentic self. This creates opportunities for me to be vulnerable and allows my true personality to emerge, creating additional avenues for authentic engagement.

3) Engaging in a humane manner and maintaining healthy boundaries. This allows me to be open to a range of emotions, reciprocal interactions, and to be clear about the function of my role.

4) Allowing my experiences to contribute to the narrative when appropriate. This includes sharing my past triumphs and challenges as a social worker and discussing how I could have done things differently, mistakes I made, and what I gained from the experiences.

5) Serving as a role model for cross-cultural communication. This is critical for setting the stage for how to communicate compassionately about different perspectives and lived experiences. This also includes not assuming everyone will understand my perspective and being open to articulating myself in various ways. As our society experiences a deep purge of historical trauma, necessary for true liberation, being able to understand these dynamics as a helping professional is essential. This is not about taking sides or establishing a position, rather holding space for what is and being able to facilitate a dialogue about the experiences.

6) Adhering to standards and principles of the profession, not professionalism. As a social work educator, I am reminded of the core values and principles of the profession that resonate with me: racial equity and social justice, what the profession is striving towards. I am reminded also of how this can get lost in day-to-day interactions when there may be more focus on professionalism and less emphasis on how we embody social work values and principles.

Based on the experiences shared by students and my observations during the pandemic, I would argue that professionalism stifled students' skill development as they attempted to adjust to a new practice environment that was not conducive to the practice standards embraced by the profession. In these moments, students needed permission to deviate from these practices and support in normalizing their experiences. The remote learning environment amplified this longstanding concern of professionalism. It also illuminated how students were hesitant to be vulnerable, share intimate space with others, and adapt to unexpected changes. However, we cannot fault students for attempting to survive without the proper training.

As an educator working to support the next generation of helping professionals, I recognize that I have a responsibility to prepare social workers to enter the field. These experiences have reinforced the importance of ensuring humanity is at the forefront of social work practice. As a profession, we have increasingly strayed away from our core values in exchange for the perceived benefits of professionalization. This has not only impacted social work practice; it has also seeped into social work education. This is problematic as it influences the next generation of social workers and perpetuates a narrative rooted in Whiteness that excludes multiple racial and cultural perspectives that are essential to the social work profession. It also positions professionalism as the primary standard of practice.

It is time that we critically analyze our approaches to social work practice and education and demand change. Our institutions were developed by dominant culture and are designed to reinforce systems of power and privilege—the status quo must be deconstructed before any desired change can occur (Reisch, 2013). The pandemic has provided several examples of why this analysis is warranted. Some propose reform, while others call for abolition of social work (Maylea, 2021). For either stance, this is an opportune moment to consider moving away from concepts and constructs that are not in alignment with who we say we are as a profession.

One suggestion would be to adapt liberatory approaches to teaching and practice developed by scholars such as Freire (1968/1970) and hooks (1994) that complement the profession. As educators we can begin to liberate our classrooms by challenging curricula, embracing diverse approaches to teaching, resisting the master narrative, and cultivating critical consciousness among our students. We can begin by being role models—embracing ways of engagement that are authentic and promote empowerment. As I have learned, we can give ourselves permission to detox from the adverse effects of professionalism. Most importantly, we can collectively start deconstructing outdated practices and consider new and existing practices that better align with our core values and principles as a social work profession.

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