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Six-word Memoirs: A Reflection of Social Work Professional Competency and Identity

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Language is a powerful communication tool that holds symbolic meanings, various forms of expression, and is a strong indicator of culture. Words have the unique quality to transform the meaning of communications and interactions with others (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2006). The meanings of our interactions can change with a single word, by joining words to make sentences, or through narrative constructions such as poems or memoirs. Sandstrom et al. (2006) wrote “Words facilitate our ability to communicate and share meanings” (p. 34). In addition, words serve as the basis for understanding ourselves in relation to the world around us (Vollmer, 2005). Vollmer (2005) adds that stories become “self-stories” that communicate our past, actions, and thoughts. Stories, narratives, memoirs, and poems can thus, communicate what we once did, said, saw, heard, thought, or felt. The use of language and words is central to human communication and is especially visible in the profession of social work through its code of ethics (NASW, 2008) and competencies for social work practice (CSWE, 2008).

Social workers have a tradition of using creative expression. Lenart-Cheng and Walker (2011) describe the use of life stories as a creative narrative process and mutual sharing of ideas that can aid in both social and political change. Creative expressions are used in the helping professions in several ways: through narrative therapies (Kelly, 2011), biblio-therapies (Adams & Pitre, 2000), and poetry as a therapeutic process (Furman, Langer, & Anderson, 2006). Additionally, Furman et al. (2006) call for a social work practice paradigm guided by poetry as a means to focus on the professional identity and practice. The “six-word memoir” is a form of creative expression similar to poetry that reveals the passion (Conan, 2008),

emotions (Miller, 2011), and identity of its authors. Six-word memoirs have been used in education, libraries, media, other settings to challenge writers, students, and patients to creatively express their thoughts (Deffner, 2011; Miller, 2011; Smith & Fershleiser, 2009).

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Six-word memoirs have been featured in a numerous media sources, classrooms, churches, and community events around the world. The premise is to use six words to inspire conversation, communicate an issue, or gather multiple memoirs or essays to make a desired impact. The origins of six-word memoirs have been attributed to Ernest Hemingway who, when challenged as an author to tell an entire story in just six words, replied “For sale: baby shoes, never worn” (Miller, 2011, p. 338).

The purpose of the current study is to serve as an illustration of the creative possibilities of the six-word memoir for social work educators and practitioners. This writing experience offers social work students, educators, and those in practice a unique opportunity to express their identity. Six-word memoirs provide social work educators and the practice community with a unique framework for communicating within a short written exercise. Six-word essays as a creative exercise can empower writers, assist individuals in expressing what cannot be said, or demonstrate one’s values, ethics, and competency (Alford, 2008; Olsen, 2013). The literature conceptualizes professional identity centered on the Council of Social Work Education core competencies (CSWE, 2008), the National Association of Social Work code of ethics (NASW, 2008), and

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Mead's (1962) theory as reflected in participants six-word memoirs.

The Profession of Social Work

The Educational Policy and Assessment Standards (EPAS) specify ten competencies and 41 practice behaviors that frame the position of social work education (CSWE, 2008). The first educational policy (2.1.1) declares that a social worker, "Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly" (CSWE, 2008, p. 3). This standard is operationalized in the EPAS: "Social workers serve as representatives of the profession, its mission, and its core values. They know the profession's history. Social workers commit themselves to the profession's enhancement and to their own professional conduct and growth" (CSWE, 2008, p. 3). One focus of social work education, as Leslie and Cassano (2003) discuss, is to build a foundation of professional identity around the structured CSWE accredited education system. Educational policy 2.1.1 (CSWE, 2008) includes six practice behaviors. These six practice behaviors include social work advocacy, personal reflection, professional roles, demonstrating professional demeanor, career-long learning, and the use of supervision and consultation. The practice behaviors share the language of the NASW code of ethics core values (NASW, 2008). NASW's (2008) core values include the broad vision of the profession of social work to include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (p. 5). Expression of these core values is an expectation of social work educators, students, and professionals. The National Association of Social Work's (NASW, 2008) core values in conjunction with the EPAS competencies (CSWE, 2008) provide the framework for developing a social worker's professional identity. Carpenter and Platt (1997) found that social work values change between the time of graduation and professional practice, becoming stronger around concepts of adhering to NASW Code of Ethics (2008), the effects of oppression, empowerment, and self-determinism. Thus, social workers in the professional milieu of practice continue to take on a strong professional identity against the pushes and

pulls of their environment.

Social worker practice settings often include agencies that are not traditionally regarded as providing social services. Settings such as healthcare, corrections, military, education, organizations, or other institutional settings present conditions that may challenge the professional identity and ethics of a social worker. Manning (1997) writes, "Today social workers face the challenges of the most complex ethical dilemmas in the history of the profession" (p.223). Integrity fills the gap between professional identity and ethics. The center of this complex interaction for the social worker is self. The Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2008), along with ethical guidelines of the social work profession (NASW, 2008), produce conditions that challenge even the most resolute social worker's professional identity.

Social Worker's Professional Identity

Over the last 100 years, roles of social workers have evolved to meet the needs of the ever-changing society. Pioneers of social work have presented frameworks for developing a professional identity. Mary Richmond's presentation at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections on *The need for training schools in applied philanthropy* (1897), Lucile Brown's (1942) presentation comparing social work with other professions, and Ernest Greenwood's (1957) article describing social work as a profession have been seminal works in helping social work define itself as a profession (Johnson, Schwartz, & Tate, 1996). The profession is continually defining its educational competencies (CSWE, 2008), ethics (NASW, 2008), and professional roles and responsibilities in response to the changing environment of social work and education (Hugman, 2001; Johnson et al., 1996). In the current study, six-word memoirs will provide a professional and educational glimpse into the depth and breadth of social work's identity. According to Sandstrom et al. (2006), individuals have the ability to communicate and use language to have coordinated actions and interactions through its use. As social workers develop a sense of professional identity

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they must conform to codes of conduct and be socialized into the profession. As social workers develop their identity and professional roles they become a stronger presence in their communities. One explanation of professional development is aided by George Herbert Mead's theory of the development of self (Mead, 1962).

Professional Role Development

In conceptualizing professional role development of social workers, George Herbert Mead's (1962) theory on self-development is embraced in the current study to provide a metaphor for professional development. A central concept within Mead's (1962) theory is the description of the "generalized other" as it represents the individual's embracing of cultural norms and values as a point of reference in evaluating behaviors and ourselves. The acquisition of the "generalized other" develops as a person begins to internalize and practice the common expectations that others (in this case other professional social workers) have about the person's thoughts and actions within a specific societal context. This serves to help the person (the developing social worker) clarify his or her relationship to the generalized other (the professional social worker) as a representative of the shared social system. These interactions allow the individual to understand societal perceptions of one's self.

Three stages of self-development are conceptualized as related to the professional role development process: preparatory, play, and game. The "Preparatory" stage is a stage of imitations by the individual (Sandstrom et al., 2006). Mead (1962) suggested that early in the professional role development process, young social workers lack a developed sense of self and have difficulty distinguishing their own roles from the roles of others. At this point the young social workers begin to imitate more seasoned social workers or immediate others but only occasionally (Sandstrom et al., 2006).

Next, Mead (1962) describes the "Play" stage where the social worker individual begins to act out different roles. It is in this stage that the individual begins to develop a sense of self by conceiving the self as a third person acting out a specific role. The individual enters the "Play" stage in

which role taking occurs (Sandstrom et al., 2006). In the "Preparatory" stage, roles are modeled after significant others such as social work educators, field instructors, supervisors, etc. It is during the "Play" stage that individuals begin to develop as social workers. They begin acquiring and developing the language necessary to have the vocabulary of the profession whereby they will have a community of others using ideas expressed through a similar vocabulary that have shared meaning (Sandstrom et al., 2006). Students in social work education learn to use the profession's significant symbols, such as its language, themes, code of ethics, value system, and competency-based language as they are socialized into the profession.

Through further social experience, individuals enter what Mead (1962) labels the "Game" stage, where social workers begin the simultaneous playing of many roles. This stage involves the development of the generalized other (Sandstrom et al., 2006). This stage requires greater cognitive abilities of the individual. In this final stage the "generalized other" is formed:

After you become skillful in taking the role of specific others, you are faced with a growing number of situations where you must respond to the expectations and perspectives of several people simultaneously. Games differ from play because they have an organized body of rules, or regulated procedures, toward which individuals must orient their actions and interactions (Sandstrom et al., 2006, p. 34).

The "Game" stage requires the ability of the individual to define the behaviors and formulate group expectations. As the individual grows, the "generalized other" grows also. Mead's (1962) developmental model of the self suggests that individuals acquire the ability to take on the perspectives of others. In Mead's (1962) view, these older players have acquired the crucial capacity to take the role of several others and to combine these roles into a consistent symbolic perspective. They can take the role of the generalized other. The generalized other refers to the perspective and expectations of a network of others, or of the community as a whole (Sandstrom et al., 2006).

This requires the internalization of the ideals of the profession by the individual.

The literature review conceptualized the six-word memoir as a creative process to express ideas, feelings, or identity. The researchers in the current study are adapting the concept of six-word memoirs to frame social workers development of professional identity. The six-word memoirs are used in the current research to identify participants' competencies, values, and ethics as related to their professional development as a social worker.

Methods

Participants

Of the 79 participants responding to the survey and writing a six-word memoir, 57% held the Bachelor of Social Work degree, 39% held the Master of Social Work degree, and the other 4% held degrees in other areas of study. The vast majority of the participants were female, 90% (*n* = 71). Eighty (*n* = 63) percent of the sample reported their race as Caucasian, nine percent (*n* = 7) African American, four percent (*n* = 3) Hispanic, and remaining participants reported one or more races. The mean number of years of social service

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics of Study Respondents (*N* = 79)

Degree Reported		
BSW	(<i>n</i> = 45)	57.0%
MSW	(<i>n</i> = 31)	39.2%
Other	(<i>n</i> = 3)	3.8%
Gender		
Female	(<i>n</i> = 71)	89.9%
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	(<i>n</i> = 63)	79.7%
African American	(<i>n</i> = 7)	8.9%
Hispanic	(<i>n</i> = 3)	3.8%
Checked Multiple	(<i>n</i> = 6)	7.6%
Area of Reported Practice (<i>n</i> = 74)		
Children's Services	(<i>n</i> = 13)	17.6%
Education /Schools	(<i>n</i> = 13)	17.6%
Family Services	(<i>n</i> = 11)	14.9%
Schools	(<i>n</i> = 10)	13.5%
Addictions	(<i>n</i> = 9)	12.2%
Mental Health	(<i>n</i> = 6)	8.1%
Senior Services	(<i>n</i> = 5)	5.4%
Youth Services	(<i>n</i> = 3)	3.8%
Health	(<i>n</i> = 3)	3.8%
Veteran Services	(<i>n</i> = 2)	2.7%
Homeless	(<i>n</i> = 2)	2.7%
Domestic Violence	(<i>n</i> = 2)	2.7%
Corrections	(<i>n</i> = 2)	2.7%
Other	(<i>n</i> = 2)	2.7%

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experience reported by the participants was 8.2 years, with a standard deviation of 10.4 years, and a range of 0-42 years. Eighty-two percent ($n = 65$) of the participants reported an area of specialty. The top areas of reported practice by participants were children's services (17.6%, $n = 13$), schools/education (17.6%, $n = 13$), family services (14.9%, $n = 11$), addictions (12.2%, $n = 9$), and mental health (8%, $n = 6$).

Data Collection Instrument

The study made use of an original survey containing 20 items. Both closed- and open-ended items on the survey inquired about social work professional identity. Thirteen original items were created to provide material on students and practicing professional's self-reported competencies in social work (CSWE, 2008). The survey contained several closed-ended items to gather information on demographic characteristics of the sample. Several of these items inquired about participant's social work education, their years of social service experience, and their areas of social service experience. The survey included an additional section for participants to write six-word memoirs. Participants were asked to respond to the statement "The School of Social Work would like you to write a six-word memoir about what it means to be a social worker."

Procedures

This exploratory study utilized a purposive sampling method to recruit social work students and professionals. Subjects were in attendance at a professional social work conference and recruited through a booth in the exhibit area hosted by the study's authors. This sample included 82 completed surveys, and 79 of the participants completed a six-word memoir. Each participant, who voluntarily consented to participate, was asked to sign a consent letter and submit it along with the completed survey. This study received human subjects' approval from the authors' Institutional Review Board.

Each participant was asked to complete a twenty-question survey that included demographics along with the writing of a six-word memoir that described the meaning of social work from their perspective. Several participants chose to write the memoir on a separate piece of paper. They were

reminded to submit the survey and memoir together. When the participants returned the memoir and survey they were offered a copy of the letter of consent. The consent letter contained information on their participation, consent, contact information on the study's purposes and proposed use of information gathered for the study.

Total time used by participants to complete the survey and six-word memoir was between 15 and 30 minutes. However, several participants choose to take the survey with them and return it later in the day, to allow time to compose their six-word memoir. Once the survey and the memoir were completed the respondents submitted it to one of the investigators.

Design and Data Analysis

Since little is known about the relationship between six-word memoirs and professional identity, ethics, and perceptions of competency, descriptive statistics were chosen as a means to provide initial, exploratory data. The data were coded by each of the investigators and compared, then recoded after review by all investigators to increase the validity of interpretation of the content of the six-word memoirs.

This exploratory study utilized qualitative analysis to describe the participants' characteristics, values, competencies, and the six-word memoirs. The study categorized participants' six-word memoirs using an online program designed to make word clouds. The Wordle application (Feinberg, 2009) was used as an initial qualitative online research tool to determine word counts. McNaught and Lam (2010) describe the use of Wordle as a technique to assist in qualitative data analysis. The Wordle analysis assisted the researchers in quickly determining what words in the six-word memoirs occurred most frequently. The word counts assisted the researchers in determining the validity of categorization of the memoirs. Figure one represents a Wordle of the six-word memoirs written by participants.

Qualitative Analysis of the Memoirs. The six-word memoirs were coded first by two of the investigators. This first coding produced labeling of themes within the memoirs. Next, all investigators met and discussed the initial coding and categories. Three primary categories of memoirs

Figure 1.

Wordle of Most Frequently Occurring Words in the Six-word Memoirs.



emerged in the current study. These were categorized as: a personal identity category, a professional identity category, and an integrated category that encapsulated social work into both their personal and professional identity. These initial categories provided the researchers an opportunity to expand and provide additional defining criteria for the memoirs. Categories that were developed illuminated how social workers, at varying stages of their professional identity and competency development, defined social work.

After the three categories were established, the investigators individually read through all of the six-word memoirs and determined to which category the memoirs belonged. The initial inter-rater reliability on this was 89%. Memoirs that did not receive initial consensus of categories were discussed among the researchers until consensus was achieved.

The memoirs provide a creative narrative for participants to express social work experiences, concepts, competencies, values, and ethics of the

profession. The analysis provides evidence that the participants' experiences or maturity in the profession provided memoirs that defined social work on a continuum from the personal (internally-focused) to professional (externally-focused) to an integrated (personal- and professional-focused) professional social work identity. Figure two represents the conceptualization of the three categories of the six-word memoirs.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from the six-word memoirs were categorized according to the emerging themes of the qualitative data. These themes/categories provided the structure for analysis and presentation of findings and discussion. The categories were identified as: personal, external, and integrated expressions of social work.

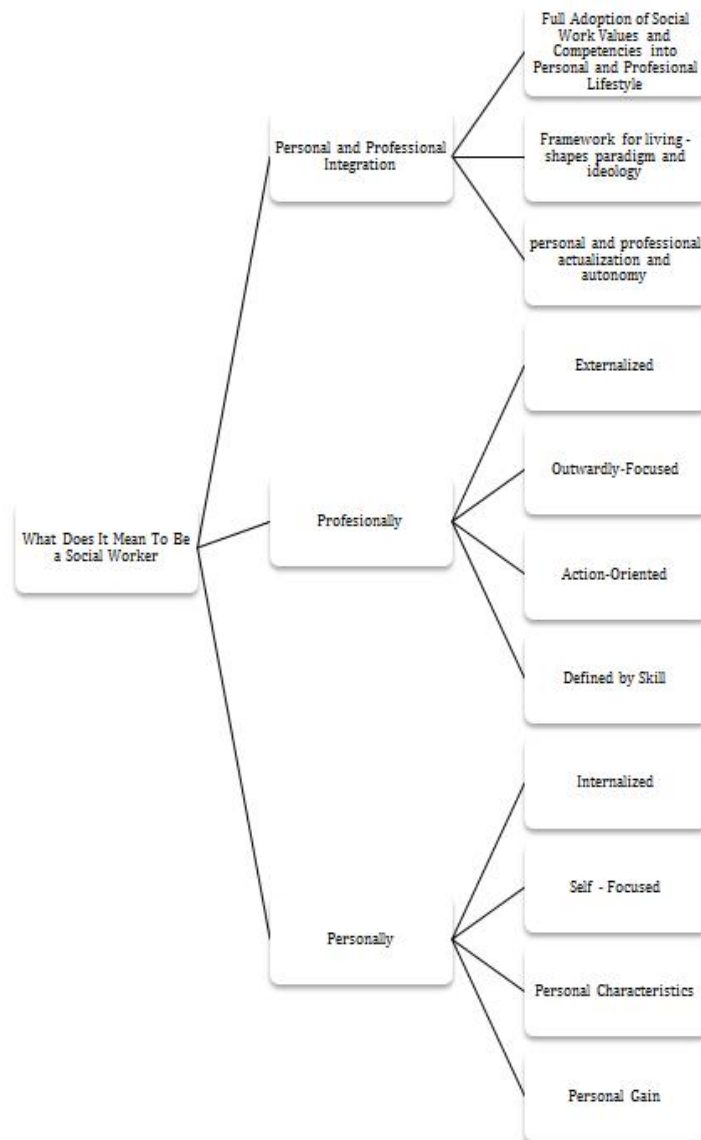
Personalized Social Work Identity

Thirteen (16.5%) of the participants' memoirs were categorized as personalized social work identity. These six-word memoirs reflected a

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Figure 2.

Categories of Six-Word Memoirs



more personal focus of the social work profession. The researchers describe these memoirs as internal, self-focused, containing personal characteristics, and focused on personal gains. Examples of these personalized memoirs are: “The chance to make a

difference” or “Building your strengths, strengthens my spirit” or “I help others to help themselves.” Overall, this category of participants’ memoirs had the lowest overall self-reported feelings of being competent at a mean of 45.1 out of a

possible 56. This category closely resembles Mead's (1962) conceptualization of self-development in the "Preparatory" stage. Thus, for personalized social work identity, the six-word memoirs symbolized an emerging social worker developing their professional self.

External Social Work Self

Thirty-one (39.2%) of the participants' memoirs were categorized as reflecting an external professional social worker. These memoirs reflected a more external focus for the social work profession. The researchers defined these as skill-based, action-oriented, outwardly/externally focused. Examples of these professional memoirs are: "Positive changes inspire future growth" or "Strong ability to impact others positively" or "Faithfully caring for and serving others." This category of participants' memoirs compared with the overall self-reported feelings of being competent had a mean of 48.1 out of a possible 56.

This category closely resembles Mead's (1962) conceptualization of self-development in the "Play" stage. As described earlier the individual in this stage is beginning role taking of the social work profession. This could be students who are in practicum modeling their conceptualization of their social work self after their practicum instructors or professors in the classrooms. During this stage the young social workers begin to "grow" as professionals, where they acquire and develop vocabulary and the culture of the profession. This category of participants has clearly embraced roles guided by the CSWE EPAS (2008) competencies and the NASW (2008) code of ethics. The external social work self actively reflects a perceived social worker through the six-word memoir.

Integrated Social Work Self

Thirty-five (44.3%) of the participants wrote memoirs the researchers classified as an integration of personal and professional. These were identified in the qualitative analysis as personal and professional actualization and autonomy, having a framework for living shaped by paradigms and ideologies of social work, and those who have fully adapted social work values and competencies into their personal and professional lifestyles. Examples of integrated memoirs are: "Positive change proactive justice, advocacy empower-

ment," "It is a way of life," and finally "Love, justice, peace, mercy, hope Always!" The integrated category of participants had the highest overall self-reported feelings of being competent at a mean of 48.3 out of a possible 56.

This category clearly reflects Mead's conceptualization of self-development in the "Game" stage (1962). Participants' whose six-word memoirs reflected the integrated category appeared to embrace their roles as part of the greater social work culture and community with words, concepts, language, and vocabulary around global concerns, ethics, and values of the profession. These memoirs reflected the social work profession as greater than the individual or the role of being a social worker. Finally, for the authors of the paper, this category of memoirs reflects the acquisition of a "generalized other" for social workers.

Wordle Analysis

Content analyses of the six-word memoirs were analyzed using descriptive methods. The Wordle application provided researchers with an additional tool to determine words counts and assist with categorization. These words were: empowerment ($n = 20$), helping ($n = 15$), change ($n = 14$), caring ($n = 13$), empathy, ($n = 11$), advocacy ($n = 9$), and compassion ($n = 9$). The word counts indicated social work students' and professionals' identified with social work as an empowering and change-oriented profession. Carpenter and Platt (1997) found similar themes of care, and compassion, respect for humanity, and empowerment in their work. Overall, the themes identified through the use of the Wordle analysis showed that many of the participants wrote six-word memoirs that were external or integrated. Words such as helping, compassion, caring, and empathy illustrated external professional self, while the use of words such as empowerment, advocacy, and change illustrated a more integrated professional self.

Further, these words reflected the social workers' professional identity with advocacy, and working with various levels of the system, such as communities ($n = 7$), families ($n = 5$), groups ($n = 3$), and people in general ($n = 8$). Words such as professional ($n = 4$), serving ($n = 4$), strength ($n = 4$), diversity ($n = 2$), and ethics ($n = 2$) did not frequently occur in the six-word memoirs. While

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word association is a powerful element of communication and understanding of the profession of social work, the Wordle analysis revealed that the majority of the participants reflected knowledge and understanding of the role of a professional social worker.

Implications for Social Work

This study begins a dialogue on social work identity, ethics, and competency in the form of six-word memoirs. The development of this type of project brings about an opportunity to understand the stories of social work from participants. The language that is chosen explains how an individual views their profession, or themselves within the profession. The six-word memoir can be a technique for a class activity, an evaluative tool, a method to encourage clients to express ideas, or a means of reflection for social work students and professionals. Beginning with a brainstorming session or free write, this activity increases critical thinking of not only word choice but descriptions of the profession they are invested in. For education, the implications are varied and powerful for classroom learning about students, their writing development, and their critical thinking. Video can also be utilized in the six-word memoir context in terms of creating videos that gather multiple memoirs on a particular subject to send a desired message.

In the practice setting, six-word memoirs could be used to help clients express ideas in a creative way that is also figurative. The symbols and meanings that are drawn from language choices can provide an excellent platform for discussion, feelings, and understanding how people make meaning of their situation or experiences. Brainstorming with clients has long been a method of beginning to work through problems. This type of activity not only has the potential to create a higher level of engagement with clients but also supports social workers using ethical decision making. Writing out feelings, problems, resources, etc. with clients helps in the assessment process and treatment planning.

Six-word memoirs could provide a professional self-check or activity associated with professional development. Lenart-Cheng and Walker (2011)

state, "...the act of listening is seen as a symbol of reciprocity..." (p. 146). For example, a practicing social worker could be given the task of debriefing at the end of a stressful situation to help facilitate the process. A supervisor could provide the opportunity for workers involved in an incident to provide six words to describe the incident. This would help with the debriefing. Additionally, six-word memoirs can be used in the workplace as icebreakers, team-building, and meeting activities where social workers might be asked to describe an element of their workplace, work experiences, or decision making on a particular work issue, and the essays can provide a lead for discussion and insight for the individual, group, or supervising professional. Thus, an understanding of how to meet the challenges of training competent social workers and sustaining excellence in graduate social work education is one of the potential benefits of this research.

Cultural implications also exist with the creation of six-word memoirs. This is a technique already used in some intercultural communication education and professional environments. This activity can be utilized with a culture focus as well. In higher education and in social work professional settings, the need for improved dialogue on diversity exists. Creative activities often have the ability to allow people to openly communicate thoughts and feelings regarding diversity issues from an abstract perspective.

The study is a creative expression that uses participant voices to illuminate social work education and practice. This offers an opportunity for educators to implement creative ideas into research that involves participants in a process of creatively expressing themselves. Further, the six-word memoirs could be used for advocacy and activism, as Lenart-Cheng and Walker (2011) discuss the life stories as political activism by stating, "...the act of sharing a life story is supposed to make people conscious of their responsibility to participate" (p. 146).

Social work's professional identity and professional development is a continual process. Understanding a social worker's professional developmental level (personal, external or integrated) is crucial in furthering professional growth. Social

work's competencies and ethics are part of professional development, and six-word memoirs are a useful tool for measuring one's growth. As Carpenter and Platt (1997) point out, "... professional identity may be conceptualized as an outcome of person-environment fit: A good fit enhances the fit between personal and professional values" (p. 348). This point captures the integrated nature of the "generalized other" as the social worker's professional identity reaches its highest level of development.

The use of the six-word memoir has much potential for social work education and practice. Six-word memoirs can be used inspire, communicate, and gather information for varied outcomes. Hemingway's vision of this creative expression to tell an entire story in just six words is true. Words are powerful, and when people are asked to construct meaningful messages in only six words, a variety of processes go into action. These memoirs have the potential to evoke humor, imagery, emotions of all kinds, and most of all opportunities to learn about people around us and their experiences. The purpose of the current study was to serve as an illustration of the creative possibilities of the six-word memoir for social work educators and practitioners. In the writing of the six word memoirs, social work students, educators, and those in practice were able to express their professional identity and provide a beginning discussion of the use of this activity for understanding participants as well as using a creative and expressive data gathering method.

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