**Queering the Social Worker: Approaching ‘Social Worker’ as a normative identity**

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Modified reflection from SWRK-3105H: Queering Social Work
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June 4, 2024 (orig)
November 28, 2024 (ed)

In social work education, we are often asked *knowing this,* *how will I practice differently?* Like many of my marginalized colleagues, a significant proportion of my assignments become attempts to find ways to integrate two identities: myself as a sapphic, demi, mad, white, trans woman, and myself as a social worker. This has led me to consider how ‘social worker’ itself is constructed as a normative category. To that end, the biggest learnings I’ve had from many classes aren’t so much about social work *with* people but doing social work *as* a person who also accesses services. How does this peer experience inform my work?

In our conversations in social work education, professionalism is regularly framed in terms of competency, skills, and other “technical aspects of helping” (Mullaly & West, 2018. p. 171). This way of constructing our practice creates “impersonal service models of professionalism that imbue practitioners with the power of knower” (Sarkisova, 2015. p. 267). In this framing, a social worker is a person with an applied set of skills and knowledge. This conceptualization also serves as a barrier that delineates who is or is not a social worker based on rigid definitions, which is further reified through professional accreditation. While some elements of professionalism serve vital purposes, with the Code of Ethics being a great example, “[p]rofessionalism contains elements of oppression not only for service users but also for the profession as a whole and certain groups of social workers in particular” (Mullaly & West, 2018. p. 172).

Social Worker as an identity is constructed in numerous ways in social work pedagogy. A critical component of this is the development of a ’professional self’. One definition centered in our coursework is that the ‘professional self’ is the identity one constructs or integrates to serve as a self-reflective and conscientious mediator between personal identity/personal interpretation, professional obligation, and the service user/community (Urdang, 2010). This conception of the professional self focuses on boundary development to protect both service users from exploitation and malpractice, and the practitioner from burnout, vicarious trauma, and ethical pitfalls (Urdang, 2010. pp. 527-528). Critical to this professional self is mindful *use of self* – the mobilization of one’s own experiences for therapeutic work. Certainly, my presence as someone who may share disadvantaged positionality with the people who engage me for services has practice implications (Munro, et al. 2017), but this framing positions my lived experience as something that must be activated via practice skills and mediated by the professional self. Thus, who I can be in practice is subject to the normative restrictions of ‘professionalism’. What then does it mean to *queer* social work if not to object to normative definitions of social work and social work practice?

My past work in queer communities was founded in peerhood, working within 2SLGBTQIA+ communities as a queer person first and as someone working in social services second. Since returning to social work education, these identities have been in tension. What has become evident to me is that this tension is rooted in fear. As much as social work states inclusivity, my presence remains tenuous. The degree to which I can perform ‘social work’ within the funded, policy-approved, and legislated bounds of the profession determines my employment and wellbeing. While there are queer and radical agencies I can work with, they are exceptions to the rule. The intersection of queerness and mental health introduces further risk – mentally ill social workers are still astoundingly taboo in professional discourse. That I might have to disavow parts of myself to appease professional expectations is a constant worry.

A perfect framing of this tension was offered by Profitt & Richard (2016) in discussing their experiences as social workers and educators: “Queer social workers were [and I would argue, are] forced to compartmentalize their professional and private lives in pursuit of a personal commitment to social work practice and education” (p. 98). If the abjectification of a social worker’s queerness is prerequisite to ‘professional practice’, a queer social work is one in which the notion of professionalism itself is upturned. This is not to say that we should reject ethical standards or respectful and safe boundaries, but that this is yet another case for a truly intersectional understanding of oneself *in relation to* the people we work alongside and with. Rather than ‘social worker’ as an identity, my queer social work may be an *action*, akin to allyship. Instead of filtering my existence through a professional self or articulating myself via a series of practice skills imbued with professionalism, I exist as me *doing* social work. This analogy reinforces that a queered social work is a relational and collaborative interaction. Moreover, it provides a mirror to hold up to our professional standards. If we are to respect the inherent dignity of people; promote social justice; pursue truth and reconciliation; value human relationships; preserve integrity; maintain and respect privacy; and provide competent services (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2024), perhaps we too deserve these in our work.

*This article was originally submitted as coursework during the Summer of 2024 for SWRK-3105H: Queering Social Work. If used by future students for coursework, please cite appropriately <3.*

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