

Response to Adams: Free speech and special responsibilities of the profession

Richard Spano, PhD and Terry Koenig, PhD
University of Kansas

Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 6, Number 1 (2009)
Copyright 2009, White Hat Communications

This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of White Hat Communications.

Abstract

The authors comment on Adams' latest response to their original article entitled, *What is sacred when personal and professional values collide?* (2007/2008). In their remarks, the authors reiterate principles outlined in the original manuscript and provide a critique of Adams' response entitled, *Code of ethics or ideological club?* Specifically, a guiding principle distinguishing personal and professional values is highlighted: all personal worldviews held by social workers must be mediated through the *Code of Ethics*. The authors express concern about Adams' inability (or unwillingness) to distinguish between free speech in the public square and the special responsibilities and benefits placed on the social work profession.

Key Words: Code of Ethics, free speech, professional responsibility, personal worldview

All personal worldviews must be mediated through the Code of Ethics

We wish to thank Professor Adams for his willingness to continue a dialogue around a broad range of issues that are embedded in our original article entitled, *What is sacred when personal and professional values collide?* (Spano & Koenig, 2007/2008) as well as in subsequent responses (Adams, 2008; Spano & Koenig, 2008). In the following remarks, we clarify our position on the salient points of the original article and respond to points of the critique provided by Adams (2009) in his latest response entitled, *Code of ethics or ideological club?*

Adams' responses continue to miss the point and principle that we believe is essential – all personal worldviews that social workers bring to the table must be mediated through an understanding of the NASW *Code of Ethics* (1999). He reacts to the exemplar of Christianity that we provide, but not to our stated principle. Thus, Adams argues for radical social work to be held to the same standard as orthodox (Evangelical) Christians. We agree and previously stated this position clearly in the abstract of the original paper. However, Adams sees our examples, which are currently being debated, as an attack on one side, rather than an illustration of the principle to

be applied across the ideological spectrum. For our purposes, a person's worldview may be drawn from many sources (e.g., religion, political science, sociology, psychology, parents, friends and Aunt Esther). No matter what the source, the translation of these ideas and values into action in one's professional life is open to examination and is the legitimate purview of the profession.

Adams accepts in his latest response that it is correct to place some limits on professionals' behavior (e.g., no sex with clients). If you accept the premise that clients are vulnerable and limits need to be placed on professional behavior, the question becomes "Who imposes those limits?" We purport that it is the larger profession that sets limits through an agreed upon code of ethics.

Ideology, professions, and orthodox Christianity

Adams argues that any restrictions placed on professionals' behaviors contribute to the development of an ideological club in which some are excluded from membership. We understand that every profession espouses a particular ideology or philosophy that combines knowledge with values and ethical principles. In essence, an ideology or philosophy undergirds all professions. For example, the medical profession does not allow physicians to engage in assisted suicide, as it runs counter to the ideology of its profession (e.g., values such as protection of life and use of knowledge regarding the means to end life). Attorneys must provide a vigorous defense for their client, whether or not the person committed a heinous act. No judgment based on the attorney's personal perspective is allowed to intrude on this professional responsibility. The profession of social work is no exception. Social workers cannot refuse to work with those who are Republican, pro-life, or considering an abortion, or who are members of the GLBT population. These refusals run counter to our profession's ideology (e.g., values such as self-determination and respect for diversity combined with knowledge of relational and problem-solving skills to assist clients in their decision making).

It is ironic that Adams refers to himself as "unorthodox" when describing his position within the social work profession. Indeed, Christian, Jewish, and other social work scholars (e.g., Keith-Lucas, 1972; Loewenberg, Dolgoff, & Harrington, 2009; and others) have described the professional importance of keeping "in check" strongly held personal and religious values so as not to pass judgment on clients that subsequently affect professional behavior. Professionals who refuse to serve clients based on personal values alone are viewed as unorthodox and based on our *Code*, are engaging in unethical behavior. As noted by social work ethics writers, these judgments,

combined with behaviors, violate clients' self-determination or undermine the respect due to them based on their status as human beings. Indeed, this type of behavior rooted in strong personal, religious beliefs is viewed as unethical within the profession of social work. What is even more ironic is that Adams states, "that I have neither the authority or inclination to decide who is or who is not a Christian." However, Adams substitutes George's assertion that only orthodox positions are Christian. All other expressions of Christianity are "thrown out" or put in the category of "secular."

Free speech and professional responsibilities

What does concern us deeply is Adams' inability (or unwillingness) to distinguish between free speech in the public square and the special responsibilities, benefits, and restrictions placed on any profession – including, but not limited to, social work. Adams referred to the National Association of Scholars' (NAS) study (2007) of ten major schools of social work. NAS expressed outrage at the fact that social work schools emphasize social justice as part of the profession's purpose. Their fundamental stance, which seems worthy of acknowledgement, is that there are different conceptions of social justice that need to be articulated in social work education. Otherwise, students are being brainwashed rather than educated. NAS takes a stance that any limit placed on the concept of social justice is an abridgement of free speech and free flow of ideas. We have no argument with this position when applied to liberal arts education.

However, schools of social work are preparing students to translate ideas into behavior directed toward some professional purpose, not to debate ideas in the abstract. Professional social work education can and should provide students with opposing frameworks for understanding social justice, but those ideas need to be evaluated based on professional purpose and our *Code of Ethics*. Therefore, if one conception of social justice (e.g., based on equity or equality) better promotes the well-being of populations that are the focus of professional concern, e.g., marginalized group of people based on race, gender, age, or sexual orientation, then, social workers must choose the one that is more useful than another to achieve the profession's stated purpose. To accept NAS' argument for free speech strips the context from the ideas. Hence, all ideas are somehow equal no matter what their consequences are for people in obtaining services from a profession.

Conceptualizing marriage, abortion, and poverty

Adams anchors his analysis of marriage, abortion, and poverty within the current patriarchal conceptual framework (which he fails to acknowledge). He discusses marriage as a protection for women and presumes women cannot make it on their own but must rely on the protection of men. Adams views abortion and poverty as outcomes of the erosion of marriage. We differ with his conceptualization and view this as a form of “context stripping.” Larger social issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and ageism are causal factors that contribute to the problems identified by Adams. For example, the earnings of women and people of color continue to lag behind those of white men and contribute greatly to the poverty faced by women and children. Further, the lack of adequate and affordable child and health care for all human beings also contributes greatly to the poverty faced by women, children, and also men. The examples are not driven or linked to marital status. These are larger social issues whose roots run deeper than the personal, religious positions held by orthodox Christians about abortion and marriage. We agree with Adams that this is a “class” issue, but do not view it as attributable to the marriage gap between the rich and poor. Instead, broader social structural issues, within which families exist, are causal factors that shape their economic circumstances. Adams argues for preserving traditional marriage as a solution for abortion and poverty. How does this strategy address social and economic injustice driven by forces beyond the family?

Conclusion

Adams’ concluding quote from the U. S. Supreme Court has no connection to our discussion about codes of ethics for professions. We have never taken the position that professionals cannot hold *personal views* on “politics, nationalism, religion or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein” (U. S. Supreme Court, 1943). This legal decision is about First Amendment rights for citizens. What we have argued is that in their *professional lives*, social workers must adhere to standards set by the profession and that if they fail to do so; they should be held accountable by their colleagues. Perhaps a more relevant citation, 1.06b Conflict of Interest (NASW *Code of Ethics*, 1999), better applies to this discussion: “Social workers should not take unfair advantage of any professional relationship or exploit others to further their personal, religious, political or business interests.” When we recognize that all professional relationships are based on power imbalances between professionals and clients, then any intrusion of personal, religious, or political views on the part of the worker is a violation of

the *Code of Ethics*. Professional codes of ethics create frameworks that direct our professional actions. To suggest that we be allowed to do as we please with regard to imposing personal values on clients deconstructs the very notion of profession and creates real potential for harm to those for whom we have responsibility.

References

- Adams, P. (2008). The code of ethics and the clash of orthodoxies. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 5(2). Retrieved January 21, 2009 from <http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/content/view/94/65/>.
- Adams, P. (2009). Code of ethics or ideological club? *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*.
- Keith-Lucas, A. (1972). *Giving and taking help*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Loewenberg, F. M., Dolgoff, R., & Harrington, D. (2009). *Ethical decisions for social work Practice* (8th ed.). NY: Thompson.
- National Association of Scholars (2007). The scandal of social work education. Retrieved February 3, 2009 from <http://www.nas.org/pollInitiatives.cfm>
- National Association of Social Workers. (1999). *NASW code of ethics*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Spano, R., & Koenig, T. (2007/2008). What is sacred when personal and professional values collide? *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 4(3). Retrieved Feb 3, 2009 from <http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/content/view/69/54/>.
- Spano, R., & Koenig, T. (2008). A response to Paul Adams. The code of ethics and the clash of orthodoxies. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 5(2). Retrieved Jan 20, 2009 from <http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/content/view/93/65/>.
- United States Supreme Court (1943). *West Virginia State Board of Education vs. Barnette*, 319 U. S. 624. Retrieved February 6, 2009 from <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=319&invol=624>.