

# Pathways from Personal towards Professional Values: Structured Small-Group Work with Social Work Students

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## Abstract

This qualitative research was based on structured small-group work conducted with 34 undergraduate social work students. It aimed to reveal students' understandings of their personal values and modes of evaluation, their views regarding the value base of social work, and the possible influence of their personal values on professional practice. The data was collected through a semi-structured questionnaire, self-reflective diaries and a semi-structured focus-group discussion. During the study, it was seen that the students had difficulties when talking about their personal values. Yet, whenever they did talk about them, they saw that their values were actually not their own, but were socially constructed by the dominant cultural and moral norms. Prejudices based on the hegemonic cultural codes and norms, hidden in the form of personal values, are the biggest handicaps in the development of a professional identity. Thus, the values of social work are extremely important because they allow social workers to work professionally with all people without exception or discrimination and to promote human rights. This study showed that educational settings must be transformed so that students may express their own values without being judged. Arts-based techniques like creative drama have a great potential to achieve this goal. Therefore, social work education should benefit from creative and critical ways to prepare students for the profession, which aims to protect the value of humans.



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**Keywords:** hegemonic culture; structured small-group work; social work education; the “new” Turkey

## **Introduction**

In the “new” Turkey, anybody who is not a part of the hegemonic culture can be marginalised. Different ethnic groups and classes, people with different sexual identities or orientations, different religions or nonbelievers outside of the hegemonic culture are marginalised (Acar et al. 2017; Toprak 2009). Similarly, social work students may also share prejudices originating from the hegemonic culture against people with different ideologies, men and women denying mainstream gender roles, LGBTI+ and individuals of different ethnic origins, sects, religions and languages. If social work students are influenced by personal values that are formed by these prejudices rather than by professional values, it is challenging for them to make a right evaluation of these marginalised persons, groups and communities. Moreover, they may contribute to social work becoming an element of oppression in the “new” Turkey.

As discussed in the literature, it is highly important for social work students to understand social work values through discussions on the values inherent in hegemonic culture and its intersections with social work education (Beckett, Maynard, and Jordan 2017; Birnbaum and Lach 2014; Chinell 2011; Gair et al. 2015; Osteen 2011; Royse, Dhooper, and Rompf 2016). It is emphasised that all social work students have individual prejudices which “affect their judgement and ability to utilize professional values when interacting with marginalized groups” (Wahler 2012, 1058). Studies conducted with social work students show prejudices that overlap with judgements of the hegemonic culture regarding different categories such as gender roles (Dedotsi and Paraskevopoulou-Kollia 2015) and different sexual orientations (Kwok, Wu, and Shardlow 2013; Papadaki, Plotnikof, and Papadaki 2013). For this reason, many studies draw attention to the importance of a comprehensive curriculum for social work students that focuses on the incongruity between personal values and the values of the social work profession, and that can assist social work students in integrating professional values (Duffy and Hayes 2012; Osteen 2011; Prinsloo 2014).

Bearing in mind that social work students are socialised under the influence of prejudices that conflict with the values of social work, the studies and their suggestions are of enormous importance to social work education. Additionally, in terms of the curriculum that will be shaped by taking these suggestions into consideration, it is important to encourage social work students to address ideological discourse that may otherwise remain unspoken in the social work classroom, because critical reflection on and awareness of the connection between personal and societal values are vital in order to serve individuals, groups and communities effectively (Canda and Furman 2010; Furness and Gilligan 2010; Rosenwald et al. 2012). Since the profession has undergone many changes along with rapid and complex transformations in the social structure, social workers are obliged to take on multiple roles. However, it is not discussed enough

in regard to the construction of professional identity (Caza and Creary 2016, 2–5). In this respect, Canda and Furman (2010) argue that educators should draw attention to how the complexity of larger society and its hegemonic culture may oppress individuals. Thus, with more complex values within society, we should place greater emphasis on the nature and purpose of the professional identity, which is challenging for social workers to adopt (Caza and Creary 2016, 31–2).

Although few in number, some social work educators and scholars in Turkey have recently opened discussions on the above matters. These discussions especially focus on gender inequalities, the problems of LGBTI+ and individuals of different ethnic origins, sects, religions and languages (Buz 2011; Cankurtaran and Beydili 2016). Despite the growing problem of discrimination in Turkey, the reason for the inadequate number of studies on the matter is the conditions in the “new” Turkey, in which the political regime is trying to establish social homogenisation and the possibility to live freely is disappearing along with social and cultural differences as a hierarchy that subjects the weak to the powerful has been constructed (Candaş 2010). Given the complexity of the social conditions, how to approach discrimination and prejudice in social work has barely been touched upon. Acar, Akar and Baykara Acar (2016), who conducted the first study about the matter in Turkey, stressed the need to increase the number of studies on values in social work and to plan the curricula on the basis of student profiles and personal values. It is necessary to work with social work students in terms of personal values, modes of evaluation, the influence of hegemonic culture on them, and the potential influence of these factors on professional practices in turn, as well as to address the value base of social work. Questioning and challenging the influences of hegemonic culture require a new way of thinking about professional education.

Therefore, we preferred to combine constructivist and critical pedagogical perspectives. The constructivist perspective, with its emphasis on cognitive activity and social interactivity, provided us a more face-to-face and interactive learning environment in order to encourage students to exchange thoughts, feelings and experiences. On the other hand, a critical pedagogical perspective helped us to focus on culturally transformative and emancipatory principles while discussing social justice and human rights as the basic values of social work (Caza and Creary 2016, 9; Taylor 1998, 1112). With these two perspectives, we planned educational group work to help social work students to develop critical thinking skills regarding social work values. By using structured small-group work, we tried to understand how it may be possible for them to separate their personal values from professional values while they work with persons with different ideologies, genders, ethnic origins, sects, religions or languages. Therefore, this study was designed to reveal how students understand the potential effects of the hegemonic culture which shapes their personal values and modes of evaluation in professional practice.

## **The “New” Turkey: Challenges to Accepting Diversity and Living Together**

Turkey’s current socio-political and cultural system is part of the “new” Turkey project implemented by the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which was first elected in November 2002. JDP has maintained its presence as a single-party government since then, despite sharp divisions among the public and increasing secularist opposition (Çağlıyan-İçener 2009, 595). Thus, the JDP has ruled Turkey continuously through a single-party majority government by skilfully playing “the nationalist” (Larrabee 2016, 70) and religious card. JDP, with its ideal of the “new” Turkey, has aimed to reformulate “the conservative, religion-inspired and essentially patriarchal value system” (Acar and Altunok 2013, 16). Within this aim, JDP has tried hard to provide a path for its culturally conservative and economically neo-liberal ideology (Buğra 2014), which has critically been dubbed “neoliberalism with a Muslim face” (Coşar and Özman 2004, 69). While neo-liberalism emphasises “individual self-reliance and the self-regulation of social and economic domains, neo-conservatism ascribes greater moral value to the private sphere, which makes disadvantaged groups more vulnerable vis-a-vis power relations” (Acar and Altunok 2013, 20).

The discourse of this new social order has been grounded on the idea of a powerful nation which is divided into two dimensions: one focused on religion as “the sustenance of the nation” and the other focused on the family as “the pillar of national unity.” Thus, religion and family are instrumentalised as the basic social institutions of the “new” Turkey. This new social order has created a hegemonic culture in which people don’t have equal access to public services or are discriminated against because of the fact that their identity is not of the Sunni-Turkish majority (Toprak 2009). The policies that created this culture have shaped “faithful generations” as “ideal good citizens” and have quietly marginalised people who don’t suit this ideal citizen identity as *personae non-gratae*. For instance, the study conducted by Acar et al. (2017) revealed that many individuals and groups suppress their identities in order to benefit from social welfare services, or withdraw their applications due to this marginalisation process. These circumstances also lead them to lose their confidence in public consciousness and justice. Eventually, they give up the idea of being integrated as free and equal citizens.

In this process, the family has been used as the kernel of social order and as the essential social institution preserving conservative values (Çağlıyan-İçener 2009, 599). “The maintenance of the extended family and the strengthening of the family structure” became crucial in encouraging anti-elitist and anti-Western feelings, and ruling out the threat to the “traditional family structure” (Yılmaz 2015, 382). The conjunction of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism exacerbates the pre-existing inequalities in society including gender inequality. As a result, women tend to remain at home and become housewives, thus constituting the largest group that suffers from such unequal conditions (Göksel 2013). In the “new” Turkey, women are seen as the guardians of the moral-cultural order. As a consequence, they have been naturalised as wives and sacred

mothers with the compulsory motherhood role emphasised through limited access to reproductive health services, the condemnation of abortion, caesarean birth, and birth control, the pressure to marry early and have many children, and the attempt to criminalise adultery (Acar and Altunok 2013; Korkman 2016). Discrimination and domestic violence against women have increased in society in general (Özar and Yakut-Cakar 2013). Additionally, homosexuality or the sexuality of youth or unmarried women are not approved of since they are seen as threats to the patriarchal family structure.<sup>1</sup>

The socio-political atmosphere created in the “new” Turkey victimises people (Yeşilyurt-Gündüz 2015). Especially people with different identities or preferences are faced with oppression and “otherisation” (Toprak 2009). Thus, JDP’s policies and political discourse are derived from the conservative and authoritarian values of the Sunni-Muslim majority. Thus, the party excludes people who do not share these values (Ertuğrul 2012, 183). Particularly women, children, the elderly, the disabled, the poor, individuals of different ethnic origins, and LGBTI+ can be faced with serious discriminatory practices due to conservative and authoritarian values (Acar et al. 2017).

Under these conditions in the “new” Turkey, the social work discipline struggles against the hegemonic cultural values and tries to stand as a profession that advocates for marginalised people. However, social work education and students are influenced by these phenomena. Each day, social work is presented more as a religious (Sunni-Muslim) value-based profession. Presidents of newly founded educational institutions are selected from among theologians (Alptekin, Topuz, and Zengin 2013), and they aim to shape the perspectives of social work students with religious values rather than the professional values of social work. As a result, the circumstances generated by the “new” Turkey cost both the service users and social workers dearly. According to Acar et al. (2017), the costs for social workers of not supporting the hegemonic culture are facing oppression, threats and bullying. For instance, administrators in social work institutions and agencies can cast aside evaluations made by social workers and choose which people will be entitled to benefits. In brief, social workers are othered when they advocate the rights of devaluated groups.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is increasingly important that social work students in Turkey have their awareness of their personal values raised, and learn—as well as internalise—professional social work values.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the former minister of state in charge of Women and Family Affairs (this state ministry was scrapped and the Family and Social Policies Ministry was established instead in 2011) stated that, in her opinion, “homosexuality was a biological disorder and should be treated as such” (Jones 2010).

<sup>2</sup> In 2016, IFSW made two separate declarations regarding social workers and academics from the social services field, who are accused, targeted, and often laid off in the increasing political tension in Turkey. These declarations were published on IFSW’s official website as “IFSW Supports Turkish Social Work Academic Facing Detention” (IFSW 2016b) and “Challenges for Social Work in Turkey” on 27 October 2016 (IFSW 2016a).

## **The Importance of the Distinction between Personal and Professional Values**

Social work as a discipline and profession has a unique ability to touch human life. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work's (IASSW) definition in 2014, "social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people." In order to achieve the goal of promoting the empowerment and liberation of people, social work offers a distinct and unique view (Adams 2005). It is a basic declaration in professional practice of acceptance that all humans are valuable and dignified beings because of the fact that they are human. This basic declaration about human beings requires specific professional actions in the behaviour of social workers; i.e. they should not apply their personal value judgements but rather see the special value and place of human beings, each with their unique characteristics and potentialities that are different from other living beings (Kuçuradi 2013, 5).

Professional practice based on the value of human beings is very important for social workers, not only for making assessments but also for making right evaluations throughout their professional actions. To make correct evaluations, social workers need to be aware of two modes of evaluation, namely, value ascription and value imputation. While value ascription focuses on evaluation that assumes a special relationship between the evaluating person and the evaluated object, value imputation focuses on evaluation by means of the prevailing general value judgement. Both of these modes of evaluation fail to lead people to grasp the value of the object they are evaluating (Kuçuradi 2000, 55), and social workers and their evaluation processes are no exception. Indeed, on occasion, social workers use value ascription and value imputation instead of making evaluations based on knowledge. The root of the problem is having a security-focused perspective which initially aims for the conservation of the system rather focusing on the acceptance of all humans' innate value. A security-focused perspective, in contrast to a rights-based perspective, is not holistic, does not focus on needs and generates non-individualised services (Acar et al. 2017). However, a rights-based perspective in the educational setting identifies students both as the "rights-holders" and the "duty-bearers." It aims to prepare students to challenge power imbalances, inequalities and discrimination by helping them to develop new skills while working with marginalised and oppressed groups by protecting and promoting their rights (UNICEF 2007). The rights-based perspective requires an evaluation that eschews general and personal value judgement.

Right evaluation is indispensable in order to prevent conflicts as a result of different norms on the same issues (Kuçuradi 2008, 6). Thus, it is also important for daily professional practice in which these conflicts mostly appear between social workers' personal and professional values. Social work literature stresses that personal values have the potential to suppress professional values (Prinsloo 2014, 457; Reisch 2014).

Therefore, social workers need to gain awareness on their own personal values and their meanings in order to understand how these values might influence their professional practice.

Personal values may be shaped by the values of the society in which people live or belong to (Beckett and Maynard 2013); certainly, social workers are not immune to this. Thus, social workers should not use their culturally shaped personal values as an evaluation tool. Otherwise the social work profession will not keep its claim of being a humanitarian effort against restricting, oppressive, unequal and unjust circumstances (Thompson 2009). Therefore, two aspects of professional socialisation play an important role in social work education. The first aspect is professional identification, where students internalise the norms, values, behaviours and attitudes expected of their new roles as professionals. The second aspect is professional identity construction, where students are seen as creators of their own professional self-image, which has been associated with internalised professional values that have positive outcomes (Caza and Creary 2016, 7; Webb 2015). Thus, it is a process where students take on an active role in their professional identity construction by “doing, acting, and interacting” in the social context (Pratt 2012, 26).

Social workers need to see themselves as a part of the collective struggle to achieve a just society (Banks 2014), but if social workers are not careful, their practice can add to or exacerbate the oppression that service users have already experienced (Thompson 2009). At this point, professional values form a very important base for social workers. Social work values are seen as an important component of what social work is and should be (Clifford and Burke 2009). A professional value base has the potential to prevent social workers from being a part of unjust and oppressive situations (Galambos 2009, 346; Reamer 2014).

Values, as identified by Biestek, are seen as a set of principles that specify how social workers should work with service users (Shardlow 2009). These values are based on a definition of social work as individual casework. Biestek listed them as “individualization, purposeful expression of feelings, controlled emotional involvement, acceptance, non-judgemental attitude, self-determination and confidentiality” (quoted in Thompson 2009). These values have been criticised for being highly individualised and for failing to adequately take into account the broader social and political context of social work (Dominelli 2002). Despite this criticism, it should be taken into account that these values are based on the requisite of seeing human beings as a purpose. That is why Ferguson (2008) has insistently stressed that even these values can motivate social workers to challenge existing social structure and its policies and practices. But of course, these criticisms also create a space for some additional values. Thompson (2009) presents emancipatory values which emphasise the importance of phenomena such as power and inequality. These values are de-individualisation, equality, social justice, partnership, citizenship, empowerment, and authenticity. The emancipatory values of social work are characteristic of the profession

and they reflect the fact that social workers' particular focus is on the least powerful groups in society (Beckett and Maynard 2013).

Banks (2014) stresses that all these professional values are at the heart of social work, so social workers should give them priority when working with people experiencing poverty, indignity, suffering and all forms oppression. Therefore, social work education is the first step for students to deeply question the distinction between personal values within a hegemonic culture and professional values.

## **Method**

This study was part of structured small-group work<sup>3</sup> conducted with social work students to raise awareness on the value base of social work. A qualitative research design was used to understand personal values and modes of evaluation of social work students and how their personal values influence professional practice. Within the context of the research questions, data was collected through a semi-structured questionnaire (conducted in the first group session), self-reflective diaries written weekly by students and a semi-structured focus-group discussion at the end of the last group session. The research questions were the following: 1) How do social work students assess the importance of the value base of social work? 2) What are their personal values and modes of evaluation? 3) What is the vision of students regarding the possible influence of their personal values on professional practice?

Structured small-group work sessions included preparation/warm-up, improvisation, and evaluation/discussion stages: the three stages of creative drama. Creative drama was chosen both as a pedagogical and qualitative research tool. In terms of the pedagogical aspect of creative drama, it aims to encourage students to present their decisions on specific oppressive situations and unequal power relations regarding their personal and professional values (Hatiboğlu, Özateş Gelmez, and Öngen 2019). As a qualitative research tool, creative drama also helped us in our study “because of its strong connection with critical thinking” (Norris 2000). Within this perspective, all the sessions were designed with specific aims.

### **The Structured Small-Group Work Process**

Two small, structured groups were created with social work students who were in their 6th semester at Hacettepe University in Ankara in the spring semester of 2015. The

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3 Another research output derived from this group work was recently published. This research (Hatiboğlu, Özateş Gelmez, and Öngen 2019) specifically aimed to examine the conflict resolution strategies of social work students when their personal and professional values contradict in neo-liberal Turkey.



groups met once a week for eight sessions and each session lasted between 200–240 minutes.

The invitation to participate consisted of the study's purpose and procedures, and the researchers' contact information was announced on the department's notice boards for a two-week period before the groups began. Students were also given information on the days of the groups and were asked to commit to one of them.

In this group work, an interactive and non-didactic group process was adopted. Since arts-based techniques like creative drama have great potential to offer a democratic learning environment “for expressions of individual and collective knowledge, values, emotions and experiences” (Jensen 2017, 45), creative drama techniques are preferred in whole group work. Brandler (1999) stated that creative drama techniques such as brainstorming, games, role-cards, role-play, improvisation and storytelling can be used as effective teaching tools in small, structured groups. These techniques helped educators to create a bridge between theory and practice by binding professional concepts and “real life” contexts (Baldwin 2009; Jensen 2017, 55).

In the literature, it is stressed that creative drama techniques develop sensitivity to cultural differences, create space for mutual support and new ways to communicate and share thoughts, ideas and feelings by transforming a didactic teaching process into a creative, experience-based, democratic, humanistic and amusing co-learning process (Baldwin 2009; Davy 2017; Jensen 2017). As stated by Galambos (2009), since education influences worldviews, including opinions and values, it is crucial to provide a participatory classroom environment. A participatory classroom is important for students to be encouraged to structure their knowledge through imagination, to reflect on their experiences, and to discuss opposing views. It facilitates criticism of their existing understanding, and enhances their problem-solving skills, decision making, empathy and authenticity (Elwyn, Greenhalgh, and Macfarlane 2000; Toseland and Rivas 2017; Wahler 2012).

In this study, our group work showed us that creative drama techniques have the potential to encourage students to express their feelings and personal experiences and to address sensitive and unspoken issues. It is crucial for social work students to understand both their feelings and the feelings of potential service users while advocating for human rights and social justice.

In the whole group work process, a preparation/warm-up stage prepared students to adapt to the determined subject for each session. The preparation/warm up activities helped them to feel relaxed and focused. During improvisation stages, activities like brainstorming, games, role-cards, role-play and storytelling encouraged students to feel, to think and to act in complex social situations in the predetermined subjects. The students had a chance to experience and understand how to work with diverse individuals and groups such as LGBTI+, women exposed to violence, adopted children,

the poor, and people with disabilities, people with mental disorders, and people with addictions. In the evaluation stage, students discussed the activities of the session and self-assessed their feelings and thoughts generated during the group session. They critically reflected on their personal values, how these are influenced by the hegemonic culture and its projection on the social work practice.

The first group session focused on the formation of a group identity, common group rules and roles in the group. Furthermore, we tried to learn what the expectations of the students were and received their verbal informed consent. The students were informed about the importance of being non-judgemental during the group process and compulsory attendance. The students gave their approval for the use of the records taken both in group and focus-group discussions, and the reflective diaries written by them after each session.

The second and third sessions aimed to reach an understanding of the students' personal values and modes of evaluation using creative drama techniques such as freeze-frame, games, improvisation, group discussion and wall newspaper. We raised the following questions to learn about students' personal values: (1) How difficult is it for you to tolerate differences in people, and why? (2) What kinds of differences are not tolerated in your community/society? (3) What is the connection between personal and societal perspectives while tolerating differences? Role-plays about gender equality, power relations and anti-oppressive practices were performed during group sessions. Afterwards the students were asked to write about reflecting on their personal and professional values in the reflective diaries.

The fourth and fifth sessions were designed to ensure that the students comprehended the importance and meaning of professional values through the value base of social work via role-play and in-group discussion. Reflective diaries about the meaning of professional practice were collected.

The sixth and seventh sessions aimed to encourage the students to think about the potential impact of their personal values and modes of evaluation on professional practice. Role cards on basic human rights and social justice for oppressed groups were used. Reflective diaries were collected afterwards.

In the last session, a focus-group discussion was conducted to collect ideas from students about the group process and their achievements.

## **Participants**

Participants of this study were selected by purposive sampling among students of the 6th semester (third year) in the Social Work Department at Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey. An announcement describing the structured small-group work was made on the department's bulletin boards.

The first 40 students who applied for the group work were included and separated into two gender-mixed groups. All the group work sessions were implemented in the drama room of the department with three facilitators due to the large number of participants. Nineteen students (13 females and 6 males) participated in the group A, and 15 students (11 females and 4 males) participated in group B. The age composition of the participants was between 20–23 years. In order for this information to be used in the study, the students who participated in the group work were asked their sex, age and the district they had grown up in. However, they were not asked about their ethnicity, religious beliefs, sect, or political ideology, all of which could have had an impact on students' evaluations. The main reason for this is that asking about differences in religious beliefs, political ideology, ethnicity etc. may cause a sense of discrimination, especially under Turkey's conditions, where talking about these matters is almost impossible. But despite that, during the group work and after the establishment of mutual trust, students talked about their different ethnicities, religious beliefs, sects and political ideologies in the evaluations.

## **Data Analysis**

Records of in-group discussions, a semi-structured focus-group discussion and reflective diaries were analysed.<sup>4</sup> Data were independently coded by the researchers. The researchers came together regularly to discuss the codes identified until they reached a consensus. After the coding process, NVivo 9 was used while the main themes and categories relevant to the research questions were identified by the interpretations of the words used by the students, as stated by Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) and Rubin and Rubin (1995). For anonymity pseudonyms were used.

## **Ethical Issues**

After the announcement of the structured small-group work, the potential participants were informed that the whole group process would be recorded and all the data collected would be used for research. Their informed consent was taken verbally in the first group session. The informed consent included voluntary participation and freedom to leave at any time, protection of personal information and identity, security of the collected data and its protection from a third party. In addition, to enhance critical thinking and non-judgemental and non-threatening discussion during the sessions, group rules, participants' rights, confidential and privacy issues were emphasised and the researchers indicated that the group work would not affect the participants' grades. Before the group work, the Academic Board of the Social Work Department at Hacettepe University was informed about the group work and the research and their permission was received.

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4 In the results section, quotes are shown with abbreviations: "ig" stands for in-group discussions, "fg" stands for semi-structured focus-group discussion and "rd" stands for reflective diaries.

## **Researchers**

The research team work as academics at Hacettepe University's Department of Social Work in Ankara, Turkey. Two of them have PhD degrees in social work and they are lecturers in the ethics courses in the department. One of these researchers has been certificated as a creative drama instructor. The third researcher is a PhD student in the Social Work Department. All three researchers participated in the whole group process as facilitators. The activities carried out by the facilitators included planning the group process, preparing material for activities and facilitating the group process. Because of the large number of participants two researchers conducted the group by turn. During the sessions, one researcher was fully responsible to record and observe the group process.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Because the research sample was formed by a relatively small group of volunteer participants willing to be critical about their personal and professional values, homogeneity is limited. Therefore, it is impossible to generalise the research results to whole cohorts of social work students in Turkey and more research is required. Moreover, this study was implemented in a school atmosphere in which complex power relations exist between lecturers and students. This kind of learning atmosphere may cause difficulties for students to be critical and non-judgemental when their feelings and experiences contradict with the professional identity. This prevents a true transformation of mindsets and being critical about existing power relations in social contexts that eventually lead to more socially desirable answers. To overcome learning barriers created by unequal power relations, we adopted an educational approach that encourages students to share their discomfoting feelings about social injustice and pressures. As stated by Zembylas (2015, 163), it is possible to challenge dominant beliefs and norms and create chances for individual and social change via exchanging feelings. Within this perspective we adopted, the lecturers (also researchers) took on the role as facilitators in the group work. This facilitator role included recognising and celebrating differences, enabling mutual trust between facilitators and students, and encouraging the voicing of opinions and feelings freely (Biscombe et al. 2017, 16–7). Despite all the limitations and power dynamics, these efforts still can cause socially desirable responses.

## **Results**

The data analysis rendered three topics (see Table 1). The first topic is evolving from the privacy of personal values to criticism of hegemonic values. The coding categories under the first topic are the following: the difficulty of talking about personal values, raising awareness of personal values, and reflections on the dynamics shaping personal values. The second topic is confronting prejudices/stereotypes. The categories under this topic are as follows: the presence, agent, and source of prejudices/stereotypes, the problem of making a wrong evaluation, and the necessity of breaking down

prejudices/stereotypes. The third topic is the importance of a social work value base. The categories under this topic are the following: the necessity of professional values, an emphasis on the acceptance of differences in the value base, and the internalisation of social work professional values.

**Table 1:** Topics and categories

Evolving from the privacy of personal values to criticism of hegemonic values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulties in terms of talking about personal values</li> <li>• Raising awareness of personal values</li> <li>• Reflections on the dynamics shaping personal values</li> </ul>
Confronting prejudices/stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The presence, agent, and source of prejudices/stereotypes</li> <li>• The problem of making wrong evaluations</li> <li>• The necessity of breaking down prejudices/stereotypes</li> </ul>
The importance of a social work value base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The necessity of professional values</li> <li>• An emphasis on the acceptance of differences in the value base</li> <li>• The internalisation of social work professional values</li> </ul>

**Evolving from the Privacy of Personal Values to Criticism of Hegemonic Values**

One of the aims of the group study was rendered as raising students’ awareness of their personal values. In the first step of raising awareness, students reflected on their personal values and shared these reflections. Giving students the opportunity to share for the first time is one of the highlights of group work. One of the students expressed her experience as follows: “Before this, never in my life have I talked about my own values. I have never shared them with anyone” (P., woman, aged 20, fg). Some also stressed that they explored the different personal values among them: “We realised each of us has different perspectives. I became more respectful of my friends’ personal values. People may adopt different thoughts and now I am well-aware of that” (T., woman, aged 21, ig).

With raised awareness of their personal values, the students questioned the share of their own will as well as that of the values of hegemonic culture in shaping their own values. Thus, most of the students discovered that their personal values were strongly influenced by their environments, and especially by their families: “My relationship with my parents, the prevailing culture of my home town, and the opinions of my family members influence my personal values. All of these shape my personal values—then and now” (K., woman, aged 20, rd).

Students defined personal values, mainly, as values “adopted with a herd mentality, without questioning” (P., man, aged 21, rd) and “taught by society and expected to be followed and believed with blind obedience” (Y., man, aged 20, ig). In this research, we observed that students had difficulty discussing their own values, which is congruent with their statements about their personal values. This is because questioning their own values as a subject of the hegemonic culture implies questioning the culture itself. In this regard, family and faith are the values that should be questioned but are also the most difficult to question. This brings social marginalisation to the fore, as suggested by one of the students: “Living outside of the social values is assumed to be wrong and one pays the price of having a marginal personality” (A., woman, aged 23, fg). Therefore, it is even harder to question personal values or discuss them. One of the students underlined this challenge: “They force individuals to adopt the system. And they threaten individuals with exclusion from society, with being left alone” (M., man, aged 20, rd).

The values of a hegemonic culture do not shape personal values as such, spontaneously, but are rather imposed upon its subjects. The students (as demonstrated by the following quotation; B., woman, aged 22, rd) identified this type of imposition as “restriction of freedom”:

The culture lived in, the social environment, and the education system limits us and restricts our freedom, for the society we live in has its very own values and limitations. We have certain positions in the society; we adopt certain values; however, we cannot pursue our beliefs because of communal pressure.

During this process of discovering personal values, students realised that hegemonic culture shapes their lives as well as their personal values, which triggered in them the courage to express their true desires and their own will: “I want to be free of these society-borne values, because they limit me. The education system makes marginalised minorities insignificant, and religion segregates people with so-called tolerance, and further, leads to fanatical patriotism’ (S., man, aged 22, rd).

### **Confronting Prejudices and Stereotypes**

The second aim of this group study was to ensure that students discovered the possible influence of their personal values on their professional practice. In the latter phases of questioning personal values, students (as demonstrated by the following quotation; D., woman, aged 21, ig) started to discover the prejudices and stereotypes within their values:

I realized that I do not respect people at all; and even if I try, I am not capable of doing it. It may be challenging for me to objectively approach people whom I cannot tolerate, or provide them with the best service, or respect them.

Discovering prejudices and stereotypes is an important step. By doing so, students manage to unveil their prejudices and stereotypes a little bit more in order to question toward whom they are directed. All the answers they sought within their values corresponded to their responses to the question, “In your culture, what type of personal differences are not tolerated by society?” For instance, all the students highlighted that those who adopt unorthodox opinions, notions and ideologies are not tolerated by society. Parallel to hegemonic culture, some students discovered that they have prejudices against those who adopt different opinions and ideologies, as demonstrated in the following statements: “I realised that I cannot tolerate ideologically opposing views” (M., man, aged 20, fg) and, “No matter how hard I try, due to my upbringing, it is very difficult for me to objectively approach people with a certain political approach” (D., woman, aged 21, rd).

Many times, students denoted that our society is generally intolerant toward LGBTI+ and men and women who deny mainstream gender roles. Likewise, students discovered their own gender stereotypes and their prejudices regarding gender identity and sexual orientation. Sometimes students reflected “I realised that I adopt gender roles directly, without questioning” (X., woman, aged 22, ig), or “I realized that I do not want to work with LGBTI+; I will have a hard time approaching them, communicating with them, and embracing them due to my personal values” (M., woman, aged 21, ig). Sometimes, during the discussions after the sessions, students stated similar judgements, as expressed by the following student (S., woman, aged 20, ig):

Suppose there comes a service user with an illegitimate child. I could not empathise in this situation. For, no matter how much we try to put forward our own awareness, still, social pressure penetrates us and rests in our subconscious.

Students discovered that some of the prejudices and stereotypes within their personal values were related to religious beliefs. It is even more striking that all the students underlined that the society they live in is generally intolerant of sect-, religion-, and ethnic identity-based differences of individuals. One of the students (G., woman, aged 21, fg) expressed the prejudices directly influencing their professional practice:

I asked my colleagues a question: Suppose that a Christian family wants to adopt a child who is a Turkish citizen. All the conditions are met and they are a very good family; what would you do? As they are Muslims, according to their personal values they consider that they will be judged in eternity if they let the child become a Christian. Two of my friends stated that they would pass this case to another colleague, for them to bear the burden. Another two said they would not allow the family to adopt.

In this group, one of the students expressed his stereotyping of or prejudice against people with other ethnic identities: “Even, if I don’t show it, I sometimes have a negative approach towards people with regard to their ethnic identities and language” (F., man, aged 22, ig).

Since they are different, some students face prejudices in the society themselves. For example, one student stated that he experiences disadvantages and injustice due to his ideological opinions, ethnicity, and sect: “Being a Kurd, Alevi, and a leftist puts me in a disadvantageous position in this country. I experienced this sort of injustice” (L., man, aged 22, fg).

Another important acquisition of the students regarding facing their prejudices/stereotypes is the realisation that sometimes such prejudices cause them to make wrong evaluations, and most of the time they fail to see the personal worth of people: “We all have former life experiences, our prejudices, traits and customs of our own. This is why we jump to conclusions too soon when it comes to people” (T., woman, aged 20, fg).

By adopting a critical approach, they discovered how hegemonic culture takes over their personal values. Students indicated that political language and prevalent hate speech are the source of such judgements in society: “The culture I live in—with all its systems—triggers violence, assumes gender roles, and puts pressure on the individual with all the expectations of the society and the family” (E., woman, aged 20, rd).

Lastly, the students emphasised the necessity of breaking down prejudices and stereotypes, which cloud the self-worth assumed for all individuals: “I should break down my prejudice as much as I can. Sometimes I do discriminate, no matter what. We all have biases. Maybe I can reduce them to a minimum” (H., man, aged 23, fg).

### **The Importance of the Social Work Value Base**

The third aim of this group study was for the students to recognise the importance of the value base of social work. In sessions where social work values were discussed, the students sought to answer the question: “Why are professional values important?” Usually, they highlighted that social work is a human-oriented profession, and that social workers may change lives with the services they provide: “We are not engineers, we are not dealing with machines; these are people, flesh and blood, with a soul and life ... This is why these values are our guide” (C., woman, aged 21, rd).

The students suggested that professional values warn the social worker about the ever-present risk of prejudices and stereotypes and that these values are necessary to recognise the differences between people. As one student (F., man, aged 22, rd) explained:

I believe recognising differences is a professional value in itself. It is against professional values if a social worker is incapable of providing services to people, for they have opposing thoughts, believe in different religions, and have different skin colours; which may lead to disappointment in the service user, who placed their hopes in us.



Based on their elevated self-awareness and awareness of the importance of professional values, the students responded positively to the inherent dignity and worth of each and every individual. The following comments made by two students are among the desired outputs of this research: “I am becoming more sensitive to human rights, I can empathise with people, and I am even more interested in my profession” (G., woman, aged 21, ig), and “we should value people; we should internalise the inherent dignity of people” (H., woman, aged 21, ig). The internalisation of professional values is important to the students, as can be seen in the following statement: “Any social worker failing to internalise these values on a professional level would fail to practice ethically and would stumble” (Z., woman, aged 22, fg). What is reported by students with regard to their altered opinions and the immediate influence on their lives is proof that this group fulfilled its purposes, as statements by the following two students (S., woman, aged 20, rd; G., woman, aged 21, fg) demonstrate:

I used to think that women should be equal; however, it is with the group that I started to have my awareness raised regarding the inequalities women face, and on women’s rights. I started talking to my family and friends, and so on and so forth.

We discussed torture before; I used to be a favour of it. After the group sessions, I became aware that torture is an ongoing process with its psychological-sociological, etc., after-effects, and it will influence the next generations. I adopted a more rights-based approach.

## **Discussion**

This structured small-group work was performed with social work students in Turkey for the first time to reveal their understanding about their personal values, the importance of the value base of social work, and the impact of their personal values and the modes of evaluation they will use on their professional practice. The first topic that resulted from the data analysis is “evolving from the privacy of personal values to criticism of hegemonic values.” Under this topic, students’ difficulty talking about personal values, students’ awareness of their personal values, and their reflections on the dynamics shaping their personal values surfaced. The social work literature emphasises that students should be aware of their personal values (Congress 2006; Kirst-Ashman 2010, 47). To ensure this, educational environments should enable students to discuss their personal values and modes of evaluation without judging others. Establishing this kind of educational environment can be a challenge. The increasing political tension and polarisation in Turkey make it harder for students to discuss the values of the hegemonic culture, share their values that are opposed to those of the hegemonic culture, and even advocate the professional values of social work.

The findings indicate that the students’ personal values were strongly influenced by the values of the hegemonic culture. Cultural values are usually conveyed, adopted and propagated by the immediate relations in the family and near vicinity. This group work provided an opportunity for students to share their personal values that had been shaped

within the hegemonic culture. After all, the primary purpose of social work education is to stimulate students to think critically and conceptually and to acquire a sense of their own capacities and values (Reisch 2013, 728).

The second topic that resulted from the data analysis is “confronting prejudices/stereotypes.” The categories under this topic are the presence, agent, and source of prejudices/stereotypes, the problem of making wrong evaluations, and the necessity of breaking down prejudices/stereotypes. The findings showed that the students’ personal values may have been shaped by those emphasised by the hegemonic culture; seeing this enabled the students to catch their hidden prejudices. Some of the surveys that have been conducted with social work students have revealed that they themselves may become a target of society’s prejudices because of their differences (Chinell 2011; Gair et al. 2015). Our research also concluded that students can become the target of society’s prejudices due to their different ethnic origins, sects and ideologies in the “new” Turkey.

The third topic is “the importance of the social work value base.” The necessity of professional values, the emphasis on the acceptance of differences in the value base, and the internalisation of the professional values of social work are the categories covered under the last topic. Social work assumes the inherent dignity and worth of each individual and advocates that social justice and human rights should be protected for all. The value base of social work provides a strong foundation for social workers to fulfil their professional actions in line with this basic assumption, as well as guides them (Kirst-Ashman 2010; Payne and Askeland 2008). Cultural awareness and sensitivity are crucial for social workers while engaging cultural and human diversity (NLASW 2016). This requires that professionals, equipped by the knowledge of diversities and capable of empathy, genuinely accept every human being as an equal (Dominelli 1988). Therefore, social work education on values is vital for students so that they can understand the importance of professional values. This is especially true for social work students living within a hegemonic culture where diversities are not accepted or tolerated. Professional values are very important, for they warn social workers against their own prejudices, and not to utilise personal values as an evaluation tool. This is the only way to practise this profession, which assumes the inherent dignity and worth of individuals in oppressive societies. This is why social work education should principally aim, on the one hand, to raise awareness of the possibility that personal values could propagate prejudices, and on the other hand, to encourage the internalisation of professional values. Therefore, social work education should focus on self-awareness and self-regulation to challenge personal values while working with diverse service users (CSWE 2015).

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative research study was based on structured small-group work planned to raise the awareness of social work students on the value base of social work by using

creative drama techniques. Since it is crucial for social work students to be aware of their personal values and the influences of these on their professional practice, educational settings should be organised for students to talk about their personal values and the dynamics that shape them, without fear of being judged. The hegemonic culture deeply affects both personal and professional values, the organisational structure of social work agencies, social policies and legislations by (re)producing unequal power relations which usually go unnoticed and are unspoken. Therefore, it is highly important for students to critically reflect on the hegemonic cultural norms that surround them and the impact these have on the social work practice.

We realised that combining constructivist and critical pedagogical perspectives can be helpful in social work education in countries like Turkey where conservative and authoritarian values marginalise people and undermine the professional values of social work, such as accepting diverse people and treating them with inherent dignity. In terms of social work education, an educational setting where students find themselves in diverse and complex social situations that they explore through creative learning techniques can be promising for the process of professional identification and identity construction.

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