

# Identifying and Challenging Social Work Students' Biases

Elizabeth A. Wahler

*All students have individual biases that can affect their judgment and ability to utilize professional values when interacting with marginalized groups in social work practice. While traditional cultural diversity courses often address racial/ethnic or sexual minorities, many students are biased against other groups that may not be included in social work curricula designed to address prejudice. This manuscript describes a four-step teaching method designed to provide students individualized assistance with self-identifying and challenging prejudicial beliefs and value systems. Steps include consciousness raising and identification of the targeted group, education, exposure, and self-reflection.*

*Keywords:* Ethics and Values; Prejudice; Bias; Stereotype; Social Work Education; Teaching Professional Values

## Introduction

Social workers interact regularly with people from a variety of backgrounds, life experiences, and cultures. It is the social worker's obligation to understand the client, despite differences in beliefs, values, or choices, and to empower them to make the best decisions for themselves. Sometimes, however, personal values can conflict with clients' lifestyles and problematic behaviors. In many cases, prejudicial beliefs are so ingrained that they are subconscious (Nicoitara and Kang, 2009), and bringing them to consciousness is necessary to make objective decisions in practice. How do we help students examine their stereotypes and misconceptions about groups with whom they will be working?

The core values of social work, as stated in the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008), include respect for the dignity and worth of all people as demonstrated by awareness of diversity and honoring clients' right to self-determination based on their own personal needs and values. This social work core

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ISSN 0261-3479 print/1470-1227 online © 2012 Taylor & Francis  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02613479.2011.616582>

# Challenging Social Work Students

**Joacim Rocklöv**



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