

Culture Wars in the Classroom: Perceptions of Social Work Faculty at Public and Private Institutions

Nickolas B. Davis
Aloha VanCamp

Abstract: *Social work educators engage with students from diverse political and personal backgrounds, often facing culture wars within the classroom. The Council on Social Work Education emphasizes academic freedom in higher education. This study surveyed 35 social work educators to examine their perceptions of culture wars' effects on programs, students, and faculty. Using a nonexperimental, causal-comparative design, it compared these perceptions between faculty at public and private institutions. Demographic data were analyzed using crosstabulations and descriptive statistics. Public institution faculty ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .58$) reported lower faculty scores than private institution counterparts. Private institution faculty felt their institutional culture conflicted more with NASW policies but had more positive perceptions of culture wars. Findings indicate significant implications for teaching where social work values clash with institutional values or political influences.*

Keywords: *Culture wars, social work education, academic freedom*

Social justice is one of the core values embedded in the profession of social work. Social workers enter the profession due to their commitment to addressing social justice issues, eradicating social injustices in society, and advocating for the marginalized and oppressed (NASW, 2021). Challenges in today's times lend themselves to divisive thinking and group polarization. Many would say that these issues are reflective of what is referred to as culture wars - conflicts that reflect changing times and societal differences in ideals, beliefs, and values.

Social work education prepares future professionals for conflicts and conflict resolution, including preparation on the theoretical underpinnings of Karl Marx and conflict theory. Marx, a political philosopher of the 19th century, proposed conflict theory that was based on his belief that society was in a constant state of flux due to scarcity of resources and unequal distribution of those resources. He believed that society's social order was reached by power and wealth rather than consensus and conformity (Garret, 2018). When conflict occurs in wealth, values, and social norms, justification is socially constructed by those who are in power. In the case of current culture wars, tensions are increasing among individuals in workplace and educational settings.

Attacks on education are reflective of the broader culture wars phenomenon. Though heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, culture wars have been present in American society for some time (Darbyshire et al., 2020; Hartman, 2015). The term "culture war," popularized in the U.S. in the 1990s by sociologist James Davison Hunter, referred to tensions between the orthodox and progressive worldviews. This tension could be described as conflict between those with traditional values and those with more progressive

Nickolas B. Davis, PhD, LCSW, Assistant Professor, Aloha VanCamp, PhD, LMSW, Associate Professor (retired), Department of Social Work, University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit, MI.

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or nontraditional values (Hartman, 2015). Culture wars describe the political struggle over cultural issues; as well as the “meaning of America”—who we are now and who we aspire to become (Hartman, 2015; Hunter, 1992).

The concept of culture wars gained mainstream attention at the 1992 Republican Convention when Pat Buchanan said that they were wars “for the soul of America” (Voices of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory Project, 1992, para. 39). More recently, the concept of culture wars broadened to include topics, such as religion, marriage and family, social behavior, sexuality, and gender identity, as well as other issues that separate people and their beliefs (Castle, 2018; Liechty, 2006; Perry et al., 2020; Ulrich, 2024). Notably, culture wars may not be seen as a real phenomenon but rather as a result of belonging to different political or social groups. While culture wars are often found in educational settings, they may manifest in a variety of other settings, such as the therapeutic relationship (Farrar & Hanley, 2023). Nonetheless, culture wars reflect a crossroads of cultural transformation (Duffy & Hewlett, 2021), with experiences and differences of opinion and/or political affiliation underlying the idea that culture wars have emerged in the experience of education, at both the K-12 level and higher education (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005).

For example, a new wave of legislation in K-12 education is attempting to limit the breadth and depth of teaching and learning based on cultural beliefs and values. In K-12 education, legislators have introduced and passed legislation to support parents who wish to have the right to restrict the kinds of education available to their children. In 2022, 25 states passed 64 laws that restricted or limited what K-12 teachers could say about race, racism, gender identity, sexuality, and LGBTQ issues. These laws provided parents with the right to influence what their children learn (Natanson et al., 2022). Teachers, caught in the crosshairs of political and cultural conflicts, are challenged in their ability to educate and simply do their work (Hess, 2009).

Higher education is faced with similar challenges. The term culture war began in higher education on campuses in the 1980s when worry about campus political correctness appeared (Roth, 2022). Campuses often have been criticized for being havens for ideas that were outside the mainstream. State boards of education have responded with threats of defunding and challenging tenure policy. According to Roth (2022), preserving traditions of intellectual freedom is best done by promoting what he referred to as cultural peace. Practical idealism must be defended from threats of violence or being marginalized to preserve intellectual diversity (Roth, 2022).

Several states have introduced or passed legislation limiting academic freedom within higher education (Maxwell & Sonenshine, 2022). This type of legislation, typically introduced in politically conservative states, poses various limits to academic freedom ranging from banning the inclusion of critical race theory in the state of Tennessee to selectively teaching aspects of American history in South Carolina to broadly limiting the inclusion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) related content into the curriculum in Florida (Briscoe & Jones, 2024; Cineas, 2023; Maxwell & Sonenshine, 2022).

The attacks on academic freedom in higher education are so widespread that in March 2023, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) issued a call to protect academic freedom. In 2021, CSWE, along with several other organizations, condemned legislation

that “violates the First Amendment and principles of academic freedom through state censorship of teaching, research, and public speech” (CSWE, 2023, para. 5). Since then, more states have introduced legislation aimed at limiting academic freedom in many ways. The issue is so prevalent that social work education may be at risk in some areas, which may harm vulnerable communities (CSWE, 2023).

Freedom of thought and expression are the cornerstones of higher education and intellectual life. Over 80 years ago, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) highlighted the importance of freedom of thought and expression in their 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure (AAUP, 2022). These rights and responsibilities are central to higher education and social work education. Social work educators must inform their students of evidence-based practices that help others. Social work also has a responsibility to raise, discuss, and challenge new and existing ideas.

The social work profession has never been apolitical, and many would say that social work should be even more visible and prominent in responding to political discourse and differences. However, inherent risks exist in social work and social work education while exploring tensions between truth and ideology, especially in the classroom. Among the core values of the social work profession are respect and the dignity of the person, integrity, and the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2021). Historical and cultural implications of current shifts in society and dynamics of power are at the core of conflict in the classroom.

Social work educators and practitioners frequently find themselves at the intersection of these conflicts, as their work often involves advocating for marginalized communities that may be targeted in culture war disputes. NASW policies have strong stances on many issues central to culture wars, which sometimes draw support or criticism depending on the political context (Hartman, 2015; NASW, 2015)

Previous Research

Few studies have been done on the prevalence or impact of recent culture wars in educational settings. In 2021, Bročić and Miles studied whether educational institutions could influence moral relativism. They found that colleges in the humanities were most influential, but they were most influenced by moral absolutism rather than moral relativism. The authors suggested that more work is needed on political conflict and moralization. While NASW policies, namely the Code of Ethics, do not explicitly discuss moral absolutism or moral relativism, they are implicitly noted through the values and principles these policies promote such as dignity and worth of the person, cultural competence, and social justice (NASW, 2021).

In 2023, the Pew Research Center compared private and public K-12 mission statements to determine if any difference existed in attitudes toward education about DEI. The study indicated differences along the partisan divide in topics that parents thought were appropriate for their children to learn about in school (Odabaş & Aragão, 2023).

Although there is a paucity of research on culture wars in higher education, there is an indication of beginning research on the influence of DEI in higher education. DEI has

evolved since the 1960s after the Civil Rights Movement and the development of laws pertaining to affirmative action and an inclusive work environment (Patton, 2015). These laws were aimed at eliminating discrimination in the workplace based on gender, race, and ethnicity. Marchiondo et al. (2023) researched the impact of leadership's attitudes on the success of institutional diversity on faculty. In the study, men experienced more perceived bias when their leaders held more positive attitudes toward diversity. Yet perceived bias predicted faculty endorsement of institutional diversity two years later, thus mediating the relationship.

Despite deep roots in American society, culture wars are not a uniquely American phenomenon, as higher education institutions across the globe are increasingly impacted by this phenomenon. In Canada, research has demonstrated how racialization and colonialism influence the graduate classroom experience (Park & Bahia, 2022). In Australia, culture wars are manifested by dwindling federal funding for higher education, leading to an increased reliance on international student fees (Welch, 2022). In Hungary, the intersection of culture wars and higher education reached a climax when Central European University was required to relocate to Austria due to the revocation of its operational licenses. The relocation and ensuing discourse highlighted the intersection of culture wars and broader society (Enyedi, 2022). Similar to funding issues experienced by Australian universities, budget cuts were also used as a tool for culture wars in Brazil. These budget cuts aligned with former president Jair Bolsonaro's attack on higher education in the nation to eliminate "cultural Marxism" (Lima & Iamamoto, 2022). The influence of culture wars on higher education is not limited to a specific national context, as it manifests in various forms worldwide. In the United States, these conflicts often center around debates on curriculum content, diversity initiatives, and free speech, which may pose challenges for social work educators who attempt to navigate these in the classroom. Understanding the global dimensions of culture wars may allow for a broader framework for examining how social work education in the U.S. is influenced by similar pressures, as educators contend with external political forces that shape educational priorities and practices (Giroux, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to examine social work educators who are working in public and private institutions and their perceptions of culture wars on programs, students, and faculty. The hypothesis that was tested is social work educators in public and private institutions will not differ in their perceptions of culture wars on programs, students, and faculty.

Methods

A nonexperimental, causal-comparative research study was used to compare differences in social work educators' perceptions of the effects of culture wars on students, classrooms, and university levels in public and private institutions. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Detroit Mercy approved this study.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics by Type of University/College*

	<i>n</i> (%)		
	Type of University/College		Total (<i>n</i> = 35)
	Public (<i>n</i> = 17)	Private (<i>n</i> = 18)	
Age (years)			
22 to 30		1 (7.7%)	1 (3.4%)
31 to 40	4 (25%)	3 (23.1%)	7 (24.1%)
41 to 50	5 (31.3%)	2 (15.4%)	7 (24.1%)
51 to 60	5 (31.3%)	4 (30.7%)	9 (31.1%)
Over 60	2 (12.5%)	3 (23.1%)	5 (17.3%)
Missing	1	5	
Education			
MSW	5 (31.3%)	5 (3.8%)	10 (33.5%)
DSW	8 (50%)	7 (50%)	15 (42.9%)
PhD	3 (18.7%)	1 (7.1%)	4 (13.3%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	1 (3.3%)
Missing	1	4	
Position			
Administration	5 (29.4%)	1 (5.6%)	6 (17.1%)
Faculty	12 (70.6%)	17 (94.4%)	29 (82.9%)
Rank			
Lecturer		2 (11.1%)	2 (5.7%)
Asst. Professor	3 (17.6%)	5 (27.8%)	8 (22.9%)
Assoc. Professor	1 (5.9%)		1 (2.8%)
Professor	6 (35.3%)	8 (44.4%)	14 (40%)
Adjunct	6 (35.3%)	2 (11.1%)	8 (22.9%)
Other	1 (5.9%)	1 (5.6%)	2 (5.7%)
	Mean [<i>SD</i>], Range		
Years at Present Program	9.2 [5.77], 1-17	10.4 [10.54], 0.5-33	9.8 [8.46], 0.5-33
Years in Higher Education	15.2 [9.45], 4-30	14.1 [9.08], 1-33	14.6 [9.18], 1-33
Students in Program	184.5 [114.64], 24-400	259.9 [609.53], 28-2100	225.6 [452.41], 24-2100

Participants

Social work educators who are members of the Baccalaureate Program Directors (BPD) listserv were asked to participate in this study. Participants working in public and private universities/colleges in BSW programs were invited to participate. Thirty-five participants completed and submitted their surveys.

The participants ranged in age from 22 to over 60 years of age, with most indicating their ages were between 51 and 60 years of age ($n = 9$, 31.1%). Most participants ($n = 15$, 42.9%) had earned Doctor of Social Work (DSW) degrees, with 10 (33.4%) indicating a Master of Social Work (MSW) as their highest degree. The majority of participants were faculty ($n = 29$, 82.9%), with 6 (17.1%) reporting they were in administrative positions. Fourteen (40.0%) participants held the rank of professor, followed by 8 (22.9%) assistant professors. The years in their present program ranged from 0.5 to 33 years, with a mean of

9.80 ($SD = 8.46$). The mean number of students in their institutions' social work programs was 225.61 ($SD = 452.41$) and ranged from 24 to 2,100. The demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Instrument

An original survey was developed by the researchers to obtain information regarding the perceptions of BSW faculty regarding culture wars. The first section of the survey provided information on the participants and their demographic characteristics. The second section of the survey used three questions to determine the conflicts between personal and professional beliefs and NASW policies. These items were answered yes or no. The third section of the survey used 25 items to measure the perceptions of social work educators on their beliefs regarding culture wars. These items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The items were divided into three subscales: program, student, and personal. The responses to each item were summed to obtain a total score, which was divided by the number of items on the subscale to provide a mean score. The use of a mean score allowed comparison among the subscales using the original scale of measurement. Cronbach alpha coefficient was used to determine the internal consistency of the survey items. The obtained alpha coefficient of .77 was considered adequate for the study.

Data Analysis

The data were downloaded from the Lime Survey platform. The data were cleaned by removing all incomplete cases. Tests for normality were used to determine if the 25 items measuring perceptions of culture wars were normally distributed. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnoff tests for normality were not statistically significant, indicating the data were normally distributed. The demographic data were summarized using crosstabulations and descriptive statistics to provide a comparison of the sample between public and private universities. The research question was addressed using multivariate analysis of variance, with the mean scores for the three subscales measuring culture wars used as the dependent variables and the type of university/college, public or private, used as the independent variable. All decisions on the statistical significance of the findings were made using an alpha level of .05.

Results

The participants were asked to answer three questions regarding conflict with NASW policies. When asked if their school's mission conflicted with some NASW policies, 1 (5.9%) participant from public institutions and 4 (22.2%) participants from private institutions answered yes. Four (23.5%) from public institutions and 10 (55.6%) from private institutions indicated that the culture of their university conflicted with some NASW policies. None of the participants from public institutions and 4 (26.7%) from private institutions indicated that their personal beliefs conflicted with NASW policies. These findings are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. *Conflicts With NASW by Type of University/College*

Some NASW policies conflict with...		<i>n</i> (%)		
		Type of University/College		
		Public (<i>n</i> = 17)	Private (<i>n</i> = 18)	Total (<i>n</i> = 35)
The mission of my university	Yes	1 (5.9%)	4 (22.2%)	5 (14.3%)
	No	17 (94.1%)	14 (77.8%)	30 (85.7%)
The culture of my university	Yes	4 (23.5%)	10 (55.6%)	14 (40%)
	No	13 (76.5%)	8 (44.4%)	21 (60%)
My personal beliefs	Yes		4 (26.7%)	4 (12.9%)
	No	16 (100%)	11 (73.3%)	27 (87.1%)
	Missing	1		

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to determine if the perceptions of the participants regarding experiences with culture wars involving the program, students, and faculty differed between public and private institutions. The results of the MANOVA were statistically significant ($F(3, 31) = 3.90, p = .018$), indicating a difference in perceptions of culture wars by type of institution. When the between-subject tests were compared between the two types of institutions, significant differences were found for faculty, $F(1, 33) = 4.86, p = .035$. Participants in public institutions ($M = 3.64, SD = .58$) had lower scores regarding culture wars for faculty than participants in private institutions ($M = 4.00, SD = .37$), indicating that participants in private institutions had more positive perceptions of faculty's experiences regarding culture wars than those in public institutions. The differences between program and student by type of institution were not statistically significant. Based on these results, participants in public and private institutions appear to differ in their perceptions of faculty's experiences regarding culture wars. Table 3 presents the MANOVA results.

Table 3. *One-Way Multivariate Analysis of Variance - Perceptions of Culture Wars by Type of College/University*

Perceptions of Culture Wars	Type of College/University [M (SD)]		<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Public (<i>n</i> = 17)	Private (<i>n</i> = 18)			
Program	4.3 (0.40)	4.2 (0.38)	1, 33	0.44	.514
Student	3.4 (0.56)	3.9 (0.33)	1, 33	0.33	.517
Faculty	3.6 (0.58)	4.0 (0.37)	1, 33	4.86	.035
Multivariate Statistics were generated from Wilk's Lambda $F = 3.90, df = 3, 31, p = .018$					

Discussion

This study explored social work educators' perceptions of culture wars on programs, students, and faculty. The results of this survey may serve as a sign of this conflict in practice. Although the sample size in this study is relatively small ($n = 35$), the results suggested differences between public and private higher education social work program faculty and their experiences of culture wars both in the classroom and in their

university/college institutions. Faculty teaching in private institutions reported more positive perceptions of their experiences regarding culture wars, suggesting that they are more comfortable with the internal experience of cultural wars differences whereas those teaching in public institutions reported fewer positive perceptions, suggesting more dissatisfaction or dissonance with the climate of the institution and classroom experience. While the exact reasons for the differences are unclear, it is known that there is pressure on many learning institutions due to the culture wars phenomena. Recalling the foundations of Marx's conflict theory, values and norms are socially constructed by those in power. These differences may be a product of restrictive state policies towards higher education that have been widely reported in the media. These policies, often set by state legislatures, have an outsized impact on public institutions when compared to private institutions. Current governmental influences and/or policies may be endangering the experience or spirit of academic freedom within higher education.

The results also suggested that social work faculty at private institutions feel their culture conflicts more with some NASW policies than those at public institutions. While the specific reasons for this are ambiguous; some private institutions may be traditional in their beliefs. Religiously affiliated colleges and universities may not embrace the professional values and ethical norms held by social workers.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Education

Previous research highlights the influence of culture wars on educational institutions and emphasizes the impact on higher education policies and practices. This study extends these insights by exploring how social work educators perceive culture wars within their professional context, specifically in relation to programmatic, faculty, and student experiences across public and private institutions. The findings, which highlight significant differences in perceptions, suggest that institutional type may play a role in shaping educators' experiences with cultural conflicts. These results have important implications for social work education, particularly in preparing faculty and students to navigate ideological tensions while upholding the core values of social work. This study's outcomes underscore the need for more targeted strategies to support educators in institutions where political pressures may threaten academic freedom and the integrity of social work values.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the small sample size and gathering data through only one data source. Although the survey was made available to the approximate 800 BPD listserv members, only 35 chose to submit completed surveys. A larger sample size could yield more accurate results. A second limitation was the combining of parochial and for-profit private institutions into one group. As the participants were not required to include the name of their college/university, it was not possible to segregate the parochial and for-profit institutions. Future research should include a question as to the governance of the institutions, public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit. Care must be taken when interpreting the results, as some participants' responses may reflect social desirability to align with their institutions' or programs' stance on culture wars.

Future Research

Additional research is needed to explore the underlying factors that influence the differences in perceptions of social work faculty regarding their experiences with culture wars. Completing a comparative analysis of social work faculty's experiences with culture wars in different states, for example, those that have passed legislation restricting aspects of higher education versus those that have not would be beneficial. Moreover, future researchers may wish to examine the impacts of culture wars on other stakeholders in higher education, such as social work administrators, students, practicum instructors, and support staff. Future research could involve longitudinal studies that track changes in social work educators' perceptions of culture wars over time, especially in response to shifts in state or federal policies. This would provide insight into how evolving political climates and legislative actions affect academic freedom and pedagogical practices in social work education. Qualitative approaches could also be advantageous as the culture war phenomenon is a lived experience and adding a "voice" to the data may allow for a deeper exploration of the strategies used by social work educators to address conflicts and how these strategies impact student learning and program outcomes.

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Author note: Address correspondence to Nickolas Davis, Department of Social Work, University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit, MI, 48221. Email: davisnb@udmercy.edu

Author ORCID:

Nickolas B. Davis, *University of Detroit Mercy*
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8921-670X>

Aloha VanCamp, *University of Detroit Mercy*
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5061-0937>