AN ASSESSMENT OF THE KNOWLEDGE LEVEL OF GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO QUEER THEORY AND CRITICAL THEORY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Heather Valdez

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Abstract

of

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE KNOWLEDGE LEVEL OF GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO QUEER THEORY AND CRITICAL THEORY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Critical theory and queer theory are highly relevant to social works objective of social justice. The present study was designed to determine these theoretical concepts relevance and benefits to social work education and practice. Study results from student surveys and course syllabi found low rates of these concepts incorporated into graduate social work programs. Key informant interviews validated these perspectives as necessary for a progressive approach to social work that aims for social justice and the emancipation and liberation of oppressed populations. The literature and key informants suggest that critical social work enables social work to merge micro and macro level work. Merging micro and macro level work enables social work to return to its social justice objectives.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Literatures discussing both the limitations of the biomedical model of psychiatric illness and methods, or approaches, which question scientific truth claims, are marginalized within the social work literature pool (Morley, 2003). The present study contextualizes and examines the relevance of queer theory and critical theory for social justice goals within social work practice as opposed to deficit-based individualized models. The researcher intends to use this study’s findings to encourage social justice oriented theoretical concepts to be used in social work curriculum with a focus on critical and queer theory in direct and indirect practice with clients in micro and macro work.

The focus of the present study is promoting the need to integrate social justice oriented theoretical concepts into social work curriculum. It is hoped that these chosen theoretical concepts will promote and teach the necessary tools needed for working towards social justice. Two theories that are informed by social justice queer theory and critical theory-- are the focus of this study. A focus on the above two theories are especially important for students in higher education because they are in the stage of their academic careers that is priming them for social work positions. Implications for encouraging social workers to engage in critical social work practice will be made.

Social work is the only academic major and profession with a mission of social justice (Ritter, 2013). Striving for social justice means for social workers to promote and advocate for equal economic, political, and social rights of all people while emphasizing underserved populations (Ritter, 2013). According to Ritter (2013), social work is losing
sight on its historical and true mission and not upholding micro and macro practice methods that privilege social justice. Due to the hegemonic influences of medicine, psychology, and professionalism, social justice oriented work is slowly falling away from direct and indirect practice (Herz & Johansson, 2011). Current trends in social work show the tendency for social workers to use biomedical models of psychiatric mental health work without critically analyzing these approaches (Morley, 2003; Taylor, 1989; Thyer & Wodarski, 1998). The medical model of mental health practice, according to Morley (2003) is informed by the view that “psychological distress is a disease with physical properties caused by biochemical malfunctioning and resultant imbalances in the brain” (pp. 66).

Given the above accounting and critique of the current medical model drift, how can social work reclaim its historic, radical roots and work to decrease the effects of oppression and the deleterious influences of the medical model? Recovering social work’s foundations will most likely mean that social work students and professionals need to understand the meanings of social justice oriented social work and what tools are needed to engage in it. Social work students and professionals must deconstruct oppression by looking at all structural and social influences that contribute to these injustices, as opposed to only looking within the individual. Then, these practitioners need apply these strategies within their work with client at both the micro and macro level. Exposure of theoretical concepts that will help promote this type of work will be the framework for this mission.
**Background of the Problem**

Within the literature pool for social work education, there are lack queer theory concepts in relation to social work practice (McPhail, 2004). Furthermore, critical theory is marginalized in direct practice work (Morley, 2003). The connection between queer theory and critical theory is rarely found within social work literature. This finding leads the researcher to assume these concepts are not readily available to students and professionals nor are they being integrated into social work programs. With social work’s mission of social justice, it is the ethical obligation of social workers to include all disadvantaged groups when working towards equality and justice through practice with clients (Burdge, 2007). Queer theory and critical theory are two theoretical tools, rendered virtually invisible in social work discourse. Yet, both theories can help promote the value of social justice and open new possibilities of social work practice. Students and professionals need exposure to queer theory and critical theory as models for a more complete, multi-layered, and rich approach to social justice oriented practice with clients. Understanding these concepts will contribute to the objective of social justice; not solely for queer populations but can lead to a better understanding of oppression of all marginalized people. The researcher encourages using queer theory and critical theory in social work curriculum as a framework for students and professionals to view clients through a person-in-environment lens.

This study will attempt to provide a foundation for queer theory and critical theory concepts as being beneficial and crucial to critical social work practice; a practice
structure aimed at social justice (Healy, 2001). In this study, these theoretical concepts are examined to discover the frequency of exposure to students in social work classrooms while assessing students’ knowledge and understanding of these concepts. Ultimately, it is hoped that these theoretical contributions may be a foundation for the use of critical social work practice with clients. The purpose of this study is to encourage their use in practice settings and encourage critical social work as a preferred approach to practice.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between queer theory and critical theory, explain how queer theory is a critical theory that can be used practically, encourage their use in social work education and practice, and make implications for critical social work about why it is a model for social justice oriented practice. The aim is to encourage critical social works use in education and practice settings as a way to return to social works mission; with the use of critical theory and queer theory as practical guidelines. From a qualitative and quantitative research standpoint, this study will look to explore the meaning and relationship between queer theory and critical theory to promote critical social work.

One goal of this exploration will be to deconstruct current social work practice and define how it has moved away from social justice and towards a deficit, individualistic, and psychological model of practice (Morley, 2003). Overall, the intent of this research endeavor is to bring this information forward and encourage social work to return to its radical roots through utilizing critical social work techniques and theoretical perspectives. The researcher will argue that queer theory and critical theory’s
assumptions, values, and practices help provide a social justice informed framework for working with all populations, especially those who are subjugated. It is also believed that a greater understanding of critical social work will show its effectiveness and relevance to social works mission.

The knowledge and understanding gained from this study will benefit many social workers on the micro and macro level. In micro practice, social workers will be able to use the perspectives of queer and critical theory in direct work with clients to deconstruct structural and cultural discourses that influence their current place within society. It is hoped that empowering individuals through using queer and critical theory-informed models, such as narrative therapy, will counter the deficit, individualizing trend in social work that elides the influences of larger structural and cultural discourses that impact person’s lives. The goal is to decrease the occurrence of locating the problem within the individual by showing that people are separate from their problems and affected by larger social constructs.

On a macro level, the information from this study will hope to influence social workers and clients to collaborate on a larger scale to make change at the policy level to improve structural conditions and inequities that influence marginalized populations. The aim is to bridge the so-called disconnect between micro and macro level social work. It will be argued that queer theory and critical theory assists in making links between micro and macro social work practice. Relatedly, the researcher aims to analyze deficit models of care that are heavily influenced by individualism, and encourage more holistic approaches for striving for social justice.
The present study aims: 1) To assess social work graduate students self-reported knowledge level, understanding of, and exposure to queer theory and critical theory concepts; 2) Examine the frequency of these theories incorporated into social work graduate course curriculums; and 3) Describe the relevance and importance of using these theories in social work practice with clients.

**Theoretical Framework**

Based upon the connection between post-structuralism, postmodernism, and social constructionism and their links to queer theory and critical theory, the author has chosen these perspectives as a conceptualizing framework. The background and description of these perspectives is laid out and then an explanation for their application to the purpose of this study is given.

**Post-Structuralism**

In order to understand the meaning and relevance of post-structuralism to this study, one must understand structuralism. In short, structuralism is the school of thought that believes that culture can be understood by studying the underlying structures in texts. Structuralism believes that the ‘truth’ or a ‘real’ structure can be found (McBride, n.d.). In structuralism, meaning is constructed through difference, such as binary pairs like man vs. woman, which means we only know things by what they are not; therefore, meaning and truth are constructed through language (McBride, n.d.). Binary pairs are then ultimately dependent on the other for its meaning, and possibly for its existence (McBride, n.d.).
Post-structuralism was a response to structuralism in that it rejects that one could truly map the universal structure of language or culture (McBride, n.d.). Post-structuralism utilizes deconstruction to show that there is no “real” truth. This reaction to structuralism states that we must deconstruct the binaries created through language and comparison. Doing so will show that language, culture, and objects hold no real truth value and are all socially constructed.

Post-structuralism believes that the ‘meaning’ of something is constantly changing dependent upon the environment it exists and therefore does not hold a natural truth. Creating space for multiple realities to exist is one of the key tenets of post-structuralism. It is also believed that within all binaries, one term is always subordinate to the other (McBride, n.d.). With this subordination, one term holds more power; heterosexual vs. homosexual, man vs. woman, and good vs. evil, with the latter of these binaries as subordinates. Post-structuralist thought recognizes the power of discourse that shapes a perceived reality of a person and/or object; including binaries. Discourses are believed to regulate what is said, thought, and what is seen as true or correct, and are seen as the tool through which “power is expressed and people and practices are governed” (McBride, n.d.).

Postmodernism

For postmodernism to be understood in this study, the researcher will first explain the aspects of modernism. Modernism believes that there is an existence of an objective reality that has the ability to be known, or found out, by positivist science thus meaning that western science has the ability to make truth claims (Brown, 2012). The belief in this
type of western research has created “totalizing and universalizing grand narratives”; therefore, this ‘found out’ objective truth is presumed to be truth for all individuals (Brown, 2012). Modernism rejects the option of social construction as a pathway to making meaning and rejects the ability to have multiple realities.

Postmodernism rejects modernism’s notion of knowledge by positing that what masquerades as universal “truths” is in actuality situated within a historical, political, discursive, and cultural context. This perspective rejects the belief in metanarratives; the grand universal truth stories that are assumed by modernism (Bloland, 2005). Utilizing a postmodern perspective enables us to doubt and be skeptical of unexamined truth claims and directs us to seek out the implications and consequences of these claims (Bloland, 2005). Postmodernism allows one to bring into question the assumptions of universal truths by deconstruct their meaning and existence. Multiple realities are allowed as a possibility within the postmodern perspective, which allows for the existence of many versions of the self.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionist theory is built upon the assumption that many of aspects of one’s everyday experiences are the consequence of historical, linguistic, institutional practices, and/or collective social action rather than objective reality. Social constructionism is characteristically located in opposition to essentialism, which sees experiences in terms of inherent, trans-historical essences independent of context. Looking at the world as understood by the subjective experience of daily life as opposed to an objective reality is a key aspect of social constructionism (Andrews, 2012). Social
constructionism is mainly concerned with how knowledge is constructed and understood and believes that interactions between people and how they use language constructs their realities (Andrews, 2012). Realities are created within the context of daily interactions, produced through language, and are socially constructed by these means.

**Anti-Oppressive**

Anti-oppressive theory is an umbrella term for anti-oppressive practice (AOP) which signifies a range of social justice type approaches to social work (Brown, 2012). Critical social work had adopted anti-oppressive discourse as a postmodern view within progressive social work that encourages issues of diversity, difference, and oppression to be situated at the center of social works commitment to social justice (Brown, 2012). The hope of this type of theory is to address oppression in a more comprehensive manner by bringing together many theoretical perspectives whose heart lies on the aim for social justice.

**Application of Theoretical Framework**

Anti-oppressive theory is inclusive of all three theoretical perspectives listed for the framework of this study: post-structuralism, postmodernism, and social constructionism (Brown, 2012). These theoretical perspectives are rooted in queer theory and critical theory and all have a relation to one another. Anti-oppressive theory utilizes these perspectives, including others, as a way of understanding means for striving for social justice. All three of these theories believe that there is no universal natural truth and through the use of deconstruction, one can see that subjects realities, objects, and other entities are all socially constructed which enables for multiple realities to exist.
This definition is important to the understanding of queer theory and critical theory and their use in critical social work practice. Critical social works emphasis on addressing social injustices, as opposed to focusing on the individual as the problem, makes it for a steady foundation for social justice social work by utilizing anti-oppressive theoretical perspectives within practice; such as queer theory and critical theory.

Definition of Terms

Queer theory. Queer theory is situated within post-structuralism with a particular focus on the socially constructed nature of gender and sexual identities and practices. A key aspect of queer theory is highlighting and questioning the categorization of gender and sexuality suggesting that identities are not “natural” or fixed. Broadly speaking, queer theory’s goal is to destabilize sex and gender identity categories drawing attention to the supposed stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire. By challenging this model of stability, queer theory focuses on the incongruities between sex, gender, desire, and identity. Hence, queer theory deconstructs the limits of sex and gender identity categories, which are often informed by binaries and heterosexuality as the norm (Adams, 2002; Beasley, 2005; Crawly & Broad, 2008).

Critical theory. A theoretical framework that attempts to understand social systems by focusing on power and domination, which can enlighten us to become more conscious of the need for change and encourage us to work towards that change (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). Critical theory investigates and deconstructs the social order of things and how power structures are created and maintained (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Through understanding social order and power, critical theory is offered as a guide for
social action, leading to social change, and towards the emancipation of oppressed populations (Hoy & McCarthy, 1994).

**Critical social work.** The mission of critical social work is to promote and work towards social justice through utilizing social work practice and policy efforts to address social injustices as opposed to only focusing on individual client problems (Healy, 2001). Critical social work is an umbrella term for field of practice that promotes practice theories striving towards social justice social work through a critical theoretical lens (Healy, 2001).

**Heteronormativity.** A belief system that supports normative gender categories, suggesting that heterosexuality is ‘natural’. Valorizing the cultural idea of heterosexual family (Ingraham, 2005; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005), a heteronormative view reinforces the idea of a stable alignment between biological sex, sexuality, and gender identity. One of the projects of queer theory is to make visible heteronormative ideologies that marginalize alternative genders, desires, and sexual practices.

**Discourse.** Rachel Hare-Mustin (1994) defines discourses as, “systems of statements, practices, and institutional structures” (p. 19). Discourse is the social language of culture produced at a specific time and place that suggests, and expresses, a way of understanding the human experience (Tyson, 1999). This language gives a way of telling something about a person, the culture, which the person lives, the social institutions the person is a part of and assumptions that a person may hold or value (Whisnant, 2012). Historian Michael Foucault (1997) examines how certain discourses create meaning systems that have gained a “truth” or hegemonic status, and dominate
how we define and shape our social world, while other discourses are marginalized and subjugated yet potentially ‘offer’ sites where hegemonic practices can be contested, destabilized, and resisted.

**Externalizing problems.** A narrative practice that views and talks about problems as separate from a person and as a distinct entity outside of the person. Externalizing is in stark contrast to internalizing problems, locating them solely within the individual (Morgan, 2002). By externalizing, the cultural discourses that support problems in people’s lives are rendered visible and open for interrogation. Once unmasked, people can begin to resist problems and live preferred lives.

**Assumptions.** Assumptions to be considered for the purpose of this study include:

1) Critical social work practice is an anti-oppressive theoretical approach to practice; 2) Oppressed groups want to be emancipated; 3) Current social work values essentialism over social constructionism; 6) Education values positivism. 7) Current social work trends are inconsistent with critical social work goals.

**Justification**

Social work is widely defined as a profession working towards social justice for oppressed groups. Yet, currently, social work trends are not matching up to the definition of its mission (Herz & Johansson, 2011). Social work is increasingly losing its sight on social justice oriented social work by neglecting social problems (Ritter, 2013). Without social justice social work, the populations we serve will continue to face oppression and unequal treatment. In order to return to social works radical roots, social work education
and practice needs to include theoretical perspectives that will influence social workers, both in micro and macro practice, to work with clients with a social justice framework. This study aims to suggest some of the theoretical perspectives that could enable this work and that can be used as examples as ways of working with clients through critical social work practice; queer theory and critical theory with a post-structural, postmodern, and social constructionist foundation. The researcher includes expert opinions on the relevance and important of these theoretical perspectives in order to promote their use in educational and practice settings. The researcher encourages critical social work practice to be a preferred style of practice due to its commitment to social justice (Healy, 2001).

By utilizing critical social work, the profession may be able to move away from only using deficit based models of practice that encourage individualism and locate the problem within the person (McPhail, 2004).

Social work education already encourages a person-in-environment approach to practice (Burdge, 2011). Even with this approach, there are gaps in the profession's ability to continue to fight for social justice due to its adoption of psychological methods and approaches that have shifted the profession's focus away from social problems and towards individual psychiatric and psychological problems (Herz & Johannson, 2011). Locating the problem only in the individual and not looking at structural and environmental influences has pushed social work towards more micro work with clients and away from macro level work (Herz & Johannson). However, even if social work remains focusing on micro work, it is still possible to work with clients on a level that externalizes the problem to larger social constructs to promote change not only within the
individual but also at the macro level. The aim of micro work with clients is to empower them, and with these theoretical perspectives in mind, it may be possible to empower them to be agents of change at the macro level.

Collaboration and collective social action between the provider and consumer is a vital value of critical social work practice (Healy, 2001). This is an empowerment approach to practice that aims to produce larger outcomes, such as empowering clients to alleviate societal pressures on a macro level as opposed to an individual level, which is a social work value when working with clients (Burdge, 2011). The researcher attempts to show the importance of critical social work as a social justice oriented model in order to encourage social work to return to its radical mission.

**Study Limitations**

This study is a descriptive study that is both quantitative and qualitative in nature and does not provide causal or relationship information. Participants and key informants are limited in number and their responses may offer a narrow set of information. Key informants included the advisor of this study for a key informant interview and a referral through the advisor for the second key informant, which may be limiting due to bias. Surveys are all self-reported answers through convenient sampling of the same social work department as the researcher. The researcher cannot guarantee there was not an influence from this fact. There is no way to guarantee the truthfulness of answers to questionnaires. This study is not intended to be able to provide answers as to what is best practice; it is only intended to provide a deconstruction of current trends and suggestions.
Chapter 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Although social work literature encompasses values striving towards a just society, social work has moved largely towards adopting oppression and deficit models (McPhail, 2004). Social justice social work seems to be lost. For the scope of this study, analyzing every way in which social work is lacking in methodology and theory needed to better serve underserved populations with a social justice framework would be too large to complete. Therefore, this study attempts to describe and encourage critical social work concepts that have minimally been available in social work literature and that is assumed to be lacking in educational settings: critical theory and queer theory. The researcher views queer theory as a critical theory that can be a practical framework and example as to how to engage in social justice social work. The present study will attempt to describe the need and importance for social workers to have knowledge of these theoretical concepts for use in direct and indirect practice; micro and macro level work.

Current Social Work Trends

Structural Injustices

Over time, social work has increasingly become concerned about the status of the profession. Conforming to the ideals of professionalism (Macfarlane, 2009) has hindered the radical roots of social work working at a social justice level. There are many arguments as to how this happened, but it is important for social workers to be aware of this shift in direction of which approaches are commonly used in practice. Social workers have increasingly positioned themselves towards psychological methods which has
transformed social problems into psychological and psychiatric problems (Herz & Johansson, 2011). Medical model influences (Morley, 2003), positivist academic research (Brown, 2012), administrative and policy changes, to name a few, have all shaped how the social work profession has adapted to structural changes within practice.

Social work has embraced psychotherapy by only looking at ‘individual’ problems and has abandoned its mission of social change through looking at the ‘social’ influences to problems, which has created a dichotomy between micro and macro work (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). Organizational discourses have shaped how we have adopted these practices (Healy, 2001). Due to such discourses, social work is criticized for its lack of commitment to an ideology for social change because of its shift towards administration and provision of direct services (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). In 2001, Healy reported that things such as globalization, privatization, and market driven approaches to work have geared social work in a direction where social workers are abiding more and more by contractual obligations and are then provoked towards authoritative type work (Healy, 2001).

Mainstream social work is also criticized as being an agent for capitalism, which is viewed as antithetical to human need (Mullaly, 2001). The analysis and deconstruction of capitalism is needed to show its oppressive and exploitative aspects in order to gear social workers towards adopting progressive type practices (Mullaly, 2001). Approaches aimed at developing people’s awareness of the how capitalism shapes, limits, and dominates their experiences may open a window for alleviating its effects (Allan, 2009). The literature suggests social workers have essentially covered up the negative influences
of capitalism by reframing their work with clients by helping them cope with, or adjust to, capitalism instead of deconstructing its damaging effects (Mullaly, 2001). Inequities and social injustices are perpetuated by the current capitalist system, which have effects on mainstream social work (Allan, 2009). Capitalism has many economic, social, and political consequences to social work such as the governments’ repeal from the social welfare of its people (Mullaly, 2001). The ideals of capitalism are in opposition to social workers’ ethical obligations and to the promotion of progressive social work values.

Current social work continues to face these same barriers due to major changes in social and institutional structures. Mullaly (2001) suggests that emancipatory forms of practice are needed in order to transform capitalistic approaches into a form of socialism to attend to human need. The effects of social spending cuts, privatization of public services, restrictive eligibility criteria, and barriers due to user fees are all examples of the effects of capitalism (Mullaly, 2001). Due to these barriers, social workers are spending more time refusing services because of systemic priorities that emphasize efficiency, cost containment, and worker control (Mullaly, 2001).

An example of barriers created by capitalistic contractual obligation would be insurance contracts with service providers. Much of micro social work practice is guided by insurance and therefore abides by a number of strict rules in order to provide services. Direct practice social workers know the limitations of insurance guided practice and that it is very restrictive in the work that is able to be done with clients; these policies place private profit above basic human need (Mullaly, 2001). Social workers are forced to abide by cost-effective practice as opposed to flexible and creative ways of working with
clients that is sometimes needed. With these limitations, working on a larger level with clients is hard to do and makes for the decrease of a vital value of critical social work: shared decision-making and collective social action with clients (Healy, 2001). Due to the effects of capitalism, authoritative approaches with clients are adopted which limits collaboration with clients and emphasizes individual responsibility of the client.

**Individualism**

Locating the problem within the person is a current trend within social work practice. An individualized approach to social problems has become the dominant practice in social work (Herz & Johansson, 2011). As McPhail (2004) states, social work has adopted oppression and deficit models into practice with clients. These practice models fail to externalize problems to larger social injustices that maintain oppression and instead transform these problems into an internal psychiatric or psychological issue (Herz & Johansson, 2011). This approach has made social workers ignore structural elements and stop acknowledging environmental influences (Herz & Johansson, 2011). A core emphasis in social work education is using a person-in-environment context when exploring problems with clients in order to look at the client in a holistic manner (Burdge, 2011). Yet, in practice, we have moved towards a model based on individualism that is coordinated with the medical model and keeps up with the current standards of the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) (Morley, 2003). Utilizing these structural approaches, practitioners are placing organizational production over the social work value of human need (Fisher & Karger, 1997). Deficit-based work is the product of these approaches with clients; further internalizing the problem within the
person. When internalizing occurs, the person starts to believe that the problem represents something about their inner-self, something that is of their ‘true nature’ (Russell & Carey, 2004).

To counteract the effects of internalizing, externalizing problems is suggested to promote that “the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem” and encourages that problems are outcomes of history and culture and not of the sole ‘nature’ of the individual (Russell & Carey, 2004, p. 2). This definition of externalizing problems fits the theoretical concept of social constructionism. Because problems are viewed to be socially constructed, they are seen to not be ‘natural’ or an ‘innate’ aspect of a person. The person will then view himself or herself as separate from the problem and that, they and the problem are not the same (Russell & Carey, 2004). Therefore, externalizing problems liberates clients into the mindset that they are capable of being relieved of the problem. Salas, Sen, and Segal (2010) also suggest that if individuals become aware of their place within social structures, and how they are influenced by these social structures, they can become more aware of how to makes changes towards self-empowerment; an outcome of externalizing problems.

**Binaries**

The profession of social work accepts many taken for granted social constructs that are then projected onto clients in both micro and macro work. Current social work trends in education and practice blindly encourage essentialist ideals and lacks deconstruction of naturalized norms in order to create space for preferred selves to promote the empowerment of clients (McPhail, 2004). The deconstruction of power and
binaries that serve the purpose of creating a ‘natural truth’ and minimizing the ‘other’ (Morley, 2003), may be empowering for clients to know the social construction of norms and that their differences are not innately deviant or abnormal in any way. The belief in the innate pathology of oneself is often internalized and reinforced by the medical model approach to practice and can cause for many problems within the individual. These social norms have served a purpose in the construction of language, categorization, assumptions, and defining labels that have contributed to the development of the social being, identity formation, and the ideology of the ‘self’. These norms cannot be ignored, but solely using these categories for the purpose of classifying people can truly be limiting in nature, harmful to populations involved, and inaccurate (McPhail, 2004).

Binaries that produce internalizing problems are sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Social work theory and practice largely views group identity as a core construct and contributes to the reasoning the profession focuses on marginalized groups as the main interest of concern. Identifying groups of people into binary terms such as privileged/marginalized maintains the social work definition of advocating for oppressed groups. Many theories incorporated into social work practice, such as feminist theory, largely depend on these binary divides, such as female/male, to work towards social justice (McPhail, 2004). For these perspectives, these binaries may be beneficial for identity politics. Yet, binaries can contribute to the internalizing of the ‘other’ as innately bad and/or unnatural and constructs them as minorities (Sands, 1996). Only using
binaries as categories for language may ignore important information and tools to be used for a more complete model of obtaining social justice for marginalized groups.

Social work practice and theory follows a model where categories such as sex, gender, and sexual orientation are largely left unquestioned due to essentialist trends of the profession (McPhail, 2004). The deconstruction of binary categories and the power they hold may contribute to the liberation of client problems (McPhail, 2004). Binaries create the subordination and submission of groups of people who are put into the ‘unnatural’ category. Social construction may be a complete way of tracing back to how these binary norms were developed and maintained. Doing so may reveal their existence as not ‘natural’ and only socially constructed over time. Social construction of these binaries may be the root of oppression due to their hierarchical qualities embedded within them (Morley, 2003).

McPhail (2004) agrees that although group identity is a starting point for oppression, it may also be used as a point for liberation for these oppressed groups. One side of the binary is usually valued on some level, which maintains the opposite binary as being the deviant “other” and is devalued (Sands, 1996). Deconstructing these binaries may develop a clearer picture as to how society has created oppression, which may open a window to answers as to how to diminish and reverse this oppression.

Post Theoretical Social Work Trends

Progressive social work values social justice, human liberation, and social equality at the forefront of its mission (Mullaly, 2001). Critical social work has many of the same elements of a progressive approach to social work practice. To understand the
aim of critical social work in the context of using critical theory and queer theory approaches to practice, it is important to understand some of the theoretical foundations upholding these perspectives. Three focal points are described in relation to the purpose of this study in promoting queer theory as a critical theory and using these theories as an approach to critical social work practice. The researcher will term these as ‘post’ theoretical perspectives: post-structuralism, postmodernism, and social constructionism. Many critical social work approaches to practice are based on the theoretical perspectives that value constructionism and oppose essentialism. However, most therapeutic literature emphasizes essentialist ideas of a true nature of the self (Herz & Johansson, 2011). The lack of constructionist ideas in therapeutic discourse and reinforces the need for these perspectives to be included in the social work literature pool to provide alternatives to the naturalized ‘essential self’ (Herz & Johansson, 2011). Critical social work has also accepted anti-oppressive theory as an umbrella term for these perspectives as they all serve to work towards social justice social work (Healy, 2001). McPhail (2004) states that critiques that hold the values within these theoretical perspectives are well regarded in other academic disciplines, including political science, sociology, philosophy, literature, and others, yet are marginalized in social work academia.

Often, postmodernism is used as an umbrella term for many theoretical perspectives that share common elements (McPhail, 2004). A postmodern perspective, and other schools of thought, criticize the existence of objective truths and instead supports their being multiple realities that are subjective in nature and are socially constructed (McPhail, 2004). These social constructs, for example the male/female
binary, maintain the hierarchy of power structures which are seen in large as objective truths; therefore creating one side of the binary holding a higher value than another (Morley, 2003). Postmodernism denies these truths and suggesting that they are constructs informed through discourse and then reinforced by privilege and power. Post-structuralism, postmodernism, and social constructionism all use the tool of ‘deconstruction’ to make meaning of social conditions of the world. Deconstructing is used to show how a concept, idea, model, theory, and other constructs, are ideologies that are socially, or culturally, constructed rather than being natural or reflecting truth or reality (Collins, 2000). All three ‘post’ schools of thought were a reaction to linear, structural, and truth making ways of viewing the social world. They believe that objective truths and realities do not have the ability to be found out. These perspectives believe that truths and realities cannot be found by studying underlying structures in texts, comparing objects through a binary lens to understand an object by knowing what it is not, or through western positivist research (Brown, 2012). Instead, these viewpoints attempt to understand human problems through deconstruction in order to liberate marginalized groups.

**Critical Social Work**

**Critical Theory**

Critical theory attempts to understand social systems by focusing on power and domination (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). Since its creation in the 1920s and 1930s by key scholars of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, critical theory has been a foundational idea for the liberation of people and promotion of social change
Critical theory is based on practicing reflexivity, which means to question and deconstruct social order and how power is distributed in order to explain human conditions (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). Salas, Sen, & Segal (2010) suggest that through critical theory we can understand social systems by the deconstruction of power and domination, which will encourage us to become more aware of the need for change within these systems, which will then encourage us to work towards that change. Therefore, critical theory can be seen as a framework for encouraging clients to engage in social action; merging micro work with macro work. Critical theory brings forward the need to examine how power and domination maintain and create individual problems. The general outcome of understanding social order is it can lead to social change and the emancipation of oppressed people (Hoy & McCarthy, 1994).

Critical theory is based on social justice oriented social work by taking action through challenging injustices of oppression and inequality (Nylund, 2006). Critical theories examine social constructs, such as race, sex, gender, and class, and how they influence the experiences of individuals and groups of people. This analysis is done by looking at social contexts of structural issues, such as inequality and its harmful consequences, in order to challenge the individualized assumptions in psychologized practice with clients (Macfarlane, 2009). To engage in critical practice, an awareness of social, cultural, and historical factors that influence and shape individual and group experiences, and the meaning put to these experiences, is needed (Macfarlane, 2009). Salas, Sen, and Segal (2010) state that practice through a critical theoretical lens involves: 1) examining historical and cultural contexts in which the issue is situated; 2)
considering power distribution by looking at who is in power and who is not; 3) self-reflecting on one’s own experiences in relation to the construct being discussed; 4) practicing taking a nonjudgmental stance in that there is no right or wrong view; 5) acknowledging values of clients within their own systems; 6) and believing that building a greater awareness then comes the ability to take action on these social issues. Through this type of practice the goal is to resist “oppressive and dominant norms and structures” (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010, pp. 93); such as normative binaries of male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, with the latter positioned binary resting in a submissive position, therefore leaving out the possibilities of denaturalized multiple and fluid identities. For this work to occur, critical theory rejects universal truths and objective realities and validates people’s own perceptions of reality with their own meaning making of those realities (Morley, 2003). These facets of critical theory are influenced by a ‘post’ theoretical lens.

**Practical Applications**

The psychologization of social work has inhibited the merging of micro and macro level work with clients by ignoring the influences of larger social, normative, oppressive, and dominant constructs (Salas, Sen, and Segal, 2010). Critical social work is a practice that may counteract the present direction of social work through the use of critical theories. Important to the production of social justice social work are the practical applications within critical social work. There are many interpretations of the definition of critical social work practice. Hence critical social work practice is used as an umbrella term for various avenues of social justice social work that promote social justice and
examine larger systems and hegemonic ideologies. In the context of mental health, a critical social work approach to practice situates client’s problems in a broader structural/social context. Locating problems in larger historical, cultural contexts counters the dominant, prevailing assumptions of problems, feelings, and behaviors residing in individuals. (Morley, 2003). The mission of critical social work is to promote social justice through utilizing both practice and policy efforts to address social injustices as opposed to only addressing individual client problems (Healy, 2011).

Critical social work denies the sole use of the medical model due to its individualized focus on finding ‘the real truth’ about a client. The medical model has been criticized for gaining status through finding ‘objective truth’s’ through positivist, scientific academic research (Morley, 2003). This model has hindered social works ability to incorporate more progressive alternative approaches because they reject the essentialist notion of ‘truth’ and believe in a social constructionist approach to problems (Collins, 2000). By only individualizing problems, societal responsibility is lost which creates inequitable social arrangements (Morley, 2003). For example, the rejection of essentialism is reflected in critical social works rejection of artificially constructed polarized categories commonly used in positivist research (Pardeck & Murphy, 1993). These polarized categories, otherwise known as binary categories, create a hierarchy that puts more value on one side of the binary while devaluing the other (Morley, 2003). Creating ‘the other’ maintains the concept of normalcy, also rejected by critical social work because critical theory does not believe in universal truths (Morley, 2003)
Therefore, critical social works value of diversity supports the concept of multiple realities and identities (Allan, 2009).

Critical social work approaches are influenced by postmodern thinking by questioning these modernist grand narratives of universal truths and realities (Allan, 2009). Many models, such as the strengths perspective, have been identified as alternative approaches to traditional mental health work and are heavily promoted in social education, but these perspectives are criticized for not questioning their own influences of ‘medical truths’ (Morley, 2003).

Critical social work practice looks at multiple versions of an individual and the ways in which structural and social influences have shaped these realities due to power injustices. Allan (2009) describes the core concepts of a critical social work approach to practice as: 1) working towards social justice for oppressed and marginalized groups; 2) working as an ally alongside these groups; analyzing power relations that contribute to the oppression and marginalization of these groups; 3) questioning “taken-for-granted and dominant assumptions and beliefs” (Allan, 2009, pp. 41) and 4) leading towards personal and social emancipation of these groups. Due to the above values, critical social workers (Allan, 2009) have frequently adopted narrative therapy. The ability of narrative therapy to deconstruct the “taken-for-granted” and locate problems outside of the individual and within the individuals relationship with larger social structures (Allan, 2009), epitomizes its approach as an ideal critical social work practice.

Critical social work attends to issues of social justice and equality. The product of integrating critical theory and social work practice to create critical social work fits
greatly with the values of the social work profession of increasing the well-being of people, promoting social justice, and empowering oppressed populations (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). This integration is inclusive of both micro and macro practice and promotes them to work in coordination not separate from one another (Salas, Sen, Segal, 2010). A passion for social justice and equality is what attracts social workers to critical social work practice (Allan, 2009). Critical social work aims to be inclusive of all populations of people (Allan, 2009) which is a core value of the mission of social work. Collectively, critical social work approaches can influence the well-being of all populations at the social justice level.

**Queer Theory**

**Bridging With Critical Social Work**

Some social workers are committed to social justice oriented work on the macro level but may ignore influences from micro practice. Micro social workers may fall into the same trap of ignoring the importance of integrating the influences of their work at the macro level. The present study calls for a bridge between micro and macro level practice and suggests a critical social work framework to meet these needs. For the purpose of strengthening the argument that critical social work needs to be a preferred approach to practice, an example of utilizing a queer theoretical lens is highlighted as an option as a guideline to this type of work (McPhail, 2004). Queer theory in this study is viewed as a critical theory due to their parallels in their approaches. Therefore, queer theory is studied in this research to determine these parallels and its relevancy to critical social work
practice by looking at its rejection of individualized deficit-based social work and encouragement of an alternative postmodern approach to practice with clients.

**Critical Approach to Practice**

Queer theory attempts to question and challenge binary categories related to sex, gender, and sexuality (Featherstone and Green, n.d.). Burdge (2007) suggests that social workers should reject the dichotomous belief of gender as a binary. Queer theory deconstructs binaries of heteronormativity and heterosexuality to deny their essentialist assumptions. The concept of ‘deviance’ is created by these binary norms and queer theory attempts to challenge these in order to create a more just society without the use of “the other” categories. These gender binaries are viewed to be the source of oppression for gender-variant populations and contribute to the imbalance of power structures; therefore leading to oppressive attitudes (Burdge, 2007). Queer theory attempts to question and challenge given categories related to sex, gender, and sexuality; controversial concepts that depend largely on what is accepted as natural and what is out casted as deviant.

Social constructionism and queer theory together can give richer insight to social workers to view gender through a more accurate lens (Burdge, 2007). These models can be used as an example of social work’s true ethics and values of social justice oriented work through using the example of working with gender-variant people such as the transgender community (Burdge, 2007). The ethics and values of the social work profession include empowering clients towards self-definition as a way of encouraging
self-determination and social justice (Burdge, 2007). Through the use of these models, alternatives approaches to the pathological, medical, and psychological models that the social work profession has largely adopted can be constructed (Burdge, 2007).

Michel Foucault, a French Philosopher, created the basic framework for challenging and deconstructing discourses while making implications on the social construction of binaries and other factors aiding power (Foucault, 1977). Such binary discourses that can be challenged by queer theory concepts are sex, gender, and sexuality.

Queer theory posits that sex and gender are historically and socially constructed and therefore rejects essentialist theories of sex and gender identity. Gender and sex binaries may create acknowledgment of differences in the identity of individuals. Yet, the binary excludes the numerous variations of sex, gender, and sexuality (McPhail, 2004). The binary ideology created the “other” as a category for strengthening the privileged category (Halpern, 1995). Groups who are identified as the subordinate category are deemed ‘deviant’ and/or unnatural and are subject to being disciplined or controlled through over and insidious ways. This power difference decreases access to basic human rights that are privileged through institutions and policy thus making marginalized groups to have limited access to equal rights and resources.

Foucault offered insight into political resistance and provided a model for sexuality to not be seen as a biological or psychological entity, but a product of discourse that has created socially constructed binaries that contribute to power imbalances (Halpern, 1995). Queer theory promotes followers and users to identify and recuperate all sites of resistance to the ideology of what is constituted as normal and natural (Rudy,
2001). These “normal” ideologies perpetuate the power imbalances between groups of people (Halpern, 1995). By using Foucault’s theoretical perspectives as a foundation for queer theory development, a language for deconstructing power and its use to reinforce oppression has been created.

Judith Butler (1998), a large contributor to the development of queer theory ideology by the inspirations of Foucault and his work on discourse, challenged the discourses of sex, gender, and sexuality by attempting to deconstruct these binaries. Butler’s work analyzed performativity within gender roles and how gender is a social construct in which it is learned, acted out, and repeated through behavior (Butler, 1988). Performativity supports the ideology of sex, gender, and sexuality as all being socially constructed in that its definition states the creation and maintenance of learned and performed gender and sex roles that are assumed to be normal.

Maintaining historically performed acts of gendered behavior only reinforces their reoccurrence and further maintains these binary categories (Butler, 1988). Due to the reinforcement of hegemonic binary categories of sex and gender, people who challenge these roles, such as transgendered, bisexual, and intersex populations, are continually seen as the ‘other’ and become powerless (McPhail, 2004). By critiquing performativity, Butler challenges the very issue of who is recognized and acknowledged as human in order to portray what is so easily excluded from “normal” (Featherston and Green, n.d.). The binary viewpoint suggests there are only two sexes, genders, and sexual orientations, but queer theory attempts to break apart these very assumptions of the binary and expose
the existence of multiple identities within these categories; thus creating space for multiple identities and realities through validating preferred selves.

Hegemonic heterosexuality, otherwise known as heteronormativity, is a construct opposing the natural nature of anything but hetero practices (Ingraham, 2005; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Heteronormativity is an essentialist construct that supports the exclusion of anything other than what is constituted within society as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’. From this approach to categorization, there are many negative outcomes for the various other sexes, genders, and sexual orientations; ultimately leading to maltreatment within politics, institutions, and social relationships. The false idea of a continuum of ‘sex causing gender and gender causing desire’ is widely accepted as natural and therefore is accepted as the norm, which dismisses other variations of fluid identities (McPhail, 2004). Butler rejects these causal assumptions and works to disconnect these supposed links among these three categories (Featherstone and Green, n.d.). Butler’s ideas reject the belief in the ‘natural’ and support the reality of the social and historical construction of sex, gender, and sexuality. The body is then viewed to have no essentialist true original desires or expressions of character and that they are all socially constructed (Featherstone and Green, n.d.).

A central aspect of Butler’s work is identifying normative gender discourses that police and sanction alternative expressions of gender and sexuality. Queer theory was formed based upon Butler’s assumptions and findings and how they impact an individual’s sense of self and their treatment and denial by a majority society. She viewed these categories as not dependent upon one another; rejecting the idea of them having a
causal relationship (McPhail, 2004). Therefore, Butler rejects these societal norms as facts and instead deconstructs the power hierarchy between heteronormative populations and anything constituted as “deviant”; such as transgender, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other queer populations.

Queer theory challenges dominant gender constructs by highlighting the social construction of these categories that has perpetuated the oppression of non-normative genders and sexualities. Providers such as social workers can greatly learn from these concepts and apply this theoretical lens to the construction of oppression of all marginalized groups.
Chapter 3

METHODS

This chapter describes the methods used to complete this study. Included in this section will be a description of the research question, study design, sampling procedures, participants, data collection procedures, instruments, data analysis, and lastly, protection of human subjects.

Objectives

The present study investigates the relevance of queer theory and critical theory for social justice goals within social work practice. The researcher utilizes both qualitative and quantitative analysis procedures to examine the relevance and integration of these concepts into social work practice and education. The literature suggests these concepts are marginalized within social work. Therefore, the researcher attempts to examine students’ exposure to these concepts, their frequency of use within social work courses, and the relevance and importance of these concepts to social work and its mission of social justice. The methodology of the study was created to answer the proposed research questions aimed at understanding these theoretical concepts place within social work.

Research Questions

Three questions were investigated by this study: 1. what are social work graduate students’ self-reported knowledge level, understanding of, and exposure to queer theory and critical theory concepts? 2. Is the frequency of the incorporation of these theories into
graduate social work courses adequate? 3. What is the relevance and importance of using these theories in social work practice with clients?

**Design**

In order to investigate the proposed research questions, the researcher conducted a descriptive study utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze data. Three separate types of data collection provided answers to these research questions. Descriptive statistics were determined within survey answers of graduate level social work students concerning understanding, knowledge, and exposure to queer theory and critical theory (Appendix B). For key informant interviews concerning the relevance and importance of these theories (Appendix D), and syllabi review for frequencies of these concepts incorporated into social work courses, a process of content analysis identified both latent and manifest content. The following will provide a more detailed description of the process for this research design.

**Descriptive Research**

The researcher used descriptive statistics to describe: 1) Social work graduate students self-reported knowledge level, understanding of, and exposure to queer theory and critical theory concepts: 2) The relevance and importance of using queer theory and critical theory in social work practice with clients and; 3) The frequency at which these theories are incorporated into graduate social work course curriculum.
The researcher used quantitative methods to analyze the data from structured surveys about the student population sample. Descriptive statistics were used for the purpose of demographic information to determine frequency distributions.

For this study, the researcher used a qualitative approach to analyze and categorize key informant interview responses to open-ended questions. The use of interviews for data collection enabled the researcher to gather information to describe relationships between variables; for this study, queer theory, critical theory, and critical social work were the variables requested for key informants to discuss.

The data obtained from these interviews were in the form of text that allowed the data analysis to be interpreted non-numerically and enabled for the development of patterns of relationships, themes, and categories (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). These themes or categories were analyzed for the purpose of the proposed research question concerning the relevance and importance of queer theory and critical theory in social work education and practice. The advantages to this type of qualitative research, using open-ended questions, include the ability to gain more insight by producing a greater variety of responses from participants and more in-depth answers. The disadvantage to using open-ended questions is that they are more difficult to code; making it harder to analyze.

For the archival research part of this study, the researcher used descriptive content analysis to code information provided from syllabi. This form of analysis examines both qualitative and quantitative data that can be collected through documents, interviews, and surveys with the aim of summarizing these findings for the purpose of answering the research question related to this data. The researchers aim for syllabi analysis was to
show the frequency of the use of these theoretical perspectives within social work courses; specifically manifest content. The researcher used content analysis for both key informant interviews and all syllabi obtained from online university websites.

Information provided by content analysis of key informant interviews will show why these theoretical concepts are important and relevant to social work education and social justice oriented social work practice. The researcher looked at content within syllabi to assess for the frequency of these concepts being taught in graduate social work classrooms and received self-reported perceptions from students on whether or not these concepts are incorporated into their graduate social work education. The aim is to find the frequency of these theoretical perspectives use within practice to show what is missing in social work graduate education. If these perspectives are incorporated, they could potentially benefit social justice social work. Low rates will therefore suggest that social work may not be utilizing theoretical perspectives that could be aimed towards social justice and away from individualistic deficit based practice that social work has continually adopted and accepted as a professional way of practice.

**Sampling Procedures**

Study participants included 59 graduate level social work students, two professors of social work, and syllabi from three social work departments across three universities. All three types of data collection have the common aspects of being affiliated with a graduate social work department and being able to provide information relevant to the purpose of the study. The graduate level student sample consisted of students from the
social work department in a California State University, United States (US). Key informants included a professor at a California State University, USA, and a professor at a University in Geelong, Australia. Syllabi were collected from a California State University, a University of California, and a Private University in California.

Criteria for inclusion for graduate students were being in a masters level social work program (MSW) with at least one semester of exposure to coursework. Criteria for inclusion for syllabi content were to be syllabi from graduate level social work practice and theory/human behavior and social environment courses. Criteria for inclusion of key informants were to be a professor of social work in a masters level social work program. A key informant from Australia was included in order to gain a perspective from an expert on critical social work, showing familiarity with these concepts, and who is incorporating these theoretical concepts into coursework and research.

First, non-random convenience sampling was used to recruit graduate level social work students to take a survey on their knowledge level, understanding of, and exposure to queer theory and critical theory. Second, syllabi were collected from three social work departments across three California universities from their public websites to analyze for specific content taught within graduate social work courses. Lastly, purposive sampling was used to recruit two professors of social work as key informants to describe the relevance and important of these theoretical concepts to social work practice and graduate social work student curriculum.
Data Collection Procedures

Data was first collected by using non-random convenience sampling for questionnaires (Appendix B) given to graduate level social work students. Professors of practice, theory, and human behavior and social environment courses were contacted to request use of class time to distribute surveys to students. After permission was granted, times and dates were established for this researchers to present this study to students to request their participation in this study. Students were given informed consent forms with information pertinent to the study (Appendix A). Students who agreed to participate signed the consent forms and then continued to complete questionnaires. Students were reassured they could stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. Consent forms and questionnaires were then returned to the researcher anonymously by placing them in an envelope in the back of the classroom when completed. Students were thanked for their time and willingness to participate and their part in this study ended.

Through purposive sampling, key informants were identified by the referral and suggestion of the advisor of this research study. Four potential key informants were contacted with an explanation of the proposed research study and how their input will be beneficial for the completion and purpose of this study. Two of the potential key informants agreed to participate; one being the advisor to this study. Informed consent was then obtained through email consent; electronic signatures to consent forms were requested (Appendix C). Key informants were then given two months to respond to open-ended interview questions by email. Once responses were received electronically by the
researcher, key informants were thanked and their part in this study ended. Email interviews were qualitative in nature; semi-structured with open-ended questions for the purpose of content analysis (Appendix D).

Lastly, the researcher chose syllabi using non-random convenience sampling by downloading publicly available syllabi from three university social work websites. Downloaded syllabi came from three types of social work courses: practice, theory, and human behavior and social environment. These courses are important to the purpose of this study because they are known to include theory in their curriculum. Data collection, across all three types, fits the research design in that each type seeks to provide evidence for the proposed research questions. Students were surveyed to measure their knowledge of queer and critical theory concepts in order to assess their exposure to these concepts. Key informant interviews seek to measure their understanding of these concepts and provide the relevance and importance for incorporating these concepts into social work curriculum and practice (Appendix D). Lastly, the collection of syllabi will show the frequency of these concepts use within the classroom in order to support or deny the researchers assumption that these concepts are not being incorporated into curriculum.

Data Analysis

After data was collected through student surveys, data was entered for quantitative analysis into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The researcher conducted frequency distributions to determine frequencies of student’s self-reported answers. Key informants returned interviews to the researcher via email;
therefore, interviews were typed out and ready for analysis. The researcher used content analysis to find latent and manifest content within key informant responses. During this analysis, the researcher identified relevant ideas, themes, and concepts across both key informant responses. The researcher used content analysis strategies to analyze social work syllabi. Doing so allowed the researcher to find manifest content that showed the researcher various categories of themes and concepts taught within course curriculum.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

As required by California State University, Sacramento, a human subjects application was submitted to the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects from the Division of Social Work. This committee approved the proposed study and considered this study as “minimal risk” to the students and key informants involved as participants. Approval was given formally to the researcher prior to any collection of data with an approval number of 12-13-002 (Appendix E).

In this research study, participation by social work graduate students and key informants was strictly voluntary. The researcher informed all participants they could stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. To maintain confidentiality, the researcher told student participants to only sign consent forms. In the informed consent process, key informants were aware that the identifying information requested on the interview questionnaire may be used in the research paper. All surveys and consent forms from students were kept only in the possession of the researcher and surveys will be destroyed by June, 2013 after data was entered into the statistical program SPSS.
Chapter 4

STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the following research questions: 1. What are social work graduate students self-reported knowledge level, understanding of, and exposure to queer theory and critical theory concepts? 2. Is the frequency of the incorporation of these theories into graduate social work courses adequate? 3. What is the relevance and importance of using these theories in social work practice with clients?

Students were given a survey (Appendix B) with questions regarding demographic information including identity questions, political and religious affiliation, a question regarding experience working with queer populations, and then questions regarding knowledge, exposure to, and understanding of queer theory and critical theory. Key informants were emailed questionnaires (Appendix D) with questions asking for demographic information including professional title and affiliation along with identity questions, and then questions about the relevance and importance of queer theory and critical theory in relation to each other, to graduate social work education, and to social work practice; emphasizing critical social work. Syllabi documents gave information regarding content exposed to students in social work courses; with assumptions made about what students are not exposed to within these courses in relation to this study.
Findings

Overall

Students participants of the study aged in range 23-62 ($M = 27.50$, $SD = 7.75$), who volunteered to participate in a paper-and-pencil survey. Information regarding demographic characteristics of race/ethnicity, class level, and gender identity was also collected. Class year was measured with three categories of first year MSW students with one semester of curriculum exposure (35.6%), second year MSW students (61%), and third year MSW students (1.7%). Race was dichotomized such that Caucasian consisted of one group (45.6%) and all other races were combined to create the non-Caucasian group (54.6%) of the sample population. Gender identity was also dichotomized such that the binary Male (6.8%) and Female (71.2%) consisted of one group (78%) and all other gender identities including gender non-conforming (15.3%), androgynous (1.7%), queer (3.4%), and other (1.7%) created the gender variant group (22%) of the sample population.

Two key informants, Professor Bob Pease, PhD, of the School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University, Australia (AU), and Professor David Nylund, LCSW, PhD, of California State University, Sacramento, United States (US), volunteered to participate in this study through an email open-ended questionnaire. Both key informants are professors of social work at their respected universities. Key informants provided vital information on their perspectives in regards to the relevance and importance of queer theory and critical theory to social work education, practice, and mission.
Specific

**Syllabi.** The researcher-analyzed syllabi across three social work departments for manifest content to find themes related to the purpose of this study. Collected syllabi were from theory, human behavior and social environment, and practice courses only. The researcher was attempting to identify instances where critical theory, queer theory, and critical social work emerged within course syllabi. Of the 30 (N = 30) syllabi collected, only one syllabus had content showing teachings on critical social work. The researcher found that critical theory and queer theory were not included in any of the collected syllabi. Other themes emerged, in relation to the purpose of the present study, which was included in 21 of the collected syllabi: LGBTQ populations, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, homophobia, diversity, and cultural competence, postmodernism and social constructionism, and narrative therapy.

**Student Surveys.** Descriptive statistics showed frequency distributions of students self-reported understanding, exposure, and perception of importance of critical theory and queer theory in relation to their social work graduate program. The following will describe the survey findings.

**Queer theory.** Of the 59 students, when asked if they had experience working with queer populations, students reported yes (33.9%) and no (66.1%). Students were asked if they felt competent working with queer populations and responses were dichotomized to either they ‘agree in some way’ (47.5%) or ‘disagree in some way’ (47.5%); three students left this question blank (5%). When asked if they had heard of the term ‘queer theory’ students reported yes (72.9%) and no (27.1%). When asked if they
knew what ‘queer theory’ is students reported yes (40.7%) and no (59.3%). When students were asked when they were exposed to queer theory concepts, students reported either they had not learned about queer theory yet (50%), before the MSW program (19%), in courses during the MSW program (25.9%), or during the MSW program but not in courses within the MSW program (5.2%).

Students were given a Likert scale with questions from three categories: exposure to queer theory, knowledge, and understanding of queer theory, and perceived importance of incorporating queer theory into course curriculum. For the category representing exposure to queer theory, three questions were presented and students most frequently answered ‘completely disagree’. To represent all possible answers, answers were dichotomized, and then percentages for each question were averaged across all three questions to ‘disagree in some way’ (68.8%) and ‘agree in some way’ (26.7%); remaining students left some of these entire questions blank (4.5%). This data shows students disagreed with queer theory being exposed to them in their MSW courses. For the category representing students’ knowledge and understanding of queer theory concepts, three questions were presented and students most frequently answered ‘completely disagree’. To represent all possible answers, answers were dichotomized, and then percentages for each question were averaged across all three questions to ‘disagree in some way’ (60%) and ‘agree in some way’ (35.6%). This data shows students disagreed with understanding, having clear knowledge, and feeling they are competent of queer theory concepts. Lastly, for the category representing student’s opinions of the level of importance for queer theory to be incorporated into MSW course
curriculum, three questions were presented and students most frequently answered ‘completely agree’. To represent all possible answers, answers were dichotomized, and then percentages for each question were averaged across all three questions to ‘disagree in some way’ (25.5%) and ‘agree in some way’ (87.5%). The data shows students agreed with having an interest in learning these concepts, feeling it is important to learn queer theory concepts, and feeling it is important to incorporate these concepts into curriculum.

*Critical theory.* Of the 59 students, when asked if they had heard of the term ‘critical theory’ students reported yes (55.9%) and no (44.1%). When asked if they knew what ‘critical theory’ is students reported yes (35.6%) and no (64.4%). When students were asked when they were exposed to critical theory concepts, students reported either they had not learned about critical theory yet (57.6%), before the MSW program (8.5%), in courses during the MSW program (33.9%), and lastly no students reported ‘learning about critical theory during the MSW program but not in courses within the MSW program.

Students were given a Likert scale with questions from three categories: exposure to critical theory, knowledge, and understanding of critical theory, and perceived importance of incorporating critical theory into course curriculum. For the category representing exposure to critical theory, three questions were presented and students most frequently answered ‘completely disagree’. To represent all possible answers, answers were dichotomized, and then percentages for each question were averaged across all three questions to ‘disagree in some way’ (69.4%) and ‘agree in some way’ (29.5%). This data shows students disagreed with critical theory being exposed to them in their MSW
courses. For the category representing students’ knowledge and understanding of critical theory concepts, three questions were presented and students most frequently answered ‘completely disagree’. To represent all possible answers, answers were dichotomized, and then percentages for each question were averaged across all three questions to ‘disagree in some way’ (66.7%) and ‘agree in some way’ (33.3%). This data shows students disagreed with understanding, having clear knowledge, and feeling they are competent of critical theory concepts. Lastly, for the category representing student’s opinions of the level of importance for critical theory to be incorporated into MSW course curriculum, three questions were presented and students most frequently answered ‘completely agree’. To represent all possible answers, answers were dichotomized, and then percentages for each question were averaged across all three questions to ‘disagree in some way’ (9.7%) and ‘agree in some way’ (90.3%). The data shows students agreed with having an interest in learning these concepts, feeling it is important to learn critical theory concepts, and feeling it is important to incorporate these concepts into curriculum.

**Key informant interviews.** Interviews provided vital information pertinent to the purpose of this study. Both key informants answered the same questions in relation to queer theory and critical theory concepts and implications for critical social work practice. The following will be organized by each question presented to both key informants. Key informant Bob Pease will be referred to as Professor Pease and key informant David Nylund will be referred to as Professor Nylund.

**Question one.** What is the relevance and important of queer theory to social work practice? Key informants were asked to discuss their perceptions of the relevance and
importance of queer theory to social work practice. Both professors reported in agreement that queer theory is relevant and important to social work practice and provided information in support of their view. Professor Pease included that queer theory informs anti-heterosexist and anti-homophobic social work practice and challenges heterosexual practitioners about their own heterosexual privileges. Professor Pease suggests using critical heterosexuality studies to interrogate heterosexual privilege alongside queer theory. Professor Nylund parallels this response in that queer theory offers social workers tools for deconstructing essentialist notions of gender and sexuality.

Professor Nylund states essentialism is informed by binaries such as heteronormative binary categories that are necessary for identity politics and social movements, but are problematic by limiting and regulating people and their identities. Professor Nylund continues to say these binary categories marginalize groups such as women and GLBT populations, but by offering social workers queer theory as a way of understanding GLBT populations, opportunities for liberation, self-definition, and empowerment can be presented and give voice to persons living non-normative lifestyles; a social work value of self-determination.

**Question two.** What is the relevance and importance of critical theory to social work practice? Key informants were asked to discuss their perceptions of the relevance and importance of critical theory to social work practice. Professor Pease reported that social work has to be informed by critical theory in order to fulfill its mission comprised of emancipatory and social justice objectives; adding that critical theory includes many theories such as Marxism, feminism, anti-racism, queer theory, etc. Professor Pease
reported he has co-edited on critical social work practice in Australia that are used for Deakin social work courses and were adopted as key texts in many other social work programs in Australia, but reports that critical theory is marginal in social work because it is dominated by evidence-based practice and traditional models such as strengths-based practice. Professor Nylund also included this critique of social work in that it has moved towards psychologizing problems through evidence-based type practices that individualize problems. He adds that by locating problems within the individual, social workers omit larger social structural influences on clients. Professor Nylund reports that critical theory helps social work to return to its radical traditions by including the social processes that contribute to personal and social problems. He also states that critical theory’s focus on injustices of corporate capitalism is congruent with social work’s socially oriented, politically sensitive approach to addressing social inequalities.

**Question three.** Is there a connection between queer theory and critical theory in relevance to social work practice? Key informants were asked to discuss their perceptions of the connection between queer theory and critical theory in relation to social work practice. Professor Pease stated that critical theory has to include queer theory as one of its approaches. Therefore, Professor Pease suggests that queer theory is one form of expression of critical theory and that intersectionality studies has important things to offer to understand the links between critical theories. Professor Nylund adds that both critical theory and queer theory encourage a critical stance to practice and are both committed to co-participatory rather than authoritarian practice relations. He also states that both theories suggest that knowledge is historical and biased and these theories reject the
positivist idea of objective knowledge. Lastly, Professor Nylund states that both theories
take on a social constructionist rather than reductionist approach to analyzing culture and
society.

**Question four.** What is the relevance and importance of queer theory and critical
type to *critical* social work practice? Key informants were asked to discuss their
perceptions of the relevance and importance of queer theory and critical theory to *critical*
social work practice. Professor Pease states his view is that you cannot have critical
social work without critical theory. He posits that critical social work is most often used
in the UK, Canada, and Australia but that it has somewhat different meanings across all
three. As Professor Pease is in Australia, he draws upon the critical theories previously
reported in his answers. Professor Nylund reports that both theories are extremely
relevant to critical social work practice. He continues to explain that critical social work
draws upon larger structural inequalities and the micro practice of discourses, and queer
theory and critical theory are a perfect combination for working at both micro and macro
levels. Professor Nylund states that due to the complex issues derived from late capitalist
culture, social workers are in need of theoretical advances in order to address problems
people’s lives are situated in; including the shifting and production of new identities.

**Question five.** Do you believe it is important for graduate social work
departments to incorporate these concepts into practice and theory course curriculum?
Why or why not? Key informants were asked to discuss their perceptions on whether or
not they think it is important for queer theory and critical theory to be incorporated into
graduate social work practice and theory courses. Both professors reported that it is
important to incorporate these concepts in social work programs. Professor Pease states that all social work programs should be informed by critical theory approaches in order to enable social workers to live up to social work’s social justice objectives. Professor Nylund agrees in that he states students need new theories to address the complexity of problems people are facing.

Both professors mention the effects of neoliberalism on social works agenda. Professor Pease states that he doesn’t believe that critical theory will ever become a preferred approach to social work practice because of social works location within the state and the power that neoliberalism holds over social work theory and practice. He suggests that these challenges that neoliberalism creates for critical social work should be included in teaching critical social work because social work has become a neoliberal project, which undermines its potential to develop critical approaches to practice. Without this interrogation of neoliberal influences on social work, Professor Pease suggests that social work will not be able to move forward in a progressive way without critical social work losing its radical potential. Professor Nylund agrees that it is important for these theories to be incorporated into social work courses especially in a media-saturated, neo-liberal context. He states that queer theory and critical theory can help bring back creativity in social work, re-connect us with the mission of social work, and give voice to marginalized persons such as transgendered persons.
Interpretations of the Findings

Overall

Students from one social work department were surveyed with the majority of students being in their second year; meaning students have had at least three semesters of exposure to course curriculum. The remainders of the students, excluding one, were in their first year of the program with at least one semester of exposure to course curriculum. Students race/ethnicity comprised of almost half Caucasian with the remaining half stated as the non-Caucasian group. Most students identified as either male or female with most of the group reporting as female. The remainder identified in the gender-variant category and made up approximately a quarter of the student sample.

Key informants were both Professors of Social Work from two separate countries and colleges. Professor Bob Pease is a professor at the School of Health and Social Development at Deakin University in Australia, AU, who has done significant work on critical social work. Professor David Nylund is at the Division of Social Work at California State University, Sacramento, in the United States, US, who also has contributed to critical social work through education, literature, and practice. With their knowledge and experience on these theories and practice perspectives, these key informants were able to provide the researcher answers to the questionnaires provided to them (Appendix D).
Specific

Syllabi. The researcher found that syllabi collected did not contain the terms ‘queer theory’ or ‘critical theory’. Only one syllabus, which was a syllabus collected from a course taught by Professor Nylund, included readings on critical social work practice. However, although ‘queer theory’ and ‘critical theory’ were not mentioned in any of the syllabi, other terms were mentioned that are assumed to be related to populations that would benefit from queer theory and critical theory in practice. These terms show that some, 21 out of the 30 collected, included some discussion on LGBTQ populations and the issues they face, diversity and cultural competency, postmodern and social constructionist perspectives, and narrative therapy. The researcher has no way of knowing if any of these discussions or assignments included queer theory or critical theory in their content. The findings of syllabi content analysis is consistent with survey findings of students in that most students reported low exposure to these theoretical concepts and low understanding of these concepts which will be further discussed below.

Student surveys. Students understanding, exposure, and perception of importance of queer theory and critical theory in relation to their social work program are presented through survey findings. The researcher found strikingly similar percentages across both queer theory and critical theory answers and therefore makes for the ability for the researcher to describe them together.

Students reported low rates of having experience working with queer populations. Half of the students surveyed reported they feel competent working with queer populations while half reported they do not feel competent in working with queer
populations. Most of the students reported they had heard of the terms ‘queer theory’ and ‘critical theory’ before but most of them reported they do not have an understanding of what they are. Half of the students reported they had not learned about queer theory or critical theory yet, while about a quarter of them stated they learned about these concepts during the MSW program within their courses.

Next, students gave answers to Likert scale questions regarding exposure to queer theory and critical theory, knowledge and understanding of queer theory and critical theory, and perceived importance of incorporating queer theory and critical theory into course curriculum. For the category representing exposure, students most frequently answered they had not had exposure to queer theory or critical theory concepts in their MSW program. For the category representing students’ knowledge and understanding of these concepts, students most frequently reported they did not have clear knowledge and understanding of queer theory and critical theory concepts and they do not feel competent with utilizing these concepts. Lastly, the category of questions representing students’ opinions on the level of importance for queer theory and critical theory to be incorporated into MSW course curriculum, students most frequently reported that they have an interest in learning these concepts, that it is important to learn these concepts, and that it is important to incorporate them into course curriculum. Therefore, although students report low understanding and exposure to queer theory and critical theory, they believe it is important to incorporate these concepts into social work courses.

**Key informant interviews.** Interview answers provided by key informants gave insight into the relevance and important of queer theory and critical theory to social work
education and practice. Both professors agreed that critical social work, and theories associated such as critical theory and queer theory, is vital to social work’s objectives of emancipation, liberation, and social justice. Critical social work practice is social justice oriented and both professors have stressed its importance of incorporating these perspectives into social work. They state that social work has adopted evidence-based practice and traditional models of practice and has omitted the influences of larger social structural influences on client problems. They also reported on the influences of neoliberalism and capitalism on social work’s agenda and how this has negatively affected social works ability to address social inequalities.

Although these practices are utilized in the UK, Canada, and Australia, Professor Pease still reported that critical social work practice may never be a preferred approach to practice because of the power neoliberalism holds over social work theory and practice. However, by utilizing critical approaches to practice such as queer theory, which was reported to be a critical theory, social workers can commit to co-participatory rather than authoritative type work to resist individualistic influences on the profession. To do so, both professors state that it is important to incorporate these theories into social work course curriculum.

**Summary**

In this chapter, overall and specific findings were analyzed and described in relation to the purpose of the study. Student surveys and collected syllabi showed low exposure rates of these theoretical concepts. Findings and suggestions of key informants
were consistent with the literature review findings in that the proposed theories are relevant and important to social works objectives of social justice. Chapter 5 is a description of the conclusions of this study and recommendations. The limitations of this study and implications for micro and macro level social work are also discussed.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION, SUMMARY, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The present study aimed to describe the extent of awareness, knowledge, and understanding of social work students on queer theory and critical theories with the hope to encourage social work to move away from using deficit-based individualized models of practice and towards alternative models of social justice oriented practice with clients. As stated in the literature, social work is missing discussions of the limitations to the biomedical model of psychiatric illness and methods that question scientific truth claims (Morley, 2003). This study attempted to deconstruct the limitations of these types of models and discuss their influences on the social work profession. Alternative theories such as queer theory and critical theory were then provided as a framework for critical social work practice as an example to how this alternative approach is a social justice oriented way of working with clients. This research is important to social work in that it hopes to help the profession return to its mission of social justice through education and practice models. Recovering social work’s foundation will mean that students and professionals need to understand social justice oriented social work and what tools are needed to engage in it.

To support this study, the researcher took three approaches to data collection to answer the three study questions: 1. what are social work graduate students self-reported knowledge level, understanding of, and exposure to queer theory and critical theory concepts? 2. At what frequency are these theories incorporated into graduate social work
course curriculum? 3. What is the relevance and importance of using these theories in social work practice with clients? Data was collected by student surveys that showed students low exposure and low understanding of the proposed theoretical concepts. Syllabi were collected that showed low rates of these concepts incorporated into social work course curriculum across three social work departments. Lastly, key informant interviews showed the relevance of these concepts to social work micro and macro practice and the importance of these concepts to be incorporated into social work curriculum.

This project was designed to discuss the above research questions and provide answers to them in a manner that showed the importance of these concepts to social work. Students reported low rates of exposure and low rates of understanding these concepts which is consistent with queer theory (McPhail, 2004) and critical theory (Morley, 2003) being largely marginalized in the social work literature pool and in social work practice settings. Students reported that although they have rarely been exposed to these concepts. Yet, the students stressed their interest in learning these concepts and the importance of them being incorporated into social work course curriculum. Syllabi analysis also backed up students claims of not being exposed to these concepts as none of the syllabi contained the terms ‘queer theory’ or ‘critical theory’. Students and syllabi gave good insight into what is lacking in social work curriculum. Unfortunately, social justice oriented approaches to practice have been found in this study to be what is missing in social work education and practice.
Key informant interview answers also supported literature review claims that social work has been influenced by deficit-based traditional medical models (Morley, 2003) and the administration and provision of direct services (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). Both key informants also reported on the negative influences of capitalism on the social work profession that is consistent with Mullaly’s (2001) critique of mainstream social work being an agent for capitalism. Professor Pease also suggested (in line with literature findings) that neoliberal and capitalistic influences on the profession need to be deconstructed to show its oppressive and exploitative aspects in order to encourage social work to adopt progressive type practices (Mullaly, 2001). Professor Nylund also stated that critical theory’s focus on the injustices of corporate capitalism is congruent with social work’s socially oriented approach to social inequalities. Utilizing critical theories may enable the profession to address these inequalities.

The literature discussed how social work has adopted individualized approaches to social problems as its dominant method of practice with clients (Herz & Johansson, 2011). Professor Nylund reported that critical theory helps social work return to its radical traditions and include the social aspects that contribute to personal and social problems. This is important because according to the literature, individualized approaches to social problems have made social workers ignore structural elements and stop acknowledging environmental and social influences (Herz & Johansson, 2011). By including the social aspects of problems, clients can be relieved of internalizing problems and utilize externalizing as a tool for liberation.
Essentialism was also discussed within the literature review and within key informant interviews. Queer theory aims to deconstruct essentialism and the binaries it produces in order to empower clients and create space for preferred selves (McPhail, 2004). This deconstruction shows how binaries are naturalized and minimized and how they serve the purpose of valuing one over the other, which creates a power imbalance (Morley, 2003). Critical theory rejects universal truths and objective realities and validates people’s own perceptions of reality with their own meaning making of those realities (Morley, 2003). Professor Pease validates that queer theory is a critical theory as they both reject these universal truths and objective realities. Professor Nylund stated that queer theory deconstructs these essentialist notions of gender and sexuality and attempts to break the cycle of marginalizing groups such as women and GLBT people; a social justice oriented approach to working with clients.

Post-theoretical influences, such as social constructionism and postmodernism, are embedded within both critical theory and queer theory. Critical theory questions and deconstructs the social order of things and how power is distributed in order to explain human conditions (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). Salas, Sen, & Segal (2010) suggest that by understanding social systems by the deconstruction of power and domination, such as binaries and their hierarchical qualities (Morley, 2003), it will encourage us to become more aware of the need for change within these systems which will then encourage us to work towards that change. Queer theory is an approach that provides social workers a framework for looking at inequalities due to the socially constructed nature of ideologies such as gender and sexual identities. By engaging in queer theory, Professor Nylund
suggests that liberation, self-determination, and empowerment of these populations can occur, which are social work values. Critical theory and queer theory can bring forward the need to examine how power and domination create and maintain individual problems. The outcome of understanding social order is it can lead to social change and the emancipation of oppressed people (Hoy & McCarthy, 1994).

Critical theory is based on social justice oriented social work by taking action through challenging injustices of oppression and inequality (Nylund, 2006). Critical theories examine social constructs, such as queer theory, which examines sex, gender, and sexual orientation, and how they influence the experiences of individuals and groups of people. These approaches challenge the individualized assumptions in psychologized practice with clients; a key principle of (MacFarlane, 2009) critical social work practice. The mission of critical social work practice is to promote social justice through utilizing both practice and policy efforts to address social injustices as opposed to only addressing individual client problems (Healy, 2011). Both key informants stated that critical theory and queer theory are important and necessary to engage in critical social work practice. Professor Pease states you cannot have critical social work without critical theory, while Professor Nylund added that both queer theory and critical theory encourage a critical stance to practice.

**Implications for Social Work**

The psychologization of social work has inhibited the merging of micro and macro level work with clients by ignoring the influences of larger social, normative,
oppressive, and dominant constructs (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). Critical social work practice, which includes critical theory and queer theory, can be a framework for merging micro work with macro work. Key informant interviews concluded that theories that make up critical social work need to be incorporated into social work course curriculum in order for them to be encouraged for use in practice with clients. Professor Nylund suggested that critical theory and queer theory are a perfect combination for working at both the micro and macro level. The problem is that social work departments are not adopting these theoretical perspectives into their curriculum. Alternative approaches to social work practice that are social justice oriented are not being taught at rates that are necessary for social work to move away from evidence-based and deficit-based psychologized practice that only looks at individualized problems.

Critical social work has many things to offer micro and macro level social work. This approach to practice aims specifically to promote social justice by using both micro practice and macro policy efforts (Healy, 2011). Medical model influences have hindered social work’s ability to adopt more progressive social justice oriented approaches to practice due to its apolitical, positivist academic standpoint that claims to identify essentialist ‘truths’, locating problems in the person, and marginalizing alternative discourses that situate problems in sociocultural context. (Collins, 2000). One of the key critiques of the medical model is that is positions the social worker as an authoritative “expert” as opposed to the practice being a shared decision making enterprise with the client (Healy, 2001). Professor Nylund suggests that critical theory and queer theory are both committed to co-participatory rather than authoritarian practice
relations. This collaboration between clients and practitioners is what links micro practice with macro level work. Without this binding of clients and social workers, the profession will continue to maintain its focus on solely micro level practice and ignore macro level work by omitting the ‘social’ from ‘social work’.

Critical social work approaches encourage the merging of micro and macro level work and promotes them to work in harmony and not separate from one another (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). Engaging in critical social work increases the well-being of people, promotes social justice, empowers oppressed populations, and work towards the emancipation and liberation of oppressed individuals and groups of people (Salas, Sen, & Segal, 2010). Using critical social work models, alternative approaches to pathological, medical, and psychological models can be constructed (Burdge, 2007). This study suggests that social work education and practice adopts these alternative approaches to practice in order to return to social works objectives of social justice by utilizing micro level practice and macro level work in tandem to their maximum potential.

**Recommendations**

Based on the above discussion of the implications for social work, the researcher recommends that more research needs to be conducted on critical theory and queer theory in order to increase their frequency within social work literature. It is encouraged that future researchers interview more people on the relevance of these theories to social work practice and their importance for their use in social work curriculum. Interviewing committee members who make decisions on what is included in curriculum may be a way
of understanding why these models have not been adopted into courses. Another suggestion for future research includes interviewing more mental health practitioners on their views and use of critical social work theoretical concepts in practice. The researcher also suggests that more insight is needed on critical social work’s effectiveness with clients and its influences on larger structural and social change.

**Limitations**

The limitations in this study involved study participants, the size of the study, syllabi content availability, and the researcher’s influence on the study. Due to the student sample only representing one social work department and the researcher using non-random convenient sampling, the findings from surveys cannot be generalized. The researcher is also a student in the same social work department as the student sample and therefore could have had an influence on biased responses on student surveys. The low number of key informants also makes for findings from their interviews to be unable to be generalized. One of the key informants is also the thesis advisor of this study and may also have had an influence in the research paper. Syllabi were obtained only from social work departments that made syllabi publicly available on internet websites; therefore, schools that did not make syllabi available did not have an equal chance of being included in this study. Syllabi may also not present a full reflection of theoretical content as critical theories may be combined with other theories such as feminist theories and critical race theory, etc. The bias of the researcher may have also have had an effect of on the design of the study and interpretations of the research findings.
Conclusion

This study was designed to determine the relevance and benefits of queer theory and critical theory to social work education and practice. The researcher found support for these concepts being highly relevant to social works objective of social justice. Yet, low rates of these concepts being incorporated into graduate social work programs were found. Key informants with significant contributions to critical social work alternative practices validated these theoretical perspectives as necessary for a progressive approach to social work that aims for social justice and the emancipation and liberation of oppressed populations. The literature review suggests that critical social work enables social work to merge micro and macro level work. By merging micro and macro level work, social work can return to its radical roots of social justice.
APPENDIX A: Student Consent

Informed Consent to Participate in a Study on Queer Theory and Critical Social Work

I hereby agree to participate in a study entitled, “An assessment of the knowledge level of graduate social work students with special reference to queer theory and critical theory and their implications for strengths based social work practice”, and I understand that participating in this study involves:

Why is this study being conducted?

This study is conducted by Heather Valdez of California State University, Sacramento to acquire student’s attitudes and perceptions of Queer and Critical Theory and their implications for social work practice. I have been requested to take part in this study because I can provide information on my experience as an MSW student and my exposure to these concepts.

What am I being asked to do?

I will be one of about 100 Masters level respondents in the social work department at California State University, Sacramento who will be asked to participate in answering survey questions regarding my identifying demographics, my knowledge and understanding of queer and critical theory, and my perceptions of these theories and their use in graduate level courses.

I will be asked what some people consider to be sensitive questions about my self-identity and my affiliations with political, religious, or spiritual institutions. The questionnaire may generally take about twenty minutes and I can either return it to the researcher during class time if permitted by the professor, or on my own time in a locked box on campus.

Is this voluntary?

Yes. I am under no obligation to participate. When I agree to participate, I am allowed to skip any questions. I am also free to stop the interview at any time without penalty.
What are the advantages of participating?
Participating in this study will be instrumental in promoting a more holistic approach to practice and education for social work students and professionals. I will not have any direct advantages from participating in this study.

Is this confidential?
Yes. All answers will remain confidential and the only identifying information will be my signature on this consent form which will be filed away in a locked box. The researcher will be the only person having access to these signatures. Names will not be written on the survey itself. All records will be identified only by a number, and the link between that number and my name will be kept in a locked file that is available only to the principal investigator. At the completion of the study, all identifying information will be destroyed and only the compiled content of the interviews will be kept. Everything I say will be strictly confidential and any reports or other published data based on this study will appear only in the form of summary statistics or condensed account without the names of or other identifying information about the participants.

What risks do I face if I participate?
There is minimal risk expected as the researcher will ensure my privacy and I have the right to not answer any question that I do not want to answer. If any questions bring any potential psychological harm, contact information for psychological services will be provided.

Who do I contact if I have questions about this research?
If I have any questions, I can email the researcher at queerthesisresearch@yahoo.com. My signature below indicates that I consent to participate in this research, that I have been given a copy of this consent form, and that I read and understood it.

Signature: _____________________________    Date:______________
APPENDIX B: Student Survey

Demographic Characteristics
1. Age: ______
2. Employment: (circle one) Full time  Part time  None
3. Are you (circle one):  First year MSW student (2nd semester students only)
   Second year MSW student  Third Year MSW Student (in three year program)
4. Current GPA: ________
5. Pick ONE that best describes you:
   Gender non-conforming__ Female__ Male__ Transgender__ Two-Spirited__
   Androgynous __ Feminine __ Masculine__ Queer __ Other____________________
6. What race do you identify as? ____________________
7. What Bachelor’s Degree did you graduate with? ___________________
8. Do you identify with a political party? (circle one)  YES   NO
   If yes, please state which political party you identify with.  ___________________
9. Do you identify with a religious affiliation or any spiritual practice? (circle one)  YES/NO
   If yes, please state which affiliation or practice you identify with.  _________________
10. Do you have experience serving or working with Queer populations/communities?
    (circle one)  YES  NO

In regards to Queer Theory:
11. Have you heard of the term ‘Queer Theory’? (circle one)  YES   NO
12. Do you know what ‘Queer Theory’ is? (circle one)  YES   NO
13. If yes, please indicate when your first experiences learning about queer theory concepts happened. (circle one)
    (0)  I have not learned about queer theory concepts yet
    (1)  Before entering the MSW program
    (2)  During the MSW program within course material in my classes
    (3)  During my time in the MSW program but not due to course material within my classes
    If before the MSW program, where did you learn these concepts?
    ________________________________
    If during the MSW program, which class did you hear/learn of these concepts?
    ________________________________
    If you did not learn during a class in the MSW program, how do you hear/learn of these concepts?
    ________________________________
14. Please write the number that corresponds with the statements below. State whether you:
    1-  Completely Agree
    2-  Mostly Agree
    3-  Slightly Agree
    4-  Slightly Disagree
5- Mostly Disagree
6- Completely Disagree
(1) I understand what queer theory means. ______
(2) I have clear knowledge of queer theory concepts. ______
(3) I have had queer theory concepts in lectures in my classroom experiences in the MSW program thus far. ______
(4) Queer theory concepts have been taught within the MSW courses I have taken thus far. _____
(5) I have interest in learning queer theory concepts. ______
(6) I feel it is important for students to learn queer theory concepts. ______
(7) I feel professors have done a good job in teaching me queer theory concepts. ______
(8) I feel it is important to incorporate queer theory concepts into the curriculum. ______
(9) I feel competent with queer theory concepts. ______
(10) I feel competent working with queer populations. ______

In regards to Critical Theory:
15. Have you heard of the term ‘Critical Theory’? (circle one) YES NO
16. Do you know what ‘Critical Theory’ is? (circle one) YES NO
17. If yes, please indicate when your first experiences learning about critical theory concepts happened. (circle one)
(4) I have not learned about critical theory concepts yet
(5) Before entering the MSW program
(6) During the MSW program within course material in my classes
(7) During my time in the MSW program but not due to course material within my classes
If before the MSW program, where did you learn these concepts?
__________________________________________________________________________________
If during the MSW program, which class did you hear/learn of these concepts?
__________________________________________________________________________________
If you did not learn during a class in the MSW program, how do you hear/learn of these concepts?
__________________________________________________________________________________

18. Please write the number that corresponds with the statements below. State whether you:
7- Completely Agree
8- Mostly Agree
9- Slightly Agree
10- Slightly Disagree
11- Mostly Disagree
12- Completely Disagree
(1) I understand what critical theory means. ______
(2) I have clear knowledge of critical theory concepts. ______
(3) I have had critical theory concepts in lectures in my classroom experiences in the MSW program thus far. ______
(4) Critical theory concepts have been taught within the MSW courses I have taken thus far.____
(5) I have interest in learning critical theory concepts. ______
(6) I feel it is important for students to learn critical theory concepts. ______
(7) I feel professors have done a good job in teaching me critical theory concepts. ______
(8) I feel it is important to incorporate critical theory concepts into the curriculum. _____
(9) I feel competent with critical theory concepts. ______
APPENDIX C: Key Informant Consent

KEY INFORMANT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT

Informed Consent to Participate in a Study on Queer Theory and Critical Social Work

I hereby agree to participate in a study entitled, "An assessment of the knowledge level of graduate social work students with special reference to queer theory and critical theory and their implications for social work practice". I understand that participation in this study involves:

Why is this study being conducted?

This study is conducted by Heather Valdez of California State University, Sacramento to assess attitudes and perceptions of queer theory and critical theory and their implications for social work practice and inclusion in education. I have been requested to take part in this study because I can provide information on my experience, exposure, and expertise on these concepts.

What am I being asked to do?

I will be one of three key informants, who will be asked to participate in answering questions to discuss the relevance and importance of queer theory and critical theory concepts to social work practice, my opinions about the importance of incorporating them into graduate social work programs, and some identifying demographic information. The interview will be through email communication and I will be asked to type my responses on a word document under each question and return it to the researcher by email response. Typing my name at the bottom of this form in the space provided, and copying and pasting the statement that follows directly into the body of my email, accompanied by a copy of my syllabus will act as my consent to participate. (PLEASE COPY AND PASTE THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT INTO THE BODY OF YOUR EMAIL).

"I ___________________________ consent to participate in this research and will submit a word document of my typed answers attached to this email to Heather Valdez, California State University, Sacramento, for the purpose of the study entitled ‘An assessment of the knowledge level of graduate level social work students with special reference to queer theory and critical theory and their implications for social work practice’."

Is this voluntary?
Yes. I am under no obligation to participate. When I agree to participate, I am allowed to skip any questions. I am also free to discontinue my participation at any time without penalty.

**What are the advantages of participating?**

Participating in this study will be instrumental in promoting a more holistic approach to practice and education for social work students and professionals. I will not have any direct advantages from participating in this study.

**Is this confidential?**

By signing this consent form, unless otherwise requested of the researcher, my answers and suggestions may be used with identifying information as a key informant to this research.

Agreeing to participate in this study means that I agree to the researcher using these identifying demographics: name, professional title and affiliation. The information from the interview will remain with the researcher in a locked box and used only for the use and purpose of this study. At the completion of this study, data collected from the interviews will be destroyed and only the remaining information compiled into the research study paper will remain.

**What risks do I face if I participate?**

There is minimal risk expected. I have the right to not answer any question that I do not want to answer. If any questions bring any potential psychological harm, contact information for psychological services will be provided if requested.

**Who do I contact if I have questions about this research?**

If I have any questions, I can email the researcher at queerthesisresearch@yahoo.com

My signature below indicates that I consent to participate in this research, that I have been given a copy of this consent form, and that I read and understood it.

Signature: _____________________________  Date: __________________
APPENDIX D: Key Informant Demographic and Interview Questions

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Name: __________________________________________

2. Professional Title: ________________________________

3. Professional Affiliation: ___________________________

4. Year of birth: _____

5. Pick ONE that best describes you:
   Gender non-conforming__ Female__ Male__ Transgender __ Two-Spirited__
   Androgynous __ Feminine __ Masculine__ Queer __ Other____________________

6. Ethnicity: _______________________________________

(For the questions below, please type your answers under each question and attach this document to your email reply. The lengths of your answers are of your choosing but please provide as much information as possible to answer the question fully. You may also combine answers to these questions).

In your opinion:

1. What is the relevance and importance of queer theory to social work practice?

2. What is the relevance and importance of critical theory to social work practice?

3. Is there a connection between queer theory and critical theory in relevance to social work practice?

4. What is the relevance and importance of queer theory and critical theory to critical social work practice?

5. Do you believe it is important for graduate social work departments to incorporate these concepts into practice and theory course curriculum? Why?
APPENDIX E: Human Subjects Approval Letter

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO
DIVISION OF SOCIAL WORK

TO: Heather Valdez
Date: 9/25/2012

FROM: Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects

RE: YOUR RECENT HUMAN SUBJECTS APPLICATION

We are writing on behalf of the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects from the Division of Social Work. Your proposed study, “An assessment of the knowledge level of graduate social work students with special reference to queer theory and critical theory and their implications for social work practice”.

X approved as ___ EXEMPT ___ NO RISK X MINIMAL RISK

Your human subjects approval number is: 12-13-002. 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.

Professors: Maria Dinis, Jude Antonyappan, Teiahsha Bankhead, Serge Lee, Kisun Nam, Maura O’Keefe, Dale Russell, Francis Yuen.

Cc: Nylund
References


Featherstone, B. & Green, L. (n.d.). *Judith Butler*.


http://webs.wofford.edu/whisnantcj/his389/foucualt_discourse.pdf