Recent contentious and, at times, radical positions dominate our societal debates. Within social work, these same value-based debates occur between Evangelical Christians and progressive writers. To move the debate forward, the authors propose a six-stage model for addressing value conflicts between personal worldviews and the Code of Ethics.

What is sacred when personal and professional values collide? Richard Spano, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Terry Koenig, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare

The authors propose that the NASW Code of Ethics (1996) provides the framework or screen through which professional social workers’ personal worldviews must be drawn to determine their acceptability in social work practice. Few current writings (Canda & Furman, 1999) on professional ethical decision-making frameworks emphasize ways to examine conflicts between personal worldviews and the Code of Ethics. To move the debate forward this article examines: (1) the context of social work practice; (2) value tensions between some types of Christianity and social work as an example of personal worldviews colliding with the Code of Ethics; (3) the nature of professional relationships and the use of the Code; and (4) a model for examining congruence between personal worldviews and the Code.

Context of practice

There is a long standing tradition in social work literature acknowledging the complex challenges faced by social workers as they interact with clients. The person-in-environment focus of social work has been central to our conceptions of practice for nearly a century (Hollis, 1964; Perlman, 1957; Pincus & Minahan, 1973; Richmond, 1930; Smalley, 1967; Taft, 1962). This systematic examination of the nature of social work practice continues in the work of Shulman, who uses Schwartz’s ideas to more fully develop his â€œmediating modelâ€ (Schwartz, 1961; Shulman, 2006). In this model, the definition of the social worker’s professional function is to facilitate a process through which individuals and society reach out for each other in mutual need for growth and self-fulfillment. Shulman then uses a triangular model to diagram three key elements of practice: client(s), worker, and agency/family/peers. He acknowledges that the mediation among these systems can include a broader range of behaviors, including activities like advocacy and confrontation.

The richness of this conceptualization is quite useful to social workers, because it provides us the ability to include multiple system foci as we work with clients (e.g., individual, family, group, and community). It also incorporates the idea that there are often value conflicts among these systems and that conflict resolution is endemic to practice.

Unfortunately, it leaves out an important systemâ€”the profession. Social work writers, with the exception of those focusing on spiritually-sensitive social work practice (Canda & Furman, 1999; Derezotes, 2005), typically identify professional values and the Code of Ethics as part of their discussion of practice (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larson, 2002; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2001; Miley, Oâ€™Melia, & DuBois, 2001), but they presume that there is a fit between the workerâ€™s personal values and the professionâ€™s values. Consequently, value conflicts are typically described as between workers and their agencies or workers and their clients. In contrast, we propose the following schematic as a more useful representation of the context of practice in which the potential for value conflicts between workersâ€™ personal values and the professionâ€™s values is directly acknowledged.

By adding a fourth component, we draw attention to potential conflicts that exist in other conceptualizations, but explicitly identify the role of the profession as separate from the other systems. Practice occurs in the shared area (i.e., oval with lines) at the center of the diagram. What this suggests is that each system (i.e., client, worker, agency, and profession) has a life and a set of values that may compete with the needs and values of other systems within a specific practice encounter. For example, agencies’ interests extend beyond their individual clients, their workers and the profession, e.g., the agency may constrain client choices because of policies established by funding sources. Workers have personal lives and values that may compete with their employment in an agency, e.g., their professional membership. Finally, clients’ values may conflict with workers’ personal values, e.g., client and worker may disagree on
views of marriage or homosexual behavior. The vast majority of ethics writings focus on the management of ethical dilemmas or values conflicts occurring between workers and their agencies or workers and their clients. Only a few authors have more directly addressed the conflicts between workers’ personal values and the Code of Ethics (Canda, Nakashima, & Furman, 2004; Keith-Lucas, 1985; Letendre, Nelson-Becker, & Kreider, 2005; Levy, 1976; Rhodes, 1992; Sherwood, 2002). More specifically, we focus on conflicts between personal worldviews held by workers (i.e., some types of Christianity) and professional ethical obligations outlined in the Code of Ethics. By examining the nature of the relationship between Christianity and social work, as well as the nature of the profession, we identify areas in which inherent tensions exist and present a model to manage conflicts between workers’ personal worldviews and their professional responsibilities. 2. Christianity and social work To highlight the current debate about the role of personal values within the social work profession, the authors have chosen to use some types of Christianity as exemplars. Current literature, produced by Evangelical Christians who are social work professionals, puts forward the argument that their particular views of Christianity should be included within the social work profession (Hodge, 2005). For our purposes, Evangelical Christianity is defined as a trans-denominational Protestant movement that emphasizes (1) salvation only through a belief in Christ’s death and resurrection, (2) a transformed life that involves improved moral conduct and participation in religious rituals, and, (3) relies on the authority of the Bible (Hodge, 2003; Mardesen, 1987, Pellabon, 2000). These Evangelical Christians argue that social work’s respect for diversity should apply to an acceptance of professionals’ personal worldviews that encompass an ultimate divine authority that takes priority over the Code of Ethics. This runs counter to the traditional application of respect for diversity as applied to clients who have been marginalized as a result of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability (NASW Code of Ethics, 1996, 1.05, p. 9). Some Evangelicals argue for inclusion of diverse perspectives for professionals’ personal worldviews without placing that worldview in the context of the Code (Hodge, 2005; Ressler & Hodge, 2005). They refer to the Code of Ethics, Section 2.01 on Respect (1996, p. 15), which states that colleagues should avoid unwarranted negative criticism of other colleagues as well as avoid demeaning comments that refer to colleagues’ level of competence or individual attributes including race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion and mental or physical disability. & The Current literature produced by Evangelical Christians who are social workers provides a sweeping picture of this worldview as being anchored with the Code (e.g., non-discrimination) are not only justifiable, but essential to maintain the integrity of the profession. Not all perspectives can find a home within the social work profession. Some of the problems associated with this current Evangelical Christian argument were foreshadowed by Keith-Lucas (1985), who writes about the connection between Christianity and social work (1972; 1962). Amazingly, few current Evangelical Christian writers acknowledge Keith-Lucas’s in-depth examination of Christianity and social work. We think it is critical to acknowledge the role Alan Keith-Lucas, as a respected scholar, practitioner, and founder of the National Association of Christian Social Workers (NACSW), played in distinguishing among different types of Christianity. He developed a four-fold typology of Christianity (Keith-Lucas, 1983) which appears useful for our discussion of value conflicts between social workers’ personal, Christian beliefs and the NASW Code of Ethics. See Table 1 for a summary of this typology. A Table 1. Keith-Lucas Christian Typology A Type of ChristianType of Human natureNature of sinSerious SinsRemediesChristians of EthicsNeeds perfecting, not forgiving; to be self-fulfilledFailure to find self-fulfillment; maladjustmentInjustice, indifference, and violenceTherapy, environmental change, education, and social reformChristians of GraceGood, but fallibleChristians of being or mind, not unlawful actsPride, arrogance, and acting autonomouslyChristians of LoveEvil, controlled by devilWillful disobedience of the lawCheating, lying, avoiding work, and having sex outside of marriageFollows literal interpretation of law; involves punishment and rewards Christians of MoralityEvil, controlled by devilWillful disobedience of the lawLike Christians of Law; Sins committted by othersChristians of Grace as divine and human loveChristians of LawEvil; will naturally cheat, lie, avoid work, and indulge sexWillful disobedience of the law Cheating, lying, avoiding work, and having sex outside of marriage Following literal interpretation of law; involves punishment and rewards Christians of MoralityEvil, controlled by devil Willful disobedience of the law Like Christians of Law; Sins committed by others The only legal obligation to the Law is to follow the Law to the letter. If s/he (Christians of Law) could only persuade or exhort a troublemaker to commit to Christ, then, that person’s problems would be solved Christians of Morality are certain of their authority to interpret a substitute code of conduct for the client Christians of Morality do not see love as necessary for helping people because some people act morally Christians of Morality are more likely to use the language of grace to describe helping people Christians of Morality are quick to forbid, judge and reject the sinners (1983). While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the totality of his critique of these worldviews, it is quite clear that those individuals holding these Christian views (i.e., many Evangelical or Orthodox Christians) will face significant...
tensions or value conflicts between their personal worldviews and the ethical principles found in the NASW Code of Ethics.Â 2.1 Value conflicts between Christianity and social workÂ In the Code, social workers are admonished to take into account multiple sources of information, including ethical theory, social work theory, research, laws, regulations and agency policies, but recognize that members of the profession should consider the NASW Code of Ethics as their primary source.Â (1996, p. 3).Â Further, the Code directs us to be aware of the impact of personal values, cultural, and religious beliefs on ethical decision-making processes in our practice.Â Among those areas in which we see value conflicts or tensions between Christians of the Law/Morality and our professional Code of Ethics are the ethical standards related to the social workersâ€™ responsibilities to clients.Â For example, in the section on â€œCommitment to Clients,â€ we are responsible for promoting the well-being of clients and that, in general, clientsâ€™ interests are primary (1.01, NASW Code of Ethics, 1996).Â The NACSW, as a Christian social work organization, has put forward an interpretation of this standard (Ressler, 1997).Â It equates abortion, sexual behavior, gambling, and control of pornographic material with (p. 7) child abuse. In doing so, they significantly expand the idea of harm to self or others (Tarasoff, 1976) to justify the suppression of a broad range of client behavior based on a perceived threat to the well-being of the larger society.Â This interpretation supports a sweeping, judgmental stance toward others that is reflective of a Christian Law or Morality perspective.Â In another example, the NASW Code of Ethics, Cultural Competence and Social Dignity section (1.05c) states that social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, and, mental or physical disability.Â The NACSW interpretation of this standard (Ressler, 1997, p. 9) is as follows:Â Â An historic orthodox Christian worldview is supportive of this standard.Â It suggests that increased educational attention be given to religion, especially those with orthodox worldviews.Â There are a number of ethical dilemmas that emerge when various diverse groups are juxtaposed.Â Especially difficult are questions about sexual orientation and orthodoxy to theological beliefs.Â An historic orthodox Christian worldview believes that the controversy is not about sexual orientation but sexual behavior.Â Persons with an orthodox Christian worldview believe that it is in societyâ€™s best interest to have social policies that direct sexual intimacy to heterosexual married adults.Â While persons with a progressive worldview tend to compare sexual orientation to race or gender, persons from an [sic] orthodox perspective compare sexual orientation to alcoholism.Â This NACSW position is articulated by David Hodge (2005), who argues that Evangelical Christians are accepting of homosexuals, but that just as in the case of unmarried heterosexuals, sexual intimacy is reserved for married couples.Â However, he never addresses the reality that homosexual couples are denied marriage, which he asserts is the basis for sexually intimate behavior, and thus denies gays and lesbians one of the central elements of our human existence.Â He further fails to see any connection between his statement and the oppression emanating from his interpretation, which is solely based on his worldview (i.e., a Christianity of Law/Morality worldview) with no connection to the Code of Ethics.Â What is thematic in each of these examples is that these writers start with a stance that their personal worldview, i.e., self-described Orthodox or Evangelical Christianity, provides the preeminent framework for understanding the world and that the NASW Code is relegated to serve that larger purpose.Â Even when empirical knowledge suggests that an approach wonâ€™t work, i.e., sexual conversion therapy, no mention is made of a lack of empirical evidence to support this approach (Jenkins & Johnston, 2004).Â Â 2.2 The nature of a professionÂ Because we are focusing on the relationship between the practitionerâ€™s personal worldviews (e.g., Evangelical Christianity) and her or his profession, it becomes important to examine (1) what special responsibilities are placed on practitioners as part of this profession and (2) the role of a professional code of ethics in monitoring personal values.Â 2.3 Special responsibilities of practitionersÂ As members of a profession, social workers have special responsibilities in their relationships with clients, students, and supervisees.Â These are fiduciary responsibilities in which the less powerful client, student, or supervisee place trust in the more powerful practitioner, educator, or supervisor.Â The practitioner has certain responsibilities and limitations placed on his/her behavior because of the greater power endowed to him or her as a member of the profession.Â Â Clients, students, and supervisees trust that the practitioner will do no harm and act in their best interest.Â Practitioners are called to put their personal worldviews (e.g., Evangelical Christianity), values, and needs second to the interest of those whom they serve.Â Because of the power imbalance, practitioners can unduly influence or sway clients to change their behavior to reflect the practitionersâ€™ views, not clientsâ€™ views and behaviors.Â We are not arguing, as some have indicated (Loewenberg, Dolgoff, & Harrington, 2006), for agreement on personal worldviews or values as the best ingredients for growth within professional relationships.Â On the contrary, differences between worker/client, educator/student, or supervisor/supervisee values can positively challenge and enhance growth within professional relationships.Â 2.4 The role of the code of ethicsÂ Rather than continuing an unending and irresolvable debate about whose worldview (e.g., progressive or orthodox) captures the â€œTruth,â€ which then should be imposed on clients, we argue for the insertion of the NASW Code of Ethics as a screen through which competing worldviews must be drawn to create constraints on professionalsâ€™ behavior.Â The social work professionâ€™s long history of acknowledging the central role ethics play in professional practice is carefully documented by Reamer (1998), who traces early twentieth century efforts to develop, revise, and update codes of ethics to reflect emerging practice issues.Â What the Code of Ethics provides is not final answers regarding what is ultimately rightâ€• or wrong.Â It represents an agreed upon framework within which social workers are expected to formulate their actions in their professional roles.Â Social workersâ€™ actions may be judged as correct or incorrect within this particular framework, and this is the function of a professional code. It is not designed to address ultimate moral answers as to how the world â€œought to be.â€Â In response, we are proposing a six-stage model that builds on some existing literature and adds new elements that focus on ethical dilemmas or value conflicts between professionalsâ€™ personal worldviews and the Code of Ethics.Â This model views the social work professionalâ€™s thorough understanding of the Code as central to competent and ethical social work practice.Â 3. Implications: A model for examining personal worldviews and the Code of EthicsÂ To address tensions between personal worldviews and the Code of Ethics, we propose a six-stage model that builds on existing literature and adds new elements.Â This model views social work professionalsâ€™ thorough understanding of the
Code of Ethics and its professional knowledge base (See Stage 3) as central to competent and ethical practice. This model includes the following components (See Table 2): (1) self-awareness, (2) self-reflection, (3) understanding and applying the Code of Ethics within a professional knowledge base, (4) comparing personal worldviews with the Code, (5) ethical decision-making, and (6) professional ethical action. Table 2: Model for Examining Personal Worldviews and the NASW Code of Ethics

Stage 1: Self-awareness

Develop an awareness of one’s personal worldview and the values that undergird that perspective.

Stage 2: Self-reflection

Use self-reflection skills to examine the implications of one’s personal worldview on professional work.

Stage 3: Understanding and applying the Code of Ethics within a professional knowledge base

Thoroughly examine the NASW Code of Ethics to understand its meaning, historically and currently. As the basis for defining values and principles like diversity, social justice, self-determination, respect for human dignity, and other core elements articulated in the profession’s literature, the Code of Ethics is a critical tool for ethical decision-making.

Stage 4: Comparing personal worldview with professional Code

Engage in a process of examining discrepancies between the Code of Ethics and one’s personal worldview.

Stage 5: Professional Decision Making

Make decisions about what needs to be done to remain faithful to the Code of Ethics (Decisions in practice should never be made solely based on one’s personal worldview).

Stage 6: Professional Ethical Action

Take action and monitor conformity to the Code of Ethics.

Some writers identify the need to examine personal values within an Ethical Assessment Screen (Loewenberg, Dolgoff, & Harrington, 2005; see also Abramson, 1996; Levy, 1976; Rhodes, 1992; Sherwood, 2002). They suggest workers become self-aware in an attempt to minimize conflicts among personal, societal, and professional values. However, they offer little guidance about how this can be done or what to do when these values are sufficiently divergent that workers must choose to honor one or the other of these value configurations. What makes sense is for workers in Stage 1 to focus on developing a clear understanding of their personal worldview and the values that undergird that perspective.

Without the capacity to develop self-awareness of our values, no other steps can be taken to move toward competent ethical practice (see Spano & Koenig, 2003). Stage 2: Self-reflection. The social work profession has a long history that places self-reflection at the heart of competent practice. This skill is most often connected to clinical practice; however, it has great importance in ethical decision-making. In this arena, self-reflection involves examining the consequences of our worldview on our work.

The idea of a personal dialogue involves workers’ examination of clients’ perspectives on dilemmas, and self-reflective questions workers can ask themselves to deal with these value conflicts (Spano & Koenig, 2003). Here, the focus moves toward understanding how these consequences are or are not consistent with the Code of Ethics.

Stage 3: Understanding and applying the Code of Ethics within a professional knowledge base. This component of the model diverges from what has been done in the current polemics addressing conflicts between personal and professional values. What many writers do is use their personal worldviews as a basis for interpreting the Code of Ethics (Lattig, 1995; Parr, 1996; Pellabon, 2000; Ressler & Hodge, 2000; Vanderwoerd, 2002). This approach leads to distortions in meaning that allow workers to impose their personal worldviews on the Code of Ethics. Thus, some argue that a personal perspective on diversity as it appears in sections of the Code that relate to clients should be transformed into respect for all people, a diversity of views held by professionals (Hodge, 2005; Ressler, 1997). While their argument that social work professionals have a responsibility to understand and respect various worldviews held by clients is valid, to suggest that professionals should be recruited based on the existence of worldviews that are held in the larger society, no matter how those views fit within a professional code, opens the door to the deconstruction of the profession.

Our approach starts with the assertion that the Code of Ethics provides a broad framework for professionals to adhere to in their practice. However, the values, principles, and guidelines in the Code are sufficiently broad to allow reasonable people to understand and apply principles in different ways. Therefore, we must add another element that moves beyond familiarity with the Code.

For our purposes, the application of our professional knowledge base provides a way to translate the general principles and values in the Code into specific practice situations and suggests courses of action that are most likely to be considered ethical when examined by one’s colleagues or other relevant regulatory bodies. The following excerpt provides a classic example of the application of one’s personal worldview to the Code. The NASW Code of Ethics (see italics immediately following Section 1.02) of the Code states: 1.02 Self-Determination: Social workers respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals.

Social workers may limit clients’ right to self-determination when, in the social workers’ professional judgment, clients’ actions constitute a serious, foreseeable, and imminent risk to themselves or others. An historic orthodox Christian worldview is supportive of this standard. Christian theologies that endorse the concept of human freedom include a wide range of ideas about the individual and community, and the relationship between the two.

Persons with an orthodox worldview may reach different conclusions as to what actions are considered ethical and thus what ethical decision-making is required. The Code of Ethics provides broad parameters for defining the ethical foundations for practice.

However, it does not, nor can it provide the specific formula to apply in a specific situation. It is the interaction of knowledge with values that informs professionals how to behave in a given situation. The majority of this knowledge is drawn from theory and empirical research in the social sciences and not in theological writings.

Stage 4: Comparing personal worldview and professional code

In this stage, professionals engage in a process of identifying discrepancies between the Code of Ethics and their personal worldviews. For example, for social workers who are Christians of Law...
and Morality, serving gay and lesbian clients or single, pregnant women present challenges to their personal worldviews and run contrary to traditional understandings of sexuality and marriage. Common responses are on a continuum from referral to overt condemnation (i.e., conversion therapy). These responses shift the focus to solving the professionalâ€™s conflict with this clientele and further ignore the work (e.g., self-reflection) that the professional needs to do in addressing discrepancies between his/her worldview and the Code of Ethics. Clients may also see these referrals as a form of rejection, contributing even further to their experiences of discrimination. To develop and grow as ethical practitioners, social workers need to wrestle with personal worldviews and their congruence with the Code. We also think this wrestling should occur in a community of social work colleagues within clinical, administrative, educational, and supervisory settings where personal worldviews can be discussed and weighed against the Code. In spite of agency shortages in funding for supervision and ongoing professional training, this process should not be ignored or sidestepped. Stage 5: Professional decision making. Professionals must make decisions about what needs to be done to be faithful to their professional ethical responsibilities. Decisions in practice can never be made solely on the basis of the professionalâ€™s personal values. Instead, decisions must be made in a way that is consistent with the Code of Ethics, and when personal values conflict with professional values, the Code of Ethics, as understood within the knowledge base of the profession, should take precedence. Social workers must seek to promote client self-determination by assisting clients â€œin their efforts to identify and clarify their goalsâ€ (NASW Code of Ethics, 1996, Section 1.01, p. 5). For example, a gay couple may meet with the social worker to strengthen their emotional, spiritual, and physical connections. If the social worker refuses to assist the couple in meeting their goal based on a personal worldview that defines homosexual relationships as inherently immoral, this represents a lack of professional integrity, runs contrary to the Code, and is an outright rejection or denial of the clientsâ€™ expressed goals. For social workers to be faithful to their professional ethical obligations, they must be able to manage their disagreement with clientsâ€™ worldviews and make decisions that limit the influence of their personal values on professional work. Stage 6: Professional ethical action. Professionals need to take action and monitor their conformity to the Code of Ethics. Practicing ethically involves not only making decisions, but acting on those decisions. Once action is taken, social workers have a responsibility to monitor the consequences of their actions on clients, the agency, and others and to pay attention to unforeseen consequences that may present ethical dilemmas or other ethical issues. For example, a social worker who believes that abortion is wrong may work with a single, pregnant woman struggling with whether or not to give birth and keep her baby. Consistent with the social workerâ€™s personal worldview, the client may choose to have her baby. However, the client may face unforeseen consequences when, contrary to previously developed plans, her parents are now unavailable and cannot provide child care. Even though the client made an initial decision that is consistent with the social workerâ€™s personal worldview, it is imperative for the social worker to remain involved with the client (and not abruptly terminate services) to help her address difficult decisions about whether or not she can keep and provide for her baby because she must return to work. As consistent with the Code of Ethics (Section 1.16), social workers should not terminate services abruptly, but continue to monitor the clientâ€™s situation even if clients are considering decisions that are not consistent with the social workersâ€™ personal worldviews. In conclusion, our proposed model for managing personal and professional value conflicts stresses the importance of fidelity to the Code of Ethics in the context of the power and special responsibilities we hold as professionals in relation to our clients. This model makes the Code of Ethics the primary document that sets parameters within which professionals must operate as they delineate their personal worldviews within the context of their professional roles. Furthermore, professional literature, not personal worldviews, becomes a central source for understanding the Code of Ethics. When mediating conflicts or dilemmas that arise between personal and professional values, our model encourages reliance on the Code of Ethics and provides a way to manage the complex process of ethical decision-making. Finally, our model reemphasizes the importance of teaching ethical decision-making in social work programs and amplifies ethical decision-making as a central feature of ongoing professional development for practitioners. References Abramson, M. (1996). Reflections on knowing oneself ethically: Toward a working framework for social work practice. Families in Society, 77, 195-201. A. Canda, E. R., & Furman, L. D. (1999). 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