

# SENSITIVE CONTENT AND SENSITIVE CONTEXT: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

**Roni Berger, Professor [berger@adelphi.edu](mailto:berger@adelphi.edu) Adelphi University School of Social Work 1**

**South Ave. Garden City NY 11530**

**Theme: Development of curriculum and course contents in social work**

Professional social work education requires in addition to enhancing students' theoretical, empirical and clinical knowledge, also socialization to the profession and its value, self-awareness of own assumptions, beliefs, values, attitudes and biases and their potential impact on the relationships with clients, assessment and choice and implementation of intervention strategies. This becomes even more complicated when sensitive content is taught and when the educational context is characterized by conflict among ethnic, religious and political groups within the society. Teaching such content requires tackling subject matter that is controversial or sensitive such as trauma, multiculturalism, on-going military conflict and changing paradigm from a pathogenic to a salutogenic perspective. While teaching such content is critical for future professionals and is required by most accrediting bodies, it may present challenges to educators.

In the proposed symposium, five papers will be presented. Together they provide a rich and in-depth critical and innovative framework, encompassing diverse pedagogical issues and challenges in teaching such sensitive content in complex situations. Additionally, they suggest and illustrate via case examples, relevant curricula and teaching strategies. The first presentation will demonstrate the use of critical reflection to uncover and conceptualize students' own assumptions, values and beliefs underlying their actions. The second will discuss and illustrate challenges and strategies in teaching trauma content. The third will address strategies for developing cultural competence among students of diverse ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The fourth will focus on social work education within a

society affected by on-going political conflict. The final presentation will discuss ways for transforming students' perspective from the employment of pathological to salutogenic lenses.

**Using Critical Reflection for identifying gaps between espoused theory and theory in use, in a mandatory MSW course**

**Professor Riki Savaya, Bob Shapell School of Social Work Tel Aviv University, Israel**

**[savaya@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:savaya@post.tau.ac.il)**

Social work is a profession strongly anchored in western humanistic values (i.e. individual worth, autonomy, the right to self-determination of clients). Social work education devotes considerable energy to socializing professionals to these values. Yet it is widely recognized that personal values, preferences, attitudes, and beliefs impact on social workers' practice and decisions. Scholars have repeatedly expressed concern that the intrusion of such values into social work practice may lead to bias and errors in judgment and decisions which impair the effectiveness of interventions. Consequently, writers emphasize the need for social workers to be aware of their values, beliefs and preferences and the ways they influence their practice. The call for awareness rests on the understanding that persons are often unaware of the values and assumptions that underlie and guide their behaviors. This understanding is elaborated by Argyris and Schon in their concept of two theories: espoused theory and theory-in-use. Argyris and Schon maintain that persons' deliberated actions are not happenstance, but guided by the theories of action they hold. They further point out that if people are unaware of the theories-in-use that drive their actions, they cannot effectively manage their behaviors, which may, as a result, have unintended – and undesired -- consequences.

In the proposed presentation I will use a case study to demonstrate the use of critical reflection in a mandatory MSW course. The aims of the course are to help students uncover and conceptualize assumptions, values, and beliefs underling their theory of use, to identify

gaps between their espoused theory and theory in use, to understand the consequences of these gaps for their practice, and to develop alternative mode of operation for more effective practice.

### **Challenges and strategies of teaching sensitive content: The case of trauma education**

**Professor Roni Berger Adelphi University School of Social Work, 1 South Ave. Garden**

**City NY 11530 USA [berger@adelphi.edu](mailto:berger@adelphi.edu)**

Teaching trauma-related content has been recognized in the literature on social work education as associated with a wide plethora of pedagogical challenges. Specifically, teaching trauma content has been documented as potentially retraumatizing for students with trauma history, while hearing the stories of others who choose to share their trauma experience may be anxiety-provoking for listeners without trauma experience, both of which present unique challenges to educators. Exposing students to traumatic content offers transformative for course participants; however, it may also affect students negatively and generate emotional reactions. This is even more problematic in professional education in the helping professions in light of the fact that psychology and social work students report a higher incidence of history of psychosocial traumas, such as a family of origin affected by substance abuse, mental illness and violence than liberal arts, business, engineering, and other students. This presentation will include two parts. The first part will review and illustrate pedagogical and ethical aspects of exposing students to emotionally difficult and potentially traumatizing (and for those with trauma history, retraumatizing) content and relevant contextual correlates as well as discuss central issues in trauma education. Based on available theoretical and empirical knowledge and on the presenter's extensive experience, the second part will

suggest and illustrate pedagogically sound and ethically safe principles for establishing a class atmosphere conducive to teaching trauma and effective strategies for trauma education that ameliorates potential negative effects.

**Teaching strategies for developing cultural competence  
in a socio-cultural-political sensitive academic context**

**Professor Yael Geron, Tzfat Academic College Department of Social Work, Israel**

**[yaelg@zefat.ac.il](mailto:yaelg@zefat.ac.il)**

It has been well established that sensitivity to social work students' cultural backgrounds and professional experiences is an essential component in the development of their cultural competence and professional growth. Nevertheless, more practical knowledge is needed in order to develop strategies for the implementation of these notions in social work education programs, especially in a social context marked by high levels of cultural and political tension. The presentation will focus on the development and implementation of teaching strategies in a social work program within a complex multicultural and politically sensitive context, where a delicate fabric of relationships exist among students, faculty and staff.

Zefat Academic College is situated in the northern region of Israel, the Galilee, where 50 percent of the population are Arab and Druze citizens of Israel. The mission of the College is to be a multicultural Academic center which represent the population of the Galilee. This mission creates numerous challenges in teaching social work content to a student body comprised of orthodox and secular Israeli-born and immigrant Jews, Muslim and Christian Arabs and Druze. Multiculturalism is based on the belief that cultural factors, along with psychological, social and humanistic factors explain human

behavior. Since the ability to recognize one's own and others' cultural lenses is essential to all learning, it must be taught as part of social work training.

Based on the presenter's experience as the head of the program and experiences of the faculty, the presentation will address and illustrate the development of cultural sensitive teaching strategies. Effective strategies for teaching coping with the "other", understanding and providing culturally-competent services to social work clients of diverse socio-ethnic- religious backgrounds will be offered.

### **Social Work Education in the Shadow of ongoing political armed conflict**

**Professor Michal Shamai, Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Studies**

**University of Haifa, Israel**

**[michals@research.haifa.ac.il](mailto:michals@research.haifa.ac.il)**

Since receiving independence in 1948, the State of Israel has been involved in political armed conflict with the surrounding Arab countries. For the last 50 years, since the 1967 war, Israel and the Palestinians have been at the heart of the conflict. The armed conflict is characterized by Palestinian acts of terror against Israeli civilians and Israel Defense Force (IDF) soldiers, which the Palestinians define as freedom fighting, and the IDF's armed response, which the Palestinians define as Israeli terror.

Attitudes among the Israeli population toward resolving the conflict are diverse. The intense emotions that it triggers and the general intolerance of other points of view (on both the political Right and Left) lead to avoidance of the discussion of conflict-related issues. Like the general population, Israeli social work educators and students are characterized by their diverse political orientations and most object to discuss political issues related to the armed conflict. However, political issues related to socio-economic policy are discussed because they are accepted as relevant and a significant part of the social work discourse.

The first part of the presentation will describe difficulties in discussing armed-conflict-related issues in general, and regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in particular in social work education and practice. The second part will focus on some possible ways of including issues of the political armed conflict in the Israeli social work education curriculum.

**Applying positive psychology to education and training for changing the focus of intervention: From protecting and avoiding problems to facilitating happiness and flourishing**

**Professor Tammie Ronen, Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel-Aviv University, Israel**

**[Tamie@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:Tamie@post.tau.ac.il)**

Maintaining satisfaction in life and increasing positive functioning and well-being have long been challenging to educators, researchers and social workers who help children and adolescents. Diener, Oishi, and Ryan (2013) define subjective well-being as "the level of well-being experienced by people according to their own subjective evaluations of their lives... These evaluations include cognitive judgments about life satisfaction, and affective reactions to life" (p. 153). These challenges are: 1. Guiding students to focus on a positive outlook and strengths rather than on pathology and weaknesses as a key in the change process and 2. Focusing on empowering children and adolescents rather than protecting them to prevent danger and risk situations.

This presentation will discuss three large scale projects designed to train students in facilitating happiness among at-risk children and adolescents. Students were involved in all phases of development and implementation of the projects. The first project sought to reduce aggression through teaching children about the brain, emotions and behaviors. The second involved children in applying school-based sport activities to change their self-evaluation, bullying and obedient behavior. The third project involved children at risk in music through

the establishment of orchestras to help participants overcome traumatic experiences and reach happiness.