

Discovering, Acknowledging, and Understanding Biases in Social Work Practice

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Introduction

I chose to go into the field of social work so I could simultaneously help others with their mental health concerns, as well as tackle the societal issues that may be contributing to their current situation. Although anxious, I was excited to discover I had been placed at an agency that would allow me work with those who deal with mental illness in an urban environment. By the standards of my home state, the mid-sized working class city in which I was raised is very diverse. However, to say I was raised in a diverse environment would be an overstatement. It wasn't until I moved to Detroit and began this field placement, my first in the MSW program, that I began to get some sense of how insulated I have been. I began to recognize I held biases in regard to a person's class and race that interfered with my ability to empathize with the primarily black, impoverished population I was working with.

Origins of My Bias

Winawer and Wetzel (2005) write that "We see German Americans as industrious people, who are often thrifty and frugal, very determined to better their own and their families' standard of living..."(p. 561). I have come to realize how much this rings true in regard to my own family history. I was raised by parents of almost entirely German descent who did not have the opportunity to attend college, but wanted a better life for their two children. They achieved this through hard work and devoted thriftiness. Anyone who did not work was seen as lazy, and anyone who spent money on anything frivolous was seen as not having their priorities in order.

Growing up I lived on all-white streets and attended mostly or entirely white schools. What I knew about those from different backgrounds I learned from others, and what I heard from them was rarely positive. I remember my mom coming home from working her job in retail

and complaining about how many black people paid with food stamps despite her perception that they all had designer handbags and stylish hair and nails. I recall driving through some of the poorer neighborhoods in my town and listening to my parents point out how dilapidated some of the houses and lawns looked, and how much nicer they would look if the lazy inhabitants would just take care of them and not buy the expensive-looking car sitting in the driveway. I remember my mom looking at the neighborhoods she grew up in and remarking about how much nicer things used to be there before “the Blacks”, “the Bosnians”, or “the Mexicans” moved in.

During my primary and secondary education, I was similarly taught that if I worked hard I could achieve anything I set my mind to. I began to equate effort with status as I received praise when I worked hard, and reprimands when I did not. This led to the development of my view that those who had done well for themselves could be deemed “worthy”. Although most of the people I interacted with were white, I was not as different as I thought I was from those of other backgrounds.

The first time I became aware of holding a bias against poor people of color was at a barbecue for my dad’s work. My family was introduced to his black coworker’s family and I felt surprised that this family was actually rather similar to my own, and that this man had a wife, two or three children, and a stable job just like my father did. This was the first time I had ever knowingly met a black person who wasn’t chided for the way he dressed or accused of cheating the government. This family wore clothes similar to ours, and they talked and acted like we did. I figured they must be good people and not like the black people my parents talked about throughout my childhood. This experience and my view at the time of what constituted success raised the question in my mind, “Why are some black people successful and others on welfare?”

Adams et al. (2013) points out that wealth disparities in the U.S. are real and have been caused by centuries of policies, attitudes, and institutional racism that was designed to keep people of color from having the same economic status as whites. When the Pew Research Center analyzed data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, they estimated that black workers earn only 75% of what their white counterparts earn (Patten, 2016). While I was quick to criticize black people for not having money, it never occurred to me to criticize white people for making that system possible. I assumed that since some black people were financially successful, those who were not simply were not trying. Once again, it did not occur to me that I knew white people who had a lot more money than my family did, and many who had a lot less. I did not find myself wondering why some white people lacked money, and I assumed that those who did had it because they deserved it.

Soon after I turned 14 I obtained a part-time job at a grocery store. By this time, I had really internalized what my parents and teachers had told me, namely that if I worked hard I would succeed in life. Almost immediately I began recognizing what my mother so often complained about. I could not help but notice that nearly every black customer that came through my line paid with a food stamp card, yet it was relatively uncommon for white people to do so. Based on that I began to judge that the few white people who had them must actually need them, since there were so few. Since so many black people I interacted with and observed had them, I reasoned that they must be cheating the system in some way. I began to think I could tell just by looking at someone what their form of payment was going to be, and my coworkers and I would try and guess when these customers were out of earshot. The store at which I worked was in a rather prosperous neighborhood, and the employees of the store, myself included, treated these customers differently. On different occasions I would be brusquer with these customers,

sometimes avoiding them altogether in the hopes that another associate would help them out because I didn't want to deal with their carts of merchandise, or the WIC checks, or whatever it may have been that made me not want to help them. The computer would tell us how much money a person's food stamp card contained, and after certain customers left my coworkers and I would form a group and complain about the thousands of dollars in food stamps this person had and the fact that we were working so hard to get what little money we had.

At the time I did not see my behavior as a problem. On the one hand I was taught by parents and teachers that the right thing to do is treat everyone with respect and be nice to them. And I was, to their faces at least. But to be perfectly honest, I felt contempt for these customers based on my perceptions of their laziness. I believed and modeled the attitudes I was taught by ignorance.

How Biases Develop

How is it that these biases developed in me and seem to have been passed down through generations? Martin et al. (2014) explains that humans seem to lack the cognitive capacity to store all the information necessary about a single person, and that our brains synthesize this information overload by discarding the details and filtering stimuli into broad categories. The researchers performed an experiment in which participants were shown photos of fictitious alien species and were supposed to try and remember the traits associated with each species' color. To mimic the transfer of information and the passage of time, a participant's responses would be used to populate the list of traits the next participant would see. In other words, instead of seeing the original list of traits, subsequent participants would be seeing the traits that others before them associated with the aliens. Over time, attributes were replaced by categories and subsequent "generations" were able to more accurately and quickly predict information about groups of

aliens, even groups that they hadn't been exposed to yet. While interesting, the glaring problem with this phenomenon is that traits go from attributes to categories, losing information about the individual in the process. More simply, stereotypes had formed as all of the alien's nuances were filtered out and categorized broadly. In a lab setting with fictitious aliens this is fairly innocuous and even fascinating as it shows the brain's remarkable efficiency, but the effects of this saved brain-power have an incredibly detrimental impact in the real world.

Another unsettling finding of Martin et al. (2014) was that the formation of these stereotypes was at times spontaneous. In other words the first generations were putting the aliens into categories and drawing conclusions about their similarities when those similarities may not have been there. The authors give the example of the Western cultural stereotype of blue being a masculine color and pink being a feminine color. The association is seemingly random. After all, it is possible that red could be associated with femininity and green with masculinity. There is nothing inherent about a color to suggest its association with gender. This idea of arbitrary assignment to traits is referred to as "cumulative cultural evolution" (Martin et al., 2014, p. 1778) and explains how information is simplified and passed along from person to person. This finding makes sense within the context of my experiences, as I recall that many of the stereotypes I found myself endorsing were things I heard from family members and the media and culture at large, things that did not have any sort of factual grounding.

Implicit Bias and its Impact on Field

In social work courses we often hear that everyone has biases. This sentiment has at least some mainstream acceptance, as public figures such as Hilary Clinton have mentioned it in the media, resulting in much public discussion and criticism (Johnson, 2016). Social psychology research gives credence to the comments of Clinton and social work professors alike. Greenwald

and Banaji (1995) recognize stereotypes as being either explicit or implicit. Explicit stereotypes are those that are in a person's awareness. For example, if a person tells a racist joke and knows that it is a racist joke and thinks it is funny because of the commonly held stereotype that joke describes, then that person is exhibiting explicit bias. Implicit attitudes and bias, on the other hand, are unknown to the person who possesses them and operate below the level of consciousness.

I first learned about the concept of implicit bias during the Elementary Psychology course I took the first semester of my freshman year of undergrad. We were given the URL to take an online version of the Implicit Association Test (IAT), developed by Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz (1998), which demonstrated that we make unconscious assumptions things as simple as everyday objects. For example, in their first experiment, Greenwald et al. (1998) found that participants were more likely to associate positive characteristics more quickly with words such as "flower", and negative characteristics with words such as "insect" or "weapon". In a later experiment they found the same to be the case with white and black racial categories; that is, participants associated positive words with typically "white" names more quickly than they were able to associate positive words with typically "black" names. What is important about these results is that they often materialized regardless of whether or not the participant admitted or supported racist attitudes.

After taking the online test, I felt angered when I read the results saying that I harbored implicit biases. I took comfort in the Harvard website's disclaimer that explained the results are not necessarily an accurate description of a person's actions or true feelings toward those of another race. I continued unabashed, believing I was somehow "less racist" than everyone else.

I existed in this state of ignorant bliss, feeling I was beyond the stage of needing to question my own personal attitudes for pretty much all of my undergraduate career. After all, I went to university and took a training on cultural competence. My closest friend at the university was Peruvian. I thought that somehow made me immune from bias, or at least better than many of my relatives, who I had an arrogant tendency to perceive as less educated and worldly than I.

I continued on this trajectory with little interruption until a particular instance at my field placement this past fall. I was seeing a client for the first time and was mostly listening as I allowed her to tell her story. At one point this woman, who is African American and in her early 40s, commented that she would like to get on disability because she cannot work right now due to chronic back pain. Without even thinking, a voice in the back of my mind said to me, “Yeah, right. You just don’t want to work. You look fine to me.” I found myself tuning her out and having a hard time paying attention to what she was saying as I felt like she was incessantly complaining. I went months without seeing her. She called a few months after that first appointment to schedule another and I found myself questioning whether she would actually show up. It was not until writing this vignette that I realized that maybe I had something to do with my client’s reluctance to return. My lack of attention showed the client my bias, which was that I was unwilling to listen to her and take her seriously because she was poor and black.

My adherence to the principle of hard work has practice implications not only for the above client, but for my other clients as well. I am now realizing that I had been evaluating the amount of attention to devote to a client based on their efforts. In other words, I find that I was working harder for clients who were working harder. Although I was showing a commitment to those clients who are putting forth a lot of effort, the National Association of Social Workers

Code of Ethics (2008) expresses that the goal of the social work profession is to help those in need, not just those who are making the most progress or come to the most appointments.

Conclusion

But how do I change my thoughts and actions in order to improve my multicultural practice? According to Ancis & Sanchez-Hucles (2000, as cited in Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011), “Self-awareness of white privilege and racism are essential in developing an empathic therapeutic alliance with racially and ethnically diverse clients” (p. 22). Mindrup et al. (2011) also found that those who had greater awareness of white privilege had greater knowledge of multicultural counseling subjects, and most importantly, that those who have greater exposure to those backgrounds are more likely show a desire to confront white privilege. This is important for myself and others from similar backgrounds to recognize, and will be necessary as I strive to acknowledge the value inherent in all people that the social work profession works on behalf of, in regard to the principle of “dignity and worth of the person” (NASW, 2008). It has been difficult to disentangle my values regarding work ethic from the privileges afforded to me based on my race. My belief that hard work is necessary and enough for advancement is so strong simply because it has generally worked out for me in the past. As a white male, society rewards my achievements over other groups, even if the achievements of another group are greater. Awareness of this fact and a willingness to work against it in the spirit of social justice will be necessary for my effectiveness as a social worker.

This experience has led me to approach clients in a more empathic and understanding way. Hearing the stories of others has made me recognize that the experiences of others differ greatly from my own, and that applying my lens to that view is not effective. Reflecting on my

experiences during my first semester MSW field placement has led me to begin identifying my biases and put me on the continual path of working through them, allowing me to grow as a professional and in turn help my clients regardless of their situation or background.

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