

Novel Ideas: Spirituality and Community in a Clinical Social Work Course

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Abstract:

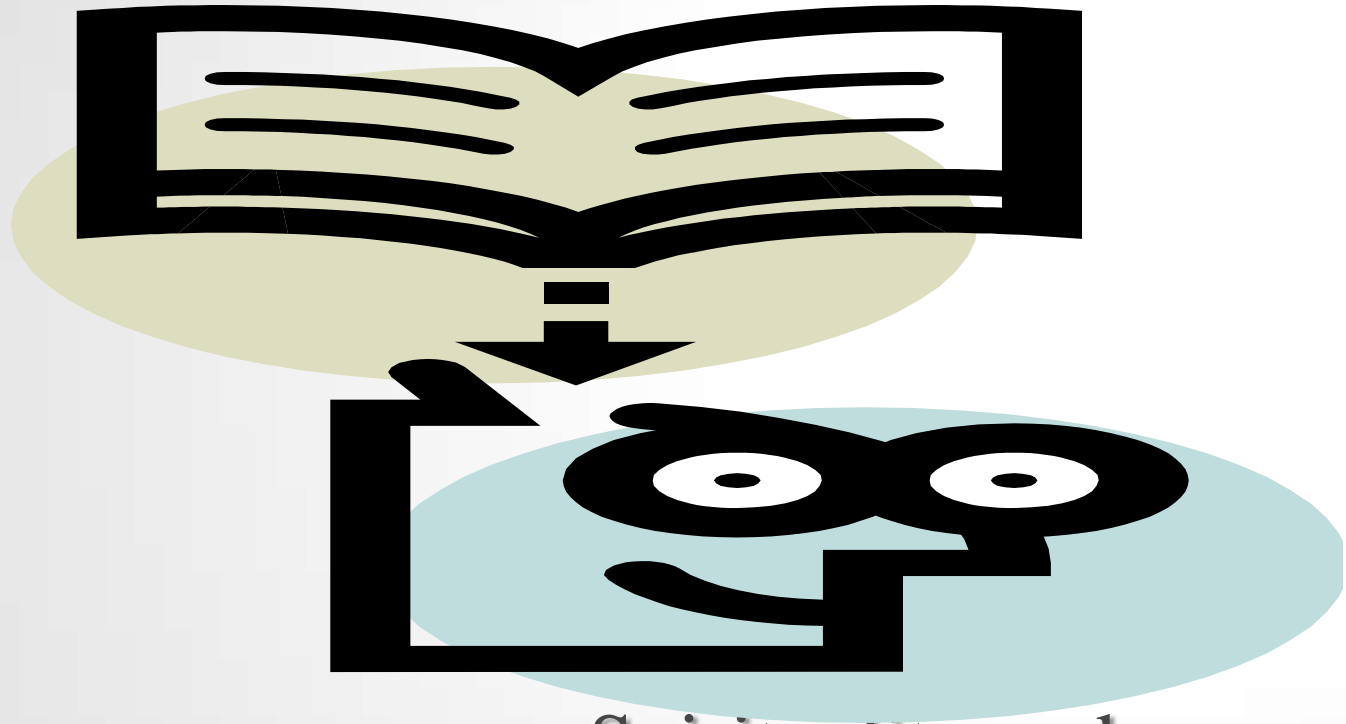
Spirituality and sense of community can be difficult concepts for graduate students to understand and apply within the context of their professional practice. Most undergraduate social work training does little to challenge Western individualistic and secular culture and professional practice tends to reinforce these orientations. This paper argues that popular fiction can be a valuable tool to assist graduate students to better understand the roles of spirituality and community in individual and collective well-being and to translate this knowledge to professional practice contexts. The paper illustrates the use of two novels in a graduate clinical social work course, Richard Wagamese's *Keeper 'N Me* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, to challenge mainstream clinical social work and create space to reorder conceptions of change and the role of the clinician in this change.

The paper weaves together text from the novels, from complementary course readings, and from student assignments to highlight three key learnings that the novels facilitate:

1. The multidimensional and interactional aspects of spirituality, sense of place, sense of community, and sense of self.
2. Processes of change and the relationship between individual and community change.
3. Re-conceptions of clinical social work practice.

Biography:

Dr. Gillespie is an assistant professor with an MSW (Calgary) and a Ph.D. in urban planning (UBC). Her research focuses on the field of child welfare and includes interprofessional education as well as policy approaches to strengthen community in the lives of children and families. She teaches in the areas of social work theory, social policy, child welfare practice, community practice, and community centred clinical practice.

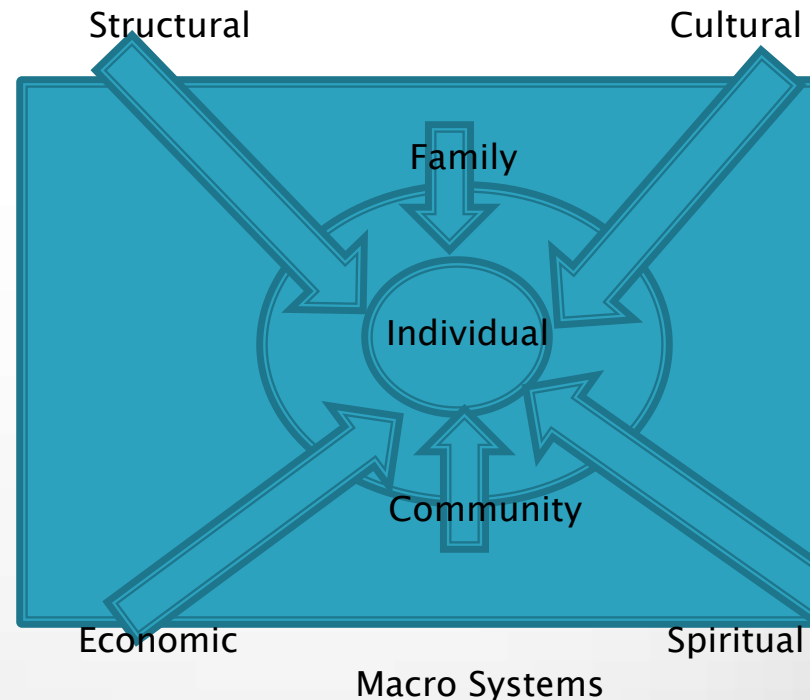


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A new developmental paradigm for clinical social work

Dennis Saleebey argues that we are seeing a paradigm shift in our understanding of human development. Research is suggesting that genetics and environment are the interactive “superstructure” of development and that biology and the environment interact in complex and dynamic ways to produce specific developmental outcomes. While the most important environmental elements are the *proximal* (or community) elements, all the elements of context, from the micro to the macro are being recognized for their interactive impact on human behavior and human development.

Our understanding of human development is also being influenced by research on child, adult, and family resilience. This research is suggesting that human development occurs throughout the lifespan and is shaped by the kinds of challenges and adversities that people face and the personal, interpersonal, and social resources that they have at their disposal; the self is “less predictable and more malleable” than we have supposed (Saleebey, 2006, p. 49).



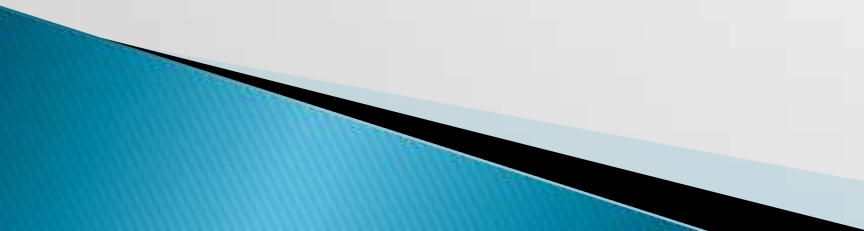
Social Work 502: Clinical Practice in the Community

This course links clinical social work practice to the broader community contexts within which both clinician and client are situated.

The nature and meaning of community and its role in the well-being of diverse individuals and groups are explored.

Students examine practice frameworks that incorporate community relations in clinical assessment and intervention and are expected to situate specific their own clinical practice within such a framework.

This new developmental paradigm provides the basis for a graduate level clinical social work practice course that I have taught over the past four years. The course focuses on the role of community in human development and the implications this has for clinical practice. The concept of community is explored through two interrelated and interactive elements: one, “sense of community” and two, “sense of place.”



Sense of Community

Membership

Influence

Integration and Need Fulfillment

Shared Emotional Connection

Sense of Place

Belonging

Rootedness

McMillan and Chavis' seminal 1986 article proposing a definition of "sense of community" provides one conceptual framework for students understanding of community.

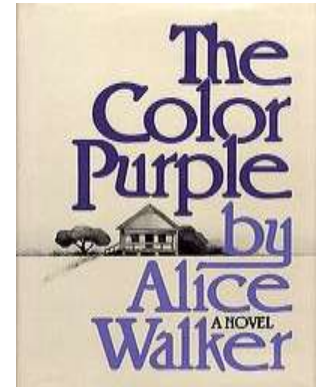
Readings from environmental psychology exploring sense of place and place attachment provide the second conceptual framework.

For many students, however, the concepts within these frameworks are highly abstract and they struggle with their applicability to clinical practice.

Case examples provide a useful approach to facilitate student understanding of these issues.



The Novels



In this course the theoretical readings are supplemented with novels that act as case examples. Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple*, set in the early twentieth century provides re-telling of forty some years in the life of Celie, a black woman born and raised in rural Georgia. Award winning writer Richard Wagamese's novel *Keeper 'N Me*, tells the story of Garnet Raven, a young Ojibway man who, after spending his childhood in a series of white foster homes, and his young adulthood drifting, ultimately ending up in jail, finds his way back to his Aboriginal community. (A third novel is Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*).

These novels provide a rich medium through which to examine the role that community plays in human development and well-being and challenge students to think about how to translate this to their clinical practice. And while there are numerous similarities between the three stories, significant differences between them assist in conveying the complexity of the role of community and implications for clinical practice.

Membership: Belonging to Community

“This is your home,
these are your
people, and your
family ... you
belong with us.”

“What you got? You
ugly, you skinny,
you shape funny.
You too scared to
open your mouth to
people.”

Keeper 'N Me

The Color Purple

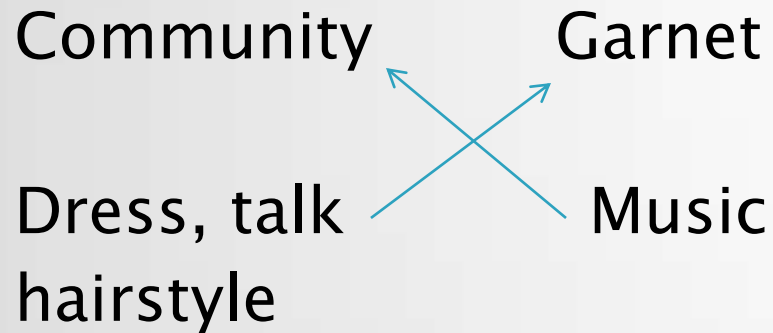
Influence: The Power of Community

Member openness
to influence by
community members

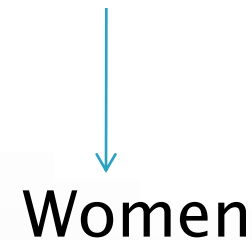


Power of member
to influence the
community.

Influence: The Power of Community



Community
Patriarchy, Abuse



Keeper 'N Me

The Color Purple

Integration and Need Fulfillment: Mutual Contribution

Garnet here's been an example to all of us how important [the old ways] are. The Red Eagle drummers ...have brung an honor song especially for you Garnet, an' they're gonna sing it now. It's your song. Always gonna be sung in your honor now.

When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with MamaBut everybody laughed at me....Well, nobody gon laugh at you now, I said. Help me stitch these pockets. But I don't know how, he say. I'll show you, I said. And I did.

Keeper 'N Me

The Color Purple

Shared Emotional Connection: Community of Spirit

Shared emotional = contact + high quality
connection interaction.

High quality interaction = (community
celebration x sharedness of the event) +
amount of honor felt by members.

Shared Emotional Connection: Community of Spirit

The song went on and on and that pile of gifts got bigger 'n bigger. The warm feeling inside of me from all those hugs and all those other heartbeats, was almost overwhelming. Every face was a tear filled face that night.

Keeper 'N Me

Why us always have family reunion on July 4th say Henrietta. White folks busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other.

The Color Purple

Sense of Place: Belonging and Rootedness

Finding
“community”
by embracing
community

Keeper ‘N Me

Finding
“community”
by rejecting
community

The Color Purple

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