

MSW Students' Understanding of Social Location: The Development of a Positionality Measure

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Abstract

The current study presents findings from a pilot study of a positionality measure, developed to assess MSW students' understanding of positionality encountered in field practice settings. Positionality refers to one's social location and worldview, which influences how one responds to power differentials in various contexts. This construct is important for social work, as one's own positionality impacts one's approach when working with clients, during community engagement, and policy-making. As such, this study examined the utility of developing a positionality measure to assess how MSW students understand and respond to issues related to power, privilege, and oppression in field practice settings. The current study highlights the process of developing and piloting the positionality measure, and preliminary findings from the dissemination of the measure to a sample of MSW students (N = 103) engaged in field placements. Future opportunities for item refinement, including the further establishment of reliability and validity for the measure are discussed.

Keywords: Psychometric Theory, Scale Development, Positionality, Power, Privilege, and Oppression

Background Literature

Power, privilege, and oppression are common terms in social work but can be difficult to define, understand, and apply. While some research has examined social and racial privilege among social service providers and counselors in practice settings, little research has been conducted to specifically explore social work students' perceptions of positionality within the context of field internships. Positionality refers to one's social location and worldview, which influences how one responds to power differentials in various contexts (Warf, 2000). This construct is important for social work, as one's positionality influences how one approaches work with clients, community engagement, and policy-making. Understanding positionality is of crucial importance to culturally responsive social work practice, and given the absence of an existing measure to assess positionality, this manuscript describes the preliminary development of a positionality measure designed to evaluate social work students' understanding and experiences of positionality in field internship settings.

Research demonstrates that counselors often experience challenges when providing culturally responsive services to clients (Black, Stone, Hutchinson, Suarez, & Elisabeth, 2007). Scholars have hypothesized that counselors and social service providers may not recognize their own social privilege and how it negatively impacts their work with their clients (Hays, Chang, & Decker, 2007). This finding is critical given the diversity of clients social workers engage. Research examining diversity within organizational contexts demonstrates that not acknowledging and valuing diversity leads to problems such as miscommunication, the devaluation of individuals, decreased productivity, and inefficiency (Kezar, 2002). Moreover,

cross-cultural contact between a counselor from a majority group and a client from a minority group is likely to occur; therefore, being a culturally responsive counselor or student-practitioner is critically important and requires self-awareness, knowledge, and training in order to work effectively with diverse clients (Hays, Chang, & Decker, 2007).

Not only is it important to acknowledge and value diversity in practice contexts, but it is also essential in the context of research. Milner (2007) developed a framework using the central tenets of Critical Race Theory to “guide researchers into a process of racial and cultural awareness, consciousness, and positionality” (p. 388) when conducting education research in response to the potential dangers of students’ lack of attention to their own and others’ racialized and cultural systems of knowing and experiencing the world. The dominant and oppressive perspective is that White individuals’ beliefs, experiences, and epistemologies are often viewed as the “norms” by which others are compared. Racialized systems of knowing, including how and what kind of knowledge is valued, can create difficulty for researchers in interpreting or conceptualizing such norms within communities of color, especially if they do not understand how such systems can marginalize and/or objectify people of color. Thus, Milner (2007) argues that scholars must disrupt the discourse and beliefs about what it means to be “normal.” Furthermore, students must consider that failing to acknowledge racialized systems of knowing may result in misinformation, and misrepresentation of marginalized individuals and communities. Milner’s (2007) framework contends that students should (a) engage in critical race and cultural self-reflection; (b) understand the self in relation to others through reflecting about themselves in relation to the people they serve in field placements; (c) engage in reflection together with clients to process what is happening in their particular environment; and (d) shift from focusing on self to thinking more broadly on a system level, taking the historic, political, social, economic, racial and cultural realities into consideration.

Thus, literature regarding positionality as a social service provider, counselor, and researcher reflects the critical need for social work students to understand how positionality impacts how they work with clients, engage communities, and inform policy. In addition, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* states, “Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability” (NASW, 2008). Social workers often serve people of color and/or people who experience discrimination and marginalization, social workers must examine their own social privilege in order to provide culturally responsive care. Accordingly, the primary aim of this study is to illuminate how social work students understand and respond to issues of power, privilege, and oppression in field internships, and ultimately to improve culturally responsive social work practice by establishing a valid and reliable positionality measure.

Method

Participants

After receiving human subjects approval from the authors’ university Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited from a graduate social work program in the Rocky

Mountain region. Using the program's student listserv, 430 students were invited by e-mail to participate in the study, which was accessed online by following a link to Qualtrics, a web-based survey software program that is frequently used in social science survey research. Students were eligible to participate if they were then in social work field internships and if they held MSW foundation, concentration, or advanced standing status. Data collection occurred over a 1-week period in Fall 2014.

Procedure

Initial Item Selection

Based on a review of literature, as well as social work practice and education experience, the authors developed 95 preliminary items pertaining to positionality. The initial items were formulated as a 4-point rating scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, thereby requiring participants to think critically about their responses without relying on a neutral choice option. In order to support content validity, the scale was sent to two expert reviewers, both of whom were social work educators. One reviewer was male, and one was female. Both identified as people of color. One had a PhD and was a tenure-track professor, and the other was an MSW and full-time clinical faculty member. The reviewers were instructed to rate each item as *high*, *moderate*, or *low* for use in the measure, to rate for clarity/conciseness, to point out awkward/confusing items, and to assess whether items "tap into the phenomena" (positionality) being measured. Their feedback included simplifying the construct definition, and modifying the order of certain items to improve the clarity and readability of the scale.

Cognitive interviews were also conducted with two MSW students. Both were second-year students, who identified as White and female. One identified as straight/heterosexual, and one identified as lesbian. Since both were students in the sampled graduate social work program, they agreed to not take the final instrument once administered. Prior to conducting the cognitive interviews, the authors established a protocol to facilitate the interviews. This included asking the students to time themselves taking the survey and to record questions as they took the survey. After doing so, the authors interviewed them individually to determine any confusing or unclear questions, how they interpreted items, how they decided to answer each item, and any suggested changes in wording. While some variation in feedback existed, they offered similar feedback for clarifying context and language consistency. For example, both wanted to know if the items were to be answered in consideration of their experiences in the graduate social work program as a whole, or specifically within the context of their social work field internship. Additionally, they asked for clarification around various terminology included in some of the items. After considering the expert reviewers' feedback and conducting the cognitive interviews, the authors examined each item again and further clarified context and language (e.g., "student practitioner" was changed to "social work intern"). The authors deleted 20 items, but in the process of splitting double-barreled questions and reducing double-negatives, questions were added for a total of 95 items for the final refined measure, which may be viewed in Appendix A.

Results

Item Analysis

Data were exported into SPSS (Version 22), which was used to perform item analysis and examine demographic characteristics as shown in Table 1. After conducting the initial item

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N = 103)

	%
Sex	
Female	91.3
Male	8.7
Race/Ethnicity	
White	90.3
African American/Black	1.0
Latino/a	4.9
Native American	1.0
Asian	2.9
Multiracial	2.9
Sexual Orientation	
Straight/heterosexual	86.4
Gay/Lesbian	5.8
Bisexual	6.8
Questioning	2.9
Other	1.0
Age	
Under 24	21.4
24-28	54.4
29-34	14.6
35-39	3.9
40-44	1.0
45-49	1.9
50 or more	2.9
Religious Views	
Spiritual but not religious	32.0
Protestant Christian	14.6
Agnostic/Atheist/Secular	20.4
Catholic/Roman Catholic	10.7
Evangelical Christian/Baptist	3.9
Jewish	4.9
Buddhist	2.9
Pagan	1.9
Other	8.7
Political Affiliation	
Liberal	68.0
Moderate	28.2
Conservative	3.9
Bachelor in Social Work	
Yes	11.7
No	88.3

<i>(Table 1, continued)</i>	<u>%</u>
Year in Program	
Foundation Year	51.5
Concentration Year	36.9
Advanced Standing	11.7
Academic Interest	
Clinical	64.1
Community/Macro	21.4
Unsure/undecided	14.6
Field Placement Responsibilities	
Clinical	50.5
Community	20.4
Mixture of clinical/community	29.1

analysis, the internal consistency alpha for the aggregate measure was sufficient ($\alpha = .79$), and 21 items were negatively-correlated to others in the scale. These items were reverse-coded, and a subsequent item analysis was conducted. After examining the corrected item total correlations, 6 items continued to have low negative correlations. These items were deleted from the analysis. The final item analysis was conducted with 89 items with strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$).

Sample Characteristics and Survey Findings

A total of 107 students responded to the survey (25% response rate) and 4 students' responses were deleted because they did not complete the survey, leaving 103 usable surveys. The majority of respondents were female (91.3%), and between the ages of 24-48 (54.4%). Additionally, students self-identified as predominantly White (90.3%), followed by Latino/a (4.9%), Asian (2.9%), Multiracial (2.9%), Black (1.0%) and Native American (1.0%). The total exceeds 100% to accommodate for multiple answers selected. Half of the sample was comprised of foundation students (51%), followed by concentration students (37%), and advanced standing students (12%). Of these students, approximately 51% were placed in clinical settings, 30% were in mixed clinical and community settings, and 29% were in community settings.

Findings indicate that approximately 25% of the sample had never heard of positionality prior to the administration of the survey. However, most of the participants agreed that, as interns, they were in more privileged positions compared to the clients they serve. For example, 80.4% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that his or her role as an intern is an advantage to society, and 93.2% indicated they were aware that clients at their field placements experience societal discrimination. Although participants acknowledged that their own social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) were often more valued than many of the identities of those served at their field placements, 53.4% of respondents indicated they felt guilty about their positionality when working with social work clients.

Discussion and Implications

The preliminary findings described in this manuscript reflect the value of exploring social work students' experiences of positionality in field placement settings. Continuing to validate this measure may help social work practice and education through illuminating social work

students' knowledge bases of positionality, attitudes toward clients, and feelings of entitlement and/or guilt, which may negatively impair their abilities to conduct culturally responsive or effective social work practice, particularly with communities from which they did not originate. Knowledge of such phenomena could translate into more effective educational and practice training strategies for social work students to use a more culturally grounded approach. For further study, examining associations between sociodemographics, placement or concentration type, and other aspects of identity in tandem with positionality and viewpoints may reflect trends that indicate settings and/or courses in which there are particularly high needs for such training.

Surprisingly, about one-fourth of the sample indicated never hearing about positionality before, despite the emphasis placed on teaching this concept throughout this MSW program's curriculum. This finding may suggest that perhaps instructors are unsure about the concept of positionality, how to teach it, or are inadequately/not teaching it at all. Or, perhaps instructors are teaching about positionality but students are not grasping or retaining this vital conceptual knowledge. The validation of this measure could further clarify how this important topic could be more effectively taught through social work curricula, as the social work community has a shared onus to disrupt the cycle of lack of self-awareness, guilt, and entitlement in work with clients and communities. Educators, field supervisors, and others who play a large role in the mentoring and development of social work students must work collectively, rather than expect students to infer or intuit culturally responsive social work practice without comprehensive training.

The authors originally intended to conduct an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA); however, the small sample size to item ratio relegated this study to item analyses. In order to increase the validity of this measure, future research efforts should conduct multiple simulations to examine the conditions in which EFA could yield quality results for this small sample size. Specifically, researchers could assess the level of loadings, number of factors, and number of variables that influence adequate factorability (de Winter, Dodou, & Wieringa, 2009). To more rigorously test this measure, however, future research should also include the administration of this instrument to a larger sample (300 participants or greater). In doing so, researchers could seek to improve the validity of the measure, particularly by administering the instrument to a more diverse sample (e.g., administering to students at additional social work programs in more diverse geographical regions, different program sizes, and across private and public institutions.

Finally, this measure challenges social work educators to consider how well they understand their own positionality, ways they might engage students, other educators, field supervisors, and community members in dialogue regarding positionality, and how they might participate in the further development and validation of positionality scales. As such, future efforts at further refining this scale for improved validity and reliability show promise in aiding social workers to more effectively research, educate, and practice with regard to positionality.

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Appendix A: Positionality Measure

Definition: Positionality is defined as, “The notion that personal values, views, and social location influence how one understands ” (Warf, 2010, p. 2257-2258) and responds to power differentials within particular contexts.

Rating Scale: (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree)

1. I have never heard of *positionality* before.
2. When I do well in a challenging situation, it is “a credit to my race.”
3. I can be late for my field placement without people attributing these behaviors to the color of my skin.
4. I can be late for appointments at my field placement without people attributing these behaviors to the color of my skin.
5. I can miss my field placement without people attributing these behaviors to the color of my skin.
6. I can take a field placement with an affirmative action employer without having my coworkers suspecting I got the job because of my race.
7. I can be reasonably sure that if I ask to talk to the person “in charge”, I will face a person of my own race.
8. My race has made my life easier.
9. I have more advantages because of my positionality.
10. It is acceptable to support clients in making choices one personally disagrees with.
11. Oppression is caused by the purposeful subjugation of certain groups by other dominant groups.
12. I feel irritated when others talk about being oppressed.
13. I feel irritated when others talk about their privilege.
14. I believe that being an intern is an advantage to society.
15. Interns often have more resources and opportunities than the clients they serve.
16. The clients at my field placement lack power in society.
17. I think the clients at my field placement exaggerate their hardships.
18. Interns hold a lot of power compared to their clients at their field placements.
19. Interns have an educational advantage in society.
20. I am aware that clients at my field placement experience discrimination.
21. There are different standards and expectations for interns compared to the clients at my field placement.

22. My race/ethnicity is more valued than the race/ethnicity of those served at my field placement.
23. I am in the company of people of my race most of the time.
24. I can do well in challenging situations without being called a credit to my cultural background.
25. If I make a mistake at my field placement, it is not attributed to my race.
26. If I make a mistake at my field placement, it is not attributed to my ethnicity.
27. If I make a mistake at my field placement, it is not attributed to my gender.
28. If I make a mistake at my field placement, it is not attributed to my socioeconomic status.
29. If I make a mistake at my field placement, it is not attributed to my sexual orientation.
30. If I make a mistake at my field placement, it is not attributed to my religion.
31. If I make a mistake at my field placement, it is not attributed to my ability/disability.
32. If I make a mistake at my field placement, it is not attributed to my age.
33. I can be sure that if I needed help, my race would not work against me.
34. I can be sure that if I needed help, ethnicity would not work against me.
35. I can be sure that if I needed help, my gender would not work against me.
36. I can be sure that if I needed help, my socioeconomic status would not work against me.
37. I can be sure that if I needed help, my sexual orientation would not work against me.
38. I can be sure that if I needed help, my religion would not work against me.
39. I can be sure that if I needed help, my ability/disability would not work against me.
40. I can be sure that if I needed help, my age would not work against me.
41. I can comfortably avoid, ignore, or minimize the impact of racism in my life.
42. My field placement enacts organizational policies that support the subjugation of certain racial and/or ethnic groups.
43. Christianity is the dominant religion in this country.
44. Policies often reflect Christian values.
45. Heterosexual couples are usually depicted when referencing families.
46. Women are generally not promoted at the same rate as men.
47. Men generally make more money than women.
48. Interns rely on their field placement supervisors to facilitate discussion around uncomfortable topics related to privilege and oppression.
49. I am comfortable asking other interns questions regarding privilege and oppression.
50. Interns trust one another when discussing uncomfortable or sensitive topics related to privilege and oppression.
51. I'm comfortable exploring my own positionality as I research and work in the community.
52. I have not done anything to explore my positionality in the past.
53. I am scared to explore my positionality.
54. I look forward to exploring my positionality.
55. I am anxious about stirring up bad feelings by exposing my positionality.
56. I feel it is ethical to conduct research with communities of which I am not a part.
57. I feel it is ethical to work with clients in clinical social work settings who are from communities of which I am not a part.
58. I feel it is ethical to work with clients in community-based social work settings who are from communities of which I am not a part.
59. I think it is an advantage as a social work intern to be a member of the same community as my clients.

60. I think it is a disadvantage as a social work intern to be a member of the same community as my clients.
61. I believe that clients only trust social work interns who are members of the same social or demographic groups as themselves.
62. I do not believe that clients only trust social work interns who are members of the same social or demographic groups as themselves.
63. I think social work interns who are not from the same social or demographic groups as their clients are likely to be more effective than those who are from the same groups.
64. I feel guilty about my positionality when I work with social work clients.
65. I feel angry about my positionality when I work with social work clients.
66. I feel indifferent about my positionality when I work with social work clients.
67. I do not feel comfortable working with clients who are from other social or demographic groups.
68. I feel excited about working with clients who are from other social or demographic groups.
69. I feel like an outsider when I work with clients from other social or demographic groups.
70. I am more excited to work with clients who are from other social or demographic groups than I am working with people from groups with which I personally identify.
71. I think it is important to work with clients who are from other social or demographic groups compared to the ones with which I identify.
72. I am scared to work with other social or demographic groups because I think they consider me an outsider.
73. I am nervous to work with other social or demographic groups because I do not think I will understand them.
74. In the past, I have taken a class or classes that discussed the concept of *positionality*.
75. I believe that my clients will come from backgrounds of greater privilege compared to what I have experienced in my life.
76. I am ashamed of the many privileges that I have.
77. I feel bad for my clients because they do not experience the privileges that I have.
78. I take my privileges for granted.
79. By being open about my positionality and privilege I will hurt my relationships with people from groups with which I identify.
80. I am ashamed that the system is stacked in my favor because of the privileges and positionality that I experience.
81. If I address my privilege and positionality, I might alienate my family.
82. If confronted with a client seeking to make a reproductive choice I personally disagreed with, I would be unable to serve that client.
83. I intend to work toward dismantling power differentials between interns and clients.
84. I will work to change our unfair social structure that promotes power differentials.
85. I don't care to explore how I supposedly have unearned benefits from my social and demographic identities.
86. Everyone has equal opportunity so these so-called power differentials are false.
87. Each person, no matter his or her background, has an equal chance at success in life.
88. It is likely that I will misunderstand the needs of my clients who are from other social and demographic groups.
89. As an intern, I have the power to withhold resources from my clients.
90. As an intern, I have the power to withhold information from my clients.

91. As an intern, I have the power to influence client decision-making.
92. I sometimes feel superior to the clients with whom I work.
93. I sometimes think I would make better decisions for my clients than they would themselves.
94. I would not support a client's decision if I personally disagreed with it.
95. Our social structure system promotes power differentials between interns and clients.

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Stephanie Begun, MSW, is a PhD Candidate at the University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work. Her mixed methods dissertation research focuses on reproductive and sexual health attitudes and decision-making among homeless youth, and how youths' social networks, perceptions of social norms, and sources of social support may serve as risk/protective factors in youths' engagement in sexual behaviors. More broadly, Stephanie also investigates opportunities by which prevention science, policy, and community-based participatory research may work in tandem to positively impact family planning access and reproductive health outcomes for all populations.

Samantha Brown is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver. As a mixed methods researcher, she is interested in translating research on childhood victimization, family functioning, stress physiology, and substance use into the development and testing of interventions. Samantha received her B.A. in psychology and criminal justice at The College of Saint Rose and her M.A. in forensic psychology at the University of Denver. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor in the state of Colorado and her clinical experience includes domestic violence and substance abuse counseling and child welfare casework.