

From Clients to Colleagues: Supporting the Professional Development of Survivor Social Work Students

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Abstract : This oral presentation is a reflective piece regarding current social work teaching methods that value and devalue the lived experiences of survivor students. This presentation grounds the term 'survivor' in feminist frameworks. A survivor-defined approach to feminist advocacy assumes an individual's agency, considers each case and needs independent of generalizations, and provides resources and support to empower victims. Feminist ideologies are ripe arenas to update and influence the rapport-building schools of social work have with these students. Survivor-based frameworks are rooted in nuanced understandings of intersectional realities, staunchly combat both conscious and unconscious deficit lenses wielded against victims, elevate lived experiences to the realm of experiential expertise, and offer alternatives to traditional power structures and knowledge exchanges. Actively importing a survivor framework into the methodology of social work teaching breaks open barriers many survivor students have faced in institutional settings, this author included. The profession of social work is at an important crux of change, both in the United States and globally. The United States is currently undergoing a radical change in its citizenry and outlier communities have taken to the streets again in opposition to their othered-ness. New waves of students are entering this field, emboldened by their survival of personal and systemic oppressions- heavily influenced by third-wave feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, among other post-structuralist ideologies. Traditional models of sociological and psychological studies are actively being challenged. The profession of social work was not founded on the diagnosis of disorders but rather a grassroots-level activism that heralded and demanded resources for oppressed communities. Institutional and classroom acceptance and celebration of survivor narratives can catapult the resurgence of these values needed in the profession's service-delivery models and put social workers back in the driver's seat of social change (a combined advocacy and policy perspective), moving away from outsider-based intervention models. Survivor students should be viewed as agents of change, not solely former victims and clients. The ideas of this presentation proposal are supported through various qualitative interviews, as well as reviews of 'best practices' in the field of education that incorporate feminist methods of inclusion and empowerment. Curriculum and policy recommendations are also offered.

Keywords : deficit lens bias, empowerment theory, feminist praxis, inclusive teaching models, strengths-based approaches, social work teaching methods

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