

Embodied praxis –a participatory study of somatic practices in helping profession undergraduate education

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People drawn to helping professional pathways like child and youth care and social work may be compelled to work with others navigating injustice due to their own experiences of trauma and oppression. And, due to processes of disassociation –a common coping mechanism for trauma– emerging helping professionals may also find their way to fields of practice potentially disconnected from themselves and ways their trauma manifests. Though critical reflective practice is a key component of Child and Youth Care and Social Work curricula, these professional pathways rarely incorporate embodied ways of knowing through attunement to the body and breath. Embodiment involves building awareness of internal attitudes, feelings, and physiological experiences alongside intersections of interpersonal and sociocultural understanding. Embodied awareness can be taught through accessible mindfulness, breath, and somatic practices, and may offer support to helping professionals. The specific objectives of this research included exploration of (1) student experiences of embodiment practices specifically among equity deserving communities pursuing child, youth, and family studies and social work postsecondary pathways; (2) how these representations reflected students' experiences of themselves; (3) and how these representations may connect to broader considerations for helping profession postsecondary education. The 10-week participatory study engaged five Child, Youth and Family Studies and Social Work students as co-researchers, four of whom participated in a 12-week breath-and-movement course as part of their undergraduate education. Using a relational, collaborative general inductive approach, the research team analyzed six digital storytelling projects from a 12-week undergraduate course designed to support students' embodied experiences. Reflexivity, communication, and meaning-making were built into recursive data collection and analytical processes to engage collaborative, democratic forms of knowledge generation and continually elevate ways of knowing in service of nondominant perspectives. Student representations of embodiment practices within the context of their helping profession undergraduate education revealed intertwining themes: power of breath, wandering with self, external factors and internal experiences, awareness and action, embodiment and presence, and interconnection. These themes connect to existing literature on the integration of yoga into postsecondary social work education, with practical relevance in areas such as enhanced self-compassion, increased self-awareness, and greater acceptance of self and others. Insights from this analysis also expand on existing literature by highlighting key practice considerations regarding the interrelationship of external factors and internal experiences, with implications for who has access to embodied awareness practices. Experiences of disconnection, disassociation, and disembodiment shaped by structural oppression and corresponding trauma can stunt development in ways particularly relevant to the aspirations of relational, reflexive helping practitioners. A primary implication of this scholarship is that embodied pedagogies offer a critical intervention that can support students in helping professional pathways experience coherence within themselves and in their capacity to intervene on interpersonal experiences of disconnection and disassociation. Further, implications of this study suggest ways in which embodied awareness can support the integration of relational practice in social services, thereby scaffolding the efficacy and sustainability of a wide array of human services. Similarly, implications of this analysis shed light on ways embodied pedagogies connect to equity-oriented social-justice systems change and on considerations for teaching reflexive, relational practice skills in helping profession postsecondary education. Lastly, study implications offer insight into philosophical opportunities for integrating critical standpoint perspectives and relational ways of being towards multiple, fluid, intersectional perspectives in processes of knowing.

Meghan's scholarly interests are in the intersections of equity and wellbeing. She is deeply curious about the ways social conditions interact with individual and collective experiences of consciousness. She leans

into intersecting critical standpoint positions, including Critical Race, Indigenous, Critical Disability, Queer, Feminist, and Post-Structuralist theories. Through these vantages, in her teaching and scholarship, Meghan aims to support paradigmatic shifts that create openings for a range of intersectional orientations to knowing and being. Meghan is passionate about supporting young people, families, and child and youth care workers to explore action-oriented change processes alongside one another in ways that empower people to navigate oppressive environments safely and build agency to actively unsettle oppressive, dehumanizing systems. In all her endeavors, Meghan is deeply committed to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice, teaching, and scholarship that reinforce individual and community-centered healing.