

# Finding Balance: Group Membership and Professional Development

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*Field education is said to be the experience that all students talk about and remember the most after they graduate. Social work students from immigrant backgrounds experience unique challenges in applying and finding a balance between the obligations of the NASW code of ethics and being culturally responsive. These challenges may be even greater for immigrant social work students who are working directly with the target populations with which they identify. A crucial challenge and asset that is experienced by immigrant social workers is the knowledge and identity membership that they hold in dual cultural systems. Learning to manage that balance in a field practicum setting will be examined in this narrative.*

*Co-author Introduction:* Field education is said to be the experience that all students talk about and remember the most after graduation. I'm sure this particular student and co-author, Imad, will never forget his field placement. The context for the field education for Imad, a first-year MSW student at the time of this experience, was a social work program in a northern rural state, with a general catchment area of 150 miles. Field practicum is student driven, meaning that students plan with the field director (in this case myself, Robin) for a placement that meets individual learning goals, fits within the ability to travel, and provides for supervision, time, and learning opportunities commensurate with graduate education. Specific agencies are vetted based on those and other criteria to meet accreditation standards, department mission and goals, and capacity to provide meaningful learning. The particular agency that Imad was placed in focuses on developing housing within small and rural communities. This placement, particularly, focused on the development and enhancement of home-ownership capacity for new immigrants. Imad and I recognized immediately the opportunity to contribute to his education, his community, and his skills by seeking and accepting this placement. I immediately recognized that this student's maturity, professionalism, community awareness, and cultural fluency made this a singularly unique opportunity for both him and the agency. While we both were aware of the need for thoughtful, ethical, and respectful engagement in this placement, I'm not sure either one of us fully appreciated the degree to

which Imad would be challenged to find his footing. In this conversation, we explore Imad's efforts to maintain his cultural identity as he worked to establish a professional presence.

Imad: I knew from my course work and from cultural peers that social work students from immigrant backgrounds experience unique challenges in finding and then applying a balance between the obligations of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* and being culturally responsive. I think those challenges may be even greater for immigrant social work students who are working directly with the target populations they identify with. A crucial challenge and asset that is experienced by immigrant social workers is the knowledge and identity membership that they hold in dual cultural systems. On one hand, when working with the population they identify with (in my case Somali), they have knowledge and experience to engage in culturally responsive practice. On the other hand, having a shared cultural identity with their clients may place these student social workers in situations of blurred boundaries that are influenced by competition between their cultural values and professional values.

*Robin:* I know that almost immediately our conversations and those in the field seminar began to really focus on the challenges you were experiencing.

*Imad:* I would agree. It was essential that I talk about how culture shapes our social interaction through systems of norms, values, expectations, and behavior. It was also important to discuss the dual cultural systems that immigrant social workers operate in and the competing values and norms imposed by these systems. My first-year practicum experience, working with the Somali community, was really an illustration of those issues.

*Robin:* I know that you take a very academic approach to understanding your experiences while at the same time embracing the more personal aspects of the experience. What did you find to support your understanding in the literature?

*Imad:* From readings in another course, a theory that helped structure my thinking and allowed me to conceptualize the power of culture was social constructivism. Through this school of thought I understood the principle that “nothing is universal” and that our interpretations on how we view life are different due to the influences that are guided by culture. Scholars from this school of thought reminded me that “it is culture, not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system” (Bruner, 1990, p. 34). I could see culture not only facilitates social interaction through sets of norms, values, and expectations but also provides me ways for internalizing these factors. In addition, social institutions are grounded in the values and ideas of culture. The principle that “nothing is universal” alludes to the idea of cultural differences. As a social work student from an immigrant background, I get the pleasure and challenge of interacting in a dual cultural system. On one hand, my Somali and Muslim cultural identities have an influence in shaping my values, norms, and expectations. On the other hand, my education and work is grounded in Western values, norms, and expectations.

*Robin:* Imad, there was this very strong impression of you doing this balancing act between your “professional self” and your “cultural self.”

*Imad:* I was wearing two hats! When I was in my primary identity group my frame of reference in social interaction was shaped by Somali/Muslim culture but in my interaction with mainstream

society I switched my frame of reference to that of the Western culture. This system of operation seemed to work smoothly as long as the two cultural worlds didn’t cross. However, as an immigrant social work intern who worked directly with the group that I identify with, I began to experience the merging of my dual cultural systems.

*Robin:* You were also engaged in field seminar with other students who were beginning field practicum. Those cross-over moments made for some interesting discussions. The issues related to creating a niche for oneself in the agency were very familiar to others while the issues of merging cultural systems opened a whole new avenue of thinking and understanding.

*Imad:* I think because I was the only Muslim-Somali in our field seminar, my experience was really different than the others. The merging of the dual cultural systems was influenced by the role of identity in the interaction with the group I identify with. To understand the role in identity change it is important to first examine what my identity was prior to the change. In my original identity the role that I operated from was based on my membership in the Muslim-Somali group. Thus, as a male Muslim-Somali, my interaction with the group was governed by the values and expectations set forth by the group membership. Thus, following these values and expectations was part of exercising the group membership identity. Furthermore, members in the group are expected to follow the cultural values, norms, and expectations. However, in my role as a social work student intern, my interaction with the target community was no longer based on my membership identity. In other words, the cultural values and expectations guiding my work with the target community were shaped by my profession which is grounded in Western culture. The change of role identity introduced new values and expectations in my interaction with the target community.

*Robin:* I know something about how active you are in the Somali community. I can’t help wondering how the community experienced these changes you were experiencing as part of your educational process.

*Imad:* While I was aware of the change in my role

identity, the target community was not aware of the change. The consequence was that the expectations that the members in the target community had for me were based on my original role identity as a Somali group member as opposed to my new role as social work student. The challenge was that the target community had the assumptions and expectations that as a member of the Somali community I would uphold the Somali cultural values and norms. In addition, the group assumption was that I would use the group culture as my frame of reference to govern my interaction with the target community. On the other hand, as a social work student I have professional values, norms, and expectations. For the most part, the two cultures meet at a common ground in regard to values and expectations. However, there are times where I have experienced cultural conflicts in values and norms in regards to my work with the target community. From my experience, cultural conflicts can place immigrant social workers in situations where stakes are high in the professional and group membership role. Consequently, the responses to these cultural conflicts may impact their personal group membership and professional relationship with the target group.

*Robin:* There was a lot going on with you as you were making a place for yourself in this practicum site. How were you thinking about all that day to day?

*Imad:* This was my first MSW practicum, and I was excited that I had the opportunity to intern with an agency that would allow me to work with the Somali community. Since I have a shared identity with this population, I didn't think my personal values, beliefs, and behaviors would cause me practical conflicts. Nevertheless, I know that I couldn't take this assumption as a fact so I utilized self-reflections, evaluation, and consultation frequently. Through self-reflection, seminar, evaluation, and consultation I learned that working with a population where I have shared identity can present unique challenges.

*Robin:* The use of the field seminar allowed you the opportunity to write, discuss, and take us along on your journey and was a remarkable opportunity for your peers to understand at a more meaningful level what the issues are of being immersed in two

cultures. Each experience that you shared with us could be explored from the Western social work perspective and that of your cultural group membership. Your willingness to share that made a rich learning experience for all of us.

*Imad:* One of the greatest learning experiences in balancing was being culturally responsive and being congruent with the *Code of Ethics*. Culture influences both individual and social factors such as thoughts, behavior, policy, institutions, and social expectations. Taking the influences of culture, I can make the case that our social work profession in regard to values, norms, ethics, and expectations is grounded in Western cultural values. We know that cultures differ in views, values, norms, and expectations. An example of this is the role of age in society in terms of expectations and authority. On one hand, in the American Western culture, once you are an adult there are levels of expectations that apply across the board for all adults. However, in many Eastern cultures, including that of the Somali people, age is linked to authority, power, and respect. When I began the internship I had a challenge in dealing with Somali leaders. Almost all of the leaders were older adults. In many of my early meetings, the Somali leaders did not deal with me as a representative of my agency but as a community member. Dealing with me as a community member only introduces cultural expectations that are associated with age and other factors such as gender and tribe. Many times the decision-making process of community issues is highly dominated by the elders, mostly men. As a young person participating in community affairs, I may be influenced by cultural expectation to yield to this tradition. On the other hand, as social workers we promote equal opportunity and involvement for all regardless of the domain of diversity. Nevertheless, it is daunting to break cultural expectations because of fear of change in group membership identity and the practical impacts it may have on relationship building. In my early meetings I experienced challenges voicing my views in regard to community affairs (especially) in front of elders. This fear or anxiety was mainly due to cultural expectations associated with age.

*Robin:* You spoke earlier, Imad, about how social constructivism provided you one frame for thinking about your experience. Were there other conceptual

perspectives that influenced how you were balancing the cultural/professional draws?

*Imad:* Another example of cultural conflict, specifically in the area of values, is the competing nature of individualism and collectivism. The cultural value of collectivism is not a value that is abandoned by immigrants after they move to the United States. In the community that I identify with, collectivism governs our expectations and practices of loyalty, support systems, and conflict resolution. The value of collectivism is highly exercised in the family and tribal system. When dealing with conflict, the value of collectivism can bring interesting challenges. Prior to starting the internship I knew that there was a tension among community members and especially among community leaders. Another layer of challenge was that some of the community leaders were from my extended family. In the Somali culture the expectation set forth by collectivism is that loyalty to the family and tribe is important. This loyalty has both pros and cons. One benefit is that it may establish support systems among specific groups. However, the downside is that this loyalty may lead to unfair treatment of people who are outside the family and tribe. Prior to the internship I knew I could not let tribalism influence my practice because it promotes the idea of favoritism and exclusion. Plus, the consequence of such action is not only a violation of professional expectations but also both agency and legal obligations. Nonetheless, abandoning these cultural expectations without careful reflection would not only damage my ability to work with the group but my membership in the group as well.

*Robin:* Can you describe the resolution you found?

*Imad:* After reflecting and consulting about these issues, I knew that I could not let my primary cultural expectations alone govern my practice with the target community because this would lead to sacrificing my professional expectations and values. On the other hand, it was clear that if I only utilized my professional expectations and values it would damage my group identity and my ability to work with the community. The realization of these two extremes at hand drove me to explore a balanced perspective. In order to find this balance my first requirement was to take control in an effort to

influence how the community leaders viewed me and what expectations they were to have of me. I had to let them know frequently that they should not only deal with me as a community member but also as an agency representative who has to operate under different sets of values and expectations. Getting this point across allowed me to find strategy in dealing with my professional and personal cultural conflicts.

*Robin:* I recall that we talked and strategized at length in seminar about how to communicate respectful caring, while at the same time establishing new boundaries that integrated the best of both Western and Somali relationships and opportunities.

*Imad:* Some of the strategies that I applied were engaging in continuous dialogue and discussions with the members from the Somali community. The dialogue and discussions were based on educating the community members about the change in my role identity and the impact it would have on our social interaction in regard to cultural values, norms, and expectations. This allowed me to educate community members about the values, ethics, and norms that came with my new role as a social work intern. These discussions allowed me to get the point across that my interaction with them would not only be governed by cultural values but also my professional values. Engaging in this dialogue allowed me to build a pool of shared understanding with the community in regard to the expectations they should have for me as social work intern. My clients' understanding of my professional values, norms, and expectations was a significant factor in understanding their own rights.

For example, if I provided services to a particular Somali group based on tribal relation and discriminated against another Somali group due to tribal differences, the response of the group that I discriminated against would depend on the frame of references that shapes the expectations they have for me. Unfortunately, from a cultural perspective the group that I discriminated against may see my practice as being consistent with cultural practices. On the other hand, if that same group were educated about my professional values, norms, and ethics, they would have the frame of reference needed to come to the conclusion that I was not violating their

rights but upholding my professional obligations. Thus, educating the Somali members I worked with about my professional code of ethics was an empowerment process that helped clients understand their rights and when or if those rights were being violated. In contrast, the process of educating them also helped them understand that I had both cultural and professional values and expectations that would influence my behavior and decisions.

*Robin:* From this dialogue one can clearly see the potential landmines that you navigated throughout practicum. You were able to use the agency field instructor, who possessed a wealth of cultural acumen to draw on, for consultation and support. His cultural experiences certainly helped you find a path. You were also strongly encouraged in field seminar to talk about your experience as a means to deconstruct the experience and from that construct interaction strategies that would allow you to practice effective social work without compromising cultural relations.

*Imad:* I think the other thing that happened in seminar was that other students were able to see beyond the platitude of “be culturally sensitive” and understand what that can represent in terms of practicing in culturally responsive ways. I was also able to talk about my experience with individuals from my culture who are practicing social workers, and that was helpful because they had experienced some of the same sorts of things I was going through.

*Robin:* The issues related to being a member of the cultural group while practicing within the community as a social worker were ones that you grappled with over the months of practicum. You sought out support from social work professionals from the Somali community, the field liaison, and the field seminar as part of that process. I believe, though, Imad, your willingness to actively, and sometimes painfully, engage in finding a balance between your cultural group membership and your chosen profession was a remarkable feat. You continue to develop your professional capacity for providing social work services within and external to your cultural group as you actively seek supervision, mentorship, and support throughout your contacts, which are numerous. Your focus and

capacity for self-reflection and using resources to refine and extend your thinking are ongoing. Without all those efforts, I’m not certain that you could have found the balance that you did.

*Robin:* As the field liaison for this practicum as well as the seminar instructor, I found this experience made it abundantly clear that as educators we need to be willing to hear our students clearly, to set aside any preconceived notions that we have about how to manage complex placements, and stay focused on what the student is experiencing. Imad, you and I had lengthy conversations that focused not only on developing strategies within the agency but also focused on your cultural coping. Additionally, consultation with the field agency personnel with whom you worked was beneficial in helping to reinforce the boundaries that you were working to establish. Imad, the willingness you showed to reach out to other social workers within your cultural group was also an important source of support. While it is true that all students in field practicum need such supports, I learned that these are critical for those students who come from non-Western backgrounds. As the social work profession continues to diversify, clearly we need to develop a pipeline for students who have these rich experiences to graduate and to serve as mentors, field instructors, field liaisons, and seminar instructors, and to engage in the classroom.

### Reference

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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