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Social Work for Social Justice: Strengthening Practice with the Poor through Catholic Social Teaching

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This chapter focuses on the ways by which Catholic social teaching (CST), specifically the CST value of the "preferential option for the poor," is present in social work education and practice. That this should require mention in a book devoted to Christian social work practice reflects the central argument advanced in this chapter. That is, despite clear calls to both social work education and Catholic social workers to put the needs of the poor in the foreground, the mission of social work practice seems to be partially characterized by viewing poverty as another aspect of "diversity" that, while respected, is not a career focus of social work students or of the programs training them. In this chapter, a brief discussion of the "preferential option for the poor" and its relationship to larger Christian teachings will lead to an analysis of how CST is reflected in current Catholic leadership, the social work Code of Ethics (COE), social work practice, and social work education. Finally, specific examples of ways to better integrate CST into social work practice and education will challenge social workers of all faiths to reexamine their own commitments to practice the preferential option for the poor.

Case Example #1: A Catholic Hospital Adrift?

Helen was a BSW student doing her field placement in the inpatient unit of a Catholic hospital. She loved the work and felt that her calling to be a hospital social worker was validated by the feeling of relief she saw in her patients as she helped them with discharge planning. However, she recently had been troubled by some changes she witnessed at the hospital. Along with her supervisor, she attended a meeting at the hospital where the Chief Operating Officer (COO) discussed the need for the hospital to market their services to potential patients from the newly gentrifying neighborhood around the hospital. These new neighbors were affluent and represented a stark contrast to the low-income, largely immigrant population that this Catholic hospital served over its 100 year history. During the meeting, the COO invited staff to join in the strategic planning process to "chart this new course" for the hospital. Following the meeting, Helen asked for an overview of the economic pressures facing the hospital at this time, and reviewed the particulars with another staff member. While at Mass in the hospital chapel later that day, Helen found herself

wondering about the hospital's new direction and whether she should inquire about her supervisor's intentions in order to advocate that the hospital preserve its mission and prioritize serving the poor. "Isn't that the role of a Catholic hospital? Isn't that its purpose?" she wondered to herself. Subsequently, Helen considered how to advocate for ways by which the hospital could preserve its mission while responding to current financial pressures.

Perspectives on Change from the Frameworks of Christianity and Social Work

Helen's experience might resonate with many social workers, whether Christian or not. They may share Helen's concern that the agency or site where they work is failing its patient population. This tension may be particularly strong within students like Helen, given her Catholic beliefs and the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) that informs her concerns. From the perspective of CST, the hospital's "new course" is not just about trying to make a profit; rather, it is about the hospital potentially abandoning a central aspect of its Catholic mission--the preferential option for the poor. As an approach, CST informs social work's core mission and is the basis for considering the intersection of CST and social work ethics.

The profession of social work has historically grappled with the ways by which change can occur at the individual and societal levels. Conversations between some of the mothers of the profession are well known for the struggle to identify the most appropriate way to address issues of justice among marginalized populations (Addams, 1911; 1990; Reynolds, 1934; 1951; Richmond, 1922). In more recent years, scholars have continued to consider the merit of addressing issues of social justice within social work curricula (Brenden & Shank, 2012; Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Daniel, 2011; Deepak, Rountree, & Scott, 2015; Funge, 2011; O'Neill & Miller, 2015; Vincent, 2012). Debates continue regarding the definition and nature of social justice (McLaughlin, Gray, & Wilson, 2015; Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001; McPherson, Terry, & Walsh, 2010; Vincent, 2012; Banerjee, 2011) and the contextual and political influences that contribute to its relevance at any given time.

In the midst of this struggle, the stated value placed by the profession on social justice via its Code of Ethics (COE) remains clear (NASW, 2008). The term "social justice" is referenced multiple times in the COE and is listed as one of the core ethical principles of the document (NASW, 2008). Further, social justice is referenced via a myriad of mission statements, both within secular and religious social work programs (Holosko, Winkel, Crandall, & Briggs, 2015). Primary professional conferences, such as the Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting, continue to reference "justice" in their core themes (CSWE, 2009).

Alongside the profession of social work, many Christian theologians and leaders have continuously prioritized the role of justice as core to their belief system, although the conceptualization has shifted over time. According to St. Augustine,

for example, the source of justice comes from within. In other words, justice is the connection between an internal faith and external action (Deane, 1963). Martin Luther, on the other hand, often conceived of justice in the context of education (Luther, Pelikan, Poellot, Hansen, Oswald, Grimm, Lehmann, & Hillerbrand, 1955). In the early 20th century, the social gospel movement, which preceded Vatican II, represented a prominent Protestant Christian intellectual movement. This movement was based on the idea that justice was critical to facilitating the second coming of Christ. That is, without the amelioration of social ills in the context of social justice, the second coming of Christ would not occur. Although the peak of this movement occurred in the first quarter of the 20th century, the principles of this movement continue to inspire more recent Protestant movements. These serve as just a few of many examples of the ways by which the founders of the Christian traditions have conceptualized social justice as central to the faith.

Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is based on church doctrine and Catholic social movements that have been incorporated into church teaching since the late 19th century (Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, 2008). While all other aspects of CST are considered important for Catholics, most scholars and theologians agree that in the approach to social justice, the issue of the Catholic preferential option for the poor represents a central tenet (Pope John Paul II, 1995; Twomey, 2005).

In concept, the preferential option for the poor was initially discussed over a century ago, in the 1891 papal encyclical, "Rerum Novarum: On the condition of workers," by Pope Leo XIII (Pope Leo XIII, 1891). Through this seminal work, Rerum Novarum addressed for the first time barriers that separated the church from the common worker. This encyclical's comprehensive treatment of such social issues set it apart from its counterparts. The concept was again prominently articulated as part of the liberation theologies of Latin America, and was formalized in the Latin American Bishops Conferences (Medellin, Columbia, 1968; Puebla, Mexico, 1979) (Twomey, 2005).

In its application, this option for the poor served to organize peasants in Latin America into more self-reliant "Christian-based communities," which began to create solidarity among participants. In the United States, however, consideration of the preferential option did not formally begin until the late 1970s, and has vacillated in its doctrinal centrality since then. The approach within the United States differed some from that of the liberation theology movement, focusing more on responsibility to the larger community than specifically to the poor (U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1986). In other words, while the church is supposed to show a special solicitude for the poor, it should not ignore those who are not poor. This reflects the continuing debate in the laity and institutional church worldwide regarding the role the church should play in advocating for the poor in political and economic terms (Cooney, Harrington, & Medaille, 2002; Twomey, 2005).

Pope Francis and the Resurgent Social Justice Mission of the Catholic Church, 2013–Present

Jorge Maria Bergoglio—Pope Francis I—was inaugurated as the 266th pope on March 13, 2013, immediately replacing the recently resigned Pope Benedict XVI. As church leader of Catholics around the world, Pope Francis was given global responsibilities regarding living out church doctrine, preaching Jesus' word to all, and managing ecclesiastical systems of power throughout various regions, countries, and continents (Franco, 2013).

Francis's inauguration marked the first time in history that the church would be led by both a Jesuit priest and a Latin American. Prior to his papacy, the Catholic Church was guided by European leaders, which arguably marginalized the global south and other developing countries around the world (Franco, 2013). Recent popes, such as Pope John Paul II from Poland and Pope Benedict XVI from Germany, were known for visiting many countries, but largely within the confines of specific geopolitical values and shared cultural and religious ideals. Francis, emerging from the starkly impoverished and deeply spiritual Americas (Dionne, 2013; Duncan, 2014) in contrast, thus far has taken unique steps as a global pope (Franco, 2013).

Pope Francis's Argentinian roots and his familiarity and involvement with the Latin American Church have greatly affected his papacy thus far. Common themes emerging from Latin American Bishop Conferences in the latter half of the 20th century intertwine closely with Francis's revolutionary church mission. Massimo Franco (2013) writes that a Latin American pope means "skepticism towards capitalism and globalisation; cultural confrontation with the United States; […] increased attention to the environment; and pacifism" (p. 74). As an example, prior to 2013, European Popes' call to 'social justice' often focused on class struggle, abortion, gay marriage, and usage of contraceptives (Dionne, 2013). In contrast, Pope Francis's focus on social justice challenges systematic powers, denounces wealth and materialism, and includes, cares for, and advocates for the poor (Cox, 2014; Dionne, 2013).

Analysis of influential church documents developed at these Latin American Bishop Conferences (i.e., in Puebla, Mexico; 1979 and Aparecida, Brazil; 2007) provide insights into the cultural and spiritual lenses that have helped to form Francis's narrative as Pope. At Puebla in 1979, the Latin American Bishops encouraged Church leaders to challenge political and economic injustices and focus strongly on the preferential option for the poor (Latin American Catholic Bishops, 1979). Years later, in 2007 at the Aparecida conference, which Bergolgio attended, bishops reaffirmed the necessity of standing in solidarity with the marginalized, protecting and preferring the poor and vulnerable, and promoting social reform and human rights (Duncan, 2014, p. 183; Latin American Catholic Bishops, 2007). These themes closely align with liberation theology (Gutiérrez, 1973), a theology developed and implemented in Latin America, in that they insist that preferential option for the poor not only requires charitable acts but mandates systematic change (Cox, 2014).

Likely this Latin American influence, along with his Jesuit identity (a priestly order known among Catholics for living out a faith that seeks justice, challenges beliefs, and stands in solidarity with the poor) (Currie, 2011), is the motivation for his choosing 'Francis' as his papal name. Days after becoming Pope, Francis told the press that, "[St. Francis of Assisi] is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation, the same created world with which we don't have a good relationship… How I would like a church that is poor and that is for the poor…" (as cited in Motte, 2013, p. 165).

The peaceful, poor, humble, and environmentally conscious influences of St. Francis of Assisi have affected Pope Francis's cultural and occupational adaptations in Rome. Pope Francis quickly rejected the regal papal traditions of wearing red shoes, the red cape, a gold cross, and residing in the papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace. Rather, he chooses to wear his worn-out black cap shoes, his own iron cross, and his white papal cassock, and he stays at the Vatican boarding house for visiting bishops and church leaders (Flamini, 2013). These rejections of traditions highlight the changes that Pope Francis hopes to make as leader of the church—changes that closely align with his consistent themes and aim to make a 'poor church' rather than a 'church for the poor' (Bilocura, 2013, p. 165).

Since Pope Francis's inauguration in 2013, he has quickly spoken on and thoughtfully questioned themes of poverty, globalization, social responsibility, and capitalism in a way that has been profoundly revolutionary. Regarding globalization, the pope has mentioned the people of the church currently existing within a "globalization of indifference" (Pope Francis, 2013, #54; Cox, 2014, p. 24). As citizens of the world, we should rather have a social sensitivity that is inclusive of all people—even (and specifically) the deeply impoverished in developing countries. In doing so, the church could "rebuild their shattered image […] through renewed attention to poverty and inclusion" (Franco, 2013, p.73).

Pope Francis suggests that, in order to strive towards being a compassionate globe, the Church needs to be socially responsible and focused on breaking down, rather than building up, barriers (Dionne, 2013). According to Francis, to do so, the Catholic church must live as a horizontal church—one that values each leader and laity as an important member that will live out Jesus' word and gospel at home, at work, and in worship. Francis has discarded the belief that "baptism suffices for life of discipleship" (Sanneh, 2013, p. 166), and instead preaches that membership in the church means having an active and essential role in building bridges between the church and the world (Sanneh, 2013).

As a church, two of the largest obstacles faced in building these bridges are capitalism and materialism (of note, Pope Francis has stated that he is "all in favour of capitalism […] as long as these opportunities are open to everyone and all benefit") (Duncan, 2014, p. 191). In Pope Francis's exhortation, titled *Evangelii Gaudium*, he merges social responsibility with our current state of economic policies by calling on all participants in the economy (i.e., property owners, business leaders, financiers, CEOs, politicians, policymakers, etc.) to live like Jesus and spread the gospel (Pope Francis, 2013; Norcross & Koopman, 2015). The Pope

emphatically states that Jesus says that money is the root of all evil; you cannot serve both God and money (Duncan, 2014, p. 178). This is proven, he argues, by our current unjust economic structures in which the "powerful feed upon the powerless" (Duncan, 2014, p. 189). Pope Francis insists that the measured outcomes of economic policies and development need to be based on how they have improved sensible life opportunities for all (Duncan, 2014). After all, failure to help the poor is the rejection of God (Norcross & Koopman, 2015).

It should be no surprise, then, that Pope Francis's public addresses have shown an obvious shift towards social and economic justice. The Pope has made it a priority to shine the global spotlight on the poor (Bilocura, 2013), people who have been ignored and forgotten in these discourses for decades. Pope Francis calls Catholics to not only donate time, talent, and treasure, but to challenge systemic powers that result in people living in homelessness and isolation. Pope Francis urgently and often states that eliminating poverty is at the heart of the Christian mission and is the "central demand of the gospel" (Duncan, 2014, p. 192).

It should also be of no surprise that not all Catholics are enthusiastic about the focus of Pope Francis on systemic economic issues (Stourton, 2015; Erickson, 2015). American Catholic leaders and lay organizations whose social justice agenda primarily addresses charitable action and focuses more on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, have expressed concern about Pope Francis "dropping away [the] focus" from these issues (Erickson, 2015, para. 15). Specifically, Pope Francis's approach to economics has been called by some "a disruption" to traditional Catholic values (Erickson, 2015, para. 2). Some critics have gone as far as to accuse Pope Francis of distorting the teachings of the Church altogether, claiming that his view of CST has more in common with socialist and even communist ideas than CST (Stourton, 2015). This perspective on Pope Francis was in full view during the Pope's visit to the United States in September, of 2015. In response to this visit, numerous conservative political sources protested the Pope's message to Congress; one Catholic Congressman, Representative Paul Gosar, even declared that he was boycotting the Pope's Joint Address to Congress (Gosar, 2015).

Despite this resistance from Conservative Catholics, only 45% of whom report favorable ratings of Pope Francis, Pope Francis enjoys a 90% approval rating from American Catholics at this time (Erickson, 2015). His urgent call for social justice resurges and re-centers the "preferential option for the poor and vulnerable" to the heart of the church's mission. Pope Francis does not merely suggest that the Church treats the poor equally and lives in solidarity with them, but mandates that, as Christians, we are expected to do so. From his name choice to his rejection of regal papal tradition to his specific focus on social justice, Pope Francis has established a clear mission for us all: to challenge injustice and to be a poor Church for the poor.

Pope Francis's Impact on the American Social Work Context

Although the call for social justice has re-centered the church, the uptake of the message in the field of social work is less apparent. When the Pope visited the United States in September 2015, the National Association of Social Work released an article highlighting specific issues he addressed that social workers and their clients are immersed in every day: racial inequality, immigration, economic injustice, and criminal justice (NASW, 2015). His mentioning of these issues highlights how pertinent his teachings and public discussions are for social workers.

Although the issues raised by Pope Francis highlight the natural overlap between his message and social work, he challenges the profession in stating that welfare projects are necessary, yet not enough, in alleviating poverty and working in solidarity with the poor. Rather, he says that, "as long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural cause of inequality, no solution will be found… inequality is the root of social ills" (Pope Francis, 2013, #202; Duncan, 2014, p. 193).

How social workers develop helping relationships with clients who are poor can be complicated by workers' desire to "save" the poor, rather than stand in solidarity with them to try to change the systems and structures that often create clients' impoverished conditions. When applying preferential option for the poor to real-life situations, roles can become muddled when workers view themselves as saviors rather than as partners and fellow travelers. "Bill," the social worker in our next case example, explores this tension when working with Catholic Charities to deliver mentoring programs to youth living in under-resourced neighborhoods.

Case Example #2: Mentoring At-Risk Youth: Saving or Solidarity?

Bill has recently graduated with his Masters of Social Work from a Catholic university. He was raised Lutheran, and is a convert to Catholicism. He was hired by Catholic Charities to provide training and supervision to three mentoring programs for low-income, African-American youth in suburban and rural areas in his region. While in graduate school, he was influenced by several teach-ins led by the university's Black Lives Matter (BLM) group. Through these educational opportunities, Bill became committed to using his social work degree to combat the "school-to-prison" pipeline through mentoring of African-American youth.

At his first meeting with mentoring coordinators of each site, the discussion quickly turned to the shared sense of the staff that many of the recently recruited mentors are not following the goals of vocational mentoring in the program. One of the mentor coordinators said, "It's like the mentors pity these kids and view them as needing a rescue from their families…one mentor told me last year that she returns home from her mentoring sessions feeling sad, because she wishes she could adopt her mentee to give her a better life." Another coordinator, acknowledging that her program serves youth who live in high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods, shared

that she is struggling to find ways to get her mentors involved in the community and in the lives of their mentees' families. "It's like they just want to come to our building, do their mentoring, and get out of there as fast as they can." Bill observed that all three of the mentoring programs used the parish house of the local Catholic parish as their meeting space. He made a note to himself to talk to the parish priest and staff about how they might partner with the community to encourage stronger integration of the mentoring programs with the surrounding areas. Additionally, he told the group that he intended to address the mentors' approach through an improved training program informed by some of the ideas he had learned from his experience with BLM. The modified program would emphasize the importance of building healthy connections with mentees by focusing on mentees' strengths and dignity, rather than focusing only on their individual problems and the challenges of their environment.

Social Justice and the Practice of Social Work

As illustrated by the case example above, Bill is a Catholic social worker operating from the CST value of attending to the needs and strengths of the poor. Through this value base, he is actively seeking to make CST come alive in his social work practice by engaging the community and prioritizing its needs, rather than allowing it to remain marginalized and misunderstood. However, while Bill should be applauded for these efforts, it is also critical to explore the origins of these values. It is not clear how much Bill learned about the importance of CST as part of his MSW program at a Catholic school. As we will see in this next section, the infusion of CST in social work education is hardly a given, even when it involves teaching and learning about the poor.

The mission statements of Catholic schools of social work consistently reflect a desire to incorporate the values of faith and social justice into their curricula (Brenden & Shank, 2012). Similarly, scholars often promote the role of spirituality in professional education (Ai, 2002). The relationship between social work and religion is well documented through analysis of the literature (Graham & Shier, 2009), which specifically reinforces the importance of religion and spirituality in assessing the "person-in-environment" perspective of professional social work. However, the integration of religion and spirituality into professional education has continued to be a struggle (Barker, 2007), as the role of spirituality in formal education remains in tension with more traditional approaches to learning (Cohlic, 2006). Further complicating this struggle is the lack of guidance provided in the curriculum for social work students about integrating professional social work with faith and spirituality (Northcut, 2005; Praglin, 2004). Additional challenges come from others who suggest that preparing students as social workers should not include an explicit focus on faith as part of the human experience (Sheridan, 1994).

In the context of these tensions, we developed a content analysis focused on understanding what is being taught in Catholic schools of social work (Pryce, Kelly, Reiland, & Wilk, 2011). In so doing, our aim was to understand

how students are being prepared to grapple with concepts proposed by CST, particularly the "preferential option for the poor," as social work professionals. Through this analysis, course syllabi of foundation level MSW courses were collected from 11 of the 12 accredited Catholic schools of social work. In total, 38 syllabi were included in the analysis. After developing a coding manual together and employing several additional methods to ensure rigor and trustworthiness (Pryce et al., 2011), the research team coded these syllabi with particular attention to the ways by which course content descriptions, assignments, and themes addressed poverty.

Findings from the analysis suggest that concepts such as "diversity," "strengths," and "social justice" are emphasized far more than explicit attention to poverty in the introductory-level core courses standard to first-year curricula within these programs. Not surprisingly, policy courses attend to economic and structural issues more often than their clinical and practice-focused counterparts, particularly in terms of the kinds of assignments offered to students. Unfortunately, analysis suggests that students are not receiving the kind of formal guidance and support in addressing issues of poverty in their courses, even in Catholic MSW programs. Instead, findings suggest that at this point, much responsibility is left to students themselves to systematically and critically engage issues of poverty within their education and practice (Pryce et al., 2011). These findings continue to suggest that Catholic social work education has work to do in placing the needs of the poor in the foreground.

Discussion

The complex issues highlighted in this chapter outline some of the important challenges facing the profession of social work. Addressing these issues is imperative for our profession to provide effective service to those in economic need. Poverty continues to be the dominant social crisis in our society, and our current economic circumstances suggest it is of heightened concern (Reisch, 2013). Recent data from the Census Bureau suggest that the number of Americans living below the poverty line reached its highest level since the inception of the Bureau in 1959. Along the same lines, median household income levels in 2010 fell to levels similar to those of 1997 (Tavernise, 2011). Additionally, recent data indicate that income inequality has only accelerated in the past 40 years, with American families at the top seeing a 70% increase in income while the income of middle-class families stayed flat (Urban Institute, 2016). These data suggest a lack of growth within the middle class, and an even more dire situation for the poor in the United States.

As social work programs, we are also challenged by Pope Francis's message, and to date, our response to his challenge is only minimally visible. In surveying Catholic MSW websites, the influence and presence of Pope Francis was limited to professors' individual writings or campus-wide reflections on the Pope's visit to the United States; little to no content was identified directly linking Catholic Social Teaching, solidarity with the poor, and social work. One notable excep-

tion is at the Catholic University of America, where a scholarship, called "Pope Francis Scholars," has recently been developed. Each year, ten Catholic MSW students receive full-tuition to attend the university. In turn, the students are expected to serve the university and broader community in meaningful ways during and following their time as a student (CSWNA, 2015).

Pope Francis's commitment to the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable inspires other important program changes focused on meaningful advances toward social justice. As individuals and as a profession, we are called to respond similarly to Pope Francis's challenge with energy and enthusiasm. Social workers, while continuing to provide welfare services and community resources, need to more urgently and thoughtfully challenge structural causes of inequality in our country and world. As Christian social workers, we are reminded by Pope Francis's message that this is essential in most accurately living out Jesus' word and gospel. Until we can begin to question and devalue the complex systems that are perpetuating social ills, we will not make lasting impacts to eradicate poverty and further the gospel of joy and love.

Implications for Education and Practice

The work of the social workers in our case examples need not be exceptional if the profession (and religiously-affiliated schools of social work in particular) take the initiative to return social work back to some of its first principles. For social work practice and education, we propose the following recommendations to students, faculty, and practitioners to strengthen programs and empower students in the efforts to increase attention to the needs of the poor.

1. *Students must be challenged to attend to poverty explicitly and systematically in their education and choice of social work career path.*
   Although students bring hope and openness to the educational experience as aspiring social workers, they may not bring a specific desire to work with clients who are poor. This is not meant as a criticism of new social work students as much as a reflection on the reality that Specht & Courtney (1994) identified over 20 years ago: many incoming social work students are themselves coming from middle-class backgrounds and aspire to work as therapists, intending to focus on mental health concerns most explicitly, and possibly with clients possessing similar backgrounds to themselves (Perry, 2009).

   It is critical for social work students to challenge themselves and their peers to reflect on their identity as social workers within the historic context of the profession. This attention to the role of economic status seems to be of particular salience at this point in American life, as our country faces ever widening gaps between the rich and poor (Reisch, 2013), and as awareness grows regarding the structural racism illuminated by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

One way to engage in this reflection is to initiate action as a student body on behalf of social justice, particularly among the poor (Funge, 2011). Social work students can join peers at their college or university to address justice issues. In a study of student writing (McPherson, Perry, & Walsh, 2010), the concept of action emerged as key to student understanding of social justice, despite the fact (according to the content analysis featured in this chapter) that the social work curricula does not seem to regularly engage in this action-oriented framework. One's role and identity as a student may allow social work students the support needed to leverage some of these values in service of the community and profession.

2. *Students and instructors must explicitly include poverty in social work curricula, course assignments, and classroom activities, or it may go unexamined.* Although the chance to customize an assignment based on personal interests and comfort level is appealing and commonly offered, this approach, particularly within foundation level social work coursework and practice, will likely significantly limit a student's experience with issues of poverty, both in the classroom and in the field. In other words, despite the anxiety and discomfort that students and instructors often experience in taking on these complex issues (Funge, 2011; Daniel, 2011), it is critical that social work curriculum challenge students and faculty by incorporating issues of poverty into papers and group assignments.

To do so, departments and schools of social work must share the responsibility for teaching social justice across faculty and staff. This can help alleviate faculty concerns regarding conflicting with institutional norms, losing support of faculty, or jeopardizing one's position (Funge, 2011). Students must similarly experience a sense of institutional support for teaching this content (Funge, 2011) so that they can gain experience and confidence in effectively addressing these complex issues as Bill and Helen do in the case examples above.

Catholic scholars also encourage social work colleagues to make use of Catholic Social Teaching as an "articulate and well-developed system of social ethics" that describe and define social justice and can "fill a serious and compelling void in the social work profession" to guide social work in pursuit of social justice (Brenden & Shank, 2012, p. 130). This frame may assist students and faculty in grappling with the challenges presented by poverty and social injustice, challenges students will inevitably confront upon their entrance to the field (Davis & Wainwright, 2005).

3. *Both students and faculty must avoid the diversity trap in dealing with social justice issues related to poverty and the preferential option for the poor.* Based on the content analysis presented above, it is clear that all MSW programs examined are supportive of student interest in social justice on

behalf of their clients. The problem, however, is that sometimes social justice is discussed under the concept of "diversity," which may mask the structural and economic issues most powerful in addressing issues of poverty. Furthermore, although our Education Policy Accreditation Standards emphasize diversity and populations at risk (CSWE, 2008), other terms, such as social and economic justice and oppression, remain undefined, which makes measurement and monitoring of these ideas in curriculum more difficult. Finally, with the exception of Devore and Schlesinger (1999) and Longres (2000), few scholars address social class as a major variable or focus on the intersection of class and ethnicity. These limitations impede consideration of how diversity, social justice, and oppression are linked. They also fail to encourage faculty and students to contend with the development of strategies to change oppressive structures, particularly those disadvantaging the poor, who arguably suffer the most serious long-term negative life outcomes (e.g., health, life expectancy, educational attainment, exposure to violence), regardless of their race, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation (as cited in Iceland, 2006).

4. *All social workers, students, faculty, and practitioners must consider our commitment to the poor as critical to the future of the profession.*
   In extending findings into the larger practice domain, it is important to consider the ways by which the absence of focus on issues of poverty may influence the profession of social work more broadly. At the professional level, our ongoing distancing from the needs of the poor place both the profession and the larger society at risk. If social workers fail to address the needs of the poor, a few questions will linger: can social work claim to be a profession that advocates effectively for the vulnerable when so little of our time is spent preparing new social workers to work effectively with clients in poverty? Without such an emphasis, what ultimately will distinguish social work from other helping professions that tend to offer psychotherapy as the main intervention to address client challenges?

Conclusion

In sum, students, educators, and practitioners must consider creative ways to support one another in working with clients impacted by poverty. This support is critical within all social work contexts, including those religiously-affiliated programs that may traditionally and explicitly identify the unique importance of the poor. Such support can include facilitating collaboration, both at the student and professional levels, between more senior and junior social workers. Social work departments, including faculty and field staff, can work together to identify ways to enhance attention to issues of poverty in and outside the classroom. At a curricular level, improvements to syllabi can be complemented

with explicit attention within field education to support students in learning about and contending with issues of poverty among their clients. Further, given the impact of federal and state budget cuts on systems of care, it is critical that social work educators engage students in formal exposure to advocacy (Kilbane, Pryce, & Hong, 2013) as a means of addressing client needs within very serious fiscal constraints.

Beyond these suggested changes, it is worth considering ways that religiously-affiliated social work programs can engage issues of poverty explicitly around conversations regarding faith. For many social workers, a faith-based orientation toward working with the poor may prove more compelling than a secular approach. Each faith tradition has stated values regarding the importance of addressing the needs of the poor (Swatos & Kivisto, 1998). Through these traditions, social work students and practitioners may find inspiration or provocation to engage in work on behalf of the poor beyond what they may encounter in a secular framework.

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