Self-care and Well-being in Social Work Education: Creating New Spaces for Learning

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ABSTRACT: Social work is a profession dedicated to the promotion of human rights and social justice in support of marginalized populations. Those dedicated to the pursuit of this quest will encounter both triumphs and tragedies on their journey. Students encounter classroom learning experiences that challenge their values, beliefs, and assumptions, which can create stress and dilemmas that may exceed their coping capacities. This article examines teaching and learning strategies designed to foster wellness and self-care by reflecting on teaching practices in two required undergraduate social work courses. Through an examination of the professional use of self, and developing wellness plans in field education, teaching and learning strategies are presented to demonstrate the relationship between ethics, self-care, and reflection.

Keywords: wellness; self-care; social work education; field education; student

RESUMÉ: Le service social est une profession consacrée à la promotion des droits humains et de la justice sociale. Il soutient également les populations marginalisées. Ceux qui se dévouent à cette quête rencontrent non seulement des triomphes mais aussi des tragédies dans leur chemin. Les étudiants vont faire face à des défis d'apprentissage et à des dilemmes dans la salle de classe qui vont mettre en question leurs valeurs, leurs croyances et leurs capacités de réaction. Dans cet article, nous examinons les stratégies d'apprentissage et d'enseignement qui ont été conçues pour promouvoir le bien-être et les soins personnels par moyen de la réflexion dans deux cours obligatoires dans le programme de service social au premier cycle. Au moyen d'une étude de l'emploi professionnel de soi et du développement des projets de bien-être lors des stages, nous présentons des stratégies d'apprentissage et

d'enseignement pour montrer les relations entre l'éthique, les soins personnels et la réflexion.

Mots clés : le bien-être, les soins personnels, la formation en travail social, le stage pratique, l'étudiant.

In recent years, the social work profession has recognized the importance of health and well-being among social work academics, practitioners, researchers, and students. It has been acknowledged in the literature that wellness and self-care is an ethical imperative for social workers given occupational hazards such as stress, professional burnout, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and secondary stress trauma (Drolet & McLennan, 2016; Monk, 2011). There are persistent and systemic challenges that affect the workplace and social work practice environments. Specifically, neoliberal ideology (Baines, 2011; Rogowski, 2013) has contributed to policies that have promoted the privatization or marketization of public services resulting in less government investment in education (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Hursh, 2001), health (Coburn, 2004); and social services (Dominelli, 2010; Dustin, 2007, Payne & Askeland, 2008; Whitmore & Wilson, 2000). In this challenging context, social workers face increasing pressure to meet the complex needs of the most vulnerable in society with fewer resources (Carniol, 2010; Lundy, 2011). Social work practice is characterized by frequent crisis interventions, high staff turnover, high caseloads, and lack of consistent supervision, which contributes to increased stress (Austin et al., 2013). Women in particular experience the effects of a culture of overwork, stress, and burnout, and this is an important consideration given the over-representation of women in the social work profession. As students learn to be social workers, it is important for them to be prepared for these intersecting and complex issues that affect social work practice.

There is a need for academics and educators to consider health and wellness in the academic environment and in student learning experiences in post-secondary institutions. This is particularly important because many students do not recognize the importance and value of personal well-being in social work education and in social work practice. Social work is a profession dedicated to the promotion of human rights and social justice in support of marginalized populations, and those dedicated to the pursuit of this quest will encounter both triumphs and tragedies on this journey. Students encounter classroom learning experiences that challenge their values, beliefs, and assumptions, which can

create stress and dilemmas that may exceed their coping capacities. Often the importance of wellness emerges in response to a crisis or breakdown due to conflicting and competing demands. Challenges and stressors inherent in academia such as overwork and stress affect the well-being of academics and students alike. Academics strive to foster safe classroom spaces for students to explore these conflicts and dilemmas in their emerging professional lives by modeling skills, reflective practice, and self-care.

This article brings together social work academics in different stages of their careers who reflect on their diverse teaching and learning experiences in promoting wellness and self-care in social work education. A conceptual framework on relational well-being and self-care serves as the lens for understanding wellness. Further, we recognize the multiple ways in which gender, race, class, and diversity affect understandings of wellness, as well as a trauma-informed approach. The emotionality of reflecting on wellness is often a private issue for most social work students. A trauma-informed approach recognizes the importance of creating a safe environment where individuals do not experience further traumatization or re-traumatization.

This article examines teaching and learning strategies designed to foster wellness and self-care by reflecting on teaching practices in two required undergraduate social work courses. Through an examination of the professional use of self, developing wellness plans in field education, and professional supervision, examples from the classroom will be highlighted to demonstrate the relationship between ethics, self-care, and reflection in a course titled "Professional Use of Self." In the field of social work, the professional use of self refers to the combining of knowledge, values, and skills gained in social work education with aspects of the professional's personal self, including personality traits, belief systems, life experiences, and social identity (Dewane, 2006). In this course, a series of self-care assessments are self-administered by students related to time management, reducing stress, and healthy eating. A further example of the course "Senior Practicum" will highlight self-care plans used for direct practicum learning. Assignments such as the development of wellness and self-care plans, and field education contracts are examined to include the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of well-being. The expected outcomes of the article are to: inform how academics can create a learning environment that encourages health and well-being; enhance theoretical understanding of relational wellness, critical reflection and self-care; and support reflection on the professional use of self. "Learning more about how and why we

see things as we do will allow us to understand more about the meanings others make of their (and our) lives, and to locate ourselves (and others) in more complex and meaningful ways" (Devault, 1999, p. 210).

Understanding the Importance of Self-care and Well-being

Self-care and well-being among helping professionals is an integral component to social work practice and education. There is a growing body of literature in the human services field that recognizes the impact of indirect trauma on helping professionals generally, including students in a variety of academic programs. Additionally, there is an increased identification of the need to incorporate education and training related to the concept of "professional self-care" into the curriculum.

The professional effects, both positive and negative, of working with marginalized people in our society are important issues to address in the classroom. The terms *secondary traumatic stress* (STS), *vicarious trauma* (VT), *compassion fatigue*, and *burnout* are often used interchangeably to describe the occurrence of professional risks of our social work practice (Harr & Moore, 2011; Knight, 2013; Newell & MacNeil, 2010), but there are differences, including how they are described, understood, and applied in various disciplines. As such, for clarity in understanding the entirety of these effects, each of these terms will be defined and then linked to the relevance for social work education specifically.

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is captured within the context of indirect trauma for helping professionals. It is defined as "the experience of being traumatized through exposure via interpersonal interactions to others' primary traumatic experiences" (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014, p. 429-430). Knight (2013) describes STS as being similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), where practitioners can experience trauma or thoughts related to this via a response or reaction to the stories of the service users they work with.

Vicarious trauma (VT) is defined as a "cumulative transformation in the inner experience of the therapist as a result of empathic engagement with the client's traumatic material" (Knight, 2013, p. 227). Hesse (2002) identifies some of the effects of VT as including loss of esteem (self and others), becoming critical, engaging in cynicism, losing faith in humanity, experiencing challenges with relationships, and other related deficits.

Burnout, in the human services field*,* is described as "a state of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual exhaustion resulting from chronic exposure or involvement in human service work" (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014, p. 429). Harr and Moore (2011) differentiated burnout from the broader realm of indirect trauma in the sense that it is not confined to working with people who have experienced trauma in some form; it is also impacted by such things as organizational demands, conflicts, over-arching working conditions, and lack of job satisfaction.

Compassion fatigue is "a syndrome consisting of a combination of the symptoms of STS and professional burnout" (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014, p. 429-430). It is also described as a construct that includes an inability to empathize with service users (Collins & Long, 2003; Knight, 2013). Harr and Moore (2011) added that compassion fatigue is comprised of multiple symptoms that produce cognitive, emotional, and behavioural challenges that can impact professional social workers' personal lives as well as overall performance at work.

In a profession like social work, where professionals work with vulnerable and marginalized populations that experience traumatic or adverse events, there is an increased risk of experiencing indirect trauma in the course of doing the job (Harr & Moore, 2011; Knight, 2013). Newell and Nelson-Gardell (2014) suggested that in addition to the risks of experiencing indirect trauma via service users worked with, organizational stressors such as increasing workload demands amidst shrinking fiscal resources add to this risk. Cunningham (2004) concurs with the identification of an increasing prevalence of risks related to social work practice through the work that they do and suggests that there is a growing need to prepare social work students for this reality in the classroom.

Professional self-care is a concept that is being promoted to counter the impact of the possible negative effects of practice on professional social workers. Newell and Nelson-Gardell (2014) defined professional self-care as "the utilization of skills and strategies by social workers to maintain their own personal, familial, emotional, and spiritual needs while attending to the needs and demands of their clients" (p. 431). Bloomquist, Wood, Friedmeyer-Trainor and Kim (2015) described professional self-care as "actions to promote professional health and competence" (p. 294). Actions that foster and promote personal and professional wellness encompass physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual spheres that allow helping professionals to both cope and thrive in practice at all levels (Bloomquist et al., 2015; Newell &

Nelson-Gardell, 2014). There is a call for professional social workers, students, organizations, and institutions of higher education to integrate training in relation to professional self-care across the spectrum of practice levels and arenas for effective prevention and risk reduction (Harr & Moore, 2011; Knight, 2010; Knight, 2013; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Professional self-care serves to mitigate and moderate the impact of indirect trauma, hence is a prominent domain that is emerging for social work education (Bloomquist et al., 2015; Csiernik & Adams, 2002; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014; O'Halloran & O'Halloran, 2001).

A review of the literature related to social work practice suggests that social work students new to field education can be especially vulnerable given their general lack of experience in social work practice settings (Harr & Moore, 2011; Knight, 2013; Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Without an active awareness of need recognition, helping professionals, as well as students, are susceptible to placing themselves at risk for burnout, compassion fatigue, moral distress, and vicarious trauma (Austin, Rankel, Kagan, Bergum & Lemermeyer, 2005; Austin et al., 2013; Monk, 2011; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016).

In addition to this inexperience of social work students, other factors appear to pose some barriers to addressing issues related to professional risks in the field milieu. Newell and Nelson-Gardell (2014) suggested that there is some resistance among field instructors and agency supervisors to engage in dialogue with students about reactions to service users and the trauma experiences they may reveal, particularly if a student has a history of trauma in his/her own life experience. Students can also demonstrate some reluctance to disclose challenges with trauma experiences out of fear or concern that it may be viewed as a "weakness or limitation" by field instructors (Newell & MacNeil, 2010).

Drolet and McLennan (2016) developed a framework on relational well-being and self-care that draws from relational theory and the literature on wellness and self-care. Social work as a profession recognizes the importance of relationships and the context of the environment—the person/environment or the person-in-situation (Saari 2005). Shier and Graham (2010) discussed how the relationships we develop as practitioners have a significant impact on our overall subjective well-being. There is a need to consider relational wellness and self-care in our relationships with ourselves and others, and this is evident in the role of support for student learners (Drolet & McLennan, 2016). A

framework on relational self-care and wellness values relationships with the self, and with others (Drolet & McLennan, 2016). This framework on relational well-being and self-care serves as the conceptual lens for understanding wellness in social work education.

There is an expanding recognition of the need to incorporate education and training within the social work curriculum on issues related to professional self-care and the impact and influence of indirect trauma. This call for training is inclusive of field instructors and agency supervisors, as well as field seminar instructors in order to more fully support students in adequately preparing for the future challenges of social work practice (Harr & Moore, 2011). Awareness of the impact of indirect trauma and the importance of professional self-care strategies are crucial to prevention efforts (Bride, Radey & Figley, 2007).

Creating Space for Students to Explore Well-being and Construct Self-care Plans

In the University of Calgary's Bachelor of Social Work Program in the Central and Northern Alberta Region (CNAR) located in Edmonton, there are two mandatory social work courses that offer students formal opportunities to explore their lived experiences of well-being and practice self-care: Professional Use of Self (SOWK361) and Senior Practicum II (SOWK413). Often the senior practicum is an intensely stressful time for students as they grapple with increased independence, honing practice skills, and refining ethical understandings while integrating theory. Adjusting to the pace and complexity of the work while building a framework of practice with social justice is challenging. There is a growing recognition that social work is full of trauma; and it is understood that students are in a field that is characterized by exposure to significant traumatic situations.

Faculty have advocated for the inclusion of self-care in social work curriculum because it is viewed as a key competency that promotes self-awareness for professionals to recognize their needs and to balance the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional demands of working in a helping profession (Rowe, 2006-2007). Impaired recognition of needs may limit helping professionals to recognize stress and fatigue that interferes with their ability to effectively and ethically practice social work. In the spirit of learning from the lived experiences of professional social workers who have shared narratives of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma, social work students are invited to explore their well-being and construct a meaningful self-care practice that will

support their well-being in the short-term and provide them with a reference of self-awareness and self-care techniques that will support their transition from student to professional social worker (Rowe, 2006-2007).

Building upon self-reflection as individual faculty members we came together to make time for a group reflection on self-care and wellness. Over the course of a semester we engaged in interactions to share and learn from each other's experiences. This article examines the result of our reflection on teaching and learning strategies designed to foster wellness and self-care in two required undergraduate social work courses.

Professional Use of Self (SOWK 361)

Five years ago, the University of Calgary's Faculty of Social Work recognized the gap in social work education concerning professional self care. At the time, there was an ethics course and it was thought that combining the ethics course and writing skills with self-care would be appropriate. At first, emphasis was placed on ethics, but each year the course content on self-care further developed and evolved with the addition of new resources. The present course includes a focus on ethical decision making, self-care, writing skills, and academic integrity. The Professional Use of Self course is a mandatory course that social work students enrol during their first semester in the Bachelor of Social Work program (CNAR). Over the course of the semester, students take part in a variety of in-class exercises and assignments that guide a self-inquiry process of well-being, identify a self-care plan, and construct a self-care portfolio. The course also provides articles, videos, and speakers to address some of the challenges in working as a social worker, addressing issues of compassion fatigue, moral distress, and vicarious trauma that coincides with the self-care plan activity in order to strengthen the importance of wellness as a social worker.

The self-inquiry process consists of students completing a series of quizzes, reflections, assessments, and inventories on personal wellness, self-care, professional vitality, stress, time management, procrastination, and caregiving personality styles. After students complete the self-inquiry process, they identify dominant themes of well-being that are concerning to them and construct a self-care plan. The adopted self-care plan includes eight domains of well-being (mind, body, emotions, spiritual, work, social/relationships, and two self-identified areas). In each domain, students identify their current practice and a new practice that they are prepared to commit to over the semester. These commitments

are documented as goal statements that can be observed, measured, and evaluated. The self-care plans also require students to identify barriers to participating in self-care and their proposed strategies to address the barriers. Upon review and approval by the instructor, students proceed with activating their self-care plans for the remainder of the semester. When reviewing the self-care plans, involved faculty noted the initial drafts of self-care plans were heavily populated with activities that would require additional time and resources that may not be consistently available to students. Students were invited to reflect on what is realistic for them to commit to in their self-care practice with the multiple and competing demands placed on them.

Another theme amongst students related to the nature of proposed goals. In the first drafts of the self-care plans, students identified unclear and broad goals that did not specify rationale, measurement, and outcome. For example, under the physical domain, students would write "physical exercise." They would then be asked to identify what kind of physical activity, how long, and how many times a week. Under the spiritual domain, students would decide to go to church. They would be encouraged to be specific (e.g., how many times a week and for how long). Being specific helped the students to also complete a "What Do I Do with My Time?" exercise. Setting out on a self-care plan without clear goals may not result in outcomes that align with personal expectations. Consequently, faculty consulted with students to identify goals and select activities that were meaningful to them and aligned with their expectations.

The final required course assignments requested students to construct a self-care portfolio consisting of their original self-care plan with instructor feedback; revised self-care plan; completed self-inquiry quizzes, inventories, and assessments; documentation of self-care activities completed; and a reflection of the experiences and impacts of actively engaging in a self-care plan over the semester. Evaluations of the course showed that students valued the self-care plan activities and self-care final plan and found the process challenged their thinking about professional practice. The self-care plan is then carried over to the next year where they are re-examined in the Social Work Senior Practicum class and revised accordingly.

Social Work Senior Practicum (SOWK 413)

The Senior Social Work Practicum (SOWK 413) is a fourth year mandatory course for social work students designed to integrate their learning across social work courses and to apply their learning in a supervised practice environment. Students are

required to complete practicum learning agreements that reflect knowledge and skills they would like to develop in five practice objectives: professional social work identity; generalist social work practice; reflective practice; competence with diversity; and social policy and social justice. As part of their learning agreements, faculty request students to bring their self-care plans from the year before and to identify and/or revise a self-care plan they are prepared to invest in over the course of the semester. The adopted course template for a self-care plan is the same format used in the Professional Use of Self course. In the practicum course, students are invited to locate and complete their own self-inquiry process and determine areas of well-being and self-care activities. Students are invited to present their draft wellness and self-care plan in the first field visit. Self-care practices and activities are identified on a weekly basis as part of their required practicum hours. At the required course practicum evaluations, students, field supervisors, and faculty review the self-care plan and activities and discuss its impact on the student's well-being. This discussion is led by the student and intended to be an opportunity for students to highlight how their self-care plan is influencing their well-being.

As we collaborate with preceptors, it becomes apparent that self-care constructs are critical, and yet need to respond with the reality of workplace environments. Organizations influence how workers experience trauma, and often trauma is exacerbated by the organizational culture (Maltzman, 2011). As the senior practicum unfolds, we find that dialogues that encompass self-care strategies can become deeper, transformative conversations. There is a growing recognition and acceptance that this field is very challenging, and that while we need to always foster self-care practices, we also need to expand our understanding of stress-resistant practices. We begin to explore ideas of trauma to include the idea of being trauma stewards; of understanding that we are not working alone and we alone do not need to bear the burden that trauma brings (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009). This is a concept that helps to broaden the discourse around ideas of trauma response, not only for social work practicum students, but perhaps also for practicing social workers.

Discussion

Trauma stewardship shifts the emphasis in trauma exposure from the individual to a focus on collaboration, collectivity, intention, self awareness, and a connection to the outer world (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009). As educators, it is our responsibility to understand and impart that "… it is a gift to be

present when people deal with trauma; it reminds us of our responsibility to care and to nurture our capacity to help" (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009, p.xii). Along with helping students understand this, comes a commitment to assisting students in recognizing that their response to trauma is informed by their own personal history and the organizational structure they are in, and exists within a context of societal injustice. The senior practicum seminar and professional use of self courses are characterized by reflection and group dialogue about these responses. These dialogues further encompass articulating individual strategies while expanding upon collective ideas such as group grounding practices, vicarious resilience, collective ethics, and the building of solidarity teams (Edelkott, Engstrom, Hernandez-Wolf, & Gangsei, 2016; Reynolds, 2010a; Reynolds, 2010b; Reynolds, 2011; van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009). There is an honouring of the reality that students are vulnerable, and to this end we continuously explore ideas of co-constructing classrooms that feel safe while encouraging creativity and solidarity.

As we engage students in witnessing and knowing each other, we are motivated by the construct of the classroom as a collaborative learning community, one that is characterized by thoughtful reflection, safety, and growth. We hope that as students approach their graduation, they have moved ideas of self-care into strategies, along with a recognition that we live in relation to each other. Relational ways of being are felt and known, along with a recognition that our resilience and strength is in sharing. It is our desire that students can take their sense of a collaborative learning community into the field, and that they will continue to build on these ideas. We continue to learn how to engage in these practices in the classroom. There is a growing recognition that there is also a need to engage in these dialogues with field supervisors (Drolet & McLennan, 2016). We see that some of our field supervisors are starting to do this across agencies, particularly in the inner city. This has led to some interesting conversations and continued hope for future collaborations between students, faculty, and field instructors.

As part of recognizing the value of well-being in social work education and practice, we as academics have contemplated our own experiences in social work practice, as well as working in an environment in which we are asked to do more with less resources, not unlike social services agencies. As academics, we need to stress the importance of self-care and wellness to our students as well as to maintain our practices in our own self-care. With this two-way sharing with students of our own strategies and learning,

and encouraging students to create and evolve their strategies, we are not only preparing them for ethical practice, but keeping each of us accountable for our own self-care and wellness practice.

Conclusion

Self-care and well-being in social work are of growing concern in a profession that deals with the most marginalized and vulnerable people in society. The literature identifies professional risks that affect a social worker's ability to work effectively in their workplace and to meet the needs of the people they serve. Increasingly, social work education aims to create new spaces for self-care and well-being. Two examples from the University of Calgary's Faculty of Social Work show how this was carried out in the classroom. Moving these risks from the individual problem-solving responsibility to focus on relationships and agency climate is important to this dialogue. A self-care and well-being approach is a preventative measure ensuring students are well prepared for practice upon graduation and is an ethical imperative for social work educators. Collaboration with agencies, institutions of higher education, and students concerning self-care and well-being in practice will better prepare students for a successful career in social work.

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