

Social Work's Dialogue With the Arts: Epistemological and Practice Intersections

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ABSTRACT

Despite historical acknowledgements and recent advancements in conceptualizing the arts for social work, the calls for arts inclusion have yet to stimulate a sustained research program. Taking creative writing as exemplary art, this inquiry gathered accounts of key constructs related to the arts. Using M. van Manen's (1997) phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology, 31 creative writers, teachers of creative writing, "arts inclusive" social workers, and social work researchers completed in-depth interviews. The participants' accounts illustrated that the arts' intersection with social work facilitated integrated, nondual epistemologies for practice. The social workers also highlighted the limits and benefits of including the arts in practice. The proposed *arts infusion* approach calls upon an enlarged view of human reality for social work within an ongoing ethic of care.

There have been historical acknowledgements and more recent advancements in conceptualizing the arts for social work (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999; Damianakis, 2001; Goldstein, 1990, 1992, 1999; Gray, 2002; Moffatt, 2001; Papell & Skolnik, 1992; Powell, 2003, 2004; Reynolds, 1934, 1942; Siporin, 1975, 1988). Questions have been raised about how the arts can enhance social work practices and in what ways. Many of the points are derived from suggestions and proposals for what would enhance the professional knowledge and practices of social work. Thus, they may be said to give rise to a host of empirical expectations while challenging existing epistemological, conceptual, and practical approaches. This discussion among social work theorists, however, has largely remained at a conceptual level rather than an empirical one. Important empirical issues have not yet been addressed, and thus findings about them have not appeared in the social work literature. A pivotal empirical question was posed early on in the discussion of the value of the arts to social work: "But does grounding in the arts and humani-

ties make a difference in the worker's ability to practice his or her profession?" (Goldstein, 1992, p. 53). To answer such questions, one must locate and examine the evidence.

This study is concerned with the points of intersection: how and where the arts and social work intersect. The word "intersection" is meant to suggest that there is a domain in which the arts may inform social work epistemology and practice. As social workers develop an appreciation for the arts, they also recognize fundamental differences of objectives inherent in their professional role versus those of the classically recognized creative arts, both literary and fine arts. Social work has always adapted knowledge from the social sciences for its own professional use. Similarly, it is also in the best interest of social work scholars and practitioners to come to an understanding of the artist's worldview and knowledge base. If we hear directly from active, creative writers about their experiences and insights as artists, it is possible to generate insights that in turn contribute to social work practices and knowledge bases. It is worth considering, for

instance, fundamental similarities and differences within the worldviews and experiences of artists compared to social workers. There have been no empirical studies in social work directly speaking to such artists (e.g., creative writers) to ascertain the nature of their artistic experiences or to seek their opinions on core issues related to experiences in the creative process. I found no systematic investigation on the ways social workers incorporate the arts (and creative writing) into their knowledge, values, and practices. Nor have I found social worker accounts detailing the possible drawbacks of their use of arts-based approaches in social work.

Taking creative writing as exemplary art, this inquiry gathered artists' and social workers' accounts of key constructs related to the arts. In this study, the "creative writing process" is defined to include all acts of creative writing whereby the writer engages in artful production of texts (other than nonfiction) intended for an audience to enjoy as such. The term "creative writer" includes authors of such typical genres as poetry, plays, and fiction who are characterized by sustained, disciplined efforts. All are experienced, credentialed, or published in their respective areas. This qualitative inquiry is intended to generate new understandings of the intersection of arts and social work knowledge and practice through listening to the experiences of selected individuals in the arts, in social work, and sometimes both.

Literature Review

Professional and educational constructions of social work have historically accounted for the recognition of social work as both an art and a science (Papell & Skolnik, 1992; Reynolds, 1942, 1964; Siporin, 1975, 1988). Bertha Reynolds, early on, contributed much to our understanding of the learning process in social work. In 1934, she described the emerging role and responsibility of social workers in social case work, whereby social case work has "developed into a skilled service" (p. 6), and "must be developed as a sacred art, practiced only by those especially prepared and in setting[s] in which conditions are favorable" (p. 26). She also described social work as part of "learning an art, which is knowledge applied to doing something in which the whole person participates, cannot be carried on solely as an intellectual process" (1942, p. 69). Schön, 50 years later, noted that an exclusive reliance on "technical/rational mode is deficit" without recognition for "the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict" (1983, p. 49). Papell and Skolnik argued that art, intuition, and practice wisdom are essential to professional practice.

Siporin, 30 years ago, called social work practice a "scientific art" because of social workers' "skilled application of ethical and technical practice principles that informs

practice" (1975, p. 52). Siporin's views, along the same lines as Reynolds, emphasize the skilled use of, and disclose the science and the adoption of, humanistic and/or artistic qualities such as intuition, creativity, and self-expression, in the context of practice. He thus defined social work practice as:

...an art in that it consists of the social workers' skilled use of intuitive, creative and self-expressive processes....The social worker, as an artisan, seeks to influence and change; to shape his material; to apprehend and realize its potential; and to do so in a dynamic experiential relationship with other people and things. Esthetic values, dynamics and effects can be identified in the helping processes through which people in need are enabled to realize their capacities, to gain new perspectives and metaphors of reality and truth, to distill complex understandings, to evolve coherent meaning and pattern about themselves and their life situation, to achieve balance and harmony of conflicting elements within themselves and between themselves and others. As in other creative endeavors, the social worker tries "to interpret life, to console, to sustain," to liberate inner feelings, to enlarge consciousness and self-awareness. He[She] provides a way of encounter, exploration, and growth in the realms of human spirit and relationship on their deepest levels of meaning and experience. (1975, pp. 52–53)

Overall, his definition gives an arts-identified view of the social worker while acknowledging the value of the scientific approach. To explore the value of the arts to social work is not necessarily to devalue science or assume an antiscientific stance.

Siporin's statement also demonstrates social, epistemological, and modernist influences. It refers to the authority and power of the social worker to bring about this change, and to the importance of bringing resolution to client conflicts. It seeks to capture and centrally locate the humanities and the arts, not only for social work but *in* social work as well, and to portray social work as imbued with the arts. The social worker is presented as an "artisan" capable of drawing from a range of abilities, directing and shaping the moment and process of practice.

Howard Goldstein has been a leading social work scholar and advocate for the value and construction of social work, in part, as an artistic pursuit. He located the arts within a humanistic framework and value system that enhanced the social work profession. Goldstein (1986, 1990, 1991, 1992) argued for retaining the contributions of the humanities and the arts within social work while continuing its focused pursuit of scientific, technical-based knowledge. Like leading postmodern social work scholars, he questioned whether science alone provided the professional wisdom necessary to alleviate

social ills and achieve the social progress it originally intended (Chambon & Irving, 1994; Epstein, 1999; Irving, 1999; Leonard, 1997).

Goldstein (1992) promoted a nondualist view of the intersection of the arts for social work, one in which science influenced the arts and the arts influenced science. As a creative writer as well as a social work scholar, his respect for the arts is nondualistic. The arts have the potential to impact social work at multiple levels: in bridging theory with the practical wisdom of the practitioner; by infusing reflective, critical, and ethical inquiry in social work education; and by locating social work relations as central to a dialogical process within the clients' constructed and experienced world (Goldstein, 1992). He posited that "practitioners influenced by the arts and humanities are . . . not totally free and ephemeral spirits detached from an orderly rational world: art cannot flourish without rule and rigor" (Goldstein, 1999, as cited in Gray, 2002, p. 422).

The established categorization and boundaries between the humanities, arts, and social science were thus argued to be artificial. Each informed the other; they were interrelated cultures (Goldstein, 1992, 1999). He proposed persuasive analogies in order to move beyond dualistic assumptions according to which the social sciences were considered "factual" and the humanities "fictional," thus implying the superiority of the former (1992, p. 50). Goldstein's view is an important one in that it connects the arts to ethics and human dialogue—essential constituents of social work practice.

Augmenting the value of the arts to social work has been one outcome of postmodern scholarship (Gorman, 1993; Irving, 1999). These scholars may hold a positive view of arts-influenced social work since that development facilitates their efforts to deconstruct a modernist understanding of the role of the profession and the principles shaping its practice. Some postmodern scholars, in seeking to uproot fundamental knowledge bases of modern-postmodern frameworks—both ontological and epistemological foundations (Chambon et al., 1999; Moffatt, 2001; Murphy & Pardeck, 1998; Weick & Saleebey, 1998)—have proposed the arts and literature as a new paradigm for the acquisition of social work knowledge and development of principles of practice (Irving). Irving proposed that "to transform social work from a modernist practice to one that truly is diverse and postmodern would be to draw on styles other than just science: the arts, the humanities—literature, poetry, philosophy, theology" (p. 35). Postmodernism has helped facilitate a conceptual shift in notions of objective and absolute truth to multiple truths, while valuing ambiguities, ironies, and uncertainties central to the human experience. Postmodern scholars have also argued that the incorporation of the arts can enable marginalized voices to be heard that may otherwise be disregarded (Chambon et al.).

Highlighting some of the proposed advantages, the arts, according to the authors reviewed here: (a) provide a social function by helping individuals come to terms with the meaning of life, including its deepest questions and most perplexing dilemmas; (b) underscore moral, ethical, and spiritual issues; (c) endorse multiple ways of understanding marginalized experience toward social equity; and (d) enhance the quality of the worker-client relationship or potential for transformative moments (Goldstein, 1990, 1992, 1998, 1999; Irving, 1999; Powell, 2003, 2004; Reynolds, 1934, 1942, 1964; Siporin, 1975; Weick & Saleebey, 1998). By listening directly to artists about their experiences of their craft, we will be able to assess how their perspectives might inform and shape the arts side of social workers' current knowledge and practice domains. Also, social workers and social work researchers who use the arts in their knowledge or practice bases will illuminate whether or not "grounding" in the arts and humanities makes a difference in the social worker's ability to practice.

Methodology

Study Design

Van Manen's (1997) phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology with purposive sampling captured the personal and professional "lived experiences" of creative writers and social workers in their use of the arts (and creative writing). Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research method that focuses on the meaning and the nature of phenomena as experienced in the participants' lives. Applied in this study, phenomenology allowed for description of the phenomenon of the arts and creative writing, uncovering its essence and underlying structures as described by participants' experiences rather than relying on existing theory or generalizations. The hermeneutic inquiry in van Manen's methodology permitted the investigator's interpretation beyond the descriptions provided by the participants in order to elucidate the essence of the phenomenon, to discover underlying themes and meanings of the arts (and the creative writing experience) and to make conceptual linkages with existing theory (van Manen). An institutional review board process was completed, and all participants signed releases and consent forms.

Sample Description: Demographics

Thirty-one participants—15 creative writers, 2 teachers of creative writing, 11 "arts inclusive" social workers, and 3 social work researchers—participated in in-depth, semistructured interviews. All were experienced, credentialed, or published in their respective areas. Participants were recruited from social and health services, hospitals, community groups, women's agencies, academic/research/continuing education departments or referred

by the participants. The demographic profile of the creative writers group was 82% female, ranging from 30–60 years old, with an average age of 44.6 years. The average length of time involved in creative writing was 29.2 years; many creative writers had begun to write early in life. The demographic profile of the social work group was 78.6% female, ranging from 28–55 years old, with an average age of 38.1 years. Efforts to maximize the variability of the sample resulted in an overall demographically diverse sample. Creative writers self-identified as Mixed Race, Aboriginal, Jewish, Chinese, Goan, and White; social workers self-identified as Black, South Asian, Jewish, and White. Another focus for inclusion was to maximize representation of the theoretical orientation of the social workers. Presumed here was the general tendency for social work to locate the arts and creative writing in narrative theoretical domains. Social workers listed their theoretical orientations as including: ego-psychology, cognitive-behavioral, critical theory, feminist, narrative, anti-oppression, and psychodynamic, and many used a combination of modalities. Of the sampled social workers, 46.2% had been working in the field for 5–9 years, 23.2% between 10–19 years, 23.1% between 20–29 years, and 7.6% beyond 30 years. There was less variability in the sample in the category of education; the overall sample was well educated, with the majority holding postgraduate degrees: 76.5% of creative writers had a master’s or PhD degree, and 23.5% held bachelor’s degrees. Similarly, 76.9% of the social workers had a master’s in social work degree, and 23.1% of the sample of social work researchers had a PhD.

Procedure

All interviews were 1.5 to 2.0 hours in duration, were tape-recorded, and were transcribed verbatim. A semistructured interview guide (Moustakas, 1994) allowed for flexibility in response and probing questions. Interviews were conducted by the researcher in person or over the phone, at the participant’s choice of location, usually in their homes or office settings. Telephone interviews were necessary for six participants as they lived outside easy commuting distance for the researcher. Participants were located in the central, midwestern, and the Atlantic regions of Canada and the eastern United States. Initial interview questions aimed to encourage participants to answer from a place of their

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experience—e.g., What is your current use of the arts (creative writing) in your work? Could you tell me what kind of writing you personally like to do? How do you feel when you write? To address epistemological influences of the arts to social work, individuals responded to a number of questions: How would you describe the process of knowledge development/acquisition for social work by and through the use of the arts? How do you address differences in the

foundational objectives of the arts versus social work toward the application of this knowledge for use in professional practice? What cautions would you suggest ensuring the professional objectives of social work are met?

Data analysis sought to explicate the basic structure and meaning of the participants’ lived experiences with the arts (and creative writing) while noting the particulars and differences in participants’ accounts (Creswell, 1998; van Manen, 1997). Data collection and data analysis occurred con-

currently. “Bracketed” presuppositions helped to temporarily suspend existing theory or beliefs on the phenomena which may limit new knowledge or understanding, and the use of reflexive-journal-facilitated reflective and intuited analysis while working toward understanding the essential structures of the experiences (Cohen & Omery, 1994; van Manen). A “detailed or line-by-line approach” to thematic analysis examined possible themes or essence of the participants’ experiences (van Manen, p. 93). For each of the transcripts, significant words, phrases, and passages were identified and highlighted in the text, and notes in the margins were made. The researcher tentatively established “coding” (Creswell) of initial categories, moving gradually to greater refinement. This was done while ensuring the categories reflected the whole of the text, moving back and forth from whole to text, or reflected the overall meaning and essence of the data as the thematic analysis continued (Holloway & Todres, 2003; van Manen). A scouting for negative cases and “rich and detailed thick description” of participants’ excerpts or a “good phenomenological description” (van Manen, p. 27) characterized the data analysis, and such divergences and complexities were marked for possible inclusion in reporting the lived experience. Based on established research criteria by Lincoln and Guba (1985), additional strategies were used to enhance rigor and interpretation of the findings such as:

triangulation (comparison of multiple data sources to examine the phenomena—i.e., material from each sample group); member checking (to confirm the credibility of the data); and an audit trail, which documented items such as the researcher's methodological processes and decisions.

Findings

Four main themes emerged in respect to the intersection of the arts (especially creative writing) for social work: (a) the arts and social work aim to emotionally, physically, and spiritually move us and be moved in the world; (b) both depend on the construction of language, expression, and communication; (c) the arts enhance personal and professional self-reflection; (d) the arts transcend social work knowledge dichotomies and provide an integrated model for social work body-mind-spirit connection in a social context. There are also contraindications and potential risks of using the arts and creative writing in social work.

The Arts and Social Work Aim to Move Us and Be Moved

The arts and social work share an intention to move others emotionally, physically, and spiritually, and to be moved in the world. One social work researcher reflected on the role of the arts as a kind of wake-up call in practice:

I think they [the arts] move us, emotionally and they move the spirit. They allow us to be sexually present, to be...spiritually present, and that's a great shock sometimes if you're used to sort of working along, and you say, "You know I've worked with the same people for five years and this is what I do, this is how I do my assessments and this is what I know," then suddenly you see something about the creative spirit, or a work [a] particular group of people has done, or a work that people who work with people have done, or it's something that just kind of gets in under the skin. It's not only a wake-up call but it's another way into that consciousness. And I think that's why . . . social workers, who are really practicing their craft, often find themselves bumping into the arts . . . That's where they join . . . It's kind of like, "boom," that's where I have to go. All kinds of ways, research-wise, that happens; that's one of the major things we do. (Social Work Researcher)

One creative writer spoke on her motivation behind her creative writing and her understanding of a similar role for social work:

Yes. Yes, pardon my language, but sometimes I think it's all one f—— poem, you know [laugh]....I know that there are drives and there are questions that

haunt me and enchant me, and so there's tremendous relationship among all of these pursuits....It's very sympathetic with social work, my drives, because I'm interested in the connections among people. I'd say it comes out of a need to respond to the world and to have the world respond to me. That connectedness...I need to understand how people hurt each other and how they help each other. I need to understand how you deal with loss, and how you love things knowing that they go...but really with the goal of giving something to other people who are going through this... So my intention, I think it's very complicated being human and I think we need help. We need social workers and we need poetry. (Creative Writer)

Arts and the Construction of Language: Precision—But Don't be Too Precise

Several participants spoke of the construction of language, both in creative writing and in helping others. One creative writer spoke of the necessity for accuracy of the words that are chosen in communication, drawing parallels between her creative writing process and her role as a psychotherapist:

Do you see any similarities in the words that are chosen between how a therapist chooses their words and how a writer chooses their words?

If I can get very, very close to the feeling of what they're saying...the most clear word I can find to reflect back what they're saying then...that's similar, I'm putting the words on an experience, their experience, and then giving it to them for them to open up more. Now it's an opening for them to go further into and hopefully they'll go, yes...and then their world is open, bigger, right? Also, then they have more words to go in further and further. (Creative Writer)

Consistent with social work practice skills, the careful construction and accuracy of words reflect empathy and careful listening, and they validate a reader's or client's experience. However, an important contrasting position emerged—namely, the value of not being *too* "precious" with words:

[Interviewer:] What if some therapists use the word "pebble" instead of "stone," like how do we—?

[Response:] Part of it is not to be too precious about the words...because then the client gets all worried about being precious about the word. So one of the things I really want to do when I'm starting working with somebody is to get rid of the preciousness...I want to right away encourage them to not be articulate. I make jokes about that and I make up

words a lot in therapy... I say it's sort of like a pebbleness—maybe not a pebbleness, maybe more like a stone—so I deliberately let them and myself have a lot of room to get it wrong. No, it's not quite like a pebble, it's really like a rock being hit over—you're not hit over the head with a pebble—it's a rock.

[Interviewer:] So you play with words, too.

[Response:] Yes...it's the same thing, actually the therapist and a poet...if I go into writing thinking I have to find the right word for this I'll just choke. So I can't go in with that. I have to go in with just what's coming...and then later on go, "Does that fit? Does that actually fit?" ...So it's the same in poetry as in therapy: there has to be this freedom. Otherwise it feels you're trying too hard to know before you can speak, so the words almost have to precede your knowledge of what they mean. (Creative Writer)

The Arts Enhance Personal and Professional Self-reflection

A few social workers used their own creative writing as a way of self-care against professional stressors and frustrations, thus profoundly shaping their perspectives. One social worker, who works with assaulted women, framed it in this way:

In the last few years, I'm writing odd poetry I find, for myself in my own life, really healing. Sometimes I'll write poetry about my work. I wrote about being a witness to all these women's stories and journeys, and it was during a time where I was just feeling really burnt out and a sense of hopelessness. The whole poem, "Witness," for me was about what that's like for me as a worker to miss work and just feeling like I can't be here anymore. I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want violence to be my main framework in terms of how I define the world. (Social Worker)

Professional practices and values both collided with and reinforced social workers' personal and political worldviews. Besides informing personal reflection, creative writing provided a broader professional reflection for several social workers. One social work researcher explained it this way:

I think it [art] allows us to articulate something in social work that we're very familiar with, which is kind of a shared experience with our clients and our positioning vis-à-vis structures that often (unless you're in a primary setting like the Children's Aid)... you find yourself in among these peripheral sorts of places, which is, often, the place artists find themselves talking from, expressing. So I think there's a lot of

congruence there, and we can describe our practice through creative forms sometimes a lot more effectively than we can through simply anything, lecture, presentation. ...So, yes, it allows us to stretch and develop and to think about things differently, but it also, I think more importantly, it allows us to talk about what we already know. (Social Work Researcher)

The Arts Transcend Knowledge Dichotomies

In exploring the epistemological relationship of the arts for social work a call for a more integrated model of practice emerged, one which respected mind-body-spirit and social context. One social work researcher (and clinical director) spoke of how social work knowledge tends to be unnecessarily dichotomized in several areas:

I've had the privilege of being in positions that have been both very political and at other times very clinical. So I have an appreciation for both of those positions, but I also see that there's...a lot of work to do. The social workers I see doing that [work]...are people who do appreciate the fact this isn't a dichotomized piece, that the connection between the personal, political, spiritual, [and] creative are all very intertwined. And they're willing to mine their own experiences and the experiences of their clients and their sense of what's vibrant and "change" for people. To develop different kinds of practices and also to take advantage of the kinds of practice that are available, in different disciplines and different places in the world, and adapt those to their practice. (Social Work Researcher)

Thus, she highlighted for social work the importance of integration of and moving away from dichotomized knowledge—a potential role for the arts. Another social work researcher spoke broadly about the arts' challenges and contributions to social work knowledge and practice, based on his experiences:

I think art certainly provides lots of experiences of why modern and structuralist [are deficient]...where the flaws are and why postmodern [approaches] emerged, because art usually shows us that the categories we have created always fall short. You're always going to be surprised [by] something... I think that art and creativity can help to illuminate the...sort of postmodern understanding. (Social Work Researcher)

Here, art served a broader function for social work practice—namely, to disrupt the worker's reliance on conventional routines and social norms and to facilitate surprise and innovation.

Some social workers viewed the inclusion of the arts as a professional and moral obligation to their clients and as part of an ongoing ethic of care. One social worker explained as follows:

Everyone's experience is different, it can be expressed differently...and working with clients to find the best fit for them. And I think it challenges us as practitioners to be able to offer that and be able to work with that and not be really rigid in our approach to the work. Not—I'm just doing, I'm just narrative therapy or relational or creative expression, being able to incorporate many different means.... Yes, I think it challenges us to be creative. ...One thing's not going to work for everybody. (Social Worker)

Contraindications: Potential Risks in the Inclusion of the Arts/Creative Writing

Although there were several rationales for inclusion of the arts and creative writing in social work, several participants held contrasting perspectives of potential risks associated with the arts. In fact, some of the most eager advocates for the inclusion of the arts also had important concerns and cautions. They provided examples of the possible contraindications of the arts or creative writing for social work. One social worker spoke about how creative writing can be potentially overwhelming for clients because it can have no emotional limits or boundaries:

Oftentimes, when clients start talking about writing, we talk about the fact that sometimes seeing things on paper, like right in front of you, can be overwhelming. ...We talk about [how to] take care of yourself...about making sure that they have supports around them...so that if the feelings become overwhelming and really big, they have someone around them or some means of support to feel grounded again and to stop, to stop if it gets too big. It can bring up a lot of stuff. (Social Worker)

Another social worker raised concerns that writing on the “self” as opposed to “imaginative” creative writing was not necessarily suitable for all clients and, in some cases, may not be a therapeutically effective approach:

And it doesn't work for everyone: I have clients that won't write. ...I have a client who...cuts herself often and every time she makes the choice to write can get to the bottom of what's wrong and not cut, but won't...like some of them say I write and I write and I write and it's the same old stuff so, uh, well, write about something else then, you know? Uh, move out of yourself [that is] like, just use your imagination. And don't write about anything that has to do with you and your struggles or you and your story. (Social Worker)

Her statements highlight the emerging view of the potential for creative writing to be self-perpetuating and repetitious—a limitation that was also alluded to by one creative writer:

So, if I have a character [laugh] that's, you know, what do you call it, spinning her wheels...it's very dead on the page. And I read contemporary literature. It's like, oh, this is a nice enactment of your neurosis, thanks so much, but I don't care. I suppose if the writing were somehow beautiful enough that could, I mean even with Proust, which I adore when, if it just gets to those parts and amounts of things past where he's obsessively jealous, it's like “Eh, Marcel! Get over it!” [laugh]. Just write about something else, you know. Like one thing is expressing these damaging things and the other is expressing them in a way that you're freed from it, that release. ...I wonder a little bit about that, because it can also be something that reinforces one's inner boundaries and inner oppression as well. If you...get stuck in any one of those stages, writing can be very obsessive and not have the same function that it could have. (Creative Writer)

These excerpts underscore the need for social workers to be able to distinguish conditions that maximize client benefit and reduce the potential for stalemate or harm when using the arts. One social worker remembered her own discomfort with the inclusion of one of the arts, poetry writing, at a time when she cofacilitated a group with an art therapist:

I thought, “What the heck is this stuff that we're doing?” I'm not devaluing it—it's just not me. ...I could see that it really was very powerful for some people but not for others and...I'm not doing this... So I just took my cues from her [the art therapist] and I had to also make sure that I did not in any way communicate to the group that I was uncomfortable with this. (Social Worker)

The social worker's discomfort—in part, at least—appears to be due to a process that required a different set of skills to which she was not accustomed. While this social worker valued an artistic process, she did not wish to take up a position like the art therapist.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Social work has only barely begun to investigate the potential role and intersections of the arts for social work in the current climate. Yet, consideration of the value of the arts to social work may be part of a developing discourse that examines the current, constructed set of knowledge and skills that constitute social work's past, present, and future identity, values, and objectives.

Several of the findings here are consistent with reports on the potential for the arts to impact social work at multiple levels: (a) in bridging theory with the practice wisdom of the practitioner; (b) by infusing reflective, critical, and ethical inquiry; and (c) by locating social work relations as central to a dialogical process within the client's constructed and experienced world (Goldstein, 1992, 1999; Papell & Skolnik, 1992; Reynolds, 1942; Siporin, 1975). Participants spoke of the ways that the arts generally may be beneficial alongside cautions and contraindications.

A number of this study's emerging themes that tend to be underrepresented or nonexistent in the social work literature: The arts and social work share a social marginalization. Both the arts and social work connect to human processes, at times including spiritual ones. A central perspective arose that the arts inform social work by illuminating social work's dichotomized knowledge—i.e., false dichotomies between the personal, political, spiritual, and creative. The arts (creative writing) also illuminate life's intersections of mind, body, and spirit. There was the potential vibrancy of clients' and social workers' processes promoting critical personal and professional self-reflection. Language construction and the power of words underlay the capacity for relationships, for empathy, to challenge and interrogate current meanings of words, sometimes in non-precious and playful ways. Being engaged and vulnerable through the inclusion of the arts poses challenges for social workers in general, both personally and professionally, because of the limits of traditional training.

Highlighting some of the practice issues, several participants stated that there were contraindications to the inclusion of the arts (creative writing) to social work—something requiring further investigation. One problem was the potential for clients to become emotionally overwhelmed without established precautions and/or professional strategies for clients' self-care. Although this study is not focused on the therapeutic technique of writing, there is evidence that the expression of feelings—particularly traumatic or difficult ones within both structured (Barrett & Wolfer, 2001; Pennebaker, 1993; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990) and nonstructured formats (e.g., dream journals, letters, diaries, journaling, and creative nonfiction)—contributes to an individual's health and well-being (Dellasega, 2001; Ferguson, 2000). However, both creative writer and social worker narratives suggest that social workers must not “(re)enact neuroses” in the act of creative writing with their clients, slipping into nonhelpful uses of the arts. In using creative writing as technique, social workers must determine client suitability, risk, and benefit that are suggestive of careful planning and assessment models, even within creative, relaxed, spontaneous processes.

Arts Infusion: Pluralistic, Nondualist, and Integrated Epistemology for Practice

On the matter of a practicing epistemology, the participants in this study provide evidence of the growing ways that grounding in the humanities and the arts form an integral part of social work practice (Goldstein, 1992) and the multiple ways that social workers come to know the world in general and their clients in particular. In these ways, the foundation on the arts and science as coexisting entities—i.e., as “scientific art” (Siporin, 1975) or as an “artful practice” (Powell, 2003) as well as part of an integrated or *infused approach*—is noted. Perhaps these selected social workers—their tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1969) embedded in richly diverse personal and social experiences—do represent only a small minority of practitioners infusing epistemologies in creative ways in their practices, or perhaps they represent a broader movement. The claim that there is infusion, a blending, rests upon there being episodes where tacit knowledge is being acted upon “things that may have been ‘learned’ in some formal or semiformal sense at some earlier time, both substantively and procedurally” (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 492). It is possible that a number of social workers have practices infused with the arts, but they may choose to not characterize their work in such terms. Particularly interesting is the theoretically diverse training of the selected sample of social work practitioners who used theoretical models in ego-psychology, cognitive-behavioral, critical, feminist, narrative, and anti-oppression, to name a few—all models rooted in positivist, postpositivist, interpretative, critical, and post-modern epistemologies. As such, the arts are not confined to one epistemological paradigm or “type” of social worker. In retrospect, I recall times in social work's history when claims of social workers' “eclectic” position evoked criticism for confusion and lack of direction. Yet, these social workers, whether deliberately or not, brought disparate or opposing positions together. These multifarious positions apparently did not simply arise from an allegiance to postmodern pluralism and its multiple perspectives (although, for some, that may well be true). The activities of workers appear to demonstrate a complexity of interaction using skills, established theoretical modalities, to better resonate with their clients' lives toward effective outcomes. Just where the domain of the arts begins and ends, and where science begins and ends, will require further inquiry into a group of *arts informed* or *arts inclusive* social workers and social work researchers, such as the present ones.

In this study, the arts bring to social work discourse another perspective—intersecting *moments* between epistemologies. Importantly, participants continued to expose cultural limitations of the primary or received view of social work (Graybeal, 2001)—that social work rests upon conflicted, underlying epistemological

positions constantly in tension with one another (e.g., modern versus postmodern, material reality versus spiritual reality—as opposed to an embodied spirituality). Alternatively, participants' accounts illuminate the potential influence of the arts toward an integrated epistemological stance capable of incorporating multiple epistemological positions. Social work would need to move toward a discourse that is less divided—where we can seek the gaps, spaces, and places where there is coexistence, intersections, and even a transcendence of dichotomies (epistemological, theoretical, practical) in original and creative ways. Social workers, I suggest, will need to remain open to the challenges that the arts bring—the ability of the arts to disrupt as well as add to knowledge and practice. These challenges will likely not be welcomed in all cases and in all settings. Participants' insights move social work curricula and practice to a new terrain—nondualistic, pluralist, and integrated epistemologies—that may enhance our understanding and compassion for our clients.

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