From Student to Educator: A Social Worker's Journey with Self-Disclosure

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Abstract: The use of self-disclosure in social work remains controversial despite the growing theoretical and empirical evidence that engaging individuals with lived experience is fundamental to providing equitable and inclusive services. Within mental health services, social workers (and other helping professionals) appear particularly reluctant to engage in the practice due to stigma and fear of professional ramifications. This is further compounded by limited research and guidance on the risks and benefits of self-disclosure. Using a personal narrative covering my journey with self-disclosure as a social worker, this paper explores gaps in social work education and supervision related to lived experience and the resulting implications for social workers and service users. Recommendations for creating a culture of self-disclosure—including the role of social work education, practicum, and supervision—are discussed.

***Keywords*:** social work education, field education, practicum, lived experience, supervision

Introduction

Despite the growing evidence that engaging individuals with lived experience is fundamental for providing equitable and inclusive services (Fox, 2022; Mackay, 2023; Szczygiel, 2021), using self-disclosure in social work, particularly clinical social work, remains controversial. Literature indicates that most social workers and mental health professionals hesitate to self-disclose their personal experiences due to stigma and fear of professional consequences (e.g., Byrne et al., 2022; Campbell, 2018; Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023; Szczygiel, 2021). This reluctance is further exacerbated by the gaps in research on the risks and benefits of self-disclosure and the need for more guidance on how to use self-disclosure and supervision effectively (Dunlop et al., 2022; Mackay, 2023; O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018; Roulston et al., 2022). In this narrative, I will share my journey of self-disclosure as a social work student, practitioner, and educator. I aim to explore the gaps in social work education and supervision related to lived experience and the implications for social workers and service users. Finally, I will provide recommendations for creating a culture of self-disclosure, including the role of social work education, practicum, and supervision.

Definitions

The terms *self-disclosure* and *lived experience* will be used interchangeably throughout this narrative, though their meanings slightly differ. A review of the current literature provides various definitions for *self-disclosure* that all boil down to sharing personal information with clients, typically in a therapeutic setting (Byrne et al., 2022; Campbell, 2018; Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014). However, for this paper, *self-disclosure* is broadened to include sharing personal information in any social work setting (e.g., with clients, colleagues, professors), not just therapy. Though the term *lived experience* is not as well-defined in the literature (Mcintosh & Wright, 2019), the following definition is an accurate reflection of its meaning: "the things

that someone has experienced themselves, especially when these give the person a knowledge or understanding that people who have only heard about such experiences do not have" (Cambridge, n.d., Definition 1).

Likewise, the terms *field* and *practicum* will be used interchangeably with *internship*. On its career center webpage, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (n.d.) defines an *internship* as "a professional learning experience that offers meaningful, practical work related to a student's field of study or career interest" (para. 1). *Field education*, specific to social work education, is defined as "the signature pedagogy for social work … [teaching] future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline: to think, to perform, and to act intentionally, ethically, and with integrity" (Commission on Accreditation [COA] & Commission on Educational Policy [CEOP], 2022, p. 20). However, many schools of social work are replacing the term *field* with *practicum* as it "supports anti-racist social work practice by replacing language that could be considered anti-Black or anti-immigrant in favor of inclusive language" (Heyward, 2023, para. 3). Thus, *practicum* will be used in place of *field* throughout this paper.

My Story

Based on my personal and professional experiences, I was certain that pursuing a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree was the right path for me. I knew I wanted to work with children and youth who had experienced trauma. I wanted to be someone who understood what they were going through and believed their words. I wanted to be a person in their life who could hear their story and walk alongside them rather than recoil. I wanted to be the person I did not have growing up. While applying to social work programs, I openly shared these aspirations and was awarded a child welfare fellowship based on my disclosure. However, I was quickly discouraged from sharing this information during my master's program.

During my first internship at a children's hospital, I was faced with a case involving a severely abused toddler in critical condition. While I worked with the social work team, medical staff, and law enforcement to perform safety assessments and interviews, the child tragically passed away. As I continued to work with my practicum supervisors on the next steps, they began questioning why I was not having a more emotional response to the situation. I realized I was expected to cry or fall apart from an understandably shocking experience, especially given that I was beginning my internship. While I explained how my personal experiences of abuse and work with traumatized youth had prepared me to cope with these situations, my supervisors remained skeptical. Over the next couple of weeks, my practicum supervisors and other prominent medical team members began asking specific questions about my traumatic experiences. While I thought these interactions would strengthen my credibility and build relationships with my practicum supervisors and medical team, they ultimately led to the termination of my internship. I was informed by my school that, given my history of childhood trauma, particularly sexual abuse, the hospital determined it was inappropriate for me to intern on their unit. Additionally, they expressed concern that I was "exhibiting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder," such as "disassociating" and "oversharing" the details of my trauma,

further indicating I should not work with vulnerable populations. However, my practicum supervisors never brought these concerns to my attention, and I was never provided an opportunity to discuss them.

Culture of Non-Disclosure

Looking back at my master's program, I don't remember being explicitly taught about self-disclosure. However, I learned through my experiences in practicum and classes that sharing my childhood trauma could impact my ability to graduate and pursue a career in social work. This message was reinforced as I progressed through my program; my classes emphasized the importance of maintaining professionalism and refraining from revealing personal aspects of myself to clients. I remained silent as professors and students debated theories on trauma and analyzed case studies of children who had experienced abuse and neglect. I frequently felt exposed as my peers scrutinized and dissected case studies that mirrored my own experiences, often describing the circumstances as "unimaginable." Discussions about how victims of abuse frequently go on to abuse others perpetuated my stigma surrounding being a wounded healer (Byrne et al., 2022; Mackay, 2023) as described below. Over time, these experiences wore me down, leading to internalized messages of being an outsider, abnormal, and broken.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that social workers are drawn to the profession based on their lived experiences, the use of self-disclosure remains divisive. Central to this controversy are inconsistent beliefs about ethics and professionalism, particularly as it relates to boundaries with clients (Campbell, 2018; Dunlop et al., 2022; Szczygiel, 2021). Traditional psychodynamic theories discourage therapists from sharing personal information because they believe maintaining neutrality is essential for clients to make therapeutic gains (Byrne et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023; O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018). From this perspective, self-disclosure can be considered unprofessional, unethical, or potentially harmful to clients. However, this viewpoint often stems from the stereotype of the wounded healer, which suggests that individuals with trauma, mental health issues, or substance use problems are dangerous, incompetent, and motivated by self-healing interests (Byrne et al., 2022; Mackay, 2023).

On the other hand, interactional, relational, and attachment theories highlight the importance of transparency and authenticity in forming therapeutic connections and fostering client transformation (Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023; O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018). From this perspective, self-disclosure is seen as a therapeutic technique used to normalize and validate client experiences. However, there are varying thoughts on what information the therapist *should* disclose (Byrne et al., 2022; Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023), leaving room for individual interpretation. Still, none of these theories consider the additional structural and sociocultural factors that impact social workers, their clients, and the therapeutic relationship (O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018).

Given the limited guidance on how to utilize self-disclosure in an educational, professional, or supervisory environment (O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018; Szczygiel, 2021), many professionals are hesitant to share their lived experiences due to concerns about being perceived

as incompetent or a risk to clients, which could lead to professional repercussions (Byrne et al., 2022; Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023). This creates barriers for social workers and other helping professionals to seek consultation or supervision, perpetuating a "culture of non-disclosure" (Byrne et al., 2022, p. 10). This culture, often established and reinforced at the systemic level, contributes to the stigma around mental health and trauma (Byrne et al., 2022; Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023).

Implications for Social Work Practice

Although I obtained a new internship and graduated with my MSW, the stigma of my disclosure remained. I chose not to discuss the termination from my internship or include the experience on my resume. When I was hired as a therapist at a children's psychiatric residential facility, I was careful not to share any information that might hint at having a traumatic past. Yet, as a new clinical social worker, I faced the daunting challenge of building genuine connections with traumatized youth and felt ill-prepared. Initially, I conducted therapy sessions strictly "by the book," but I struggled to connect with clients and find my voice as a clinician. However, over time, I discovered that being genuine with my clients made connecting easier, resulting in more therapeutic progress. However, as youth courageously shared their stories of pain and suffering, I found it increasingly challenging to deflect their questions about my own experiences and to witness their uncertainty about my ability to comprehend what they were experiencing. Hence, I found myself leaning toward self-disclosure as a more authentic approach to therapy. Eventually, I perfected "disclosing without disclosing," which Byrne et al. (2022) describe as "coming to terms with one's own experience enough to draw upon it without interfering in the therapeutic work" (p. 10). Typically, this looked like comparing a client's experiences to those of "others I have worked with" while referring to my own lived experiences.

Like many social workers (Byrne et al., 2022; Campbell, 2018; Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023; Szczygiel, 2021), due to the culture of non-disclosure, I was reluctant to consult with my supervisors and peers regarding my use of lived experience with clients. Yet, given the lack of research and guidance on preparing professionals to use self-disclosure (Byrne et al., 2022; Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023; O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018), they likely wouldn't have had the necessary knowledge to support me even if I had. Moreover, the ethical guidelines concerning self-disclosure are ambiguous and rely on the clinician's personal judgment (Dunlop et al., 2022). Therefore, more research, guidance, and training on effectively utilizing lived experience are needed to support faculty, students, supervisors, and practicing social workers.

Creating a Culture of Self-Disclosure

The standards for social work education have undeniably improved since I completed my master's program over a decade ago. However, the negative impact of sharing my trauma during my master's program has continued to influence my social work practice as a clinician, supervisor, educator, and student. The Council for Social Work Education requires that accredited social work programs recognize the crucial role of the learning environment in

teaching students about the significance and meaning of cultural humility and of anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (COA & CEOP, 2022). Integrating lived experience into the social work curriculum fosters an inclusive and diverse environment by acknowledging the value and validity of experiential knowledge and allows students to challenge their unconscious biases (Campbell, 2018; Fox, 2022; Mackay, 2023; Szczygiel, 2021). Moreover, encouraging opportunities for self-disclosure and critical conversations among students helps them connect theory and coursework to those with lived experience, promoting self-awareness and reflexivity (Byrne et al., 2022; Campbell, 2018; Fox, 2022; O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018; Szczygiel, 2021).

Implications for Social Work Practice

Creating a culture of disclosure in social work education does not necessitate a specialized curriculum but rather an inclusive environment for exploration and learning (Byrne et al., 2022; Szczygiel, 2021). Sharing of lived experiences by both faculty and students provides opportunities to engage in anti-oppressive practice and is in alignment with the EPAS requirement of "fostering an equitable and inclusive learning environment by facilitating important ADEI [anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion] discourse" (COA & COEP, 2022, p. 16). By integrating theory, evidence-based practices, and the code of ethics into discussions of lived experience, social work educators can reduce stigma and increase student self-awareness and insight (Campbell, 2018; Knight, 2014; Szczygiel, 2021).

Self-disclosure is grounded in theoretical and evidence-based practices and aligns with social work values. According to the National Association of Social Workers (2021):

> The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. (Preamble section, para. 1)

Person-centered and humanistic theories support this mission, encouraging transparency and authenticity to build a therapeutic alliance and promote client growth (Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014). Similarly, attachment and relational theories value the therapist-client relationship as a working alliance built on mutuality and trust (Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018; Szczygiel, 2021). Feminist theorists further encourage disclosure to disrupt power dynamics and empower self-determination (Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014). Lastly, psychotherapies that are rooted in these theories, such as Attachment-Based Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and Narrative Therapy, rely on the therapist's disclosure of thoughts, feelings, and emotions to build authentic connections with clients (Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014).

As previously mentioned, conflicting opinions of ethics, professionalism, and boundaries are central to the self-disclosure debate. Therefore, addressing these concepts within an anti-oppressive framework provides opportunities to explore how systems of power and oppression

influence these beliefs (COA & COEP, 2022; Mackay, 2023; Szczygiel, 2021). This framework shifts the discussion from whether social workers should engage in self-disclosure to what kinds of self-disclosure support the well-being of the social worker, their colleagues, and the clients and communities they serve (Szczygiel, 2021). Additionally, through parallel processing, students who engage in self-disclosure receive valuable feedback and validation while the rest of the group expands their understanding of others' lived experiences (Campbell, 2018; Fox, 2022; Szczygiel, 2021).

Allowing space for students to bring their whole selves into the classroom leads to deeper discussions and more comprehensive learning (Szczygiel, 2021). Through self-disclosure of my experiences, I have found that students are more likely to share their identities and experiences as well. This creates an inclusive learning environment that respects diverse perspectives, experiences, and values (Dunlop et al., 2022; Fox, 2022; Mackay, 2023; Szczygiel, 2021). I have found this to be especially true in practicum seminars, when students are in their practice placements and wrestling with how their identities, lived experiences, and values intersect with the realities of social work practice.

Practicum Education

Practicum education helps students integrate social work theory and skills into a real-world setting under the guidance of a professional social worker (COA & CEOP, 2022). Practicum placements offer students the chance to work with different groups of people, learn various roles and skills, understand different service delivery models, practice culturally responsive approaches, and engage in policy advocacy (Portland State University, n.d.). Additionally, the relationship between students and their practicum supervisors can also benefit the supervisor's professional development and contribute to the advancement of the social work profession. Therefore, practicum education plays a crucial role in changing the culture of non-disclosure.

Literature supports the notion that practicum placements are the best place for students to learn and engage in self-disclosure (e.g., Campbell, 2018; Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023; Szczygiel, 2021); however, the same literature indicates that, given the lack of research, guidance, and stigma surrounding self-disclosure, practicum supervisors are unlikely to have the necessary knowledge, training, or tools to support students in this process. Moreover, the hierarchical and evaluative nature of the student-practicum supervisor relationship adds additional complexity to the power dynamics inherent in social work supervision (O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018; Roulston et al., 2022). Research indicates that these dynamics often cause supervisees to refrain from discussing personal feelings and reactions during supervision (e.g., Byrne et al., 2022; Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023). Therefore, emphasis must be placed on fostering inclusive and supportive practicum supervision, including targeted learning objectives and training on self-disclosure (Dunlop et al., 2022; Knight, 2014; Mackay, 2023; O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018; Roulston et al., 2022).

Explicit Learning Objectives. In their study of students' attitudes toward engagement in self-disclosure, Knight (2014) identified five learning objectives for guiding conversations of self-

disclosure with students that could be incorporated into seminar assignments and practicum supervision:

> (1) Articulate the major theoretical perspectives that address self-disclosure; (2) identify and discuss the impact that clients have on [your] reactions; (3) develop strategies for managing [your] reactions; (4) critically examine [your] professional use of self-disclosure; (5) identify different types of self-disclosure and indications and contraindications for their use with different clients. (p. 177)

Training. Given the need for more research and education on self-disclosure, practicum education programs should also offer ongoing training for practicum supervisors on the theoretical and evidence-based principles of integrating lived experience into practice. This training should also cover how to address structural and interpersonal power dynamics in supervision. Some potential training models to consider are the following:

Sharing Lived Experiences Framework (SLEF). SLEF was created by a collaborative group of academics, clinicians, and service users in the United Kingdom and provides a framework for deciding when and how to use self-disclosure across social work disciplines (Dunlop et al., 2022). The SLEF spans the disclosure process from pre-disclosure to disclosure to post-disclosure reflection, emphasizing the importance of supervision and self-reflection. The SLEF also provides a roadmap for six areas of consideration for disclosure, including preparedness, confidence, competence, relevance, comfort, and supervision (Dunlop et al., 2022).

Critical Conversations (CC) Model. While initially developed for social work classrooms, the CC model has been expanded and tested in practicum education and supervision (O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018). The CC model offers a framework to identify and analyze the supervisory relationship's structural and interpersonal power dynamics. The framework assists participants in addressing obstacles in the supervisory relationship while fostering a deeper understanding of power, privilege, and structural inequities within the supervisory triad (supervisor, student, client). The model provides a structure to facilitate these critical conversations, enabling participants to recognize, reflect on, label, and discuss social justice issues and power dynamics that affect the supervisory relationship (O'Neill & Del Mar Farina, 2018).

Conclusion

Self-disclosure in social work, particularly clinical social work, is a divisive topic. Many social workers hesitate to share their lived experiences due to concerns about being seen as incompetent, unethical, or potentially harmful to clients. The lack of research, education, and training on the potential risks and benefits of self-disclosure, as well as its effective use in supervision, exacerbates this issue. Through my narrative and review of existing literature, I have shown that social work education plays a crucial role in changing the culture of non-disclosure. Integrating lived experiences into the social work curriculum promotes inclusivity and diversity and encourages the examination of power dynamics and discriminatory beliefs that contribute to the culture of non-disclosure.

Providing targeted training for practicum supervisors and having clear learning objectives for integrating lived experience into practicum education is essential to disrupting our profession's non-disclosure culture. This will help create an inclusive learning environment within practicum settings, where students and supervisors can openly discuss their experiences and provide opportunities to practice ethical self-disclosure. By challenging the culture of non-disclosure in social work education, social work programs can also begin to tackle the issue of insufficient research and guidance on effectively using supervision and lived experience. This can help reduce the stigma around mental health and trauma and promote equity—both within the profession and for the individuals we serve.

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