

## **Falls the shadow and the light: liminality and natality in social work field education**

Debb Hurlock<sup>a\*</sup>, Constance Barlow<sup>a</sup>, Anne Phelan<sup>b</sup>, Florence Myrick<sup>c</sup>,  
Russell Sawa<sup>a</sup> and Gayla Rogers<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada;* <sup>b</sup>*University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada;* <sup>c</sup>*University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada*

This article is situated within an experience of conflict for Tina, a social work student, who is caught between her beliefs about the virtues of social work practice, and her disillusioning encounter with the school's administration. In this paper, we interpret Tina's experience of conflict by drawing on the central concepts of liminality and natality, and how she moves through disillusionment to illumination, thereby generating new self-understandings and meanings of social work practice. We conclude with the pedagogical implications for students, and educators, and that as messy and complex as the liminal is, it is also vital to the creation of new understandings and regeneration of meaning in professional education.

**Keywords:** conflict; liminality; natality; social work practice; pedagogy

### **Entering the shadowland**

Meet Tina, a senior social work student with a keen interest in social policy who believes in making the world a better place. A self-described workaholic, she moved to a distant city to begin undergraduate studies in Social Work. By making several trips home during the semester and communicating with her employer via mail, she was able to maintain part-time employment in her home community.

After one semester, she applied to complete the introductory practicum in her home community, at her place of part-time employment. While this was not a typical practicum arrangement, her application was approved by the Director of Field Education, who noted, 'not all students fit into a little box'. The Director of Field Education recognized that Tina was mature, doing well in her first semester classes, wanted to go home to her family, and had submitted a well-written workplace practicum proposal that demonstrated how her employer could provide Tina with an educational experience that met the school's criteria. Therefore, after the Christmas break, Tina began her practicum.

Meanwhile, the Director of Field Education who commenced a sabbatical leave, left the final practicum details to be clarified by her replacement who subsequently questioned the legitimacy of approving a distance workplace practicum for a student in her junior year. Consequently, Tina was propelled into conflict, and an uncertain space, when she learned that the decision to approve her workplace practicum was revoked.

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [dhurlock@telusplanet.net](mailto:dhurlock@telusplanet.net)

Tina described this conflict as being a near unlivable space until the practicum was reinstated two weeks later. She noted the irony of her circumstances, *'I was working on a policy practicum and it was policy that screwed me. I feared losing credit for the hours I had done, but more worrisome was the potential of losing my year, if the practicum was pulled. I'm watching my entire future crumble into a million pieces'*. During this time, she vacillated between uncertainty and self-doubt: *'You do feel you did something wrong. You feel like somehow, it's your fault'*. The continuous tension of unresolved conflict unfolded over a period of two weeks, yet for Tina, *'it felt like a month'*.

### **The study**

This paper emerges from a multidisciplinary study of conflict in professional education that examined the phenomenon of conflict within the professions of Nursing, Medicine, Education and Social Work by focusing on the field experience (Myrick et al. 2006). Poised at the intersection of the university and practice, the field experience is frequently characterized by conflict as students are exposed to numerous and competing perspectives about what it means to think and act as professionals (Barlow et al. 2006). These intersections play a substantial role in shaping the professional identities and practices of Social Work students. This case study invites questioning of *'how is conflict experienced, understood, negotiated and contested? What do these understandings tell us about what counts in professional education?'* (Phelan et al. 2005).

The study, conducted within the context of a large Canadian research university, focused on the field experience in students' final year of study. The first stage of the study involved collecting stories about critical incidents of conflict from triad members that typically included the student, field mentor and university faculty member. In *'an attempt to make the familiar strange'* (Phelan et al. 2005) interviews were conducted with participants from disciplines different than our own. For example, a researcher in social work would interview participants from education. The multidisciplinary research team engaged in the analysis of the transcripts, allowing for readings that were multilayered as we read the transcripts from our four different disciplines. We continued to analyze, interpret and write manuscripts as a multidisciplinary team. This expanded the horizon of our own disciplines, as well as helped to understand ourselves differently in our own paradigms and professions (Gadamer 1989).

The findings of the study uncover the complexity of profession education. The major interconnected themes of silence, power, and disillusionment characterize conflict in professional education. These themes show up in different ways, depending on the context of the experience of conflict. However, for students in professional education, they most commonly experienced disillusionment of the profession they were entering.

The case study presented in this paper was based on three taped and transcribed interviews and e-mail communications over a five-month period from November to March with Tina, a social work student in her senior practicum and one transcribed interview with the Director of Field Education. In response to our open-ended question, *'Tell me about a conflict you experienced in your field placement?'* Tina

engaged with us in an ongoing conversation about her introductory rather than her current senior practicum.

### ***Research approach***

As we studied Tina's transcripts, we primarily engaged a hermeneutic interpretation that focused on conversations with Tina about her experiences of conflict. Hermeneutics is 'the art of reaching an understanding – of something or with someone' (Gadamer 2001, 70). We wanted to understand differently, the experience of conflict and how it shaped Tina's field experiences. In order to do this, we engaged in a set of conversations with Tina. 'Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding' (Gadamer 1989, 385) in an interpretive approach, and each conversation with Tina unfolded into a deeper understanding of the nature of conflict for her and its implications.

As educators we contend that the 'little narratives' of the student (Kearney 2002) disappear into the fog of the 'grand narratives' of the educators. Yet, there is much to be learned by embracing the student experience as an invitation into the 'otherwise'. In this paper, we resisted the seduction of closure and the temptation to produce the 'exemplary' story that ties everything into a neat solution. Instead, we worked toward what Ricoeur (1984–8, 8) called the 'synthesis of the heterogeneous'. Although we offer a particular story, that contradicts the academic imperative to generalize and to know 'once and for all', we believe Tina's story offers an exemplar of a student moving out of the chaos of conflict, from a place of liminality to one of natality.

### **Between the conception and the creation: liminality and natality**

*Between the conception*

*And the creation*

*Between the emotion*

*And the response*

*Falls the Shadow*

(Eliot 1982, 80)

This paper explores the unsettling liminal space of Tina's field experience. The liminal is a hyphenated space, that is 'haunted and generative' (Jardine 1998, 123) and became troublesome when Tina experienced a fundamental contradiction between her beliefs about social work practice and the reality of her conflictual encounter with school's administration.

The liminal is seen as a threshold, and 'to be in a state of liminality is to be poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another' (Heilbrun 1999, 3). It is considered a site of transition, of leaving something to go into something else and is entered into briefly, 'in a passage toward something else; such persons are dipped into nonidentity and self-forgetfulness in order to change what they are' (Hirshfield 1997, 208).

This paper also considers the shadow of the liminal space. With every effort to move from ideas to reality, from thought to action, there is always a shadow, shaping the effort. Yet, we also ask, does the hyphenated space also hold a certain fecundity

that yields new understandings? Clouder (2005) refers to this as a crossing of the threshold of the liminal space, a crossing into new understandings and being. By taking up the concept of natality, we interpret Tina's movement from conflict to new understanding as one of pedagogical natality (Arendt 1959; Phelan et al. 2005) where she moves through the liminal to a new sense of self.

Natality refers to the act of beginning anew, the *initium*. Natality takes into consideration the social and political context that we are born into and live within. It also takes up the possibilities for creating anew within these contexts (Moran 2000). Could the experience of natality 'lead to new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something?' (Clouder 2005, 506). Is the possibility of (trans)formation a saving grace of being in the spaces of liminality? If Tina can transform through the paradoxical space, is it then a meaningful pedagogical experience? Are we preparing students, as we should for the swampy ground, or the rough ground of professional practice? (Dunne 2001) Or, do we burden them, and as educators, place them at risk? We ask such questions because, to Tina's surprise, she found herself 'caught'; feeling a sense of despair, as she was positioned in a space that rendered her unrecognizable. She was a stranger to herself, not being able to identify with her beliefs she had about social work.

Tina requested and was assigned a field placement 'intended to bring forth new life', new understandings (Jardine 2000) and what the Greeks referred to as *metanoia*, 'a change of orientation through which a new sense of self may emerge' (Hollis 1998, 31). However, within pedagogical experiences, there is often no learning without a darkness, for '... the emergence of a truly radical thought never dawns without casting an uncertain dark' (Bhabha 1994, 40). A pedagogical question arising from Tina's experience of conflict, is if darkness is a necessary prerequisite of learning in profession education? As educators, what is our responsibility to ensure that the darkness does not indelibly wound students and ultimately the practice of social work?

### **Between the idea and the reality: experiencing the unsettlement**

*Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow  
(Eliot 1982, 8)*

Tina's liminal space was one of attempting to integrate what she was learning as a social work student, with her beliefs that the morals of social work, from her perspective, failed to be enacted by her school's administration:

... one of the things that I felt was very powerless to advocate for myself, and a lot of that was because of the system. I was never allowed to participate in any discussion around what was going to happen to me ... Like, this wasn't what I was being taught in Social Work ... It felt ... it felt two-faced. I'm being taught on this hand, that when you have somebody who has a problem ... you always include them in the decision making process ...

In this excerpt, Tina felt silenced and excluded from a dialogue that was about her and came to believe that the institutional discourses were positioned as higher and more powerful than the student discourse. Her sense of being silenced was the beginning of her disillusionment with social work practice.

For Tina, the reality of how she is being treated was incongruent with her understanding of the values and philosophies of social work and led to a sense of betrayal. She described seeing the other face of social work, its 'two-faced' dimension. As she caught glimpses of the 'other face', Tina found herself needing to come to terms with what she believed was right, true, and good about social work; all of which she wanted to enact in her own practice and her own life. She questioned herself, her fit and her role within social work:

I am told in my training as a social worker that one of my primary jobs is to advocate for what is in the best interests of my client, and if that means that you put your job on the line, you do that. You know, and that's the philosophy that I've been told, and yet in the School that I work in, I can't do that for myself because I'm then shot down every time I tried.

The conflict for Tina called into question her beliefs about social work, and as she wrestled with her identity, she also became physically ill. Her extreme fatigue and illness reminds us as educators that education is not solely an epistemological endeavor, but is also an ontological practice. This shows up in Tina's experience as she questions her wanting to 'be' a social worker.

By June, I actually was ill.

This practicum gave me . . . it almost gave me an ulcer, because it didn't stop from January on, like, you know, it just . . . if it wasn't this, it was that. If it wasn't that, it was something else. Like, it just didn't stop, and I mean, my job is just increasing.

You [administration/institution] know . . . you make the decision. You go home at night and you sleep and it doesn't affect you at all. I don't.

I go home at night and I don't sleep.

Tina wondered if the stress of the conflict was manifesting as an illness, and she attributed the conflict of her practicum to the development of her ulcer. Her conflict was intensified by this illness, and furthered her idea that somehow she was being punished, or condemned for speaking out or for questioning a process that she perceived as unfair (Foucault 1984).

### ***Through the stairwell***

*Between the desire  
And the spasm  
Between the potency  
And the existence  
Between the essence  
And the descent  
Falls the Shadow  
(Eliot 1982, 80)*

Tina found herself in a troublesome and contradictory space; the school and educational process that she believed would enact the values and ideals of social work, was now oppressing her:

... and if I rock the boat now, and I was actually told if you rock the boat too much, you will not get into the master's program ..., or that you will jeopardize that.

I'd jeopardize my future if I continue to advocate for myself ... I really felt that was what the solution was ... That was when I got to the point of saying if this is what it is that I'm walking into, I don't need it and if I can't ... if what I'm being told as a student is I'm not allowed to do as a person, for whatever reason ... or if I'm stopped short as I'm trying to do it, then this is not a School that I want anything to do with because it's not a School that I feel is being completely honest.

Tina felt constrained to act. She noted that what was told to her as 'a student' differed from how she was able to act 'as a person'. A binary opposition was created: of student and of person. Her conflict was amplified by the belief that the very site of education, her school, was not enacting the principles they taught. In the liminal space, she attempted to develop connections between her disparate lands of policy and practice, between what she thought to be the ideals of social work, and the harsh reality of her experience. What passage would be needed to connect to a meaningful practicum experience? Could she live in what Bhabha (1994) referred to as, the 'stairwell as liminal space'?

Could her ability to exist in tension, whether invited or not, and be amidst polarities within her practicum experience, actually engender her to be a 'good' social worker? The very generativity of the stairwell relies on its use as a passage, yet also to move *through* it.

The ground on which Tina knew herself and understood her profession was shifting, thus her knowledge about social work practice became 'troubled knowledge' (Clouder 2005) and part of the liminal space. Tina asked herself, '*Do I want part of this if this is what the profession is all about?*' However, the troublesome knowledge that can be unsettling and sometimes pedagogically paralyzing; yet it may also be '[t]he opening up of a previously unknown alternative way of viewing caring in a professional context, [and] can lead students to question fundamental beliefs and values, creating uncertainty and doubt' (Clouder 2005, 506).

### **Moving beyond the liminal: natality as returning home anew**

When Tina's faith was shaken by a revoking and then the re-instating of her personal contract with the school, she described 'disillusionment' as the defining aspect of the experience that lead to fundamental questioning, 'What am I doing?' and 'Why am I doing this?' Bhabha wrote, '[t]hese in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity ...' (1994, 1). Could she negotiate this space and if so, was there then the possibility of creating anew, of re-negotiating who we know ourselves to be?

As time passed, she reflected on the conflict and made her turn from melancholy (Butler 1997) to an experience of a renewal of self, an experience of natality:

... action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possessed the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. (Arendt 1959, 9)

In the liminal space, Tina's level of consciousness was raised. Unknowingly, she began a natal movement, an 'action' from disillusionment to illumination. She began to advocate for herself and so ended her pedagogical paralysis.

Did the very meaningfulness, and the benefit of conflict in pedagogy rely on her ability to achieve natality? Do these spaces yield the very things that may make students good social workers? Do they learn in and from liminality, that the 'swampy lowland' of practice is messy, and sometimes defies a 'technical solution'? (Schon 1987, 3). Perhaps it is their experience of liminality that yields a 'new sign of identity' (Bhabha 1994) in the metamorphous of student to professional, of person to practice:

When a gap opens between the old and the new during a rite of passage, the self enters into an undivided life – both who we are and who might become vanishes. It is just then, when all is permeable, unparticularized, unborn, that a new way of being may emerge. (Hirshfield 1997, 212)

Tina begins to realize a plurality of being a hybridity in her understanding of social work and its complexity. This experience of liminality may prepare her to be in situations, and sites of practice that are messy, ambiguous, and unsettling. As educational mentors, how do we support students in these unsettling spaces and overcome the urge, possibly based on our own discomfort, to foreclose their experience?

### *Mapping the movements toward natality*

Throughout the three interviews, Tina was working out the conflict and the meaning of it in her life. She often noted that participating in the research helped her to talk through some related struggles and provided a point of reflection. We traced her movements toward natality over time. In the first interview, Tina seemed nervous, and fragile. Her narration was fragmented, and at times, dis-continuous. It was difficult to follow her unfolding narrative of the conflict as her description of it was often very frenetic.

In the second interview, Tina was calmer. Given the incoherence of the first interview, we spent time recalling the timeline and delving more deeply into the meaning she was making of the conflict. The third interview was notably very different from the others as a sense of calm prevailed in her thoughtful reflection of the conflict. At this time, Tina noted again how participating in the research interviews had been pivotal to her arriving at a new understanding of the conflict.

### *Experiencing the light of natality: disillusionment to illumination*

Tina's disillusionment with social work became an illumination of herself as she struggled with her beliefs, values, and the subsequent choices. In the third interview,

Tina reflected on the disillusionment of her practicum experience and how it intersected with other areas of her life.

In an e-mail correspondence from Tina around the time of last interview, she wrote:

The one thing I wanted to add to this was the larger effect of disillusionment that I've noticed. When it occurs in one area of my life, I notice that it has a direct effect on other areas. When I was disillusioned with my education (and possible profession) I noticed that it was much more difficult to work at my current job with full enthusiasm and energy. I also noticed that I became much more negative in my relationships and my health went down. Things that wouldn't have normally phased me or that I could have put into perspective easily became large concerns and big problems. I had trouble putting everything into perspective. It was that really bad downward spiral we can get into. Funny, I don't really know how I got out of it. I think my health ended up taking precedence and other things fell a bit more into perspective then, the fact that I finally finished the practicum also helped.

In the first interview, Tina wavered between wanting to 'quit' social work and wanting to 'fight' for her practicum. Tina reported engaging in conversations with colleagues outside her school, who encouraged her not to abandon social work. Such conversations, she said, were pivotal, and 'just enough to relieve me from the huge emotionality of the issue. Then I came back to the school and said okay, so where do we go from here?'

As Tina became more engaged in the conflict she began to advocate for herself, enacting the very principles of social work she was taught. Initially, she blamed the school: 'You created the situation, you fix it. Give it to me in writing . . . create some sense of trust so that the piece of paper that you're giving me is not going to be withdrawn'. She wanted to be seen as a person, and not a 'problem' and told them, 'I'm not a problem. I'm a person and what you've done to my life is now a problem'. At this point, Tina was protecting herself, acting defensively and had not reflected on her own culpability in the conflict. However, this struggle, this living in the uncertain space, was beginning to yield an altered sense of self. Much of Tina's frustration emerged from feeling silenced and excluded from the decision-making process. In her interviews, Tina talked about the geographical distance as a barrier to participation in the negotiations, with most of the communication occurring through e-mail. For Tina the e-mail correspondence 'felt as though very little was being said'.

Months later she had a conversation with the Field Director that generated a sense of validation. Tina explained, 'It was a good conversation. We did some talking and the one thing that she said that I really appreciated was this isn't your fault. That was really important to hear because at that point you feel that you did something wrong'. Tina was beginning her movement away from self-blame and self-doubt while experiencing other ways of understanding the situation. In this conversation she received an apology, which she identified as a turning point. 'She listened to me and said I'm sorry this happened to you. She heard my story and really sat and listened and took the time to hear how I felt'.

The recognition, validation and sense of being heard opened the door to self-reflection. The interviews, as part of the research, also provided a space and dialogue for Tina to make sense of her unfamiliar self. She began to see how difficult it may have been for the administration and sought to understand 'what they were going

through'. She also concluded that her illness during the time of her practicum might have been precipitated by other factors, including the demands of her paid full-time employment. In her final interview, Tina was able to articulate what she learned in the liminal space. She noted:

My learning came from the negative situations, it was really having to sit back and go okay, pick out the bad from the good. This is bad, but how do I turn it into something I can learn from. It was a conscious learning.

Tina was able to move beyond seeing the school as the sole embodiment of the social work profession and in doing so was able to re-position herself as a social worker, returning 'home' differently to what she believed and valued. In her final interview, she observed that 'disillusionment isn't in a way a bad thing . . . you can look at it and say, how can I do something about it?'

### **In closing: the fecundity of Tina's case**

#### ***Pedagogical implications for students***

There is a powerful fecundity (Jardine 1998) that emerges from an interpretive understanding of Tina's experience of conflict. Through our attempts to understand the conflict, we emerge with new and different understandings of conflict and its pedagogical implications for students and educators. As educators, we are concerned with the regeneration of meaning in professional education, and finding ways to unfold new conversations with the students who come into our cultures of professional education (Gadamer 1989).

Tina's experience of conflict was characterized by a painful transition of letting go of her beliefs of social work, and entering a culture that initially rendered her unrecognizable. Her experience of being in liminality and moving through it was a pedagogical experience in that it invoked questions that shaped her knowledge and being in the world, as she asked, 'What am I doing and why?' As Tina sought to make sense of her conflict, she cultivated characteristics that constitute meaningful social work practice. Tina learned to reflect; she cultivated a sense of self-awareness and attunement as she moved from a place of victim, to understanding how she also contributed to the conflict that was being created in her life. She created an understanding of how identity is shaped and formed by multiple constructs and discourses. Tina learned empathy for what the administration may have been experiencing in the conflict, while simultaneously cultivating a consciousness of self; echoing her own utterance in her final research interview in which she stated that the experience of conflict was a 'conscious learning'.

#### ***Pedagogical implications for educators***

The pedagogical implications for students are similar to the implications for educators, as we hope to continuously cultivate a consciousness of ourselves and of our practice as educators. As educators, we need to engage in a constant attunement and reflexivity with our professional culture, so that students who come into our classrooms, or our fields of work, have a space in which they can safely renew their own selves. We need to ensure that we make space for students who seek

and contend their own voice, who advocate, and question their identity in relation to their practice.

For educators, Tina's experience may evoke the following questions. What are the pedagogical implications for students negotiating the spaces of liminality? How do we teach them in such a way that they do not get 'locked in the stairwell?' Further we ask, 'Can one really know oneself without the in-betweens?' (Silva, Sorrell, and Sorrell 1995, 7). If liminal spaces are inherent in field education and practice, how they are negotiated is vital to a student's sense of professional meaningfulness. As messy and complex as the liminal space is, Clouder reminds us that crossing the thresholds, or inciting natality, 'is vital to new understandings and taking up new positions' (2005, 511).

As educators we have a sense of ethos, of pedagogical commitment to discern students who are in these liminal spaces, and to not foreclose them before the possibility of newness. This can be a difficult process. It requires attunement, a way of seeing that makes possible the discernment of such spaces, and an invitation to students to experience the interval; believing in its possibility for further self-actualization of students, and ourselves, as educators. Thus, it is through the movement of liminality into natality there exists the possibility of newness for educators, and for our students.

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