Conflict Skills for Social Workers

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Author Note

Submitted to the Council of Social Work Education in response to their call for innovative teaching modules for policy classes. Please feel free to contact me for follow up at Weber State University, Department of Social Work and Gerontology. 1299 Edvalson St, 1211. Ogden, UT 84403 or email me at barrettbonella@weber.edu.

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Abstract

Negotiating conflict is an essential skill for social workers in multiple arenas. In order to help students learn and practice conflict skills, this module is used to explain the value of conflict, the steps in managing conflict, and approaches to amplifying conflict when necessary. Following a brief discussion on the value of conflict, as well as lecture on the skills used, students then engage in a series of conflict simulations which offers them chances to analyze and try the skills they’ve learned. Students can then process the challenges and skills used in each activity, which serves to assess their skill level. This module can be used in macro practice or policy classes and lasts anywhere between 60 to 90 minutes.

Keywords: Conflict management, conflict engagement, power, policy class, macro practice class.

Conflict Skills for Social Workers

Social workers must be able to demonstrate a variety of skills for working in micro, mezzo, and macro environments. Some of the most important skills social workers can learn have to do with negotiating conflict. In order to help students practice and become effective in applying those skills, the following 60 to 90 minute module was created.

# Conflict

Conflict is an essential aspect of making change in almost any context. Social workers traditionally tend towards learning and practicing the skills of conflict management for the sake of reducing unnecessary conflict. However, social workers must also practice assertiveness, advocacy, and sometimes, direct conflict engagement in order to create change. Therefore, students need to learn and practice skills related to both sides of conflict, and learn the value it can offer when creating change.

## Conflict management

Social workers use the skills of conflict management in several arenas. In order to teach them the necessary steps of managing conflict, students in either macro practice or social work policy classes are taught the basics of what kinds of skills are used in conflict management. The activity begins with a brief, 5 to 10 minute discussion about student’s feelings about conflict, their attitude towards it, and the pros and cons of conflict. The educational goal of this discussion is to help the students articulate the necessity of conflict in social work and everyday life.

Following the discussion, a 10 minute lecture is given that explains the following steps in addressing conflict. These points are based on Kirst-Ashman and Hull’s (2014) book *Generalist Practice with Organizations and Communities* (6th Ed.). The first step is to begin the confrontation by addressing whoever the conflict is with, establish common ground from which you both can work, emphasize the importance of communication with whom the conflict exists, emphasize a willingness to cooperate with whom the conflict exists, empathize with your opponent, consider an honest evaluation of your own and your opponent’s motivation, and work through the problem until you reach an agreement or an impasse. This process can be quickly demonstrated to the class using one of the conflict scenarios listed below and processed to look for strengths and weaknesses to this approach.

Tips can also be given so that students get an idea of some of the attitudes and skills required to manage conflict, such as understanding the importance of empathy, the value of managing your own and your opponent’s emotions, the necessity of assessing motivations, doing your homework around the conflict, the need for cooperation, and the use of reflective listening as a tool to build trust and define issues more clearly for each other. These skills can be identified when processing the aforementioned conflict activity.

## Conflict Engagement

While conflict management is a vital skill for social workers, engaging in conflict is no less important. As Saul Alinsky said, “Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict.”(Alinsky, 1971, p. 21). Often, in order to make large scale changes, be it in policy, institutions, or personal relationships, we must focus on generating conflict in order to gain the power necessary to make the change. Students should be informed that a conflict management approach is preferable to engagement when possible, but they should recognize that it is not always possible and therefore should consider what it takes to create and amplify conflict when necessary.

In order to teach students the skills of conflict engagement, a 10 to 15 minute lecture explaining the following concepts should be used. First, students should understand that to engage in conflict, a focus on power is your first step, which will include an assessment of your own and your opponent’s power, avoiding a full disclosure of power, and the sparing use of power. Students are reminded here that “Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.” (Alinsky, 1971, p. 127) which bears in mind the need for a full assessment not only of the power you have, but what you and your opponent are perceived as having.

The lecture can then focus on the judicious use of any of the following engagement skills, used as deemed appropriate. These skills are listed in greater detail in chapter 3 of Kirst-Ashman and Hull’s (2014) *Generalist Practice with Organizations and Communities* (6th Ed.).The use of forestalling conflict, raising consciousness to expose false consensus, passive resistance, non-compliance, stonewalling, bluffing, emotional extortion, and divide and conquer techniques should be briefly explained with the pros and cons of each. It is often helpful to explain to students that although these are strategies that social workers should be familiar with, they are by no means the first line approaches to conflict and each approach listed above should be tried before moving on to the more serious, subsequent methods.

## The Activity

Once the students have been educated on the differing techniques, they should be given a chance to practice them. The following activity can last anywhere between 30-60 minutes, depending on how intense you’d like the activity to be. The educational objectives of this activity are:

1. Describe common situations in which they may end up engaging in conflict as social workers
2. Demonstrate the use of conflict management and conflict engagement skills
3. Analyze contexts for the appropriate level of skill required to handle the situations
4. Assess the chances of success using different skills in differing contexts
5. Formulate conflict strategies based on skill base, personal factors, and contextual needs.

The activity begins by informing the students that they will be practicing conflict with each other using a variety of scenarios. Students should arrange their desks/seating in 2 columns by 5 rows. The two columns should face each other and the 5 rows should be spaced out enough to allow for personal and movement space. Each of the 5 rows will be paired off with their corresponding partner in the opposite column. Note that this process can be duplicated for larger classrooms or made smaller for smaller classrooms. If there is an odd number of students, the instructor should join the activity to even things out.

Once the students have arranged their seating as described above, each row will be given a scenario that describes a conflict. The scenarios should correspond to each other by row with person 1 always facing person 2, person 3 always facing person 4, etc. The scenarios should stay in the seat they are assigned to, and not follow the student as they move from scenario to scenario. The students are instructed to take a seat, read the scenarios, and devise the manner of conflict they are facing, as well as how they are either going to manage it or amplify it. They are then to act out the scenario with their corresponding partner in 4-8 minute sessions. After each session, the students are asked to rotate to the left, with those at the ends of columns rotating to the next column, at which point they are given time to read the next scenario, plan, and act it out. This ensures that students will be engaging with different students each time and allows them to experience, in some cases, the same scenario from different perspectives and with different strategies. There should be at least 5 rotations during this exercise, with 6 being even better (if time allows) to allow each student to experience each scenario and at least one scenario twice from different perspectives.

After the students have gone through the rotations, they should be debriefed. Students can be asked what their experience was, what was the most difficult conflict they came across, what skills were easiest to engage in, and which ones were hardest to engage in. The processing section at the end of all the rotations is the primary assessment for the activity, where useful feedback can be received and questions pertaining specifically to learning objectives may be asked.

Here each of the scenarios are described. They can easily be printed, cut out, and distributed to the appropriate seats for the activities.

Setting: City council meeting. Person 1 speaks first. Sitting across from you is a citizen.

Person 1. You are a city council member who is very worried about being re-elected next year. You are in a position where if you do not get re-elected, you risk losing your main source of income. A wealthy developer has promised you enough money to ensure your victory next year if you are able to successfully get the city to move the downtown homeless shelter to somewhere else so the developer can develop the land where the shelter currently is. Your primary interest is in ensuring that the city votes to move the homeless shelter no matter what.

Setting: City council meeting. Person 1 speaks first. Sitting across from you is a city councilperson

Person 2. You are a social work advocate going to a city council meeting to advocate for keeping the local homeless shelter downtown. You have heard that there are people that want to move it so that the town can continue redeveloping downtown commercially. This frustrates you because the homeless need to be in a central location where they can access the many resources that are for them downtown. You are also upset that such a blatant land grab and disrespect for the homeless as second class citizens would be happening in your beloved hometown.

Setting: Staff meeting. Person 3 speaks first. Sitting across from you is one of your clinical employees.

Person 3. You are a clinical director at a small social work agency. You are worried that the treatment team is not being effective enough with your clients and the grant that is paying for their service will not be renewed because the data collected will not support the program. You decide it is time to implement a new theory and method of treatment across the agency to help improve your clinician’s ability to successfully work with their clients and propose a training to help the staff move forward

Setting: Staff meeting. Person 3 speaks first. Sitting across from you is your clinical director.

Person 4. You are a social work clinician, and you’re a little burned out. Your clients are tough to work with and tend to drop out of treatment pretty quickly. On top of that, you are required to have in-depth documentation of your work with the clients and every little detail about your services. You hear that your clinical director, a person you have little respect for, is planning on pushing for a new theoretical approach for the treatment of your clients. You think this is baloney because you know that the theory used makes little difference in terms of outcome.

Setting: In the street, on your way to work. Person 5 speaks first. Sitting across from you is the director of your rival agency.

Person 5. You are a social work administrator who runs a treatment center across the street from a rival treatment center. Both agencies regularly compete for grants. You were recently awarded with a large state grant that will keep you funded for a long time. You suspect this would make your rival jealous, and as such, you think they are responsible for a recent brick being thrown through the front window of your agency.

Setting: In the street, on your way to work. Person 5 speaks first. Sitting across from you is the director of your rival agency.

Person 6. You are a social work administrator who runs a treatment center across the street from a rival treatment center. Both agencies regularly compete for grants. Your rival was recently awarded a state grant that would’ve ensured the long term financial success of your agency for a long time. You’re sad that you didn’t get it, but proud that your rival is growing and developing. You are also a little concerned that someone recently threw a brick through their front window.

Setting: Senate chambers. Person 7 speaks first. Sitting across from you is a senator on a special environmental committee.

Person 7. You are a social work researcher presenting on the social costs of global warming on your state. You have data that shows that the recent droughts, floods, and strange weather patterns are directly related to human’s pollution of the atmosphere with greenhouse gases. This data is backed up by multiple studies across a variety of scientific disciplines and has a large array of consensus with scientists that human activity is causing global warning. Your fear is that if nothing changes at the state level at least, summers will be too long and hot, winters will be too short and warm, and many elderly will die from heat exhaustion in the summers while a shortage of water will likely cause food shortages and public sanitation issues.

Setting: Senate chambers. Person 7 speaks first. Sitting across from you is a social worker giving a presentation on the social costs of global warming

Person 8. You are a state senator on a special environmental committee. You value critical thinking, and think that most scientists have been duped by the whole global warming craze. You think the earth is going through very normal and natural weather fluctuations and that while things might look bad now, there is little you or anyone can do to influence the weather, especially at your level of power. You also think that most scientists leave out vital facts that contradict their positions, so scientists that talk about global warming have little credibility in your eyes.

Setting: in the street outside the treatment center. Person 10 speaks first as they spot person 9 walking in to work. Sitting across from you is a concerned local neighbor.

Person 9. You are a social worker at a local substance abuse treatment center. You are proud of the work you do and your adult clients, most of whom are working hard for their recovery. You had heard that your neighbors are not fond of you and your program though because your clients often smoke in front of the neighbor’s homes and park their cars all along the streets in front of their homes when they come to treatment. You can empathize with the neighbors, but still believe that the work you do is more important than any petty complaint from your neighbors

Setting: in the street outside the treatment center. Person 10 speaks first as they spot person 9 walking in to work. Sitting across from you is a clinician from the local addiction treatment center.

Person 10. You are an angry and concerned citizen. You bought a home in a nice neighborhood 15 years ago only to have an addiction treatment center move in to your neighborhood 5 years ago. You fought the program from its inception since you were afraid it would affect your home’s value and feared for the safety of the children in the area. So far, there has not been any safety issues, but you are very annoyed at the cigarette smoke that comes from the clients when they smoke outside. You are also very frustrated that there is never any parking available to your friends and family when they visit because all the clients of the treatment center park along the roads in front of your home. Yesterday you found 20 cigarette butts in your front lawn: you’ve had it.

References

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