

A Qualitative Examination of the Experiences of Christian Students in Social Work Educational Programs

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While perception of religious discrimination doesn't guarantee that discrimination has occurred, it is difficult to ignore the growing body of literature that emphasizes the negative aspects of faith integration and the social work profession. On the other hand, many Christian students thrive in social work educational programs; some have not experienced discrimination and some have used those challenging experiences in positive ways. Some frame their experiences in terms other than discrimination, reflecting excitement and energy at the opportunity to navigate plurality and different ways of thinking at every turn. This study presents and discusses the results of a qualitative research study that explores the experiences of Christian students in social work educational programs. A thematic analysis of four focus group interviews reveals perceptions of both obstacles and opportunities related to the integration of faith and practice in social work education.

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS' (NASW) (1999) focus on cultural competence in its Code of Ethics includes spiritual and religious diversity. Accreditation standards established by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2008) require that social work educational programs demonstrate student competency in practicing with diverse clients and populations-at-risk, which includes diversity regarding spirituality and religion. In other words, a professional mandate supports research focusing on spirituality, religion, and social work practice.

Many Christian students are drawn to the social work profession because of a desire to live out religious mandates that call for service to others

and the promotion of social justice. Anecdotally, many Christian students have positive educational experiences and are able to tackle the integration of faith and social work successfully. These experiences, however, are not captured in the professional literature. Recent research indicates that many Christian students have negative experiences in social work educational programs related to their faith. In fact, the argument is made that Christians, particularly those with more conservative theological beliefs, experience discrimination in the social work profession, whether from clients, other students, practitioners, field personnel, or faculty members (Hodge, 2006, 2007; Hodge & Ressler, 2005; Thyer & Myers, 2009).

The goal of this study is to document the experiences of Christian social work students, so that their experiences can help students, faculty members, and social work programs with the task of helping future students to successfully integrate their faith with social work practice. Two major research questions will be explored. First, what are the experiences of Christian students in social work programs related to their faith? Second, and more specifically, what opportunities related to faith have students experienced that have contributed to their success in social work education, and what challenges or obstacles related to faith have students experienced in social work education?

Literature Review

The importance of spirituality and religion as part of social work education, practice, and research is well supported in the literature, including both quantitative and qualitative studies with student, faculty, and practitioner samples spanning the past 20 years (Canda, 1988; Dudley & Helfgott, 1990; Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992; Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994; Derezotes, 1995; Derezotes & Evans, 1995; Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999; Canda & Furman, 1999; Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2005). A holistic understanding of human behavior requires social workers to acknowledge and respect *client* spirituality and/or religiosity and is what seems to drive the profession's attempts to better integrate these concepts into the practice context. In fact, recent research has explored and supported the use of spirituality and religion in both assessment and intervention (Cascio, 1998; Gilbert, 2000; Hodge, 2003, 2005; Mattison, Jayaratne, & Croxton, 2000; Praglin, 2004; Sheridan, 2004).

One challenge to the scientific study of spirituality and religion is the lack of standardized conceptual definitions for both terms. There are almost as many differing definitions as there are research studies, although there are certainly some similarities among them (Bullis, 1996; Canda, 1983, 1986, 1988; Canda & Furman, 1999; Carroll, 1998, 2001; Derezotes, 1995; Hodge, 2000, 2005; Hodge & McGrew, 2005). Because of the qualitative nature of this study, definitions were not provided so that participants' re-

sponses would be shaped by their perceptions, not those of the researcher.

Interest in the integration of spirituality and religion with practice has been expressed in the context of other professional disciplines, including medicine and nursing. In the book, *Handbook of Religion and Health* (Koenig, 2001) alone, more than 1,200 studies are presented on the general topic of religion, faith, and spirituality in mental and physical health.

Despite the proliferation of research related to spirituality, religion, and social work practice in recent decades, relatively little attention has been given to the role of spirituality and religion in the life of the social worker and the subsequent impact that has on the practice context. Stewart, Koeske, and Koeske (2006) found that practitioners who were more spiritual in their personal lives were more likely to utilize spirituality and religion in their practice with clients. Hodge & Boddie (2007) examined the relationship between social workers' personal spiritual characteristics and how they conceptualize the terms *spirituality* and *religion*. Hodge (2002) suggests that "the largely nontheistic worldviews of social workers inform their definitions of spirituality" (p. 39) and in turn affect how they operationalize or utilize spirituality in practice. For some practitioners, social work is understood as a "calling," a vocation rather than a career, a spiritual activity in and of itself, as it provides a context for finding meaning and purpose in life (Canda, 1988, 1999; Singletary, 2005). Additionally, the spiritual and/or religious roots on which the social work profession was founded cannot be ignored (Leighninger, 2000). Social work has much in common with the tenets of the major world religions, and all religions are concerned in some way about spiritual issues.

Most significant to the purposes of this study is the research that highlights the ways in which Christian social workers, including students, practitioners, and faculty, have perceived hostile and discriminatory attitudes and actions towards them by other social workers. In a mixed methods study, Hodge & Ressler (2005) explored the perceptions of religious discrimination in social work among members of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work who were also MSW students at three state universities and who were enrolled in elective courses on spirituality and/or religion (n=222). Social workers who affirmed a more conservative theological orientation were more likely to report personal discrimination than were those who affirmed a more liberal theological orientation. However, regardless of theological orientation, a "sizable number" of respondents were aware of clients and colleagues who had experienced religious discrimination and were aware of laws and policies that discriminate on religious grounds. The qualitative thematic analysis revealed that respondents perceived discrimination at the institutional level, namely in the social work educational programs themselves.

Hodge (2006), in a study of MSW students from various Christian faith traditions (n=391), found that there were *no differences* in percep-

tions of religious discrimination taking place in social work educational programs between students who self-identified as religious and those who self-identified as non-religious, concluding that perhaps social work educational programs are making progress towards “fostering a learning environment that is devoid of religious discrimination.” However, in the same study, students who self-identified as “evangelical” (and therefore assumed by the researcher to be “theologically conservative”) were more likely than theologically liberal and mainline Christians to perceive religious discrimination as a problem in their social work programs. In a later study of MSW students in secular social work programs, Hodge (2007) found that “theologically conservative Protestants were significantly more likely to report experiencing discrimination because of their religious beliefs than were evangelical Protestants, who, in turn, were more likely than were theologically liberal or mainline Protestants” (p. 59).

Thyer & Myers (2009) provide several current examples of religious discrimination in social work educational programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, gathered unsystematically through personal e-mails, phone conversations, and reports and articles that are available to the public via the Internet. These authors conclude that discrimination against theologically conservative students by the social work educational system is a socially unjust practice that needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

Rick Chamiec-Case, Executive Director of NACSW (personal communication, March, 2009), has identified several key areas of tension that often come up for Christian students in social work educational programs. These include: the admissions process, internships, class assignments/projects, grades, issues of dismissal from programs, conflicts (overt or covert) with faculty, and comments made by faculty and other students during discussions.

While *perception* of religious discrimination doesn't guarantee that discrimination has occurred, it is difficult to ignore this growing body of literature that emphasizes the negative aspects of faith integration and the social work education. On the other hand, many Christian students thrive in social work educational programs; some have not experienced discrimination and some have used challenging experiences in positive ways. Some frame their experiences in terms other than discrimination, reflecting excitement and energy at the opportunity to navigate plurality and different ways of thinking at every turn. These voices, too, need a place in the literature. At this juncture, a more in-depth analysis of the experiences of Christian students and the nuances between perception, reality, opportunities, and obstacles seems important.

Methodology

The methodology for this study reflects the qualitative philosophy of sampling, data collection, and data analysis. It assumes that the gathering of data using participant narratives will provide a deeper, richer understanding, in their own words, of the experiences of Christian students in social work educational programs. Specifically, this study used focus groups as a way to “facilitate the exploration of collective memories” (Kamberilis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903) and “allow for the proliferation of multiple meanings and perspectives as well as for interactions between and among them” (p. 904). Having participants with similar and diverse experiences together in groups may create a “dynamic environment” (Levy, O’Grady, Wish, & Arria, 2005, p. 1431) that affects 1) the quality of the narratives and 2) the level of support and validation participants feel in sharing their experiences. Practically speaking, focus groups are more economical in terms of time and money than are individual interviews and the overall sample size can be larger than it might otherwise be with the budget and personnel constraints associated with the project.

Recruitment

Using a venue in which a number of potential participants were already congregating, two focus groups were scheduled during the 2009 Annual Convention of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work. Convention participants were notified of the focus groups and asked to contact the researcher if interested in participating or to “nominate” others who might be interested. Two additional focus groups were scheduled in the greater Boston area using a snowball sampling technique in which the researcher used her professional contacts to recruit potential participants. Recruitment was purposeful in terms of securing a sample that was varied regarding region, denominational affiliation, gender, race and ethnicity, the types auspices of programs from which participants graduated (i.e., public secular, private secular, private faith-based), and levels of social work education (i.e., BSW, MSW, and Ph.D.).

Criteria for Sample

Participants were screened using an inclusion criteria questionnaire developed for this particular study. They were either recent graduates (within the past five years) or current students who were nearing graduation from accredited programs (BSW or MSW) or doctoral programs in social work. Participants self-identified as Christian (and later categorized themselves by denominational affiliation and on a theologically liberal/theologically conservative continuum). Finally, to be included in the study, participants

had to be able to identify specific experiences, whether opportunities or challenges, related to their faith in social work education.

The final sample consisted of four focus groups made up of six to eight participants each (n=30). Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the total sample.

Table 1: Selected Demographic Characteristics of Subjects (n=30)

Gender Female Male	77% 23%
Ethnicity White African-American/Other Black	93% 7%
Age Range Mean Age	21-54 years 32
Geographical Location Northeast Midwest Southeast West	40% 44% 14% 2%
Highest Level of Education BSW MSW Ph.D.	23% 60% 17%
Self-Ranking on Theological Scale More liberal Somewhere in the middle More conservative	30% 37% 33%

The make-up of the four groups differed in that two of the groups were made up of participants living in the Boston area and the other two were more geographically diverse. The two Boston area groups were MSWs (some also had a BSW) and the other two groups contained MSWs, BSW-only participants, and participants with doctoral level education.

Procedure

Participants were asked to participate in a focus group at a prearranged location. Upon arrival, the facilitator reviewed the informed consent document with the participants and asked them to sign two copies and return one to the facilitator. Participants were free to ask any questions. Approval to conduct this study was given through the Institutional Review Board of Eastern Nazarene College.

Next, participants were asked to complete a brief demographic information questionnaire. This included some of the same questions that were already asked of participants through the inclusion criteria questionnaire, but in order for those responses to be used in the study, they had to be asked again after participants completed the informed consent process. The guidelines for the approximately one-hour focus group were discussed, including confidentiality. The facilitator used a semi-structured interview protocol to guide the discussion (see Appendix 1), which was audio-taped and later transcribed. Some written notes were also taken during the focus group, mainly for the purpose of asking clarifying follow-up questions.

Data Analysis

Transcripts of the focus group sessions were analyzed, line-by-line, looking for themes related to the research questions (e.g., what are the obstacles participants talked about? What are the opportunities participants talked about?). However, *specific* themes were allowed to emerge from the data. Findings were linked back to the narratives using quotations directly from the transcripts as one attempt at validation.

Results

Themes which emerged from the data analysis process were grouped into four main categories: 1) obstacles connected to faith, 2) opportunities connected to faith, 3) advice for Christian students entering social work programs, and 4) advice for faculty in helping students acclimate. Each category is discussed in the summary below, using quotations from participant narratives that clearly demonstrate each theme.

Obstacles Connected to Faith

When participants were asked about obstacles or challenges that arose in the context of their faith while enrolled in a social work educational program, several themes emerged.

First, participants expressed what they felt is a *limited diversity in political ideology in social work programs*. For example, the “hot button” issues that are often associated with conflict between social work values and religious values, including abortion and homosexuality, were treated as if there were no room for a difference of opinion on those topics. One participant said:

You'd be in class, and it was assumed who you were voting for. It was assumed that everybody was on the same page about things.

Another said, about her classroom experiences in a doctoral program:

I felt as if there was sort of an assumption that if you are a social worker, you should automatically believe this way and well, of course, these policies should be this way of course, you know, looking at macro things as well as micro things, it ought to just be a certain way because you're a social worker... Do I feel comfortable to share that not every social worker will have those beliefs whether they're a person of faith or not?

Even some students who attended faith-based social work programs echoed this sentiment.

A second theme that emerged related to obstacles centered on the perception that there is a general *lack of acceptance of religious diversity in social work education, particularly Christianity*. Participants talked frequently about the assumptions that were made about them when people in their respective social work programs, both faculty and other students, learned of their Christian identity. One participant said:

What I look at is the use of the term diversity. The program was very strong on diversity—diversity towards this group, diversity towards that group, but except when it came to diversity towards religion.

Another participant spoke about an experience she had with a supervisor when interviewing for an MSW internship; he said, after noticing she had graduated from a faith-based BSW program, “You must be one of those born-again,” and continued to put her down because of her faith. She said:

... and when I left that interview, I kindly said to him, “I feel like you were very disrespectful. I feel like you don't know me, and you're making assumptions about my faith personally.”

Third, participants emphasized that *individual personalities and developmental factors affect how a student is able to respond to the obstacles and challenges*. In other words, two students may face the same experience, but respond to and view that experience differently. For example, one may see it as a challenge, while the other may see that same experience as an opportunity. One participant said:

So I don't know, it was kind of an individual thing, how this individual is going to respond to someone challenging their belief system.

On the other hand, students who are further along in their lifespan development (older students, for example, who have had more life experience) may respond to criticism differently or may be more flexible in their views

of faith. One participant said, when speaking about a time when she was able to offer advice to a younger Christian colleague:

I think [it's important] being an older person and having a younger person hear me say "It's okay. I've referred girls that talked to me about abortion. You don't have to counsel them on that but you can't deprive them of the service."

A fourth theme that emerged related to obstacles is that, *while the profession agrees that spirituality is important for social work practice, there is little purposeful discussion or dialogue in the classroom*. Many participants expressed the concern that the classroom environment does not feel like a safe place for exploring faith and spirituality and how it connects to practice. One participant said:

I saw that as an obstacle from the beginning of my program; you know, is this a safe environment to really explore academically my Christian beliefs and social work?

In addition, some participants felt like faith and spirituality was the "elephant" in the room—you know it's there, but you don't want to acknowledge it. One participant literally used the metaphor when he said:

Here we are at a secular university that's known for its spirituality and social work [scholarship] and have faculty and staff that are revered in the profession, yet there was not—it was not very open at all to you discussing your religious faith. It was kind of like the white elephant at the table.

Opportunities Connected to Faith

When participants were asked to share about specific opportunities related to faith in their social work educational programs, several themes emerged.

First, participants offered several thoughtful insights regarding *different postures that they, and others, can take towards obstacles*. Some looked at obstacles as learning opportunities, as expressed by this participant who said:

I benefitted tremendously from...sitting and listening to the many different stories about the way the church affected different people...I think it helped me tremendously in getting a better understanding as to why the perceptions of the church are as they are...especially amongst those people who felt jilted by the church or jilted by Christians—I think there were some shared [negative] experiences.

Others saw the challenges as opportunities to help dispel the assumptions and stereotypes that are sometimes attributed to Christians. One participant said:

When one of my friends found out I was a Christian, he was confused. He didn't know what it meant to me. Being a Christian means different things to different people, but in his view it meant like a right-winger in the South, that kind of stuff. And he was confused at first.

Others asserted that tension is a good thing in an academic setting and should not necessarily be looked upon as a negative. One participant said:

You have those tensions. You talk about them, but it's on an academic level almost. You don't personalize it. You don't make it 'this is me against this person' or 'this is me against another value.'

Finally, a few participants felt that some Christian students may perceive certain experiences as challenges because they anticipate certain obstacles. One participant put it this way: "I wasn't looking for anything, so I didn't find it."

A second theme emerged around the opportunity to *develop connections and support networks with other Christians in social work*. One opportunity is to connect with other students of faith who can be helpful in debriefing classroom and field experiences and in gaining other perspectives on perceived challenges. One participant said of another Christian student:

He was really a big support throughout the program—having another person who was a Christian, and he and I had some different beliefs at times, but we could, even just sorting those through and talking about that was really helpful, talking outside of class.

Other participants cited opportunities to connect with both Christian faculty members in their programs and other faculty members who are open to discussions of faith and faith integration. One participant said:

I did have a relationship with one professor who I was able to talk about faith with and kind of explore that and was very encouraged in that setting.

Another participant described an experience in which she had been able to speak up in class about her faith perspective and the subsequent encounter she had with a supportive faculty member:

My professor came up to me later and she said, “I think you just got the respect of your peers.” She said, “Thank you for reminding us that not all of us think the same...and that we, as a group, can be diverse and work with diverse populations without discrimination.”

Still other participants saw opportunities for prayer support as a Christian—not just for other Christians but also for all students. For example, one participant said:

And then when some of my other friends were going through hard times—I mean, I let them know that I was praying for them. And if they needed to talk, they can, and they did. Again, we used each other as a support system.

Finally, some participants saw opportunities as a person of faith to seek out practicum situations in agencies where the integration of faith could be an integral part of the internship experience. One participant said:

One [option] was at a Christian not-for-profit. The other was in a school social work public school setting and [through the interview] I was able to extract that faith was a part of [the supervisor's] life and that we would be able to converse on that level.

Advice for Christian Students Entering Social Work Educational Programs

One piece of advice participants offered to Christian students preparing to enter social work educational programs is *to consider the faith integration piece as part of an overall “best fit” analysis when deciding which school to attend*. One participant said:

I would say for the Christian social work student, they should research appropriately before choosing their school. I mean...there are many social work schools you could go to, find an appropriate environment.

Another participant said:

If you find you can't be there as a Christian, if your faith informs your practice in a way that's not acceptable, then find a place where you can do that.

Another piece of advice is *to reach out to other Christians in your social work program* for support and mentoring, and for creating opportunities for dialogue outside the classroom. One participant said:

There's an incredible resource that faith [provides]—faith is about fellowship, talking with other Christian social workers. Use it in a way that's most helpful for you.

Another participant said:

I think that whatever your program is that if you can find someone that can be a mentor to you within your program, whether it be the person assigned to you or somebody who just naturally becomes that person in your program—I feel like if you feel you have someone with some wisdom and experience, they'll help you learn how to navigate those difficult corners you're going to hit while you're going through the educational system.

A third piece of advice is to *be willing and open to sharing your own story*—this can break down barriers and dispel some of the stereotypes that might be out there about Christianity. One participant said:

Just be willing to share kind of your story and your value system is important, because there's a lot of myths and a lot of misperceptions about Christians...I think it's important to put your story out there so people at least know, well, if I have questions about this, I can talk to them.

Another participant said:

Be yourself. Everything. If your faith is part of you, then it's who you are. What guides who you are, and what leads you. And you need to acknowledge that, I think, and just go with it.

Next, participants advised Christian students to *be open to allowing your beliefs to change* throughout the educational process. One participant said:

Social work education had a big impact on my faith. And I think it made me more like Jesus, but my belief set changed quite a bit through that process.

Another participant said:

I was concerned that my faith would make it hard for me to be a social worker because of my stance on certain things. But, that's so changed over the years because of school. That I've been able to really understand that no matter what I believe, I don't have the right to force that onto anybody. At the end of the day, everybody makes their own choice.

Finally, participants encouraged Christian students to *embrace, rather than fear, the secular environment*. One participant said:

I think for me the advice I would give is to just not hold on so tight, and allow yourself to experience an environment that's not Christian, only because that's...the world you're going to work in.

Another participant said:

It was important for me to allow the program to affect me. That first semester, I was very defensive. I think that if we're open to allowing that program to affect you, you know, it doesn't have to threaten your faith. For me, it made my faith much richer and, you know, meaningful.

Advice for Christian Faculty in Social Work Educational Programs

Participants really want to see an *explicit integration of faith and social work in the classroom*. They encourage Christian faculty in particular to create a safe environment for these dialogues to occur, and this advice can be applied to non-Christian faculty as well. One participant said:

Professors need to have more sensitivity about these issues [faith] and be open as an educational facility, because it could really impact somebody's experience and their ability to learn.

Another participant said:

I would love to have faculty create a safe environment where we can have basic ground rules that it's okay to talk about these topics because we need to talk about our personal faith, how we're integrating that—we need to dialogue. But we need to do it in a way that respects your personal dignity and my personal dignity even if we come from different ends of the spectrum and that we're focusing on those core themes of human dignity, of we're all created in the image of God.

Participants specifically addressed faculty who teach in faith-based settings to *better prepare students for secular settings*, including MSW programs. One participant from a small, Christian liberal arts college said:

I felt like I had a good foundation so that when I went to the secular university where they didn't talk about Christianity or spirituality and social work, I had a good framework and foundation to move into the Master's program.

On the other hand, another participant in a similar undergraduate program said the opposite:

I went straight to graduate school at a secular university and I was really miserable my first semester, because I had not, I had been very much in the Christian bubble and didn't feel equipped to deal with the secular university.

A third participant wanted more preparation for defending the faith perspective in secular settings:

Knowing what to do when I get into grad school and it's a state school and people don't like what I have to say all the time. I want to know how to defend that.

Lastly, several participants spoke to the importance of *introducing students to the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)* and encouraging them to become members and to utilize all the helpful resources offered by NACSW. It is important to note here that two of the focus groups took place at an NACSW conference, comprised of participants who had already been exposed to the organization and found value in it. One participant said:

And I tell you, NACSW was a very good shock absorber for me. It was a good soft landing for me.

Another participant said:

Join NACSW as fast as possible.

A third participant said:

The professor of the class was a part of NACSW and she said, "Have you joined this yet?" I got some reassurance that [NACSW] would be a place for me, a place where I could find that support in the integration of faith and practice—knowing that this organization includes all ends of the spectrum.

Discussion

These findings depict a fascinatingly diverse spectrum of perceptions among Christian students of their experiences in social work educational programs. While many participants in this study experienced situations that were perceived as issues with which they wrestled, others did not seem to perceive their experiences in the same way. Some participants might say, "Yes, as a Christian, I had to deal with issues that I would not otherwise have," whereas others might say, "I had few issues." Some participants who did identify challenges also perceived those challenges as opportu-

nities—opportunities for self-growth, critical thinking, and preparation for a profession requiring cultural competence—rather than interpreting challenges as essentially negative.

Some participants found that they could not assume that a faith-based institution would provide support for integration of faith and social work. It might make intuitive sense to think that social work educational programs in faith-based institutions are going to do a better job of addressing the role that spirituality and religion play in professional social work practice and helping students develop self-awareness around their own faith and what affect that might have on their professional identity. However, participants from both secular and faith-based institutions felt unprepared in this area, calling for more consistent and conscious integration efforts and safe classroom space for fostering difficult discussions around faith.

Self-awareness seems important in navigating obstacles and opportunities. A large part of the context for how students make sense of their experiences is developmental. Where students are in the lifespan and how much life experience they have had contributes to how obstacles and opportunities related to identifying with the Christian faith are perceived and understood. Classroom dialogue and course assignments that contribute to a student's ability to self-reflect could go a long way in assisting the navigation process.

Finally, it's important to note that most participants clearly expressed the sentiment that social work education seems to be less tolerant of Christianity than of other faith traditions, likely based in assumptions about who Christians are and what we stand for. Those assumptions are perhaps more about the social and political views that are often associated with Christianity rather than with the tenets of Christianity itself. While several participants didn't have experiences of their own, most knew of others, either clients, peers, or other social workers in the field, who had experienced some kind of prejudice based on their Christian faith identity. This reinforces the literature calling for the profession as a whole to take a closer look at the ways in which it might not be inclusive of all religious perspectives.

Limitations

As in most research studies, there are inherent limitations. One potential limitation of this study is that the data are based on self-report; the findings are based on participant perceptions of their educational experiences, which are not necessarily "reality." A further study might compare student perceptions with the perceptions of faculty and field personnel related to the specific examples provided here that indicate prejudicial treatment. One might wonder if participants would have responded differently if they had been interviewed one-on-one; however, participants were not required to respond to every question and participant behavior during the

focus groups suggested that they were forthcoming with their responses. In fact, hearing about the experiences of others seemed to be an impetus for some to share their own experiences. In addition, the use of focus groups makes it nearly impossible to connect specific comments back to specific participants. So questions like “Are there variations in themes based on program auspices?” or “Are there variations in themes based on level of social work education?”, although good questions, are left unanswered. One way to address questions like this would be to construct each group to be homogenous on the variable of interest. For example, only participants from faith-based schools would be interviewed together and only participants from secular schools would be interviewed together. For this study, focus groups were constructed entirely around convenience.

The generalizability of these findings is also a limitation of the study. The size of the sample was relatively small, and the sample was not diverse on several key demographics, including geographic location and racial or ethnic identification. In addition, a convenience sampling method was used, which means participants might have been more inclined to participate if they had either a strong positive or negative experience. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize beyond the sample itself. Adding more focus groups that target the missing demographics would improve the generalizability of the findings.

Much more can be learned from further research that stems from this particular study. The question of *perception* of discrimination versus the *reality* of discrimination is salient; how do others involved in social work education perceive the claims of prejudice against Christian students? Important “next steps” would be to explore 1) faculty and field personnel experiences with Christian students and 2) how program directors and other decision-makers see their role as gatekeepers to the profession and the criteria they use when evaluating “fit” for the profession. Finally, a quantitative study using a survey instrument reflecting the themes as presented in this study would capture a more representative sample to see how these particular ideas resonate with a larger group of participants.

Conclusion

This study makes a new contribution to the growing literature examining the experiences of Christian students in social work educational programs by using a qualitative framework that allows for alternative voices to be heard. Many of these participants are examples of Christian students who report they have thrived in social work educational programs, whether they experienced very little perceived prejudice or despite having experienced specific challenges based on identifying with the Christian faith. This study supports the current literature emphasizing the possibility of discrimination in social work education against Christian students, as demonstrated

through the obstacles experienced by this group of participants. Obstacles included limited diversity in political ideology, religious diversity that doesn't seem to include Christianity, and the lack of purposeful dialogue about religion and spirituality in social work classrooms. This study presents, in tandem, the potential opportunities Christian students experience in social work education. Opportunities included using perceived obstacles as opportunities, the ability, if willing, to dispel stereotypes about Christianity, the positive aspects of tension in the academic environment, and the opportunity to develop connections with other Christians, both students and faculty. Finally, this study provides several ideas for follow-up studies that can continue to further this topic. As the profession continues to consider ways in which faith and social work can and should be integrated, Christians play an important role in that conversation. ❖

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Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Describe the role of religion in your personal life. Beliefs? Practices?
2. How do you think faith and social work are/can be integrated?
3. Thinking back on your social work educational experience, do you think your faith played a role in your experience?
 - If not, why not?
 - If yes, what are some examples of opportunities your faith provided?
 - What are some examples of obstacles or challenges that arose in the context of your faith?
4. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being "not at all" and 10 being "to the fullest extent"), to what extent did/do you feel supported in exploring how your religious beliefs influence your social work practice?
 - Can you describe how you arrived at this ranking?
 - What could have been done differently to warrant a higher ranking?
 - If there were/are Christian faculty members in your social work program, what role did/do they play in your experience?
5. Were/Are there other Christian students in your social work program?
 - If so, were/are their experiences related to faith similar to your own? How so?

- Were/are their experiences different than your own? How so?
 - If there were/are other Christian students in your social work program, what role did/do they play in your experience?
6. On the demographic information questionnaire, you were asked to identify whether you had experienced any of the “key areas of tension” which most often come up for Christian students in social work educational programs. Please comment on those experiences
 7. What contributions, both in general and as a Christian, were/are you able to make as a student in your particular social work program?
 8. Would you have words of wisdom or advice for Christian students as they enter social work educational programs?

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