Since the 1970s, issues in the political realm of the United States have increasingly created tension within religious communities including the Roman Catholic (RC) community. The divisions in the RC community are areas of difference which can lead to discrimination. While such divisions may always exist, the way in which these areas of difference within the RC community are recognized will play a factor in determining the level of discrimination experienced by RC individuals in different environments. This article will review how the term Catholic has been described in social work and related literature, which will enable a discussion of the future for social work in relating to differences within the RC community. The hope is for the social work profession to acknowledge areas of difference within the RC community and the potential for discrimination which occurs based on differing perspectives. By promoting a less political lexicon for tense topics and identifying areas of difference, the hope is to foster a respect for RCs of all opinions within the social work profession.

The official teaching of the Roman Catholic (RC) Church has been counter-cultural on sexuality in the United States, increasingly so since the 1970s because of its stances on contraception and abortion (Maher, Sever, & Pichler 2008). The social work profession has followed mainstream U.S. culture on these issues. As contraception became more accessible in the 1970s and abortion was legalized in 1973, the social work profession generally embraced these progressive stances. Roe v. Wade legalized abortion in the U.S., and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has embraced this progressive view. The tensions have only heightened in the present day, as the NASW and RC Church hierarchy have taken opposite stances on recent policy regarding access to contraception and abortion. Within the RC community, individuals, families, and parishes have become divided; some embrace a view closer to that of the NASW on these issues, while others are more in line with the RC Church hierarchy’s perspective.

Most would agree that media and others often frame these divisions politically, which can lead to bitter discourse rather than respectful dis-
agreement. When a particular religion has divisions within it, like RC individuals and groups have had in relation to issues like contraception and abortion, it is appropriate that these divisions are framed as diversity by social workers. According to a 2008 revision to the NASW code of ethics, cultural competency requires efforts to understand social diversity including different religious beliefs. Social workers have a responsibility to find and use terms that foster respect for different RC groups and individuals.

**ROMAN CATHOLICS: ORTHODOX AND PROGRESSIVE**

The terms orthodox and progressive are far from complete in describing the multitude of ways people identify themselves in regard to religion, however they are terms recognized in social work and sociology literature (Hunter 1991). Williams (2005) suggests that orthodox communities “perceive God as the ultimate source of moral authority, whereas progressives emphasize the importance of the individual as an autonomous being” (Williams 2005: 100). Jensen (1997, 1998) found that Baptists and Hindus with an orthodox religious perspective looked to divine direction and community in ethical dilemmas while progressives from the same religions used a combination of autonomy and community. People who hold an orthodox perspective have an extremely different perspective than that of progressives, and to liken the two as the same cultural group would be a mistake.

It is better described as an orthodox-progressive paradigm, and the inherent conflict between the perspectives can lead to discrimination when there are unequal power relations (Hodge 2003). Hodge (2003) highlights the different approaches to moral truth taken by those with orthodox and progressive perspectives; the orthodox worldview tends to see moral truth as transcending time and culture, while the progressive worldview tends to see moral truth as an unfolding reality informed by the current age. Based on a study by Starks (2009), these two terms appear to be some of those preferred by RCs who hold varying perspectives on RC Church authority and controversial social issues.

**Literature Review**

This article will review literature from social work and related disciplines about RC groups and individuals in the United States and evaluate the level of connection to the orthodox-progressive paradigm. The literature was selected by searching the keyword “Catholic” using the database Social Work Abstracts, then searching the keyword “Catholic” using the database Social Service Abstracts. The only materials included were those which discussed the RC Church in the United States, were peer-reviewed, and
were available online. The search took place on October 23, 2014, at the Catholic University of America. Articles were evaluated as tending toward a neutral perspective, tending toward an orthodox perspective, tending toward a progressive perspective, or having little to no content related to the terms. The goal is to understand the way the social work profession and related disciplines broach the subject of divide within the RC Church. Those with little to no content are not included, and more information regarding these articles can be obtained by contacting the author.

Controversial social issues like abortion and contraception are included in the discussion, because they have been recognized as related to a member’s attitude to RC Church rules and authority (Starks 2009). In turn, a person’s attitude toward RC Church rules and authority is important in the orthodox-progressive paradigm. Seidler (1986) identifies that the RC Church’s teaching on sexuality was and is perceived as unresponsive by many RC individuals and groups, which has led many to disenchantment with RC Church authority. Maher, Sever, and Pichler (2008) focused on RC college students and also came to the conclusion that there is an important connection between attitudes toward sexuality and attitudes toward the authority of the RC Church. When a person does not look toward RC Church authority or teaching for guidance, they tend toward making decisions autonomously or from guidance of the community.

Starks 2009, Seidler 1986, and Maher, Sever, and Pichler 2008 are foundational literature on the topic, and all three avoided a strong orthodox or progressive orientation. Hannon (1984) investigated the history of desegregation in areas of Boston which have a high RC population, in a way that avoided the orthodox-progressive paradigm. The significance of the article is its claim that after Vatican II, which ended in 1965, the congregation’s feelings toward the teaching authority of the RC Church became ambivalent (Hannon 1984). Seidler (1986) provides a similar analysis of RC history in the U.S. Jenks and Christiansen 2002a was neutral in its investigation into religiosity and well-being of four RC groups related to spousal relationship history, referring to RC Church teaching almost solely in connection with the data. Terry and Freilich (2012) are critical of RC Church leadership in dealing with sexual abuse to an extent but also highlight multiple factors and give credit for reform.

Fuschel (2012), Kane (2010), and Tortorici and Grame (1993) were focused on particular RC groups and are neutral in that they discuss the importance of Church authority and hierarchy without strongly criticizing or supporting it. On the other hand, Clark (2006) criticizes RC hierarchy graciously in covering the child sexual abuse scandal as it relates to perceptions of homosexuality and child sexual abuse. The tone is fairly
neutral on RC Church teachings, and the significance to this discussion is its use of the phrase mainstream Catholicism, which is distinguished from leaders and orthodox groups of the RC Church (Clark 2006). Morse and McNamara (2012) discuss RC Church power relations in a neutral way in terms of international aid with no critique of authority. Szafarski et al. (2013) covers a potentially controversial topic in HIV programming but does not comment on RC Church teaching.

Focusing almost solely on Catholic Social Teaching (CST) was one way literature avoided controversy. CST is an expansive compilation of documents made by bishops in the U.S. and popes since the 20th century that suggest principles for a just society amidst rapid changes to society’s structure. Many principles of CST appeal to orthodox and progressive perspectives, and McMillin (2012), Epple (2010), Himchak (2005), and Shank (2007) chose to focus on CST in a fairly comprehensive way while avoiding the controversial topics of contraception and abortion. Mayer (2012) discussed CST in the context of persons with disabilities and was neutral regarding RC Church hierarchy. Weaver (2012) focuses only on one principle of CST in evaluating welfare reform and also remains mostly neutral regarding church hierarchy.

Brenden (2007) focused on CST, yet the author presented the RC Church’s controversial social teaching on reproductive matters as at odds with social work values and other controversial issues of individual rights as failing to affirm human dignity. With the emphasis by Brenden (2007) on individual autonomy, the article tends toward a progressive perspective although it covers many topics in CST neutrally. Degeneffe (2003) analyzes Catholic Charities USA in a way which is mostly neutral, yet the conclusion reached is to critically examine how RC Church teaching affects objectivity, fairness, and self-determination in social services. Degeneffe (2003) recognizes RC Church teaching but seems dissatisfied with Catholic Charities USA’s integration of self-determination, like the unwillingness to promote the choice of abortion.

Leming (2007) frames RC Church rules as a constraint and focuses on individuals’ engagement with RC Church institutions when they disagree or doubt its authority. Leming (2007) avoids direct criticism of RC Church teaching and hierarchy, yet the topics are presented in a way which shows its weaknesses with little exploration of its strengths. Garland and Argueta (2010) explicitly critique the hierarchal system of religious communities including the RC Church, emphasizing inequality of power in a way which tends toward individualism and a progressive perspective. McCarty (2012) shows great respect for RC Church teaching in relation to the Catholic Worker House movement. Simultaneously, McCarty (2012)
supports the mindset of Catholic Worker Houses to avoid hierarchy, rules, and organization, promoting a disobedience of formal authority that suggests a progressive perspective.

Constable 2007 and Constable 2012 tend toward an orthodox perspective with its emphasis on integrity of conscience in relation to religious authority, although there is a demonstrated awareness of progressive views. Jenks and Christiansen 2002b tends toward an orthodox perspective in that the RC Church’s social teachings are presented as key to understanding issues of sexuality and gender, later reinforcing that the teachings are clear and firm on abortion and other controversial issues. Donaldson and Belanger 2012 tends toward an orthodox perspective in its positive regard for the hierarchy. In addition, the coverage of CST includes abortion as a new threat to life, which is an affirmation for RC Church authority in relation to controversial issues (Donaldson & Belanger 2012). Adams (2013) covers CST with a philosophical approach which rejects individualism and leans toward the orthodox perspective in its acknowledgement of morality as transcendent.

Methodology

Of the articles reviewed and categorized, nineteen are neutral, five tend toward a progressive perspective, five tend toward an orthodox perspective, and those remaining had little or no related contents. The process of classifying involved identifying whether topics like RC Church authority, truth, abortion, and contraception were present, then judging if the way they were presented matched key features of the orthodox or progressive perspective as previously defined. This is far from an exact science, and the goal of the article is to act as a starting point for discussion rather than draw concrete conclusions or judgments about articles and authors.

The methodology had numerous limitations, as the nature of the discussion is very complex and literature on the subject is limited. First, RC communities of different ethnic backgrounds have varying ways of relating to and acting as RC Church authority/hierarchy based on history and other factors. The limited studies on how individuals relate to RC Church authority and attitudes on controversial issues like abortion and contraception rarely mentioned ethnicity as a factor. This disparity on ethnicity analysis led me to leave a discussion of the topic nearly untouched. Second, the determination of how an article was classified has been made based on the author’s own judgment using the definitions of progressive and orthodox, and this judgment is prone to bias despite best efforts toward objectivity. Third, the author analyzed not only the explicit statements relating to the orthodox-progressive paradigm but also what was excluded.
This inference-by-material-excluded aspect of the analysis is more speculative than analysis of material that directly commented on topics like RC hierarchy, abortion, and contraception. Finally, it is unclear how much the editing process affected the final content of articles in reference to authors’ intent to present orthodox and/or progressive views.

**Analysis**

In this spirit, I will identify some significant observations. First, “neutral” was the category that had the most articles. Second, there were no articles that used a polemic tone consistently, even among those categorized as orthodox and progressive. Third, there were no articles where the author revealed a progressive or orthodox identity as a source of potential bias. Fourth, the majority of non-neutral articles were more recent. Finally, there are similar discussions occurring in the social work literature regarding the RC Church in other countries.

In progressive articles, the most striking content is that which contends that access to abortion and contraception is a right. Brenden (2007) suggests that RC Church teaching is at odds with social work values in its “reproductive policy” (Brenden 2007: 483). While it is mentioned only briefly, the assumption is that a social worker cannot embrace the professional ethic of promoting “equal access” for people to meet their basic needs and RC Church teaching at the same time (Brenden 2007: 475). Drawing from an orthodox background, an RC social worker may not see abortion and contraception as a basic need, a cultural view that should be respected by the social work profession. Degeneffe (2003) fails to recognize the orthodox background of Catholic Charities USA as diversity in a similar way, suggesting that individual professionals within the agency who wish to practice their profession using “secular social worker values” such as self-determination cannot do so due to the RC Church teaching on abortion (379). The implication seems to be that self-determination as a professional ethic includes active participation in the carrying out of a client’s choice regardless of social worker’s morality on a subject, which appeals to the right to access suggested by Brenden (2007). Self-determination as a client’s right to access is framed as at odds with the teaching on abortion. Based on its orthodox background, Catholic Charities USA as an institution should instead be framed positively in reference to self-determination; that is, as maintaining the social work ethic within the context of its culture.

From the orthodox category, Adams (2013) explores the dangers of individualism in CST: summarizing its view of “both individualism and statism . . . as mutually reinforcing evils” (Adams 2013: 293). The experi-
ence of those affected by poverty in contributing to a solution is important according to Adams (2013), yet the premise is that the virtues and morality involved in this process are orthodox, or transcend the here-and-now. The state is seen as a threat to the development of these transcendent virtues, yet a progressive RC social worker might suggest that the state can protect the ability of individuals affected by poverty to draw morality from their experience. In such an interpretation, it seems an obligation to advocacy by the progressive RC social worker to ensure impoverished individuals the access to resources that enable action founded on their experience-based morality, including contraception and abortion. Similarly, Constable (2013) discusses morality in a way that points toward truth as transcending here-and-now, believing that individualism leads to a radical subjectivism, a deformity where “morality becomes empty and arbitrary, merely reflecting power” (Constable 2013: 158). A progressive RC social worker may take such a statement as a failure to protect individuals in developing morality from their own experience, leading to a subsequent injustice by denying access for these individuals to carry out moral actions accordingly.

While progressive arguments may not be stronger than orthodox ones, it is important to acknowledge the basis of their thinking.

**Discussion**

The fact that the literature predominately avoids bias related to the orthodox-progressive paradigm or handles controversy respectfully is a testament to the high quality of social work peer-reviewed articles. Despite a polemic political atmosphere in the United States, most articles focused on less divisive subjects in their meaningful contributions to social work knowledge about RC communities. The NASW espouses respect for social diversity and understanding different cultures, and the recent literature shows significant attempts at objectivity amidst RC divisions (NASW 2008). While certainly the goal is not to avoid difficult subjects altogether, overall, social work authors have a respectful tone when controversial topics related to the orthodox-progressive paradigm are discussed.

At the same time, there is further follow-up needed on studies like Starks 2009, which was a long-overdue update to investigation of self-identification preferences and the nature of divisions within RC communities. In the articles reviewed in this analysis, there is a plethora of descriptors used by authors within the literature to describe RC communities and individuals of different perspectives, many which may not be preferred by RC individuals and communities. These include non-practicing, practicing, charismatic, “liberal,” “traditionalist,” and “conservative” (Seidler 1986: 855, 867), moderate, theologically conservative and “socially pro-
gressive” (McCarty 2012: 333), “mainstream” (Clark 2006: 5), “women-conscious” (Leming 2007: 75), and devout believer. Some descriptors are used in multiple articles but with different meanings; for example, Hannon (1984) uses “liberal” in a historical context referencing those in support of desegregation versus the more contemporary way it is used by other authors (Hannon 1984: 229). The variety of descriptors and meanings demonstrate the level of difficulty, confusion, and possible hesitancy authors have in covering controversial topics like abortion, contraception, and RC Church hierarchy.

These barriers to covering controversial topics reinforce future confusion, although Starks (2009) is an exception. Starks (2009) summarizes previous literature in noting that the terms “orthodox” and “Catholic [no descriptor]” are preferred by traditionalists, while many liberal Catholics call themselves “leftist” and “progressive” (Starks 2009: 3–4). Participants in the study felt many religious labels held political overtones inadequate to describe their views or pigeon-holed themselves and others (Starks 2009: 24). Considering this analysis, it seems that the literature, with good intentions, uses a variety of terms that RC individuals may find inadequate, political, or unhelpful in discourse. If the literature is any indication of how social workers in the field are approaching conversations with RC clients, this is a significant concern.

**CONCLUSION**

Arnett, Ramos, and Jensen (2001) identified that the progressive worldview is more prevalent in the culture of the United States, and McMillin (2012) suggests that the majority of religious social workers self-identify as politically liberal. The strong NASW policy positions in support of contraception and abortion, including an increasing emphasis on a right to access, reinforce a professional inclination toward progressivism with the potential for significant discrimination against orthodox individuals. Faver and Trachte state the need for social workers to “be aware of trends in religious diversity and variations in religious practices within ethnic groups” (Faver & Trachte 2005: 15). The rising trend in social work education has been a focus on diversity framed in terms of oppression and marginalization, yet the potential for discrimination against orthodox individuals in the profession has not been identified as much as potential discrimination against other marginalized individuals and groups that are more vocally expressed by NASW policy positions.

This author believes the potential regarding a “culture of silence” in classrooms for those that believe in religious authority, acknowledge transcendental truth, and disagree with abortion and contraception is high in
Social work education, and this is likely to have the effect of driving orthodox individuals away from social work (Freire 1970). Without recognizing orthodox and progressive views as areas of difference, the difference becomes an area for potential judgment and marginalization rather than an opportunity for the unique collaborative learning that can only come through discussion of diversity.

While the effect for orthodox individuals of an imposing or judgmental social work academic environment is significant, this phenomenon also has implications for the profession as a whole. Orthodox individuals may share their negative experiences in social work education with other members of orthodox communities, and the collection of such experiences will lead to generalized skepticism and avoidance of social work services by orthodox individuals. NASW policy statements will reinforce this skepticism on a macro level. Similarly, the profession will have few or no orthodox individuals to contribute their diverse background experiences in social work education, research, and other settings, and it is reasonable to believe the competency of the profession in working with orthodox individuals will diminish significantly.

Finally, the NASW and similar organizations could potentially become overly progressive to the point that policy statements fail to recognize the orthodox perspective as legitimate. As an orthodox individual, this author has concerns the profession is prone to fall into the trap of inadequate political discourse so prevalent in U.S. culture rather than giving the nuances of religious diversity the attention they deserve. However, this author has great hope that the NASW and other social work institutions can make adjustments to understand orthodox and progressive views as areas of difference to be recognized and respected, enhancing the profession’s already-prominent reputation as credible and competent helpers to all.

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