SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE RHETORIC VERSUS THE REALITY

A Project

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by
Samantha B. Cherry
Patricia Ayala

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Samantha B. Cherry

Patricia Ayala

Approved by:

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Teiahsha Bankhead, Ph.D., LCSW

____________________________
Date
Student: Samantha B. Cherry
   Patricia Ayala

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Division of Social Work
Abstract

of

SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE RHETORIC VERSUS THE REALITY

by

Samantha B. Cherry

Patricia Ayala

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore how social work professionals understand and approach the core social work value of social justice. Thirty individuals who were employed as social work practitioners in medical settings completed a 14 question online survey to elicit their views on and experiences with social justice in social work practice. Although 67% of participants stated that they were able to address social justice in their practice settings, only 30% felt that the social work profession was adequately addressing social justice. Participants tended to describe the barriers that prevented clients from realizing justice in structural terms, but reported their own social justice activities as individual-level interventions which did not address these structural barriers.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Teiahsha Bankhead, Ph.D., LCSW

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Date

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-Patty Ayala
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each others welfare, social justice can never be attained.

-Helen Keller, The Liberator, 1918

Americans are living in a time of great economic upheaval, marked by numerous, complex social problems stemming from socio-economic inequality that pervade nearly every aspect of today’s society and contribute to the decline of living standards for many vulnerable populations (Goldberg, 2012; Pyles, 2010; Reisch, 2011; Andrews & Reisch, 2002). In the face of modern social injustices, the profession of social work is uniquely positioned as the only helping profession that considers fighting for social justice an integral aspect of work with clients (Marsh, 2005). A founding principle of social work is the advancement of human rights and promotion of social and economic justice at multiple levels of practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). Implied in the profession’s dedication to social justice is that social workers are well equipped to fight systematic socio-economic oppression as a means of helping clients achieve justice, and that they regularly do so on behalf of the vulnerable populations that they serve. Social workers should be leading the charge against inequality and oppression, yet whether social workers are effectively addressing the many diverse social injustices facing client systems is debated within the profession, with one critic denouncing the profession’s supposed dedication to social justice as mere “rhetoric” (Reisch, 2011).
Background of the Problem

Human suffering and social injustices can be seen today in the many socio-economic problems currently plaguing our nation. The United States is the only major Western country that does not consider health care as a human right, leaving millions of individuals at the mercy of private health care corporations and pharmaceutical companies, or worse, with no access to medical care at all (Davis, Stremikis, Schoen, & Squires, 2014). Income inequality is extremely high- in 2014 the top 10% of income earners in the United States took 49.9% of all income and the top 1% claimed 21.2%, leaving the bottom 90% of income earners to share less than half of all available income (Saez, 2015). After the Great Recession of 2008, job recovery has been concentrated in low-wage areas, and between 2010 and 2014, higher wage industries shed 2 million middle-class jobs (National Employment Law Project, 2014). A 2015 report from the Southern Education Foundation revealed that low-income students are now the majority in schools across the United States (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). In 2009, the state of California took $4 billion from local cities and counties and cut many major programs in order to balance the state budget after the economic upheaval of the Great Recession, severely impacting the abilities of local governments to provide safety-net services to Californians in need (Michels, 2009). Corporate policies which put profits above the welfare of employees and communities have forced low-wage workers of highly profitable corporations to live in poverty and need government assistance for food, healthcare, and housing (Reich, 2014).
The profession of social work is committed to address the causes of systemic oppression and inequality in a fight for social justice (International Federation of Social Workers, International Association of Schools of Social Work & International Council on Social Welfare, 2012). Social justice is a 20th century philosophical construct which guides modern views on fairness and equity in society. (Rawls, 1999). It is also an important ethical value of the profession of social work, as mandated by international and domestic social work organizations (National Association of Social Workers, 1999; International Federation of Social Workers & International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004). In the United States, social workers are specifically instructed by the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics (1999) to end all forms of social injustice and to engage in “social and political action” on behalf of oppressed individuals and groups (para. 2). Olson (2007) describes the “social justice project” of social work as seeking to “transform the conditions that permit the existence of preventable human suffering” (p.45).

If social workers are truly dedicated to improving the lives of their clients, then fighting for social justice must be a top priority for which practitioners are well-equipped (Reisch, 2011; Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Andrews & Reisch, 2002). It has been suggested that social workers lack the knowledge and skills necessary to critically transform existing systems of oppression (Andrews & Reisch, 2012). However, social work educators may be underprepared to promote social justice in their curriculums, and institutions can limit the ability of educators to engage social work students around social justice (Funges, 2011). Social work students are also generally educated to work with the
symptoms of structural social problems without addressing the root causes (Andrews & Reisch, 2012).

Some critics have argued that social work is more concerned with ensuring its professional legitimacy than fighting for improvements in lives of the people who are served by practitioners (Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001; McLaughlin, 2009; Pyles, 2010; Reisch, 2011; Specht & Courtney, 1995). In addition, social justice work is not seen as a “scholarly” topic for researchers due to its basis in non-scientific theory, and thus receives little attention in social work research (Longres & Scanlon, 2001).

Clinical social workers also tend to provide examples of their social justice work at the micro level of practice, with little attention paid to broader concerns of socio-economic problems (O’Brien, 2011; Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001). Managed care and its mandate for social work practitioners to produce measurable outcomes forces clinical social workers to neglect the broad unjust socio-economic conditions that their clients often face (Swenson, 1998). This common “problem-oriented” focus in clinical social work practice can lead to pathologizing clients and ignoring the larger systems that may be at the root of clients’ problems (Kam, 2012). This division between micro and macro practice contributes to the perception that advocating for societal changes on a political level is not the job of a social worker in clinical practice (Kam, 2012).

Practitioners may be unwilling to take the professional risks necessary to transform social work into accepting a more radicalized agenda of promoting widespread social and economic change (Andrews & Reisch, 2002). Social workers have also been criticized for having a “hands-off approach” in the face of decreased programs and
services for clients, believing that services will be restored despite taking no collective action to ensure that this is done (Pyles, 2010). Michael Reisch, the Daniel Thursz Distinguished Professor of Social Justice at the University of Maryland (2011), argues that social workers have forgotten that modern social welfare was obtained via “sustained, collective struggle”, and advocates for social workers to challenge political authority in a shift to “radical” social work (p.20). Collective social action will need to be taken by social workers to truly address the political and economic factors which allow social injustices such as poverty, low-wages, and systemic oppression to flourish (Reisch, 2011; Goldberg, 2012; Pyles, 2010). Without addressing the wider concerns of social change, social workers are failing to live up to their mandate of fighting for social justice (O’Brien, 2011)

**Statement of the Research Question**

Are professional social workers able to apply social justice concepts to their everyday practice, and if so, how are they accomplishing this? What are social workers’ ideas and beliefs around this complex issue? Is addressing macro issues in micro practice occurring, and are political solutions to individual problems being considered? How can social workers be involved politically if most work is at a micro level in private and public agencies? Do social workers believe their professional education prepares them to confront social injustices?

**Study Purpose**

This study aims to explore graduate-level social workers’ views and understandings of the profession’s value of and emphasis on advocating for social justice
with clients. This study’s authors hope to identify how social justice is defined by social workers, and to identify whether practitioners consider social justice to be a part of their job duties. Another purpose is to determine if social justice is viewed by social workers in terms of either structural problems or individual concerns, and whether social work practitioners are able to address macro problems while working at the micro practice level. This study will also attempt to identify some of the problems that social workers experience when advocating for social justice on behalf of clients in restrictive micro settings. This will be accomplished by collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data from a survey of social work practitioners in clinical settings regarding their views on the concept of social justice and the ways that they believe they are fighting for social justice when working with clients.

A secondary purpose of this research project is to provide social work educators and professional leaders of social work organizations with knowledge of how practitioners conceptualize the idea of social justice, how they define social justice work, and how well practitioners feel social justice was covered in their graduate-level coursework. This information can assist social work departments and professional organizations in developing improvements to educational curriculum and institutional practices to clarify and promote social justice work, if warranted.

Theoretical Framework

Social justice as a political and philosophical theory has evolved over the past 50 years, with multiple versions of the concept emerging over time. For the purposes of this study, social justice theory as developed by John Rawls will be discussed (Rawls, 1999.
In his 1971 publication *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls, an American political theorist, presented his concept of social justice as a philosophical ethic which he called “Justice as Fairness”. Rawls discussed social justice in terms of societal organization, and put forth two principles of justice that would promote a morally just, egalitarian society. The first principle of justice is that basic liberties should be a right of every individual within a society, and socio-economic inequalities should benefit society’s least advantaged members. Secondly, inequalities should only exist in a society if they are beneficial to each member and open to all. Rawls’ theory is the foundation for modern thinking on the subject of social justice.

**Definition of Terms**

**Social justice**: the term *social justice* is defined in the Oxford Dictionary (2010) as “justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society”.

**Social justice work**: fighting against all types of oppression in society, advocating for economic equality, and pushing for systemic change to institutions and political ideologies which inhibit abilities of individuals to realize equal opportunities and human rights.

**Assumptions**

This study’s authors assume that all study participants answer questions truthfully and honestly, and that social justice is of great value and high concern for the social work profession.
Social Work Research Justification

Ensuring the integrity of the social work profession requires that social workers adhere to and utilize the profession’s ethical obligations in their practice. Social justice is not an issue that social workers can afford to ignore. The current socio-political climate and the economic state of America’s vulnerable populations provides further evidence of the importance of advocating for equality in a time of great inequality. Social workers have the potential to become advocates for systematic change to the status quo in order to elevate the status of vulnerable populations they serve. Exploring how social workers are understanding and applying social justice concepts in social work practice may help the profession identify ways to further expand individual practitioners’ knowledge of social justice and ways to better incorporate this concept into work with clients and client systems.

Study Limitations

Limitations to this research study include a small, non-random sample of 30 social workers in the greater Sacramento area who volunteered to participate via an online survey. This sample size affects the study’s ability to generalize results to the larger population of social workers nationwide.

Statement of Collaboration

This exploratory study is a joint collaboration between Patricia Ayala and Samantha B. Cherry. Samantha performed the research review and developed the study instrument, while Patricia took the lead in data analysis. Both students worked
collaboratively to present the study’s purpose, collect background information, analyze data, develop study conclusions, and discuss implications of survey results.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social justice is an integral part of the guiding principles of international and national professional social work organizations, providing social work practitioners with a mandate to take social action in professional practice (IFSW, IASW, 2004; NASW, 1999). The social work profession is unique in that it is the only helping profession that specifically works for social and economic justice, highlighting the importance of this organizing value (Marsh, 2005). In 2012, a coalition of international social work organizations published a global agenda committing social workers to focus on addressing the structural, systematic roots of worldwide social injustices (International Federation of Social Workers, International Association of Schools of Social Work, & International Council on Social Welfare, 2012). Social workers have the potential to be a powerful force for fighting social and economic inequality and promoting social change, yet some scholars have argued that social justice is not being adequately addressed by social workers (Reisch, 2011; Van Soest, 2012; Specht & Courtney, 1994; Olson, 2007). This study aims to explore the ways in which social workers are approaching social justice in every day practice, and to identify barriers that may be preventing social workers from fighting for social justice and for systematic social change. In this review, social justice as a theoretical construct will first be presented to provide background information on the concept. Next, the role of the social work educator in preparing social work students to work for social justice will also be examined through a review of the social work literature. Then, existing studies which have attempted to reveal how social
justice is approached by social work practitioners will be presented and analyzed. Finally, existing criticisms of the social work profession’s current approach to social justice will be reviewed, including the identification of barriers that prevent social worker from fully implementing social justice in professional work.

**Social Justice Theory**

Social justice is a complex idea that has evolved as a political theory in the twentieth century. The American political philosopher John Rawls presented his definition of the concept in his influential book *A Theory of Justice* (1971). His theory pays special attention to political and socio-economic foundations of social justice. Rawls discusses social justice in structural terms, and posits that social justice means equal access to what he describes as primary goods: income and wealth, liberties, rights, and opportunities. According to Rawls, any inequalities that exist in society must be for the benefit of its least advantaged members. He also declares that each person in a society has claim to equal liberties, prioritizing this claim over the other primary goods.

A more contemporary view of social justice was developed by British political theorist David Miller in his 1999 book *Principles of Social Justice*. In opposition to Rawls, Miller writes about the great complexity of social justice, arguing that justice must be considered in context, and that a just distribution of resources in society greatly depends on human relationships. The National Association of Social Workers (2015) defines social justice in much simpler terms, as “the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities” (para. 2).
Social Work Education and Social Justice

Social work practitioners are taught about social work ethics, including social justice, in all professional social work programs in colleges and universities certified by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). The CSWE (2008) mandates that students of social work prepare to work for the advancement of human rights and social and economic justice in the organization’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), specifically stating that “social work incorporates social justice practices in organizations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice” (p.5). Social work education plays a critical role in preparing social work students to integrate social justice into their future practice, yet research looking into how social justice is presented to students and perceived by educators is sparse and limited by small sample sizes. The few studies that do approach this topic are presented and analyzed here.

In a 2011 study, University of California, Los Angeles social work scholar Simon Funge explored the attitudes and beliefs that social work educators have with regards to implementing social justice content in coursework (Funge, 2011). The study utilized open-ended, semi-structured interviews with an ethnically diverse sample of thirteen social work educators with PhDs who taught at one of three CSWE-accredited social work programs in Southern California public universities. Funge (2011) found that two viewpoints emerged of the role of the educator in exposing students to the social justice perspective: nine interviewees stated that they had a responsibility to merely present the social justice perspective, while the other four educators in the study felt that social work
educators should actively promote social justice as a way of preparing students to lead social change (p.81). These contrasting viewpoints illustrate the differences that exist in the ways which social work education relays the message of social justice to students. Future social workers may be receiving conflicting perspectives regarding their responsibility towards and importance of social justice depending on their educational background. However, a small sample size of thirteen limits this study’s generalizability, and further research is needed to see if the trend can be found in other studies involving social work educators.

Longres & Scanlon (2001) designed a multi-faceted study to explore the topic of social justice more in depth, going beyond simply interviewing educators about their role promoting it. First, the authors interviewed twelve social work professionals teaching in public universities nationwide on their personal definitions of social justice. Longres & Scanlon noted that formal definitions of social justice were not provided by any of their survey respondents, nor did they convey any familiarity with literature on the subject. However, responses did include themes of distributive and relational justice, and interviewees discussed justice in terms of economic and social terms, as well as micro and macro levels of practice; themes of social change and empowerment were also identified. Longres & Scanlon continued further, and in the same study, performed a content analysis of research course syllabi used in BSW, MSW and PhD programs of the same twelve faculty member interviewees to determine how social justice was presented to research students, finding that none of the syllabi mentioned social justice. The interviewees explained that although the term social justice was not used, they felt that
the concept was implicit in their courses. Three subjects discussed the idea that including social justice in their syllabi could make their courses be seen as unscientific, and their research as less valid. Longres and Scanlon (2012) put forth the suggestion that there may be tension between the creation of knowledge in research and the contribution to social justice, an idea that may warrant further exploration to see if social work research is hindering the promotion of social justice as a professional goal (p.454). The authors continued in their study to review ten social work research texts published between 1991 and 1999, finding that social justice was not incorporated as a goal of research, nor was the topic systematically addressed in any of the texts, although topics related to social justice were discussed. Longres & Scanlon used small sample sizes, decreasing the validity of their findings. The authors did increase the objectivity of their study compared to Funge by using quantitative data from their review of social work research texts and syllabi for mentions of social justice.

Based on these two studies, social work educators did express familiarity with social justice, but are conflicted in their presentation of the concept to students and its utilization in research. While educators are able to subjectively define the term social justice, they differ in opinion about whether they should merely present or actively promote the subject in their coursework (Funge, 2011). Social work curricula and research texts do not explicitly discuss social justice, but educators feel the concept is present in their classes nonetheless (Longres & Scanlon, 2001). The research on the subject is extremely limited, however, so generalizable conclusions about social work education cannot be drawn based on only a few studies, especially studies with such
small sample sizes. The studies which have been presented are also limited in that only interviews from educators are performed, leaving the opinions of students about their education on social justice unknown. Further research is needed to fully understand the role of the educator and of social work education and research in promoting social justice.

**Social Work Practitioners’ Approach to Social Justice**

Professional social workers are guided by ethical mandates of and domestic social work organizations, and are specifically instructed to implement social justice in individual practice. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools Social Work (IASW), in a joint statement on ethical standards in professional social work, declared that social workers are responsible for the promotion of social justice when dealing with society and with those for whom they work (2004). Specifically, social justice is defined by the IFSW and IASW (2004) as “challenging negative discrimination, recognizing diversity, distributing resources equitably, challenging unjust policies and practices, and working in solidarity to challenge social conditions that contribute to social exclusion” (para. 4). The importance of social workers addressing social justice was highlighted by an IFSW task force which defined promotion of social change as the primary activity for social workers (Hare, 2004). Similarly, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) states in the NASW Code of Ethics that practitioners have a responsibility to pursue social change with regards to poverty, unemployment, and discrimination in order to fulfill the ethical mandate of working towards social justice (1999). Although social justice is presented as
an important concept for use in social work practice by these organizations, social justice is not explicitly and formally defined, allowing for individual practitioners to develop their own subjective interpretations of the concept as they put it in to practice with clients.

As the case with social justice and social work education, few studies have explored in depth the meaning of social justice according to social work practitioners and how it is applied in practice, with most research on the subject being performed only in the past two decades. Five of these studies will be presented to analyze how researchers have approached the topic and to review main findings. Throughout the selected literature, professional social workers vary widely in their approach to social justice, both conceptually and with how it guides their activities and interventions with clients, although common themes are identified across some studies (Olson, Reid, Threadgill-Goldson, Riffe, & Ryan, 2013; O’Brien, 2011).

Olson and colleagues identified equality and fairness as two major themes which emerged in their 2013 study on how social workers view and apply social justice in diverse practice settings. Six focus groups with an average of seven social workers per group were assembled by the authors, representing various practice settings in the Midwest, for a total of 41 individuals participating in the groups, whose discussions lasted about 45-90 minutes. Each group was asked the same five open-ended questions about their perceptions of social justice and responsibility towards it, including being asked to provide examples of social injustices in their respective communities and examples of social justice techniques to address them. The authors grouped the varied
responses on the meaning of social justice into themes that included equality, fairness, equal opportunity, and equal access to resources, as well as a moral and value-based obligation. Despite these common themes, Olson and colleagues asserted that a predominant understanding is lacking, reflected in the range of responses given by subjects. Social workers reported taking conventional actions (such as advocacy or addressing discrimination) to work for social justice, and nonconventional actions, including circumventing or manipulating systems to help clients. Besides having a small sample size which gives it low validity, the study’s use of focus groups has a negative impact on its reliability, as participants’ responses may have been influenced by other group members during group discussions; perhaps individuals would have responded differently with no outside influences.

That social workers tend to define social justice in terms of equality and fairness is corroborated by a similar 2011 study using social workers practicing in New Zealand (O’Brien). The author used questionnaires to reach a significantly larger sample size of 191 social workers, asking for their definitions of social justice, incidents in practice involving issues related to the concept, and actions taken towards it. The terms ‘equality’ and ‘fairness’ were the two most common terms used by study participants when describing their definition of social justice, and respondents provided a wide variety of meanings for these two terms, supporting the idea that social justice is indeed a subjective concept. Interestingly, O’Brien noted that very little attention was paid to structural issues, as most responses discussed social justice from an individual or micro-level approach, a point that was not discussed by the Olson et al. study.
Australian social work researchers Hawkins, Fook, and Ryan (2001) took a different approach to the subject by reviewing the language social workers use to describe their work with clients to determine if it reflects a social justice perspective. The authors analyzed interview transcripts from two earlier qualitative studies to gather data. One of these earlier studies followed a cohort of 30 social workers from the beginning of their college studies into their third year of practice; the other involved 30 social workers already working in various settings. In both studies, subjects responded to practice vignettes and described important incidents in their practice through open-ended interviews, which were then analyzed for usage of terms that the authors had determined to be consistent with a social justice framework. Hawkins, Fook, and Ryan found that the social workers in the studies used very few social justice terms when discussing their practice, with only two out of thirty experienced social workers using more than two terms, and eighteen using none at all. Instead, a pattern emerged of social workers using clinical terminology, and describing social justice at the individual level as opposed to the structural level. It is unclear if the practice vignettes or interview prompts used to elicit data could have presented a bias towards a clinical focus which the subjects merely reflected in their responses. The small number of subjects being used in this study limits the generalizability of the authors’ conclusions, and it is unknown if a similar study performed with American social workers would yield the same results. It is notable that this study was unique in that social workers were not specifically asked about how they use and define social justice in an attempt to reduce any influence the question may have on their answers.
McLaughlin (2009), assistant social work professor at the University of Calgary, interviewed 18 Canadian social workers with graduate degrees who were working in mental health about their thoughts on social justice in clinical practice. The author analyzed the gathered responses in terms of advocacy, concluding that advocacy was a strategy for social justice used by social work clinicians. The focus on advocacy and the various manifestations of the concept in this study may have caused McLaughlin to discount other themes that emerged in the data, as there seems to be a bias towards describing subjects’ responses in terms of advocacy. The data could be analyzed by another research team and yield completely different conclusions. Again, a small sample size also limits this study’s generalizability, and it is unknown if there is a significant difference in views about social justice depending on the social worker’s country of origin; in this case, all of the interviewees were from Canada. The different social norms and values of another nation could have influenced the subjects’ beliefs and actions towards social justice.

The final study being reviewed does not involve professional social workers, but counseling psychology trainees; a similar field, but technically not social work. Nevertheless, given the similarities of the professions and the use of social justice in both as a tool to assist clients, the findings of this study will be included in this review. Beer, Spanierman, Greene, and Todd (2012) designed a multi-faceted, rigorous mixed-methods study to explore how graduate trainees in counseling psychology viewed and approached social justice in their work. For the quantitative portion of the study online surveys were completed by 260 trainees. The surveys used several established scales to measure
respondents’ commitment to social justice, as well as personal and training variables. To measure social justice commitment, the authors administered the Activism Orientation Scale and the Confronting Discrimination subscale of the Social Issues Advocacy Scale. These scales measure participants’ likelihood to engage in activist behavior and responsibility to confront discrimination, respectively. Beer et al (2012) administered the Climate and Comfort subscale of the Multicultural Environmental Inventory-Revised (MEI-R) to measure participants’ views of how social justice was addressed in their training programs. In addition, subjects were also questioned on whether they think social justice should be included in training, and then asked the extent to which the concept was included. Basic demographic questions were asked in the survey (including gender, age, race, sexual orientation, political affiliations and interest, and religion); in addition, the authors included the Spiritual Assessment Scale in an effort to explore the moral leanings of participants. The use of these standardized, established instruments greatly increased the objectivity of this study, especially important given the subjective nature of social justice. Seven participants who had scored high on levels of social justice commitments were then selected to participate in semi-structured interviews that incorporated the quantitative data gathered. Beer and colleagues (2012) found that several themes emerged in the trainees’ discussion of social justice- the political nature of the concept, social justice as confrontation of injustice, and the challenge inherent in working for social justice (p.126). While this study was well-designed in an attempt to increase objectivity and validity, participants were not specifically in social work training
programs, so it is unknown whether similar results would be found with subjects who were social workers.

There are several drawbacks to the current literature which examines social justice in social work practice. The existing studies are few, and the ones mentioned here have very small sample sizes. The subjective nature of social justice requires that more research is done to further explore individual practitioners’ perceptions of the concept and how it is employed in different practice settings. Study authors may have a bias towards certain definitions of social justice which is reflected in their analysis of responses as they categorize qualitative findings into themes. None of the studies reviewed which surveyed social workers actually asked subjects whether or not social justice is personally important to them, although Olson and colleagues (2013) did report answers that reflect a commitment to the professional and ethical responsibilities that social workers have towards their clients. It remains unclear whether social workers actively promote social justice because of a personal belief in its importance, or if they are simply fitting their existing activities into a social justice perspective once they are asked how they work towards social justice by researchers. Much more research is needed to further understand the ideas that social workers have about social justice and its application in social work practice.

**Problems with Social Work’s Current Approach to Social Justice**

Social work scholars have identified several problems with the social work profession’s current approach to social justice (Beer et al., 2012; Funge, 2011; Hawkins,
Education

Numerous problems with how social work education addresses and promotes social justice to students have been identified by several authors (Funge, 2011; Longres & Scanlon, 2001; Beer et al., 2012). Funge (2011) noted that some social work educators in his study complained about a lack of training on teaching about social justice, implying that educators are unprepared to address this concept in courses they teach. In addition, educators in this same study identified practice experience of faculty members as an important variable in the effective teaching of social justice, and voiced concerns that doctoral programs may not be preparing instructors to address this subject with students. These concerns are corroborated by Longres and Scanlon’s (2001) discovery that none of the social work course syllabi they reviewed explicitly mentioned social justice. Beer et al. (2012) found similar complaints about professional training on the subject of social justice, presenting results that showed trainees’ perception of the training environment significantly predicted their level of commitment to social justice. Further research into training as a significant variable in promoting social justice for social workers is needed, as Beer and colleagues used counseling psychology trainees, not social work students, as subjects in this study. Interestingly, one conclusion that Beer and colleagues drew from their work which could cross over into the social work education spectrum is that students were too busy focusing on their educational requirements to engage in any sort of activist work as a way of promoting social justice in their work with clients.
Professional Model of Social Work

Social work’s commitment to social justice has been criticized in several studies as taking a back seat to the promotion of the profession of social work itself (Murdach, 2010; Specht & Courtney, 1993; Hawkins, Fook & Ryan, 2001; McLaughlin, 2009). The push for a professional respectability began for social workers after neoliberal and conservative attacks on social welfare programs in the 1990’s, as noted by Murdach (2010) in an article published for NASW. As social work has gained prominence as a profession, some social work scholars say that the corresponding rise in power for practitioners has created a divide between the social worker and the client, contributing to the neglect of social justice as an issue social workers should actively address in professional practice (Specht & Courtney, 1993; Hawkins, Fook & Ryan, 2001). These researchers opine that social workers may be too busy fighting for professional legitimacy to concern themselves with fighting for social justice for clients. This idea is supported by Longres & Scanlon’s (2001) findings that some researchers fear social justice research is not seen as ‘scientific’ enough, and therefore shy away from pursuing it. Hawkins, Fook and Ryan (2001) concluded that the language social workers use to discuss their practice is at odds with the profession’s mission of social justice, and instead works to promote the profession of social work itself, supporting the theory that social workers are more concerned with professional legitimacy than promoting social work values. According to the authors, practitioners become ambivalent to issues of social justice as they focus instead on the more professional, clinical work within their practice settings.
Institutional Nature of Social Work

The reason for ambivalence by some practitioners may also be explained by the nature of clinical work itself, which is often performed within institutions whose job descriptions for social workers may not include advocating for social justice on a bigger scale (Murdach, 2010; McLaughlin, 2009). Clinical social workers mostly focus on working with people at the micro and mezzo scales in their practice, often ignoring macro issues as a result. Such individual-level casework may be causing social workers to neglect systematic issues of social injustice (McLaughlin, 2009). Several researchers have pointed out that social workers tend to describe their orientation towards social justice at the individual level, with less attention paid to the broader nature of social change (O’Brien, 2011; Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001). Thus, since so many social workers work at the micro level, social justice work in the social work profession may be limited to mainly addressing interpersonal and personal problems of clients, as opposed to structural inequities and oppression. There is a perception amongst some social workers that there are just too many problems to address and with trying to solve them all comes a real personal risk of burnout, which is why focusing on battling more attainable, smaller-scale victories over injustices may be preferable for some practitioners (Olson, et al., 2013).

Summary

Social justice is an ambiguous concept, which is reflected in the social work profession’s approach to what is a founding and distinct value of the profession itself. Social work educators and organizations contribute in various ways to the definition and
application of social justice as a guiding ethical principle of social work, but do not actively promote a unified concept that social workers can use as a foundation for their social justice practice. The social work profession suffers from a lack of clear, consistent definition of social justice. The literature does show trends in how this concept is defined and practically applied by social work practitioners, but these findings are limited by the small number of studies which address the topic (Olson et al., 2013; O’Brien, 2001; Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001; McLaughlin, 2009; Beer et al., 2012). Further, the small sample sizes and qualitative data used in the existing research also prevent us from applying findings to the entire profession of social work. Given the subjective nature of social justice and the many unique possibilities of its application in social work practice, further investigation is needed to explore how social workers are defining this concept and promoting it in their everyday work. More research is also needed to clearly identify barriers to practicing social justice, so that a plan of action may be developed by social workers to ensure that practitioners are doing values-based practice and able to actively fight social injustices as social work professionals.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Study Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore how social justice is defined and approached by social work practitioners in clinical practice settings. The researchers hope to uncover whether social workers view working towards social justice at the individual level as a realistic endeavor, and to discover what barriers social workers may face when attempting to incorporate principles of social justice in work with individuals. Another purpose of this study is to reveal whether social workers are able to address structural social problems in micro practice, and if so, describe the strategies that are being used to do so. This study also hopes to identify how well social workers perceive that their professional education prepares them for social justice work.

Study Design

This research study has a mixed-methods, exploratory design using data gathered by the researchers directly from study participants. Social research is conducted to explore a topic, that is, to start to familiarize a researcher with that topic (Babbie, 2011). Mixed-methods were specifically used because it allowed the researchers to conduct a survey with both qualitative and quantitative data. The researchers proposed to examine their topic of social justice and the value that was placed within the respondents work environment. With this type of study design, the researchers could use their results to help lay the foundation for a more extensive study. Exploratory studies are most typically done for three purposes (1) to satisfy the researcher’s curiosity and desire for
better understanding, (2) to test the feasibility of undertaking a more extensive study, and (3) to develop the methods to be employed in any subsequent study (Babbie, 2011). The researchers will use the collected data in order to explore all three of these purposes.

**Sampling Procedures**

The subjects in this study were recruited via contacting program directors and or supervisors of social services at three major medical providers in the Sacramento area: UC Davis Medical Center, Dignity Health Medical Group, and UC Davis Jail Psychiatric Services. Program management administrators of these organizations consented to allow access to their social work staff and provided researchers with their staff email contact information in order to present the study and request participation in an online survey. Participants were virtually recruited over a two-month time period.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Sixty-seven (67) professional social workers were identified by three Northern California medical organizations as being current employees with graduate degrees in social work and working directly with agency clientele. An email was sent to each of these sixty-seven (67) individuals requesting their participation in this study. Additionally, the email provided an informed consent document, and included a weblink to complete the online survey. Researchers developed strategies to maximize the rate of return by sending duplicate emails weekly to individuals who had not yet responded in order to request that each individual participate in the research study. Participants were recruited in this electronic manner between January and February of 2015. Of this group, thirty (30) individuals responded to the researchers’ email requests to participate in the
study and completed the online survey. Data was collected during the same time frame as participant recruitment.

**Instruments**

Data was collected for this study using a 14 question self-administered internet based electronic survey. This survey was developed by the study researchers to elicit participant beliefs and opinions regarding social justice concepts and their personal experiences with employing social justice in their daily job duties. Four questions requested demographic information including level of social work education, number of years in practice, type of professional social work credentials, and primary level of practice. Ten questions were multiple choice, with one question allowing more than one answer. Four questions required participants to describe in their own words their understanding of social justice as a social work ethic, how they were either able or unable to address social justice issues in practice, and their opinions on how social justice could improve work with individuals.

**Data Analysis**

The researchers utilized qualitative content analysis and statistical data analysis to analyze participants’ responses to survey questions. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program was used to run descriptive statistics to analyze quantitative data including demographic information and specific questions regarding prevalence and importance of addressing social justice in practice. Open-ended questions were analyzed by the researchers using content analysis. Themes were identified in participants’ responses to questions regarding their subjective understanding of social
justice, ways in which they were able to address social justice in practice, and recommendations to improve social justice work in professional practice.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

An application for human subjects research was submitted to the Division of Social Work Research Review Committee (DSWRRC), and permission to utilize human subjects for this research project was granted after the DSWRRC determined that the research activity involved in this project meets standards for “Exempt” level of research. The human subjects protocol number is 14-15-050. The application for human subjects research ensured anonymity of participants, no physical, psychological, or socio-economic risk to participants, voluntary participation and informed consent of participants.

Study co-author Samantha Cherry originally received approval from the DSWRRC in the fall semester of 2014 to conduct this research project under the “Exempt” level of research. The original approved application was then amended and approved by the DSWRRC to reflect a new faculty advisor and to reflect the addition of Patricia Ayala as a study co-author.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to explore how social workers approach social justice in their practice, and how they feel the concept is promoted by the social work profession. Another purpose is to identify barriers to promoting social justice in both everyday practice and within the profession of social work itself. The researchers also wanted to find out if social workers were able to address structural problems related to social justice in their micro practice settings. A survey was designed by the researchers (see Appendix A) and was distributed to study participants, whom were all social workers employed at one of three major medical organizations in the Sacramento area: UC Davis Medical Center, Dignity Health Medical Group, and UC Davis Jail Psychiatric Services. Thirty (30) questionnaires were completed by study participants via an online survey. All participants had social work degrees, with a variance of years of experience in the field of social work. This mixed methods research study used both closed and open-ended questions in order to obtain quantitative and qualitative data from the sample.

Demographics

Participants answered several questions about their professional education, level of practice, and years in the field. The researchers present descriptive statistics of these quantitative results in this section.

Level of Professional Social Work Education

All 30 respondents are social workers with different levels of education and experience. Demographic data on ethnicity, race, and age were not collected in this
survey, due to the primary focus of social justice education and its correlation to the profession of social work. As seen in Figure 1, the majority of the respondents 64% (n=19) had earned an MSW or doctorate degree, 33% (n=10) earned a BSW degree and 3% earned both a BSW and an MSW (3%, n=1).

![Figure 1. Level of education.](image)

**Level of Social Work Practice**

When asked their primary level of practice over half of the respondents (60%, n=18) identified as practicing in the micro level of social work, with the remaining participants’ level of practice being both micro and macro (36.7%, n=11), and a very small portion having solely macro as their level of practice (3.3%, n=1), as seen in Figure 2.
Figure 2. Level of social work practice.

Amount of Social Work Experience

When examining the respondents' amount of years they have been practicing social work the majority of respondents (n=14) 47% had 11-20 years, and the second largest group of respondents (n=8) 27% had 1-10 years of experience (see Figure 3). An even split of respondents (n=3) 10% had 21-30 years and 31-40 years of experience, and the two remaining respondents (n=2) 7% had over 40 years of experience. The average years of practicing social work for the respondents was 18.6.
Figure 3. Years of practice experience.

Quantitative Analysis

Study participants responded to a number of multiple choice questions about their experiences with and opinions on social justice within context of their own practice and within the social work profession. Participants were also asked to provide their opinions of how well ethics and values were promoted in their social work education.

Importance of Social Justice

Study participants were asked if they felt social justice was an important issue. Seventy percent (70%, n=21) of the respondents stated that social justice was ‘Very Important’, 23.3% (n=7) responded that social justice was “Important” in their social work experience, 3.3% (n=1) responded that it was ‘Somewhat Important’ and 3.3% (n=1) responded that it was ‘Not Important at All’ (see Figure 4).
Views on Social Work’s Ability to Address Social Justice

When asked if social justice is being adequately addressed by the social work profession, 70% of respondents (n=21) stated that they did not believe that the profession was doing so. The data shows that while 90% (n=27) of the respondents agreed that social justice was an important issue to address in their practice, only 30% (n=9) said that the social work profession was adequately doing so (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. Importance of social justice.
Figure 5. Opinions on addressing social justice in social work practice.

Social Justice as a Part of Normal Job Duties

Twenty respondents (67%) reported the ability to challenge social justice issues during their regular job duties (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Ability of social workers to address social justice in everyday practice.

Barriers to Addressing Social Justice in Micro Practice

Respondents who stated that they were unable to address social justice in
everyday practice were asked to identify the barriers that made social justice work difficult. A full 54.5 % (n=6) stated that their job duties do not address social justice, 27.3% (n=3) stated social justice is a topic more suited to social workers in macro practice settings, 9.1% (n=1) stated that they were too busy with clients to address social justice, and 54.5% (n=6) chose “other reasons”, which will be discussed in the qualitative data section of this chapter (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Barriers to addressing social justice in daily practice.

General Importance of Ethics and Values in Social Work

Respondents expressed the level of importance of ethics and values in their social work experience. The study reports interesting findings as seen in Figure 8: no respondents stated that ethics and values were not important at all (n=0) or only somewhat important (n=0). The majority of respondents clearly indicated that ethics and values are important 13% (n=4), and very important 87% (n=26). These findings indicate
that all survey respondents (n=30) consider ethics and values important or very important.

Figure 8. Importance of social work ethics and values.

**Perceptions of Social Work Education**

As Figure 9 shows, the data reflects that the majority of survey respondents perceived that ethics, values, and social justice were covered in college courses “Well” 36.7% (n=11) and “Somewhat Well” 36.7% (n=11). Other survey respondents stated ethics, values, and social justice were covered in college courses “Very Well” 20% (n=6), and conversely “Not Well” 6.7% (n=2).
Figure 9. Coverage of ethics, values, and social justice in college courses.

Qualitative Analysis

Study participants were asked several questions which were designed to elicit their understanding of and experiences with social justice as an activity in personal practice and as a social work value. In this section, the researchers present qualitative data that has been coded and organized into common themes.

Social Work Practitioners’ Definition of Social Justice

Study participants were asked to describe their understanding of the term social justice in the context of the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics. Only one participant responded “no idea” to this open-ended question. For the remaining surveys four main themes emerged: equality, advocacy, empowerment, and ethical duty. In addition to these themes, responses were also noted for whether social justice was mentioned as an activity for individual practice, or discussed in relation to macro level social work.

Equality. The words “equal”, “same”, and “fair” were present in a large number
of responses. Participants discussed “equal opportunities”, “fair treatment”, and “ending discrimination” as ways to describe social justice in a social work context. Five responses were simple, single-sentence answers describing social justice as simply “equal opportunity” for “everyone” and “all”. Some participants provided more complex answers that incorporated ideas of equality and freedom from oppression: “[Social justice is] equal access and ability to attain resources, education, economic independence and freedom from racism, sexism, homophobia, or other forms of oppression.”

Advocacy. The theme of advocacy for disadvantaged populations was also commonly found in participants’ responses. Specific activities were not identified in responses that mentioned advocacy, but participants did discuss advocacy in relation to oppressed clients who were experiencing inequality or discrimination. One participant wrote, “As a social worker, I feel that we are like that bridge for people who experience [poverty, systemic discrimination, racism] and try to advocate for them…” Another subject wrote that social justice is to “advocate for clients that are the most vulnerable.”

Empowerment. While only three participants used the term “empowerment” in describing the meaning of social justice, the researchers felt that this theme should be included in this analysis in order to present the ideas of one participant who stated he/she did “not believe in” social justice. This participant stated, “The definition of social justice per the Oxford English Dictionary requires a redistribution of wealth which I do not believe in. Therefore, the term as defined I do not believe in. I do wholeheartedly believe in the code’s belief of empowerment under the social justice portion.” It should be noted that this response was the only one that described social justice as a
“redistribution of wealth”. The other two respondents who used the term empowerment discussed social justice as the “empowerment of all people”, and “empowerment and assisting patients to be the best they can be”.

**Ethical duty.** Several participants described social justice in terms of a primary activity and value of social workers that is mandated by the profession’s ethical code. These responses were further grouped by their degree of ambiguity, as a number of responses mentioning social justice as an ethical duty did not go into any further details. One participant only responded that social justice is “the core value of our profession”; another only stated, “My understanding is that it is a core social work value.” Similarly, another respondent wrote, “[social justice is] a code that guides social workers to perform at the highest ethical and professional standards.” One participant stated that “social workers challenge social injustice and promote social justice” without providing any details about the definition of these two concepts or how social workers specifically challenged and promoted them. Other responses added more details when discussing social justice as a mandated activity for the social work profession: “…basically part of a social worker’s job is to advocate for social justice”, and “we have an ethical duty to advocate for people who live on the margins of society.” One participant elaborated, “Promoting social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients is part of the NASW Code of Ethics.” Another wrote, “My understanding is that social justice, really is or should be at the heart of what a social worker does.”

**Level of social work practice.** The researchers noted that participants often discussed their understanding of social justice at the macro level. Several responses
specifically mentioned “social change”, and references to social activism were discussed by participants as part of their understanding of social justice. Some responses included discussion of micro level social work activities and values, such as treating people “with respect and dignity” and “empowerment”. One participant stated, “It is part of a social worker’s job to advocate for social justice at their level of practice.”

**Addressing Social Justice in Everyday Practice**

The researchers asked all study participants whether or not they were able to challenge social injustice as part of their everyday job duties in their practice settings, keeping in mind that 96.7% of participants (n=29) stated they worked at multiple practice levels. The majority of respondents, 66.7%, indicated that they were able to address social justice in their jobs (n=20). This group of participants were then asked to provide a brief description of their social justice activities. Respondents who answered “no” to their ability to address social justice in their job settings were then asked to explain why they were not able to do so in a separate multiple-choice question, which allowed participants the choice of “other reasons”. A full 54.5% of respondents (n=6) identified “other reasons” as barriers to addressing social justice in their everyday social work practice. Participants who chose this response were asked to elaborate on the barriers they encountered to social justice practice. These open-ended answers will be reviewed in this section.

**Social justice activities.** The majority of responses (n=15) specifically mentioned helping clients access resources and advocating for clients as main social justice activities.
Providing access to resources. A basic social work activity, helping clients access resources, was often discussed as a way in which participants felt they addressed social justice in their everyday practice. One participant wrote, “It is my job to match people with correct resources and offer them opportunities they may not have known or had otherwise.”

Advocacy. Providing resources to clients was also discussed as a way of advocating for clients in social work practice. Advocacy activities were presented as both macro and micro-level activities.

Macro level advocacy. One participant discussed assisting clients with obtaining mental health care in a timely manner by working with organizations to improve services on a structural level: “By advocating we have streamlined outpatient mental health partnership so we can get people appointments within the week instead of months out.” Another participant stated that at his/her agency, if a particular resource for clients does not exist, social workers can report to management, who may then be able to either create the needed resource or provide funding to help clients obtain the identified services.

Micro level advocacy. In addition to providing resources, some participants discussed advocacy in terms of helping clients achieve equality and fight discrimination; in the words of one respondent, “…advocate for patients/clients for service needs, resources and fair treatment and opportunities.” To do so, some participants described acting as a liaison between clients, institutions, non-social work agency staff, and other individuals. Responses included helping clients with “navigating systems”, “promoting patient rights”, and “advocating for the underserved and oppressed to management.” One
participant elaborated, “…sometimes clients are treated unfair by their landlords or care providers, so as a social worker it is my job to advocate for them”. Another wrote, “[I] help staff become more understanding of client cultural issues, behaviors, and social situations.”

**Barriers to social justice practice.** A total of six participants chose “other reasons” for why they could not address social justice issues in their practice settings. Each participant then wrote a brief description of the barriers they faced. Two of these answers did not provide actual barriers to addressing social justice in job duties, and instead appeared to be elaborations on participants’ views on social justice. One such participant wrote, “I believe we should always advocate for our clients in need as social workers, however I do not believe in the taking from others to ‘equalize’ or help others. People can give if they choose to, but not be forced to help people in need.” Another participant gave an unclear and similarly unrelated answer, stating that “I advocate for people within the social justice realm.”

The remaining four responses did present actual reasons why they were unable to address social justice in their jobs. One participant reported that social justice is not being addressed in his/her practice because the issue only comes up occasionally, when an ethical issue arises. Another participant stated that, “I don’t find that I have opportunities to do it, although I would like to.” Structural barriers related to the job setting were presented as barriers to social justice practice by two participants. One wrote that “working in the jail setting, [it is] very difficult to see social justice occur because the setting is not conducive to getting social justice for inmates.” The other
participant stated, “My organization only permits administration to participate in these issues.”

**Suggestions for Improving Social Justice Practice**

Each participant was asked for an opinion about how they felt the social work profession could improve how social justice is implemented in work with vulnerable populations. The researchers reviewed the data to look for the most common themes in these responses, and determined that increased education, improving services for clients, paying more attention to structural problems, and greater advocacy for the social work profession itself were often suggested by participants as ways that the profession could improve social justice work.

**Increased education.** Four responses specifically mentioned “education”, and several others discussed education indirectly- in such terms as “training”, “awareness”, or “understanding”- as ways to improve social justice work. The targets and subjects of this education varied widely. Some responses were unclear on who needed more education or training. Another participant’s response was, “educate on how oppression and minority status affects populations”, with no description of whom should be educated. Several participants stated that social workers needed better training, with one participant stating that, “The social work profession could do a better job on understanding the structures that are in place in our society…” This idea is echoed in other responses that suggested social workers receive more post-graduate training on the subject of social justice. One participant reported that “the profession could improve by providing more trainings that extend beyond grad school”; another stated “include more content in CEU classes and
other venues.” Some responses indicated that social workers themselves should be the educators, and bring the concept of social justice to non-social work staff, communities, and other individuals. One participant elaborated on the link between the education of non-social workers and increased recognition of social injustices:

I feel that education about these issues on TV, in schools, in the communities, on the internet, etc. would be helpful. I think one of the bigger issues with how social justice is communicated to non-social workers is that it is not communicated well or enough. As social justice is a very complex issue on so many levels, meaning different things to different people, I think if there was a larger conversation about it in the communities, people would have a better understanding of these issues and maybe the playing field would be a little more equal.

Only one participant stated that social workers should “educate oneself to the issues at hand”, and one other participant mentioned increased awareness of personal bias, something that is a standard of professional social work education programs.

**Improving services for clients.** Several responses discussed the need for more programs, services, resources, and advocates for client populations. One participant discussed high caseloads and high acuity of cases as a problem to addressing social justice, in addition to a lack of resources and programs in communities. Another participant wrote, “Identifying programs that work or are of use and where the areas of need are would be the most beneficial.” One respondent discussed the need for more social workers to assist clients: “Social justice could be improved through more active
advocacy of increased social worker positions in the health profession to help serve vulnerable populations.” Another participant bluntly stated, “Having more resources and fewer caseloads [would improve social justice work].”

**Need for social justice work at multiple practice levels.** Many study participants discussed the need to address social justice at the organizational and structural levels of social work practice. Some of these comments were general, while others provided specifics. One participant stated that there needs to be “more incorporation of macro issues into micro settings”; another opined that “social workers should be more involved in movements that address inequality.” Two respondents presented agency management support as important for social workers to work on social justice issues. One participant discussed the idea of creating more unity among community groups and organizations that address social justice: “There are always groups/activists/organizations for the same issue, however [they are] not always necessary or beneficial…Being unified in one area will help filter/funnel the needs to people.” Several participants mentioned lobbying and political action as strategies for social workers to more effectively address social justice and have a stronger voice in social policy, with one commenting that “we need more grass roots social work.” Social workers need to “encourage institutions to implement social justice into social work practice”, according to one participant. Another participant recommended that social workers also help “get out the vote.”
Greater advocacy for the social work profession. Several responses mentioned concerns that the social work profession has little power as an organization. One participant bluntly stated:

I think NASW is a useless organization. In California it only seems to serve a role in providing classes for licensure. I think we need a stronger organization. Look at the Nurses’ Union, which is powerful and successfully fought for higher wages and decreased patient ratios and increased quality of healthcare and patient safety. We as social workers need to advocate for ourselves as a profession and the populations we work with as well.

Echoing this idea, another participant stated, “Despite our advocacy skills, social workers are notoriously poor at advocating for ourselves and the value of what we do.” One response discussed the need for title protection in social work as a way to improve social justice practice: “The profession needs to first organize itself as a united front with constant standards from state to state and gain the professional respect it deserves.”

Summary

In this section, the researchers presented quantitative and qualitative data that was collected via a 14 question online survey of 30 professional social workers who were employed in medical and correctional settings. The research study was designed to explore attitudes and beliefs of social workers towards social justice. In addition, the researchers hoped to find out how social justice was being addressed by social workers in practice settings and identify barriers to social justice work in everyday social work practice.
Study participants presented their subjective understandings of social justice as a part of the social work ethical code. Over 90% of participants agreed that social justice is an important concept for social work; however, 70% expressed the opinion that social work as a profession was not adequately addressing social justice. Despite this low regard for the way social justice was being approached by social workers as a profession, a majority of respondents stated that they were themselves able to address social justice in their everyday practice settings. These respondents also discussed how they were able to do so in an open-ended question, which was analyzed by researchers for common themes. The most common themes identified by the researchers included assisting clients with resources and advocating for clients’ rights and needs in the face of structural and individual discrimination. Participants who stated they could not address social justice in their job provided the barriers they encountered. Further discussion of these findings will be presented in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION & FINDINGS

Summary of Findings

Social justice is an important concept for social workers to understand and implement in social work practice. The ways in which social justice is perceived and addressed by social workers have not been thoroughly examined in the existing literature. This study was designed to investigate the ways in which social justice is understood and approached by social workers in micro practice settings. Researchers also hoped to identify barriers to social justice practice, and the role that social work education plays in promoting social justice. A 14 question survey was developed by the researchers and administered online to 30 professional social workers employed in medical practice settings. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from this survey was analyzed by the researchers, and is presented here for discussion.

The Meaning of Social Justice in Social Work

Social workers in this study defined social justice using a wide variety of examples and terminology, as noted in previous studies (Longres & Scanlon, 2001; O’Brien, 2011; Olson et al., 2013). This tendency for social workers to define social justice as a multi-faceted concept is reflected in the International Federation of Social Workers & International Association of Schools of Social Work (2004) and National Association of Social Work (1999) discussions of the complex meanings of social justice in social work practice. Common themes of equality and fairness were noted by the researchers, similar to findings by Olson et al. (2013) and O’Brien (2011). That some
participants viewed social justice in terms of empowerment is another finding which had previously been presented in the literature (Longres & Scanlon, 2001). Despite similar themes of fairness, equality, advocacy, and empowerment, the responses that participants gave regarding their understanding of social justice varied widely, reflecting Olson and colleagues’ (2013) assertion that a predominant understanding of the term was lacking among social work professionals. Social justice was presented by some participants as just something that social workers do, without any real elaboration about what the term meant. Other responses reflected an ambiguous understanding of the term and presented social justice in very broad, non-specific terms that included advocating for clients, fighting discrimination, and creating equal opportunities. The lack of a clear, specific definition of social justice reflects the multi-faceted nature of the term and supports the idea of social justice as an ambiguous concept for social workers (Olson et al., 2013; Longres & Scanlon, 2001).

**Commitment to social justice.** Social workers surveyed in this study indicated that social justice is an important issue for social work, as is ethics and values in general for the social work profession. This reflects the idea that social workers in general are committed to the professional and ethical responsibilities that practitioners have towards the clients they serve (Olson et al., 2013).

Social Justice Activities in Social Work Practice

Social workers in this study described a variety of ways that they were able to incorporate social justice into their everyday practice. Similar to studies by Olson and colleagues (2013) and O’Brien (2011), the researchers found that there was a wide
variation in the social justice activities of social workers, but common themes were present. Many participants reported assisting clients with obtaining resources as a primary social justice activity. This is in contrast to how the International Federation of Social Workers task force defined social justice activities for social workers in terms of structural social change (Hare, 2004). Advocacy as a social justice activity was also commonly discussed by study participants. This corroborates the findings of McLaughlin (2009), who also noted that social workers in clinical practice settings often used advocacy as a strategy for social justice.

**Macro versus micro.** The tendency of study participants to discuss their social justice activities in terms of micro-level interventions corresponds with the findings from the existing literature that social justice is often addressed at the individual level by social workers as opposed to the structural level (O’Brien, 2011; Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001). Challenging policies and creating new resources were the only macro-level activities discussed by several participants with respect to addressing social justice on a broader scale. It is interesting to note that none of the study participants reported performing any sort of political work—such as lobbying elected officials or organizing protests—as a way to address systemic social injustices, even though many participants discussed the need for social work to become more involved in the political process as a strategy to affect widespread societal changes which would benefit the lives of vulnerable populations. Some participants expressed the belief that they did not need to address social justice in their practice because that was the duty of macro practice social workers.
Barriers to Social Justice Work

The existing literature does not address barriers to social justice practice as described by social workers. Critics have suggested that social justice is not being addressed by social workers adequately because the profession is more focused on ensuring its legitimacy in the field of human services than addressing socio-economic problems that are the root of many social injustice issues (O’Brien, 2011; Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001). The findings of this study suggest that instead, barriers to social justice work in practice reflect both the lack of power that individual practitioners face in their everyday jobs, and the lack of power the social work profession has in general. Just over half of study participants who indicated that they did not address social justice in their social work practice stated that the reason was because their job duties did not address these issues. This suggests that social justice work is greatly restricted by the agencies that social workers are employed by, possibly due to the seeming non-importance (and non-revenue producing activity) of social justice to these organizations. It also speaks to the lack of power that the social work profession has to make changes to social work job descriptions and duties in order to reflect a commitment to social justice. This dynamic is reflected again in the mention of high caseloads as a barrier to social justice practice, which is something the individual practitioner can do very little to change, and something that the social work profession allows to continue through its passive acceptance of this status quo. A lack of resources, programs, and services for clients was also identified as a barrier to social justice work in everyday practice. Again, these are barriers that are
structural in nature which are difficult for an individual caseworker to overcome, and which social work as a profession has not effectively addressed.

**Social Work Education and Social Justice**

In general, the majority of social workers indicated they felt that ethics, values, and social justice were well-covered in their social work education. Although Funge (2011) suggested that social work educators may be underprepared in course curriculums to promote social justice, this study’s findings point to social workers having a positive view of how social justice was presented in their college coursework. This also confirms Longres & Scanlon’s (2001) assertion that social work educators believe that social justice is an implicit concept in the social work education despite not being explicitly mentioned in course syllabi. Study participants did indicate that there is a need to increase the role that continuing education plays in promoting social justice. Continuing education and how it may impact social justice work has not been addressed in the existing literature, and should be further investigated.

**Implications for Social Work**

The findings of this study have several implications for social work practitioners, social work education, and social work as a profession. Social work as a profession is unique in that it specifically promotes social justice as a core value and basis of practice (NASW, 1999). However, many social workers are constrained by their practice environments when attempting to work for social justice and fighting for equal rights and opportunities for their clients. Simply put, many social workers do not get paid to fight for social justice, and they must work within the confines of their practice settings to
address issues of injustice for their clients and the communities they serve. Some social work practice settings are just not conducive to fighting discrimination and inequality, such as in restrictive and punitive correctional settings. It is in these environments in particular that social workers need to be creative about how they go about working for social justice for their clients.

Social work practitioners also need to better address systemic problems of social injustices if they are to ever help individuals realize equality and improve their well-being. A majority of the social workers who participated in this study stated that they do not feel the social work profession was adequately addressing social justice. Social work practitioners and the profession as a whole should work to address the barriers to social justice in micro practice via interventions with broader client systems and other types of macro-level advocacy, including political strategies. As a profession, social work needs to better address conditions in society—such as poverty, racism, and economic inequality—that contribute to social injustices faced by individuals and communities. Although social workers report advocating for clients’ rights, opportunities, and access to resources at the micro level, without addressing the structural roots of social injustices, many of the inequities and discrimination faced by the vulnerable populations we serve will continue.

The social work profession has the potential to become a powerful, organized force to fight for equality and fairness in society. A strong social work organization dedicated to targeting social injustices faced by vulnerable populations can affect significant change to the systems of inequality that oppress individuals and communities.
The ambiguity of social justice as a concept in the eyes of social workers suggests that social justice should be better addressed in social work education. Although overall, most participants believed that social justice was presented efficiently in their social work education, the lack of a clear, uniform definition of the term in survey responses indicated that there is still work to do in order to ensure that future social workers fully understand and can describe what social justice is. All students should also be taught the importance of incorporating political social work into social work practice, and effective strategies to address structural social problems in micro practice settings. Educators should stress that intervening with systems of injustice in society on behalf of oppressed individuals and communities is the responsibility of every social worker, not just those employed in macro settings. More attention should also be paid to the role of continuing education as a way of promoting social justice work in social work practice

**Recommendations**

During the process of completing this study, the researchers identified several ways to improve the validity and reliability of the data gathered. The first recommendation for future research is to utilize a larger sample size to provide more significant research findings for possible evidence-based practices and improvements. Starting the collection of data earlier may have increased the sample size in order to get a larger amount of respondents. Post data-analysis, the researchers realized that there could have been improvements made to the research instrument that would have allowed for less ambiguous answers from participants. More open-ended questions also would have been helpful to elicit views and opinions of participants on the subject of social work
education and social justice. Although administering the survey online was more convenient, administering the survey orally would have allowed the researchers the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and to clarify participants’ responses. The research instrument also should have gathered more demographic data, such as gender, age, and race, to provide a better understanding of what social justice means to people from different backgrounds and age ranges. Another recommendation is to better investigate the education background of respondents. This would be useful in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of similar education background demographics that may not have been considered by researchers and which could serve as important information for data analysis regarding preparation as social work students.

**Study Limitations**

This study was limited by several factors. The researchers used convenience sampling to recruit participants from agencies where they had professional contacts. This limited the sample size and limited the types of agencies that participants were recruited from. The researchers would have liked to include social workers employed in practice settings other than medical settings to see if any correlations existed between approaches to social justice practice and place of employment. Since this is a graduate student research project, there was limited time to collect the data; with a longer data collection period, the sample size may have increased if more survey invitees decided to participate in the survey during that extra time. Recruiting participants from different geographic areas could have increased this study’s generalizability and provided a wider range of perspectives on social justice. Qualitative analysis of open-ended questions could have
been influenced by the researchers’ own biases towards the subject. Themes that were chosen to analyze qualitative data were chosen by the researchers and could have been influenced by the researchers’ own perceptions of social justice.

**Conclusion**

During the process of completing this research study, we spent much time reflecting on the meaning of social justice. We realized that social workers have an incredible power and responsibility to help our clients realize freedom and equality in their lives by actively working to change the oppressive systems that many individuals and communities are caught in. Social workers bring hope to the lives of those they work with; the hope of something better, the hope of improving their lives and their well-being. We owe it to those whom we serve to work tirelessly towards helping our clients achieve justice. In these efforts, social workers should be leaders in creating coalitions of change which include policymakers, community organizers, educators, and other professionals to continue to bring awareness of the importance of social justice and to spur the creation of public policies on local, state, and national levels which are based on compassion and the easing of human suffering.
Appendix A

Survey

1. Which of the following represents your level of social work education?
   a. I have earned an MSW or doctorate degree
   b. I have earned a BSW degree
   c. I hold both BSW and MSW degrees

2. What is your primary level of practice?
   a. Micro
   b. Macro
   c. Both

3. Do you have any of the following professional credentials?
   a. LCSW
   b. ACSW
   c. Some other type of professional social work credential
   d. Both a & c
   e. Both b & c
   f. None of the above

4. How long have you been practicing social work?
   _____/years

5. Please briefly describe your understanding of the NASW Code of Ethics’ value of social justice:

   ____________________________________________________________
6. Is challenging social injustice something that you are able to perform as part of your regular job duties?
   a. Yes (Please answer question #7 and skip question #8)
   b. No (Please skip question #7 and answer question #8)

7. If your answer to question #6 is ‘Yes’, please provide a brief description of how you are able to specifically address social justice issues in your everyday practice:

   __________________________________________________________

8. If your answer to question #6 is ‘No’, please choose the answer that explains why you are unable to address social justice issues in your practice setting (may choose more than one answer):

   a. My job duties do not address social justice
   b. Social justice is a topic more suited for social workers in macro practice settings
   c. I am too busy with clients to address social justice
   d. Some other reason (please briefly describe):

   __________________________________________________________

9. Do you feel that social justice is an important issue that all social workers should try to address in their practice?

   a. Yes, social workers should do their best to adhere to this professional value
b. No, it is unreasonable to expect all social workers to address social justice issues in their practice

10. Given today’s socio-political climate, do you feel that the social work profession as a whole is doing an adequate job of addressing issues related to social justice?
   a. Yes
   b. No

11. In your opinion, how could the social work profession improve how social justice is implemented in work with vulnerable populations?

12. In your experience as a social worker, do you consider ethics and values as:
   a. Not important at all
   b. Somewhat important
   c. Important
   d. Very important

13. In your experience as a social worker, do you consider social justice as:
   a. Not important at all
   b. Somewhat important
   c. Important
   d. Very Important

14. Thinking back to the time you were in college, how well were ethics, values, and social justice covered in courses you had taken?
   a. Not well at all
b. Somewhat well

c. Well

d. Very well
Appendix B

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO
DIVISION OF SOCIAL WORK

To: Samantha Cherry and Patricia Ayala
Date: February 10, 2016

From: Research Review Committee

RE: HUMAN SUBJECTS APPLICATION

Your Human Subjects application for your proposed study, “Social Work and Social Justice: The Rhetoric vs. the Reality”, is Approved as Exempt. Discuss your next steps with your thesis/project Advisor.

Your human subjects Protocol # is: 14-15-050. Please use this number in all official correspondence and written materials relative to your study. Your approval expires one year from this date. Approval carries with it that you will inform the Committee promptly should an adverse reaction occur, and that you will make no modification in the protocol without prior approval of the Committee.

The committee wishes you the best in your research.

Research Review Committee members Professors Jude Antonyappan, Teiahsha Bankhead, Maria Dinis, Serge Lee, Kisun Nam, Francis Yuen

Cc: Bankhead
References


http://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/fund-reports/2014/jun/mirror-mirror


