

The Inclusion of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Field Practicum Supervision

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Peter Sobota [00:00:10] Do you have faith in field? From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocialWork podcast. I'm Peter Sobota. It's good to have you along everybody. Field practicum, or field placements if you're old school, are effectively the learning lab where MSW students have the opportunity to apply the content, the theory and skills that they've learned about in coursework. and where they receive mentoring or supervision in a relationship built to foster their professional development. The inclusion of spirituality in social work education and practice has come a long way from something that was there but was avoided to being promoted by the Council on Social Work Education, the ethical practice of social work, and the ability to demonstrate cultural competence. Despite this progress, there are still barriers or at least reluctance for students, field educators, and social work educators that impact comfort levels and accessing a supervisory relationship that welcomes and builds on these topics. Our guest Bailey Nichols, MSW will share her work interviewing MSW students about their experiences in field practicum supervisory relationships, and especially when the conversation might need to include overt discussions related to spirituality and religion. Ms. Nichols will also discuss ideas related to what behaviors students and supervisors might engage in that not only promote these discussions, but enhance social work education and practice. C. Bailey Nichols, MSW, is a PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work. Hi Bailey, welcome to Social Work.

Bailey Nichols [00:01:59] Hi Peter, how are you doing?

Peter Sobota [00:02:00] I'm doing okay. We, yeah, we had two days of warm weather here in Western New York, and then it all just started again. So I don't know, I'm not gonna complain too much about that. Well, thank you very much for joining us. We've been looking forward to talking with you. And if you would, before we get going, or before we jump right in, we already kind of did, but if you would, would you kind of allow me to lay out a couple of assumptions? and I'm actually going to lay out two or three of them, one by one, and if you would, would you comment on them one by one? And so I'll lay out an assumption and then I'll stop talking and ask you to respond based on your knowledge and your work around our topic today. So, is that fair?

Bailey Nichols [00:02:53] That sounds great.

Peter Sobota [00:02:54] All right, here we go. Here's number one. Assumption number one. Is it fair to say that the social work literature, at least related to spirituality and religion in social work practice, suggests that if a person, like say a client, for example, is

presenting with struggles or difficulties related to their own adherence or practice or even the appropriateness of their own spiritual religious practice, that in that case, unless the social worker has specific training, in spirit if you will, spiritual counseling. probably or should refer that client to someone else, maybe another social worker who does. What do you think?

Bailey Nichols [00:03:49] This is a great and I think a very multi-layered question because it really just depends on what the client is coming in with. So if we think about it, so obviously if you know someone who's trained in this area and you have someone nearby that can address these issues and you know them, absolutely, 100%, like go ahead and refer if you can. I think though, a lot of times when people are coming in with these issues, it tends to be a little bit more complex. And so with that in mind, some of the clients may be dealing with some trauma. A lot of times, like when you have people coming in in the practicum placements, I think that I have heard some students come in with some really complex concerns. And so a lot of that will be dependent on the client. So if a client is coming to a social worker, either they're not aware of folks around you have those qualifications or they're specifically wanting to talk to the social worker and not necessarily someone who is, you know, if we think about how we're the idea of pulling in religious and or spiritual leaders or resources, there's oftentimes a reason that they're coming to social worker and not to their pastor, their imam, their.. the leader of their synagogue to talk about these kinds of things because they are a little bit more complex and because a lot of times there is an element of trauma that could be pulled in or there's an element of where this is intersecting with mental health and we really do need to go and see a social worker and so I think that that really speaks to the need for for social workers to be competent in these areas to know enough to be able to help address some of this. So ideally, yes, if you have a spiritual counselor who can help you, who you know, who's available to help address those issues, absolutely do refer, but that should be something that you and the client work with together. I mean, I think it's - it's only fair to lay out as a practitioner like where you can and cannot help address some of these things. But I do think that a lot of times folks will come to social workers specifically because they're not in these realms. Because a lot of times the issues that come to social workers are related to, for example, one of the interview participants was talking about their Muslim client who was struggling with divorce and the stigma of divorce. And so adhering to her religious practices while also navigating something that is really largely stigmatized and their faith tradition, like that's a big thing. And so I think it just really speaks to the need. And again, if you're in rural settings, right? Like there's not necessarily gonna be somebody that you know that's gonna be able to address these, if they are, they're virtual or they're miles away or what have you. And so it just kind of underscores the real importance and the need to gain competence in this area and to know, and maybe, and again, this is maybe a conversation, side bunny trail here. Where, you know, it's not necessarily competence. It's not about knowing the things, but the competence comes into humility and the ability to be curious. and ask questions and ask the right questions to help engage the participant as they wrestle through some of their, where they're holding tension between their belief system that they subscribe to and the reality of where they are at the current moment.

Peter Sobota [00:07:46] Yeah, that all makes a lot of sense. And I think when I was kind of constructing that assumption, I'll tell you exactly what I had in mind. A client comes in to meet with a social worker and the phone call or the initial contact described like experiences with depression that are just like kind of unshakable. But as you talk with

them, what they just do is they relate their depression, or as they call it, and their symptoms, to, you know, I'm having a crisis of faith. And they start citing specific aspects of, for example, a religion, and wondering if that's a, and really, in the end, what they're really presenting is kind of like this crisis with particular religion, I mean, pick any. And, and let's say, even whether the worker perhaps even affiliates with that particular religion or not, but doesn't have training in guiding people through that practice, and that exploration and maybe that, I don't know, clarification process. It sounds like you're saying it would be ideal in that circumstance, perhaps, especially if you don't have expertise or training of your own to refer, or try and find somebody who could. Is that accurate?

Bailey Nichols [00:09:21] Yes, absolutely. And especially if you have the resources available. But ideally, you know, if folks are and especially grappling with that, you'd have to think about where is some of this coming from? Is it coming from some of the messages they're receiving? Because in some cases, depending, but again, you'd want to have some good judgment to see if you could help in that discernment process of, well, is this something where you partner with a religious leader to help address those together, or is this something that is stemming from? okay, my religious leader is telling me these things and they're giving me, like, they're the origin of this belief system that is now causing depression and a crisis of faith, in which case, you know, that gets to be a little bit more of a complex issue. And then - Thank you. But ideally, all social workers, hopefully at some point, will have this training to be able to help people, to be able to help ask the right questions so that the client themselves kind of works through it and you're just kind of there to help shape their processing.

Peter Sobota [00:10:34] So now, and you've kind of addressed this, but I'm going to lay out my second assumption. And so, all right, now let's say a client includes or spends a fair amount of time talking about the role that their faith, religion, or kind of a spiritual discipline plays in their life, comfort, meaning -making, anything like that, anything like that rather. Social workers... they should engage in that conversation. In fact, that would actually be an application of cultural competency and not to say even reflective of the biopsychosocial perspective. What do you think about that?

Bailey Nichols [00:11:23] Oh, absolutely.

Peter Sobota [00:11:24] I thought you might say that.

Bailey Nichols [00:11:26] Like, this is so, I mean, because ultimately the desire to help, you know, practitioners feel more comfortable and confident in this area is so that we can help our clients. And so this is, and for a lot of clients, this is where they get their main source of support and their main source of being. And, you know, it's a core part of an individual's identity for a lot of clients. And so whether they talk about it or not, it, it usually, it can be, or whatever their worldview is. And maybe we think about it not necessarily as a religion or spirituality, but oftentimes a worldview, that worldview, you know, we're all going to deal with things, you know, in life. Like, what do we do with the fact that like, things are just sucky sometimes? Like, what is your worldview for how you, how you navigate that? And so I think. Um, you know, this is really, really, really important and key, and it should be something that we get comfortable with just holding attention to the fact that other people's world views are not our world view, um, and being curious about it and not being threatened by it. Um, and that gets, you know, and that's where it gets a little dicey is because we oftentimes do get a little bit uncomfortable when things aren't, you know, aren't lining up with our own worldview. And so, but that's what we, you know, as social workers supposed to be doing, but... Increasingly in culture, I found it harder and harder to

like hold that tension. And so I think that there's such a need as social workers for us to be the ones that kind of help stand in the gap when things are uncomfortable and to be okay with that discomfort because culturally we start seeing, and I did not mean to bunny trail off into this, but like we're not really. we're not really great with holding views that are not our own and being able to teach them. Oh, my goodness, right? So, this is an invitation to personal growth and to being able to hopefully help remedy one of our culture's kind of biggest issues. And it can be in this place.

Peter Sobota [00:13:37] Well, yeah. Well, yeah. Yeah, we're supposedly the person in environment profession. So you would think that this would be second nature. But I think without doing a deep dive, I think we could probably both, well, I'll try it. We could probably both acknowledge that not all students, not all supervisors, not all social workers or people think it's really appropriate to talk about this with people. There's an element of taboo that I think has gotten a lot better. but it's still prevalent. So now, now we come to, you call, you call it, it gets dicey. I call this the juicy and really interesting part because you are asking questions in an area that applies to or that reflects students' experiences of discussing religion and spirituality in the context. of their social work education and their relationship with their field educator or supervisor. Hmm, you are studying and you're having interviews with students and asking them how that goes So here's the first question and this is a weird one if I got that part, right and People can't see us. So you'll you'll have to imagine that I there's a smile on my face when I say this Why? Why are you studying this?

Bailey Nichols [00:15:17] Great question. So every, you know, people usually say that your research is oftentimes me search. So. Go. every research question has some sort of a personal connection. And so this, this kind of, it was kind of a long journey to get here. I didn't really believe that this was at first, when I started my program, I was not planning on studying this at all. I was like, wait a minute, this is, you know, I thought you had to be in a religious school to study this. So I had a whole other plan to, you know, because I'm at the University of Pittsburgh, which is, you know, quite secular. So I started my journey thinking I would study integrated health. I'm still interested in that. Like as most researchers are, we have like 50 billion things we wanna research because we're just curious people and it's exciting. And I love it. But I started working on a project that was faith -based and didn't even, and it just opened my eyes to a world of, wait a minute, I can do research about this stuff? Hold on, like in a secular school? Wait a minute. like. So, um. Thinking about that, I just know that I did not feel equipped or trained to address some of these issues myself. And so I, you know, in my field placement, I had, sorry, practicum placement. In my practicum placement, I had two great practicum placements. I'd won my first practicum supervisor, it was wonderful. It was more of a... community organizing kind of role we, at Pitt, we separate into community organizing and direct practice. And so it was more of a, like, you know, looking at grants and research and that kind of thing. And, you know, it was really great. I felt totally comfortable if I needed to talk about issues related to religion or spirituality with my supervisor. And I, of course, had like had some reasons that I thought made it more comfortable for when my supervisor, you know, very much was. very clear going in where she stood and was willing to talk about it. And it was part of her self - disclosure was right up front. You know, it was like, okay, here, you know, I am a person that believes X, you know, believes Y. She was very much like, this is who I am. And so I was like, great. I guess I can talk about that here. So this is fine. And you didn't come up and it wasn't really, it didn't really come up much because we were doing the higher level, you know, community organizing stuff. You know, and holding. Mm -hmm. doing different things with family support centers. It just wasn't, wasn't enough.

Peter Sobota [00:17:58] Clinical practice, sir. Yeah.

Bailey Nichols [00:18:00] Exactly. It just wasn't part of the placement. But my second placement was with, um, in a geriatric care center. And so we're dealing with, you know, life stage changes and shifts and body changes and all sorts of things. And so a lot of those, like it did come up quite a bit in that setting. However, I felt very uncomfortable bringing it up to my supervisor in that setting. Ow! I had to, I had to bring it up, because I had a client who was expressing some very similarly to kind of what you were sharing. You know, in your scenario, I had a client come in and was, you know, sharing some beliefs that I thought were contributing to his depression. And so in case. I was like, well, do I challenge the beliefs? There is religious beliefs. Do I touch this? Do I not touch this? I'm not sure what to do. And so I knew I had to push through that discomfort and talk to my supervisor. She was great. She handled it like she was very clinical about it. It was wonderful. Like it was fine, but I had so much anxiety bringing up that to my supervisor. And I just thought, you know, if I have this much anxiety and I'm usually a pretty... I don't hesitate to ask questions, and I really hesitated to ask that question. So if I have that experience, how many other students were also having that experience? And what are we? and what are we? you to make this more comfortable because it is something that needs to come up and and it is taboo and we're just like we don't want to touch it with a five -foot pole because we don't want to offend people but at the same time like it could be really helpful to people to have this be part of their treatment. And so, yeah, it just was kind of out of my own discomfort.

Bailey Nichols [00:19:51] that I was like, what can we do to solve this problem to make this a conversation that's easier to have? Because I think we need to have it.

Peter Sobota [00:20:00] Sure. And, you know, if I could kind of insert like an anecdotal reflection of mine here, so I've been teaching in an MSW program, been teaching courses since probably 1995. So I've taught a lot of classes and I've been a full -time faculty member since 2001. I hear regularly, but not always in tremendous numbers. feedback statements from students saying, now this isn't an MSW program, that they don't feel comfortable even raising their own religious or spiritual beliefs in a class. There's no way without a direct invitation they're gonna touch that in a field placement. And they actually, I'll even go further, some report hostility, open hostility toward their religious orientation. or spiritual orientation when they have tried to talk about it in class. So I think that is to your point, and that rings true for me as well. Now that would be like a whole nother podcast, maybe we'll do that one, but I think it certainly fits. So now let me, if I could ask a wide open question, there's gonna be lots of room here for you, Maylee. So as you speak with these students, about their relationships, you know, talking about religion and spirituality with their field educators or in their field practicums. Oh, I got that right that time. What? Here's the really broad question. If, you know, as best you can, what are you learning? What are they telling?

Bailey Nichols [00:21:49] Wow. Yes. Lastly.

Peter Sobota [00:21:50] Yeah, this is an hour podcast, Bailey. So yeah.

Bailey Nichols [00:21:55] I'll keep it down. Well, how about that?

Peter Sobota [00:21:57] Well, how about the most popular ones, perhaps?

Bailey Nichols [00:22:01] Absolutely. Um, so the first thing I just wanted to just kind of mention is that it really, I was surprised it really wasn't that difficult to find students who want to talk about this and who want to have.

Peter Sobota [00:22:12] It doesn't surprise me, actually, yeah.

Bailey Nichols [00:22:16] So I didn't really have too much trouble finding people who wanted to talk with me about it. And it wasn't just people of one positionality. I had people all over the map. I had atheists and agnostics that wanted to talk about it. I had Bible - believing Christians. And people wanted to talk about it for a while. I had, you know, there were... There were... Several that went on, there was one transcript that went on for over two hours. So just that students are hungry for this opportunity to be able to process something that's very difficult in a safe space. And so the research context is a very safe space for people to be able to process because, you know, I think there's a lot of things that go into field placement and this has been mentioned and kind of my conversations with students, you know, the power dynamics of being you know, supervisor or supervisee can, can lead into some of the discomfort there. You know, this person's creating me in a sense.

Peter Sobota [00:23:17] Absolutely, you're being evaluated. It's a pretty high stakes if you think about it. Yeah.

Bailey Nichols [00:23:23] Oh, absolutely. Oh, for sure. And like, we put a lot of like pressure, sometimes on the field, that the practicum placement, to be this place where you're getting these on the ground skills, which is why I think that we really, really need to be doing it here and not just in the classroom. So the classroom can be I think the field is a is even more of a critical space because this is where people are are doing the application work and are going to have the questions come up more often. You know, if we're thinking about theory in a classroom, that's very different than on the ground with clients. And so making this a safe space is just so critical. And so thinking about that, so number one, students want a safe space to talk about it. I think number two, students want and need the invitation to talk about it with that in mind. Invitation.

Peter Sobota [00:24:17] Invitation, you said.

Bailey Nichols [00:24:19] an invitation, so I think. I think. Having an invitation, it doesn't necessarily mean that the students are gonna necessarily take it. But I think having an invitation to discuss this could be really helpful. But because this is taboo, there's a lot of fear in bringing it up. And I think we might get to this a little bit later, but there's a lot of topics that are uncomfortable to talk about. And so there is some fear about not being politically correct. And there is a need to break some of the stigma. And so thinking about how we do this, I guess, thirdly, just thinking through some of the things I'm learning, people have different opinions on how this should be done. So about 45 % of my survey respondents were saying, hey, I really wanna be the one to bring this up. And usually about 45 % of them are the ones actually bringing it up as well. A lot of my students. A lot of who I talked to were bringing it up in there to their supervisors and talking about the process of how nerve -racking it was to bring it up. Very similar to my own experience of I was really nervous. I had all these thoughts. I had all these worries. I wasn't sure how she was going to take it. It ended up being fine. I ended up getting educated. This was really helpful. Um, I was glad I did, but getting over that initial, you know, nerve. Those initial nerves that initial pause that, like, society puts in, there's all sorts of barriers to being able to have these conversations. And so. So that was something that, you know, when we

think about that, how do we make this, you know, inviting for other people? So we had 15, so thinking about my, I'm kind of switching to my surveys. So I did a survey and interviews. So with my survey, I had roughly 15 % said that their supervisor brought it up to them.

Peter Sobota [00:26:12] 15 you said one five

Bailey Nichols [00:26:12] 15, you said, one five, gotcha. So a very small percentage said that their supervisor was the one that initiated. Some of them said they were more or less equally. So about 40 % were more or less equally, but 23 % said that they wanted their supervisor to bring it up. So we have people who want their supervisor to be able to invite them into these conversations and supervisors are not necessarily doing that at the same level. And so there's a real need to help equip supervisors to initiate these conversations in a way that students feel not threatened but invited to be part of that process. And so there are ways that we can do that. So reflective journaling is something that we you know has brought up in the literature and students seem to think that That could be a good medium to facilitate those conversations. I have all sorts of ideas moving forward about like what we can do to kind of test this out and see see what we can do to help facilitate these conversations and maybe think about policies that could help that.

Peter Sobota [00:27:22] Can I ask just so like a really naive question, a reflective journaling, would that be shared in your vision with the field educator?

Bailey Nichols [00:27:35] So that's a good question. So one of the limitations to my survey is I didn't specify exactly what reflective journaling was. I didn't provide a definition, I think, moving forward. If I were redoing this. Sure.

Peter Sobota [00:27:46] Sure, yeah.

Bailey Nichols [00:27:46] definition that could say I would bring this up I would it would be reflective journal that was shared with my supervisor and we talked about it. That was the model that was reflected in the literature. There was an article, Jensen Hart, I believe, that talked about dialog journaling. And it was a 2014 article, and they stepped through what it looked like with one student to kind of have this religious -spiritual conversation through the student journaling and the supervisor responding. you know, in written form to the journaling questions. So they weren't necessarily engaging with those, with that in person necessarily, but it kind of, I think it can provide a jumping off point if something needed to be discussed more in person.

Peter Sobota [00:28:41] You've you've alluded to this and you've kind of given, you know, you talked about signaling and I guess. As you talk about what you're learning, I'm thinking about, and I'll go back to ask you what you're learning, so don't worry. But I'm wondering, as you're talking with students, are you also talking with the field educators or just the students?

Bailey Nichols [00:29:11] This is just

Peter Sobota [00:29:12] Just the students, okay. All right. Just forget. So I'm wondering about if you have any thoughts about the takeaways as yet. And I'm wondering, like, based on what you're hearing, do you have some opinions and thoughts about what else supervisors can do, perhaps even in the most practical ways that would create a supervisory relationship Relaid that includes discussion discussions of spirituality and religion, where they're not only broached to begin with, but they are actually found

beneficial and helpful by actually both parties. I mean, obviously, the supervisory relationship should serve the supervisee primarily, but do you have any thoughts on that yet?

Bailey Nichols [00:30:04] Definitely. I think this is one of those things that as I talk to, as I have been talking to students, students pay attention to everything. I want to start with that. Students are watching everything. And so what you don't realize you're doing when you're, when you're doing your supervision stuff or you're, you know, you're busy with a client. Everything that you're doing, students are taking in. And so how you respond to clients, how you respond to other people in the agency. you don't see. how you respond to time pressures, how you respond. I wish not just like, you know, not to put too much pressure on, but at the same time, students are watching. And so how supervisors go about their daily life is going to help facilitate or create either a safe place or an unsafe space. And so students have shared, you know, it's not necessarily how, you know, religion and or spirituality that like. is what makes like that topic itself is not necessarily the issue. It's did they create an environment where the student felt that they could ask questions? They had time. I think the big, one of the big things is to make time. Students will feel safe and able to sort through things if you, if the instructor makes time to sit with them. So a lot of, I had several students who mentioned lack of time as being a barrier to being able to have these conversations because they were... they didn't necessarily have the time to really go into depth in their supervision. Whereas another one of my students talked about the supervisor stepping them through a particular religious trauma and helping them process some of that in that time and space. And so having the time available is huge. And that's something that every supervisor can do for the most part, depending on your agency and depending on the demands that are on you and your agency. If you have time to make that time. that can be huge. So, and students are watching. I think the big key, students need to know that you're not judging. Like, there needs to be, and oftentimes it's, and the students as they were sharing with me, were saying, hey, you know, it's basically the kindness with which they responded. The way, I mean, it's kind of basic human decency here. What it comes down to is, you know, are you, are you asking questions? Are you inviting them in? Students, some students really do wanna be invited in. And so particularly around religion and spirituality, inviting them to share, you know? And again, if supervisors are feeling like, if they're able to ask some more implicit assessment questions, like, you know, how is this client finding meaning? Like, and then they can, that can be a doorway without being like, is this client religious and or spiritual? but But kind of like, you know, modeling that even in your conversations with the students, giving them an opportunity to share kind of well, well, we're, you know, okay, so this client might find meaning this way. And you're, you're grappling with this, how are you finding meaning like being able to invite them into some, some more reflective processes by their own curiosity and by modeling, you know, that kind of, and we're assuming at this point that this is a But again, that modeling is really key.

Peter Sobota [00:33:31] Oh, absolutely. And, you know, just talking with students, you know, it's not unusual for there to be, you know, a certain level of almost hero worship or idolization if they really admire, for example, their field educator. So it just adds incredible weight to all the things that you're talking about. And responsibility on the part of the field educator. I'm also thinking that what probably would be pretty helpful for in terms of field educators again, is, is being able to what would it be to kind of communicate a kind of nuanced level of empathy where the educator is able to express like acceptance and value to what the person is saying without necessarily agreeing and saying that this is the greatest thing in the world. And although that sounds simple. I think that's harder to do for I'll say that's harder to do for me and I would think probably a lot of other folks as well.

Bailey Nichols [00:34:45] Absolutely.

Peter Sobota [00:34:45] So let me let me just flip it a little bit slightly my question so in a very kind of similar vein are there things that social work students slash interns can do to promote these conversations happening and being beneficial you spoke a little bit about this but I'd like to or more if you have some more.

Bailey Nichols [00:35:07] Absolutely. I think the biggest thing is to be brave, and to actually come in and to say actually come in and to say. you know, and that's easier said than done. So one of the ways that students can do this is to communicate with the instructor how they learn best. And so it's important to say like, okay, hey, like maybe my learning style is, you know, I do better with, you know, written processing. So I would like to use journaling as we, you know, engage with one another. So that can be something that, again, students can do but I think a big key is helping to empower students and so a lot of times students come into placements and they don't know what they can and can't do and I know I certainly felt that way it's like well I don't even know I just show up at the agency what do I do and so and that's a key thing where policy can play a big role in terms of like what that field because a lot of times folks are going to have a practicum placement like practicum class that kind of is supposed to go alongside that So that's where, you know. Our practicum class that I experienced was a lot of, hey, here are some general topics that we think could be helpful. Also, let me give you some space to kind of ask questions if you have them about practicum. But I think really orienting folks before they walk into practicum, here's what you can and can't, here's general guidelines for behavior. Here's how, here's what you can expect, because... None of us like, we just waltzed in and we just didn't know what to expect. And a lot of times I think that's very much what students.

Peter Sobota [00:36:40] Yeah, and I think, you know, what I'm hearing, and back to the way that I kind of frame the question is that, you know, students don't have to know what these things are, perhaps, but it sounds like it would be great if they asked up front, what do I need to know? What do you have this written down? Is what is the culture? What are the norms here? What are you know, what is realistic and to just take that initiative. Students would be wise to do that.

Bailey Nichols [00:37:12] Yes, absolutely. So I think in addition to that, so like being able to communicate, when structure is really important and ask this question. So I think that's where practicum should not be helpful to students. Like you can ask these questions, these are questions you can and should ask. Another thing that students really should be invited into is engaging in some of their own internal cognitive behavioral therapy. Like thinking through, okay, I'm afraid to ask this question. Why am I afraid to ask this question? What's the worst thing that could happen if I asked this question and like doing some internal work? it could happen. as to why it's a barrier. And so with that, knowing that you're gonna, if you're gonna make mistakes, now's the time to do it. Like if we think about it, you know, maybe you get like a three or instead of a four or five on your, you know, competency score. But if you're gonna do that, honestly, like for the sake of the clients. But if you're gonna. now's the time to do it. And then I think at the same time also being teachable and giving your instructor the benefit of the doubt. I think instructors do oftentimes have a lot of barriers to having these conversations as well. And so definitely trying to assume good motives of your instructors. I think it's easy oftentimes and as I was hearing students talk, it's easy to assume negative motives sometimes when you're in the position of lower power. Um, but also like knowing and trying to, I think in general humans

as humans, like trying to assume good motives can be a good, helpful place to start so that you don't feel when you go into these conversations, that attack is imminent, like assume that the, the supervisor cares, assume that the supervisor cares about you. Um, you know, trying to start from that point, um, as you engage in these conversations. Um, and then the other thing is that the practical supervisor is not a good fit. And that does happen. Like I've heard stories where it's just not a good fit. I think the key would be then looking to your practicum liaison to find an additional outside supervisor who could help answer these questions. Because these questions need to be asked. And if you're not comfortable, I have all these thoughts about, oh, we could do practicum matching. We could have things like all sorts of ideas for how to make this easier and more smooth. but I think... Generally though, being able to, you just need to be able to talk about it. And so some of my students were saying, hey, I could not talk about it with my supervisor. So I went outside to XYZ person or I talked to my teacher about it or my professor about it. So I think that's key. But I think regardless for both, and this is a point that I missed on the supervisor side that also applies to the student side. Keeping the why central, the why we talk about this is because we care about the clients. Because oftentimes when we get into ourselves and this is just so easy to do. I'm uncomfortable, so I'm not going to talk about it. And then if the why is your client on both sides, if we're coming together because we are on the same side of wanting to help our client, the conversation can be very productive if it's the sake of the client. But when we start getting into our own, you know, shells, it can be real, real, real uncomfortable.

Peter Sobota [00:40:47] Yeah, and I think sometimes that that error, if you will, is when the supervisory relationship gets perceived as therapy, rather than, you know, professional development. And I would argue that, obviously, I think most people would, they're not the same thing. How about this, Bailey? How do you think, if at all, by the way?

Bailey Nichols [00:41:13] Hmm

Peter Sobota [00:41:15] Religious and spiritual topics in the context of supervision are unique from other kind of intimate or vulnerable topics that might arise in, you know, field supervision. You know, I'm thinking about race, gender, sexual or gender identity. I mean, pick one. Is religion and spirituality different in some ways?

Bailey Nichols [00:41:46] I think this is a really great question. So I think to start, spirituality and sexuality are really closely linked. And so one of my colleagues who went to the University of Pittsburgh with me is studying sexuality. And we talked about how very closely interconnected spirituality and sexuality are. And I think the thing, here's why. Spirituality and worship religion oftentimes are closely tied with morality and people's sense of right and wrong. and so it's human nature to want to be right and to not feel attacked by someone else or to feel like somebody else is judging you or judging your character and so you know thinking about the worldview that we we touched a little bit on religion and spirituality to some degree like sets forth this worldview that informs people's moral compass and so um and and before we go on any further like I want to make clear that all of us like have this innate moral compass outside of religion and so I've, you know, I've definitely witnessed how you know, witness that and seeing that in a lot of my friends who don't necessarily hold a religious or spiritual perspective. And so that even even the idea that someone doesn't hold a religious or spiritual perspective can be triggering for some folks and can feel like an attack. And so I think when we, you know, I think that's really what makes it really tricky. because you know, people can oftentimes then see this as rejection if people don't share the same views, and then people can then feel condemned. And I, you know, I don't, I think religions try to address some of this. But we,

but we don't want to feel condemned, ultimately, like, that's the real key. And we want to feel accepted, and we want to feel cared for. And, and that's what makes this so tricky, is when this kind of comes up against our sense of being accepted, cared for. And we all wanna be in a place where we're doing what we think is right and feel really about ourselves.

Peter Sobota [00:43:44] Absolutely, and especially when it's done in the context of a relationship like we've been talking about where there is a power differential, a grading component. on great. And this is so -called a learning environment. So there's really a lot of reasons why I think people might wanna quote, play it safe, but ignore this kind of like really intimate and important piece of the whole story.

Bailey Nichols [00:44:15] Definitely.

Peter Sobota [00:44:17] You know what, we're kind of starting to bump up against our time limit here. But before we move on, I think for many students, the fear is real. I think for many supervisors, the fear is real. I think for practitioners and academics, the fear is real. But if we if we keep it to supervise ease. and supervisors in field practicums. Let's not ignore the fear. Are there real risks here?

Bailey Nichols [00:44:56] That's a great question. And I think as we were talking, this is headed right to where I was hoping to head anyway in thinking about students and what students can do to help facilitate these conversations. There is real religious trauma that folks have experienced and spiritual trauma that folks have experienced. And so in these conversations, there is always the potential. for retraumatization or traumatization as a byproduct of this conversation. At the same time, hopefully that's unlikely because the supervisor is gonna be coming, the both supervisor and student are gonna be coming with understanding and care and compassion. And again, modeling this, like you said, this acceptance of the person and person and views don't have to be the same thing. But I think that is a real key thing that we struggle with is, I hold this view, therefore, you know, if you disagree with my view, you disagree with me, fundamentally. And so being able to hold that space for that person. I mean, I think also, I mean, the biggest thing is like dealing with that trauma. And so I really want to encourage students, if you have experienced religious trauma. and or and supervisors go find someone to talk that through with because that's going to really impact your ability to really help clients. So and then so other risks, you know, bad teaching and habits if you're not talking, you know, if the conversations are not going well, you know, people can pick up bad habits and not necessarily know how to engage and then definitely like misunderstandings and broken trust and then that really can it impact the way that folks are able to learn. Because without that trust, it's really hard to learn. And so from the students that shared with me about really positive field practical placement experiences, it was all about the trust. They trusted their supervisors, their supervisors demonstrated that they were trustworthy based on how they taught in the ways that they oftentimes it was about how they were teaching that made them that helped to build that trust and that relationship. It wasn't necessarily the personal disclosures per se. Personal disclosures were helpful. Some were sharing like, hey, my supervisor didn't share anything with me. I would like to know, one person said, I would like to know that my supervisor is a person. If they share their religious or spiritual positionality with me, that would mean that they're a person and not just a supervisor. Yeah. I think there's a role for that as well.

Peter Sobota [00:47:51] For self disclosure. Do you mean is that way? Yeah. Yeah. I'm the part of the field educator or the student or well, let's leave it at field educator.

Bailey Nichols [00:48:02] Yes, for the instructor, I think it can be helpful. I think that is something that it depends on what and how those things are shared. A lot of my students had various opinions. They were pretty much all over the map. Some, you know, about a third were neutral. There's about, you know, roughly a third that felt like, okay, well, it depends on what they share, you know, if it really could negatively impact it. It really could. And then, you know, closer to a little bit over third, we're like, hey, this will be great. You know, I really would like to know that my student, basically that, you know, my supervisor has views. Like, it's good to know that they're a person and how they're like incorporating their views. So I think how we do that can be, I'd love to like see some way that we could have, maybe a sheet that people fill out before they come in and meet with their instructors and say, hey, I would prefer this is how we do it. Like, this is how we dealt with it. Just for some. It really does already start the triggering and traumatizing process to even know that they hold these views. On the other hand, I'm like, well, could we push against some of the stigma that they might be coming in with? Could this be a healing opportunity?

Peter Sobota [00:49:12] Yeah, well, actually, I have a follow -up question that is kind of related to this and maybe gives you more of a narrow lane to kind of talk about it. But, you know, as we get to the end here, I'm sure you've given some thought to like what schools of social work and their curriculums. and their field handbooks, if you will, can do to foster either the kinds of positive relationships in practicum supervision that will, again, leave a lot of good space to include religion and spirituality. Do you have some thoughts or recommendations based on what you're hearing and doing?

Bailey Nichols [00:50:09] Definitely. I think one of the key things is training. I think offering training for supervisors on how to ask the right questions and how to model this in their conversations with students, how to invite students into the conversation. I think oftentimes field and track like practice structures already have a general picture of like, hey, you know, this is I mean, I'd hope that they have some pictures of like, here's how to be a decent human being, but at the same time, like just a good refresher, like it's always good to remind, be reminded of here, students are paying attention and to let them know upfront, students are paying attention, here's some good questions you can ask, here's some ways you can invite your student in, remember that your student is gonna be anxious to bring these things up. And so you are a big piece of facilitating this learning. At the same time, I think, you know, and this is something that I think we touched on a little bit before in a previous conversation. The idea of being able to help, you know, provide some accountability for our supervisors. Supervisors are often unpaid. And so that coming in, they're doing this out of their own goodwill. And so if we were to do, to even provide some extra benefits, I know some schools will give like discounted CEUs and stuff like that, but the more benefits that you can provide. instructors, I think the better, because they are giving a lot of themselves. And so to have these kinds of conversations. um, is really tricky, especially if they're uncomfortable with them. And so, um, being able to do things to help, um, to compensate them in some ways for the work that they're doing and to help value them well, um, I think that's a really important piece of the puzzle, um, also. And so, um, and then I just, I have all sorts of dreams. I think it'd be really great to dream about.

Peter Sobota [00:52:02] Well dream on, go ahead,

Bailey Nichols [00:52:03] Oh, it'd be great. I think it would be really fun to expose students to different religious and or spiritual agencies, to do little rotations, have everybody do a rotation in the Jewish community center rotation, even if it's just a day, just shadowing and maybe an Islamic community center and maybe Catholic charities, for

example, and like to give people exposure to the way that different religious organizations or spiritual organizations offer social services just as an educational thing. I think it could be really helpful. I would love to see a matching process. I don't think that it's necessarily, it's one of those things that, for example, it could be good to have both similar and different, supervisors that are similar and different to you. And even having exposure to two different supervisors, I think, I know that's kind of what we do with having two placements, but at the same time, I think it could be really helpful to, I mean, simultaneously maybe have a second person that is similar to you and one that's different to you, especially in this different areas of cultural competence that we look at, different positionalities. Because I think it could be really growing if students are open to growing in those areas. And then, yeah, I think being able to build and teach. uh curiosity and cultural humility um because ultimately like the knowledge piece is not as much important because the important thing is and I honestly think sometimes when students come in with knowledge about a specific religious and or spiritual um tradition they're gonna that is easier to make assumptions about with that, what people believe.

Peter Sobota [00:53:57] Oh yeah.

Bailey Nichols [00:53:57] And so being able to teach, regardless of what the religious or spiritual tradition is, how do you ask the questions about how this matters to the client themselves? And that's something that, you know, it's really not necessarily knowledge, but it's the, it's the questions of how the, how the client, and in this case, you know, between a church and student, how the person themselves engages with the belief systems, that's really important. And I think that doesn't require any sort of degree in religious or spiritual tradition, but that can be learned as part of the social work curriculum.

Peter Sobota [00:54:35] All right, Bailey, thank you so much for joining us and talking about your work. It was really interesting. Thank you.

Bailey Nichols [00:54:44] Thank you.

Peter Sobota [00:54:47] Thanks again to Bailey Nichols for joining us today. The InSocialWork podcast team is Steve Sturman, our tech and web guru, Ryan Tropf, our GA production assistant. Say hi, Ryan. (Ryan: Hello!) And I'm Peter Sobota. Thanks for listening and check out years of tasty episodes on our website and we'll see you next time, everybody.