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Social workers' perspectives on social justice in social work education: when mainstreaming social justice masks structural inequalities

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from an exploratory study with Master of Social Work (MSW) graduates in Canada to explore the extent to which their classroom and practicum learning addressed social justice and anti-oppressive practice. Thirty-five MSW graduates took part in a semi-structured online survey regarding the quality of social justice knowledge and practice skills in their field instruction and coursework. The survey also examined how graduates employ social justice in their current social work practice. The majority of the study sample reported favorable educational outcomes and embraced social justice goals in their current practice. Discourse analysis of written comments, however, identified a disconnect between social justice theory, field education, and the overall climate of the social work program. Despite an explicit endorsement of social justice values by the program and the profession, graduates reported limited opportunities to learn anti-oppressive practice or apply social justice theories in their field education. We argue that the 'hidden curriculum' in social work education reflects market pressures that privilege task-oriented goals while 'mainstreaming' social justice rhetoric. Skills to confront oppression with transformative change are viewed as abstract goals and thus less useful than clinical practice.

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Introduction

Social justice, equality, and diversity are fundamental to social work's mission to combat discrimination (Thompson, 2016). The International Federation of Social Workers (2012) and the Canadian Association of Social Workers' (CASW) *Code of Ethics* (2005) outline 'the pursuit of social justice' and 'diversity' as ethical principles. The U.S. Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) similarly includes both concepts as core professional competencies. Despite this profession-wide commitment, debates about the meaning of social justice and the translation of social justice theory into practice continue to unfold (Dominelli, 2010; Miller, 1999). Dominant conceptualizations of social justice emphasize liberatory ideals of distributive justice (i.e. the fair allocation of resources) (Barusch, 2009) and recognition of cultural

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difference (Fook, 2003; Fraser, 2000). Solas (2008), however, urges us to replace the utilitarian view of injustice as bad but inevitable with a conviction to confront oppression 'any time the sovereignty of an individual, as a separate and independent being, is jeopardized' (p. 821).

Although anti-oppressive (AOP) social work theories provide direction for unsettling structural oppressions, institutions of higher education remain entangled in the reproduction of discrimination and inequality (e.g. underrepresentation of racialized and Indigenous peoples in upper administration or as tenured professors; and the growing reliance on short-term adjunct faculty contracts). Universities are increasingly influenced by the market values of consumerism, professionalism, and managerialism, students are positioned as tuition paying subjects; their education must cater to the 'needs' of the market in order for these subjects to secure employment after graduation and successfully integrate within the market system. The radical and transformative work essential in achieving social justice goals is, thus, often subordinate to the concrete deliverables of objective, evidenced-based outcomes (Dominelli, 2010). Furthermore, social workers often receive training and practice in environments that limit advocacy, penalize those who take part in disruptive engagements, or who embody minoritized subject positions (Badwall, 2015; Baines, 2010).

To explore the institutional grounding of social justice in social work education, this study solicited input from recent social work graduates from an urban university in Canada to assess the integration of social justice theories, approaches, and skills within their education and current social work practice. We use the 'three pillars of social work education' as a model to guide our discussion. First, we explore this guiding frame and highlight the conceptual and political tensions produced by the 'implicit' or 'hidden' curriculum. We then present an overview of social justice theories in social work education that informed our study design, with specific attention to anti-oppressive practice, critical social work, and decolonizing approaches.

After discussing our research methods, we discuss key findings which illustrate the varied understandings of social justice knowledge and skills that graduates associate with social work practice. All study protocols were approved by the Office of Research Ethics at the first author's home institution.

Conceptual background

Three pillars of social work education

In 2008, CSWE's Education Policy and Accreditation Standards operationalized social work education as complementary 'pillars' comprised of (a) the explicit curriculum, (b) the implicit curriculum, and (c) field education (Miller, 2013). Drawing from the work of Shulman (2005), the CSWE (2008) framed field placements as the 'signature pedagogy' for teaching and socializing future practitioners. According to CSWE's accreditation standards, field education must develop competencies in the areas of: ethical behavior; diversity and difference; advancement of human rights; research-informed practice, assessment, and intervention; practice with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations; and policy practice (CSWE, 2015). While some have critiqued field education's fulfillment as a signature pedagogy in social work (Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, & Ferrell, 2011; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010), CSWE's designation reflects the profession's consensus that field education is a distinctive, if not essential, aspect of social work. Field education,

thus, represents an important site where social workers learn to embody and perform social justice knowledge and skills.

The implicit curriculum in social work professionalization

The concept of 'implicit curriculum' arose in education to theorize how students are socialized into the profession through their daily routines, interactions with teachers and school administrators, the allocation of resources, and organizational structures (Jay, 2003; Margolis, 2001). In social work education, scholars have identified the management of field education, program structure, and the broader university, as institutional factors that influence the 'implicit' social work curriculum (Grady, Powers, Despard, & Naylor, 2011). Bogo and Wayne (2013) focus on strategies to enhance 'human interchange' in the classroom. They specifically recommend teaching strategies for mitigating classroom conflict and open communication with field supervisors to ensure that field education reinforces professional behavior that is taught in the classroom (Bogo & Wayne, 2013).

Critiques of the 'Hidden Curriculum' in higher education

Critical race scholars in education, however, draw attention to aspects of the 'implicit curriculum' that reinforce social inequalities as they relate to racial hierarchies. Drawing upon Marxist critical pedagogy and critical race theory, scholars argue that the 'hidden curriculum of hegemony' (Jay, 2003, p. 3) enables schools to intentionally and unintentionally socialize students to adhere to the interests of the dominant groups, reinforcing class and racial ideology, despite the overt promotion of social justice and diversity principles (Margolis & Romero, 1998). Thus, representations of social justice may operate as an institutional value (i.e. the 'explicit curriculum') while institutional practices simultaneously reproduce racial and other societal hierarchies (i.e. lack of a diverse student body and faculty) (Ahmed, 2012; Deepak, Rountree, & Scott, 2015).

Promoting social justice in social work education—historic underpinnings

While representing a core professional value, social justice theories and their applications have been contested. Furthermore, they shift in relation to political events, social work's status as a profession, and the growing diversity among social workers and the people with whom they work. Early Canadian social work leaders in late nineteenth century, who formed the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, promoted cultural imperialism by recruiting young English women to populate British colonies and ensure the spread of English civility (Johnstone, 2016). During this same period, progressive settlement house workers drew from emerging concepts of liberal modernity, at times using the science of genetics and classifications of mental hygiene as the ideological base to encourage 'degenerate' and 'feeble-minded' immigrants to be more civically engaged.

According to Jennissen and Lundy (2011), tensions between radical and centrist strains characterized the formation of CASW. As social work sought to gain legitimacy as a profession, the commitment to radical and socialist reforms persisted, while the influence of psychoanalytic theories to advance individual and behavioral interventions to address 'mental welfare' (McLaughlin, 2008) firmly rooted the profession's ideological base and public

identity. The CASW's *Code of Ethics* illustrates this complexity in the stated commitment to 'helping individuals have a fuller and more satisfying life *and* to improve the social structure and functioning of social institutions' (*Social Worker*, 1952, p. 8, as cited in Jennissen and Lundy, p. 135, emphasis added).

Social work's alignment with dominant social and political ideologies has entangled the profession in oppressive practices, exemplified in social work's participation in the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada and continued role in the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in child welfare. Cindy Blackstock notes that in 1946, social work organizations endorsed the Indian Residential School System through which the Canadian Government systematically institutionalized Indigenous children in labor- and educational-based programs. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada recently denounced the Residential School System as responsible for the cultural genocide and intergenerational trauma among Indigenous people (Staniforth, 2015). Furthermore, during the 1950s–1970s, social work took an overt role in 'Indian' child welfare, by apprehending Indigenous children from their home communities in what has been called the Sixties Scoop (Hudson & McKenzie, 1981). Thus, assimilationist values that enable cultural imperialism and genocide have characterized social work values throughout history.

During the 1960s and 1970s, civil rights struggles and a growing diversity in the Canadian population fueled feminist and anti-racist critiques of social work, the welfare state, and political failures to address the needs of women, racialized communities, and people living in poverty. During this period, neoliberalism emerged as a dominant ideology grounded in deregulating the market, in reduced social welfare investments, and in the development of a 'risk' rhetoric which would serve as the main criteria for allocating public services. The transition to a decentralized welfare state in Canada shifted responsibility for providing societal needs onto third-sector organizations and other civil society forms of association. In short, the state now provides minimal welfare to sustain the market (i.e. social policies annexed as tools for economic growth, hence supported only if they benefit the economy), with a strong focus on social investment programs to reduce citizens' dependency on the state and increase their future participation in the market (Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2009).

Critical and anti-oppressive theories in social justice education

Presently, differing veins of social justice education include anti-oppressive practice, critical social work, and more recently anti-colonial or decolonizing approaches, among others. Each approach encompasses a range of values and objectives in relation to varied social contexts. For the purposes of this article, we provide a brief overview of some current social justice frameworks to discuss their areas of uniqueness and overlap.

Anti-oppressive practice

AOP in social work aims to educate against multiple forms of oppression, usually defined by identity characteristics (i.e. race, gender, class), in order to address structural inequalities that impact service users and the social worker. For Dominelli, Patel, and Bernard (1994), 'AOP embodies a person-centred philosophy … a methodology focusing on both process and outcome; and a way of structuring relationships between individuals that aims to empower users by reducing the negative effects of social hierarchies' (p. 3). AOP theories broadly acknowledge that intersecting oppressions shape everyday life and are reified through social

and institutional practices. AOP and structural social work frameworks problematize social work practices that maintain or produce inequality, thus dispelling 'any claim or pretense that social work is not a political activity' (Mullaly, 2001, p. 313).

Critical social work

Critical social work frameworks similarly 'prioritize structural theories and promote collaborative approaches to action' (Poole, 2010, p. 4). Gray and Webb (2009) associate Critical social work (noted with an uppercase C) with intellectual movements such as feminism, post-colonialism, critical race theory, and disability studies. These epistemological interventions share a common aim to elucidate how broader systems of oppression produce exploitative, unjust, and dehumanizing systems. At the same time, Healy (2001) argues that the academic contributions to critical social work theory have failed to acknowledge the impact of structural conditions on social work practice. For Healy, 'critical perspectives have contributed little to the understanding of practice in authoritarian, bureaucratic or privatised practice contexts in which the vast majority of social work occurs in western countries' (2001, paragraph 12). This enables social workers to espouse social justice as a value, without committing to transformative change.

Social work educators have promoted 'critical reflexivity' as a means to integrate critical theory into social work practice. Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) define critical reflexivity or 'critical consciousness' as a 'process of continuously reflecting upon and examining how our own biases, assumptions and cultural worldviews affect the ways we perceive difference and power dynamics' (p. 441). The extent to which critical theory is applied in everyday practice, however, remains contested.

Decolonizing approaches

The pedagogy of decolonial and Indigenous social work emerged as a response to critiques of AOP and critical social work by centering diverse Indigenous knowledge. Social work's complicity in the ongoing oppression of marginalization of Indigenous communities exemplifies the failure to address systemic inequality in social work practice. Decolonizing approaches in social work draw attention to the ongoing colonial agendas, particularly in white settler states like Canada, where whiteness and Western/Eurocentric biases[1] function as an unmarked norm (Sinclair & Albert, 2008). Critical and Marxist-based theories that arose during the nineteenth century, for example, typically ignored or dismissed European conquest as a precondition for theorizing power relations within structures of modernity (Ife, 2000; Mignolo, 2002). In response, educators and scholars such as Tamburro (2013) assert the importance of drawing from post-colonial theories (e.g. the concepts of othering, re-membering, hegemony, colonial power, and awareness of the cultural devastation of colonialization) toward 'decolonizing' social work education.

Schools of social work across Canada are dedicating more resources to developing curricular content on social work interventions with Indigenous communities to address intergenerational trauma, including social work's involvement in the Sixties Scoop. Indigenous social work scholars and activists have also taken high-profile leadership roles in challenging the state's continued discrimination against Indigenous communities, as exemplified by the nine-year human rights case led by Cindy Blackstock in which the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that the Government of Canada discriminated against First Nations children by underfunding welfare services for children living on First Nation reserves (Currie & Sinha, 2015).

Considering the stature of 'social justice' as a core social work value, in the remainder of the paper, we present our research on graduates' assessment of social justice in their MSW education and current practice.

Method

Research design and sampling

This study involved an exploratory, online (http://www.SurveyMonkey.com), 48-item (structured and semi-structured questions) anonymous survey of 35 social work practitioners who completed social justice coursework as part of their MSW education at an urban university in Canada. The MSW program included a one-year advanced standing stream for incoming students with a Bachelor's degree in Social Work or a two-year option for those with an undergraduate degree in a related discipline. A preliminary invitation and two email reminders were sent to all eligible MSW alumni who graduated between 2009 and 2014. Of the 75 potential respondents, 35 responded, with a survey return rate of 46%. Not all eligible graduates were reached, as updated contact information was unavailable.

The survey instrument asked alumni to reflect on courses that focused on social justice during the second or final year of their MSW education. These courses employ a range of theories that foster critical thinking and reflexive praxis such as structural, critical, feminist, anti-racist, Indigenous, and AOP approaches. They are designed to facilitate students' understanding of how theory informs their praxis, in relation to historical, contemporary, and transnational dimensions of inequality. Areas of social work practice addressed in the curriculum include: AOP practice for working with individuals, families, and groups; popular education and community mobilization; policy analysis and policy advocacy; and participatory and arts-based research methods. For their field education, students selected from a range of practicum options depending on their specific interests, either by demographics (e.g. working with immigrants and refugees; LGBT youth, people with addictions, older adults) or by type of social work practice (e.g. direct practice in a clinical or institutional setting such as a hospital, health clinic, school, and prison; direct or indirect practice in a community setting; policy analysis; community-based or academic research).

Survey instrument

Survey items included a series of questions regarding respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, their social work practice, and current employment. Respondents were also asked to self-assess areas of social justice knowledge and skills that are relevant to their current practice and to comment on how their classroom and field education contributed to their current practice.

Five volunteer respondents tested the survey for face validity (i.e. if it appropriately assessed field education with regard to coursework) and interrater reliability (i.e. raters' agreement regarding the wording, content, and format of each survey question). Survey questions were itemized numerically and respondents were prompted (through a score card) to rate the clarity, formulation, and significance of each survey question. We improved the wording and content of the lower scored questions along with the format of the survey instrument based on respondents' qualitative feedback; some items were deleted.

Questions about the social work curriculum were developed from a selection of course syllabi that specifically outlined social justice learning goals. Respondents were presented with a 12-standardized item scale to rate the knowledge and skills (e.g. critical reflexivity, policy analysis) they found useful after graduation. The Likert scale contained values from 4 (not at all) to 1 (most of the time) (see Table 2). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .90.

Respondents were also asked to rate six components of their social work education regarding instructor support, specific assignments, and courses (required or elective) that contributed to their critical reflexivity and social work practice skills. These six standardized items were rated on a four-point Likert scale, whose Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency was .79. Respondents also had the option of providing open-ended responses.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were downloaded in Excel and imported to SPSS, where variables were cleaned, labeled, and re-coded. Descriptive statistics were employed, which consisted of frequencies, percentages, and means. Cronbach alphas were calculated for all items that were reported on a Likert scale. Incomplete answers were not removed from the data; therefore, we indicated the exact number of cumulative responses for each reported question.

Our qualitative methodology is informed by semiotic and post-structural theories of discourse and language in use (Fairclough, 1993, 2003; Foucault, 1980). Qualitative data (i.e. written comments) were analyzed through a process of 'abductive reasoning' (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011, p. 24). This involves a circular process of developing analytic themes a priori from our research questions and then revising or adding new themes after repeated readings of the quantitative and textual data. Data were organized around analytic themes to identify associations, patterns in discourse, or to identify subject positions that respondents took up in their written comments. We focused on the ways in which survey questions and respondents constructed, employed, and circulated various discourses related to social justice in social work.

This approach emphasizes that language is more than content, but is performative, constituting subject identities and relations of power (Gee, 1999). The ways in which respondents comment on social justice are inseparable from their social contexts in which the signs and symbols of this discourse circulate as meaningful in social work (Baikie, 2009, p. 56). In examining respondents' use of language in their qualitative feedback in tandem with the survey questions, we analyzed the politics of constructing 'social justice knowledge' within the profession, and how social work practitioners represent the performance of 'social justice skills' in social work practice.

Results

Below we report the sample characteristics. We then present key themes that were reflected in both quantitative and qualitative data including: (a) social work background and current practice, (b) social justice knowledge and skills, and (c) learning social justice through field education. We also discuss how social justice was represented as distinct from micro- or clinical practice in respondents' open-ended textual comments.

Sample characteristics

Thirty-five social workers consented to participate in the survey. The largest group of respondents graduated in 2012 (n = 11), with the remaining equally distributed over 2010 (n = 5), 2011 (n = 5), and 2013 (n = 5). One-third of the sample held BSW degrees and completed their MSW as advanced standing students; two-thirds studied in the two-year MSW program. Most respondents were professionals between 20 and 29 years old; more than one-third were 30–39 years old. Only one respondent was between 50 and 59 years old. The majority of respondents self-identified as white (21); about a third (13) identified as racialized (i.e. those who identify as 'people of color' or who perceive themselves to be racially 'othered' with regard to constructions of whiteness as an unmarked norm (Ku, 2009) (see Table 1). Only two respondents self-identified a physical or intellectual

Table 1. Summary of participants' demographic and organizational characteristics.

	Number	Percent (%)
Type of MSW program (n = 35)		
MSW two-year full-time	24	69
MSW advanced standing full-time	11	31
Age (n = 35)		
20–29	20	57
30–39	14	40
50–59	1	3
Racialized status (n = 34)		
White	21	62
Racialized	13	38
Disability status (n = 35)		
Yes	2	6
No	33	94
Gender identity (n = 32)		
Female	31	97
Transgender	1	3
Sexual orientation (n = 34)		
Heterosexual	24	69
Queer	7	20
Bisexual	2	6
Gay	1	3
Organizational profile (n = 33)		
Community-based/not-for-profit	21	60
Government/public setting	7	20
Hospital setting	3	9
Self-employed	2	6
Type of practice N/A[a]		
Direct practice	18	51
Research	16	46
Community development	11	31
Advocacy	11	31
Teaching	7	20
Administration	7	20
Policy work	5	14
Work role (n = 32)		
Front-line/program delivery/support services	28	87
Mid-management/supervisory role	4	13

Note: Not every participant answered each question. The actual number (n) is reported for clarification purposes.
[a]Participants could select more than one choice as their type of practice.

disability. Almost all respondents identified as female. One participant identified as transgender; two self-identified as 'Genderqueer' and one as 'Two-Spirited'. About two-thirds of respondents self-identified as heterosexual (24) and the remainder as queer, bisexual, or gay. Some respondents problematized the formation of demographic questions around identity. For example, one participant wrote, 'I do not [identify as racialized], however [I] do identify with experiences of "othering," marginalization and oppressions based on my cultural identity and ethnicity'. Another respondent explained, 'Identity is more complex than a white/non-white binary'.

Social work practice background and current practice

Respondents' years of experience ranged from less than 1 year to 20 years, although most people recently started to work in the field. Their areas of practice reflected general trends in social work including health and mental health, education, child and family services, disability assistance, and general social support services (see Table 1). Respondents also identified international development, equity, diversity and human rights, research, media, and technology as fields of practice.

The majority of respondents were working in the community-based/not-for-profit sector (21), government (7), and hospital settings (3) (see Table 1). Half of the respondents worked in direct practice (18). An overwhelming majority (28) worked in front-line positions, program delivery, and support services. Respondents also reported working in community development (11), advocacy (11), administration (7) and teaching (7), and policy work (5). Less than a tenth of respondents (4) occupied mid-management and supervisory roles. Most people in the management roles had between 3 and 5 years of experience. Only one person with more than 20 years of experience held a supervisory role (see Table 1).

The sample included a larger proportion of people working at least part-time in research (16). This may reflect a sampling bias as we were more likely to have current emails for people who remained in contact with the university through their doctoral studies or by holding part-time research assistantships.

Respondents who described their day-to-day work performed a broad range of duties including: one-on-one or group counseling, case management, referral and resource brokering, program design and coordination, discharge planning research, peer training, student supervision, and management. The following comment illustrates the variety of their responsibilities:

> [I work in] addictions and mental health case management. [I do] casual counselling, harm reduction, housing support, court support and advocacy, practical supports (groceries, house cleaning, moving, bill payments, etc.), help with obtaining identification, referrals and accompaniments (i.e.: to GP, psychologist, psychiatrist, legal aid, clothing/food banks, housing, etc., emergency/crisis support, hospital accompaniments, coordinating care among various service providers, housing transitions.

In addition, the skills acquired through the program were deemed useful within a variety of fields that were not traditionally associated with social work practice (e.g. yoga instruction).

Representations of social justice knowledge and skills

Respondents were asked to identify the areas of social justice knowledge and skills they found useful after graduation. Most graduates identified critical reflexivity (27) and issues

Table 2. Summary of participants' knowledge areas and skills.

	Number	Percent (%)
Critical reflexivity (n = 30)		
Most of the time	27	90
Sometimes	3	10
Access and equity (n = 30)		
Most of the time	25	83
Sometimes	5	9
Intersectionality (n = 29)		
Most of the time	19	61
Sometimes	7	20
Occasionally	3	9
AOP (n = 34)		
Most of the time	21	68
Sometimes	12	39
Occasionally	1	3
Participatory action research (n = 31)		
Most of the time	7	22
Sometimes	12	39
Occasionally	8	26
Not at all	4	13
Integration of Theory and Practice (*n*=31)		
Most of the Time	12	39
Sometimes	13	42
Occasionally	4	13
Not at all	2	6
Transnational dimensions (n = 30)		
Most of the time	5	17
Sometimes	11	37
Occasionally	7	23
Not at all	7	23
Community mobilizing (n = 30)		
Most of the time	6	20
Sometimes	12	40
Occasionally	9	30
Not at all	3	10
Policy analysis (n = 30)		
Most of the time	10	33
Sometimes	6	20
Occasionally	9	30
Not at all	5	17
Policy advocacy (n = 29)		
Most of the time	8	28
Sometimes	7	24
Occasionally	9	31
Not at all	5	17
Anti-colonialism (n = 30)		
Most of the time	14	47
Sometimes	7	23
Occasionally	5	17
Not at all	4	13
Decolonizing perspectives (n = 30)		
Most of the time	17	57
Sometimes	5	17
Occasionally	4	13
Not at all	4	13

Note: The Cronbach's alpha for this scale for internal consistency was .90.

related to access and equity (25) as areas of knowledge that have benefited them the most. AOP practice (21), intersectionality (19), and decolonizing perspectives (17) were also considered useful. On the lower end, transnational dimensions (5), community mobilizing (6), participatory action research (7), and policy advocacy (8) were skills that graduates found useful less often (see Table 2).

Respondents also identified the elements of their social justice curriculum that contributed the most to their critical reflexivity and social work practice skills. The required courses and instructional support seemed to have mattered most. The elective classes and the projects/assignments were considered less helpful. Social change/activist elements scored the lowest in relation to graduates' social work practice skills (see Table 3).

In the qualitative feedback, respondents defined social justice as a 'perspective', a 'lens', or 'framework' with regard to social work values of 'dignity, respect, and non-judgement', mirroring the CASW's *Code of Ethics*. One participant operationalized social justice as 'a capacity to communicate and discuss difficult topics and issues such as race/gender identity/ "Isms"'. Furthermore, the capacity to talk about oppression was linked to advocacy goals, 'being able to learn ways to get [a] point across can help clients access resources in community that they may not be able to, without learning how to listen and communicate/advocate with clients'. Participating in a community of 'diverse, critical and out-of-the-box

Table 3. Emphasis on social justice curriculum.

	Number	Percent (%)
Required courses(s) (n = 32)		
Most of the time	19	59
Sometimes	10	31
Occasionally	2	6
Not at all	1	3
Elective options (n = 33)		
Most of the time	14	42.5
Sometimes	14	42.5
Occasionally	3	9
Not at all	2	6
Instructor(s) support (n = 32)		
Most of the time	18	56
Sometimes	8	25
Occasionally	5	16
Not at all	1	3
Projects/assignments (n = 32)		
Most of the time	14	44
Sometimes	12	38
Occasionally	4	12
Not at all	2	6
Social change/activist elements (n = 32)		
Most of the time	12	37.5
Sometimes	12	37.5
Occasionally	5	16
Not at all	3	9
Peer support (n = 32)		
Most of the time	12	38
Sometimes	15	47
Occasionally	3	9
Not at all	2	6

Note: The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .79.

thinkers', people who give 'courage and strength' were also identified as benefits of social justice coursework.

Some attributes of learning social justice knowledge and skills were expressed in terms of employability; 'The skills I learned in the [social justice courses] helped to set me apart from other MSWs. My understanding of AOP and intersectionality were what my employer was looking for'.

Several respondents commented that their previous community or BSW training 'in the field' played a more significant role in their current use of social justice knowledge and skills than what they learned in their MSW education.

Learning social justice through field education

Respondents reported that their MSW practicum took place in a variety of settings and with different types of practice modalities, including direct practice, community development, research, and policy. Nineteen of the 35 respondents characterized their MSW practicum as direct practice; a third as community development (12); and a quarter as research (8). The remainder reported public policy as their practicum focus (4).

Most (23) respondents reported that their learning goals were met during their practicum. There were mixed results, however, regarding social justice knowledge and skills that were learned through field education. Fewer than half of respondents (13) found their practicum experience integrated a social justice perspective; one-third (12) stated the same in relation to their field instruction.

Those who reported learning social justice knowledge and skills through their practicum participated in AOP workshops, worked with diverse staff and clients, applied critical theories into practice (e.g. when integrating diversity and inclusion goals), and provided frontline advocacy to clients. Others found ways to apply social justice theories and principles to their work, even when their supervisor and work setting lacked an explicit anti-oppressive lens.

> My practicum wasn't very connected to the skills I learned in [social justice courses], however I did use my skills a lot in working with a group of self-advocates (people with intellectual disabilities). I learned from them and their allies about their struggles and how they communicated their rights to the people that worked with them, and integrated AOP, critical reflexivity, and participatory methods into my work with them.

Practicum placements not grounded within a social justice framework were described as 'very clinical, evidence-based CBT driven', 'child and family focussed, but these theories did not reflect an AOP perspective', or to have used social justice and diversity language in a 'tokenistic' rather than empowering manner. In some cases, respondents valued the 'clinical skills' and did not expect to learn AOP or social justice practice in these settings.

Some respondents expressed frustration with 'the rigidity of the practicum selection system' as well as the incongruences between the theoretical perspectives taught in class vs. field education. Many respondents stated that they would have liked to see additional organizations as possible practicum choices, including: grassroots, advocacy placements, youth organizations, health settings serving Indigenous peoples, policy think tanks, and community coalitions engaged in advocacy work.

Four respondents shared that they took the initiative to arrange their own practicum placements because their first practicum did not meet their learning goals: 'My first

supervisors were terrible: staunch defenders of the status quo'. Respondents who sought to create their own placements encountered barriers related to CASW requirement that MSW field supervisors have an MSW degree. The following response highlights a disconnect between classroom content, which included decolonizing approaches to social work and practicum opportunities:

> When I inquired about the possibility of working in a community development role in a First Nations organization, I was told that staff at these organizations did not have the educational capacity to support graduate students (They did not have MSW degrees). The program seeks to offer de-colonizing perspectives but, at the time, did not provide placements to match these perspectives.

In some instances, an off-site MSW supervisor may collaborate with an on-site non-MSW supervisor to accommodate a student; however, this model is labor intensive. The following response characterized the reliance on MSW practitioners to supervise students as a structural problem:

> The flexibility to choose our own practicum, and to choose an organization that doesn't necessarily hire MSWs … was a very classist requirement based on a very limited understanding of knowledge, experience and expertise, and prevented a number of us from being placed in quality organizations, especially where community development and organizing are concerned.

Considering that the majority of social workers are involved in direct practice (i.e. counseling, case management) (Bejan, Craig, & Saini, 2014), the opportunities for students interested in learning advocacy and community mobilization may be structurally limited.

Social justice as distinct from clinical practice

Respondents' representations of social justice in their textual comments reinforced dichotomous framing of social justice as separate or distinct from 'micro' or 'clinical' practice. Such constructions surfaced in critiques about the MSW curriculum or practicum supervisors who 'lacked' a social justice framework. Respondents who evaluated their field instruction positively also considered social justice as separate from their clinical training.

This dichotomous thinking undergirds respondents' critique that social justice coursework focuses on theory but not enough on 'practical skills'. One respondent summarized this challenge by stating:

> The curriculum was rich with useful theory (the framework from which to understand how nations and societies function and affect people's lives), however, there was little practical or concrete information shared about providing direct (or even indirect) services to clients. Much of this was learned within practicum, however, it would have been more useful to learn about tools and strategies for practice, as it pertains to different population groups (ex: people living with disabilities, refugees, LGBTQ youth, and these intersections, etc.).

Furthermore, respondents commented that knowledge that translates easily to micro- or clinical practice is valued more than macro- or systemic practice.

Lack of integration of social justice principles throughout the program emerged as a significant theme. One respondent commented that the majority of required courses in the two-year MSW program 'rarely appreciated or integrated social justice'. Several respondents also remarked on the 'lack of institutional support'-reinforced whiteness as a dominant social work perspective, while marginalizing students or faculty who engaged in social justice work. As one respondent wrote:

> To be honest, in the particular year I graduated, I found the program to be very lacking (both the MSW as a whole and the [social justice] component as well). I felt it was geared to teaching white middle-class students with both little work experience and little theoretical knowledge. In my year, those of us who had had many years of social work experience, as well as lived experience of racism, ableism, homophobia, etc., quite often found our classrooms to be harmful spaces. Many of the instructors were either inexperienced or taught problematic content. Many of the students also engaged in various forms of racial and other types of violence towards 'non-dominant' students. I was quite disengaged and disheartened by my experience of the MSW with the exception of two courses. The most useful component of my MSW education was my second-year practicum in group therapy and an elective course I took [outside the department].

Even when respondents identified positive learning from their MSW education, this was often attributed to individual instructors or specific courses, whereas the program as a whole was critiqued for not providing practical skills that engage students in the transformative potential of social justice work.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the extent to which social justice concepts and skills are reflected in field education and MSW graduates' current practice. The social workers in this study illustrated a widespread commitment to work with and advocate for marginalized peoples, to improve their access to services, promote their rights, and foster creativity in addressing intersecting oppressions. Our findings raise concerns, however, regarding the status of social justice theory across the social work curriculum. It is notable that graduates who had enrolled in social justice-related coursework reported that social justice and AOP frameworks were not taught by their field instructor. Furthermore, respondents viewed limitations on practicum options as impeding their capacity to learn anti-oppressive practice in organizations that foreground social justice goals. The CASW requirement for MSW students to be supervised by an MSW graduate promotes professional knowledge may pose an unintended barrier for students to learn how to work with marginalized populations. This structural barrier normalizes the marginalization of anti-oppressive practice in the everyday operations of field education. This dimension of the 'hidden curriculum' of social work may also reinforce social work education's investment in 'professional status over progressive politics' (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

In addition to marginalizing critical approaches to social work, the institutionalization of social justice rhetoric may be a sign of 'mainstreaming'. Mainstreaming of 'social justice' in social work education has the potential to reduce this discourse to the profession's image (i.e. we are combating discrimination), while the practical skills required for transformative change are viewed as distinct and less marketable than the skills associated with cognitive and behavioral interventions. As a mainstream discourse, social justice commitments through institutional policies and diversity statements have the potential to remain performative; they can produce an image of the institution without fostering change (Ahmed, 2012).

Finally, our findings indicate that social work's focus on competencies reinforces a hierarchical binary between clinical and social justice skills; social workers learn that social justice theories do not translate well to 'skills' and thus are not useful in everyday social work practice. Although competency-based frameworks construct professionalism as complimentary to critical thinking, pedagogical content is task-oriented, with limited opportunities to

apply structural theories to practice. Alongside the 'hidden curriculum' (Jay, 2003; Margolis & Romero, 1998), capitalist market logic that emphasizes the commodification of social work informs standardized competencies and technical skills (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000), which in turn narrow the field of knowledge that professionals need to secure employment.

Given these findings, we contend that the niche for social justice education follows what Bourdieu and Johnson called the logic of cultural capital production, or the logic of the economic world reversed (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993), which although directly opposed to the market, it is still conditioned by the market. In professionalizing equity and diversity work, students-turned-consumers are now assessed on their future contributions to the economy (i.e. putting to good use their social justice education), although social justice is understood, for the most part, as contradictory to the needs and desires of the market. Paradoxically, it is this very same appositional value that gets commodified. Graduates are active players in the market but from a more desired position in terms of symbolic and cultural capital: they are doing diversity work; they are critical; they are taking the socially just approach. This appeal to mainstream social and institutional rhetoric that centers (and superficially embraces) diversity does not require structural or social change. In accumulating material currency, diversity becomes mainstream and it creates a way of accumulating advantage for the already advantaged (i.e. MSW students are pursuing a professional degree which will materialize into future employment) rather than challenging disadvantage (Ahmed, 2012).

Limitations

Certain methodological considerations inform our analytic claims in this paper. The sample size was relatively small and the findings reflect subjective self-reports. As such, our analysis is based on respondents' perceptions of their graduate education in social work. This makes it difficult to provide a complete assessment of the skills that graduates developed through the program. Respondents' use of diverse epistemologies to define social justice also illustrated the inherent challenges when evaluating the overall 'theme' of social justice. At times, respondents conflated concepts of social justice with equity, equality, and/or equality of opportunities; the ambiguity associated with the term 'social justice' may leave some social workers uncertain as to what they ought to 'do', or what 'skills' are needed to bring about change.

Despite limitations in the study design, our findings illustrate some of the tensions faced by MSW graduates, between the explicit and hidden curriculum, when learning and practicing social justice in their social work education.

Conclusion

Our research highlights the integral role that field education plays in reinforcing (or dismissing) social justice values in social work education. Toward realizing social work's commitment to diversity, anti-oppression, and anti-discrimination, further research is needed to explore how classroom education, field instruction, and the implicit or hidden curriculum influence students' consciousness of social justice theories and their application in different fields of practice. Further research could also explore how the competency framework has been impacted by neoliberal, profit-making principles.

Structural pressures that limit advocacy in professional practice have direct implications for social work field education. To address this gap between rhetoric and practice, professional social work bodies and social work educators need to work more closely to navigate and resist structural oppression in different fields of practice. This may require further investments in training and support to field instructors, including remuneration for supervisory work, especially when field instructors work in organizations that feel the pressure of outcome-based performance measures that limit advocacy and anti-oppressive practice.

Note

1. The concept of 'whiteness' theorizes relations of domination within racial ideologies. In the North American context, both terms signify relations of dominance, but also obscure heterogeneity and subaltern resistance within the notion of European(ess). Within social work literature, whiteness has been theorized as producing unearned privilege for whites, while remaining unmarked or invisible as a particular sociocultural perspective. Eurocentric biases of currently-in-use paradigms and theories (i.e. drawn from Enlightenment) further reinforce epistemic hierarchies; hence, we are employing these concepts to highlight that social justice approaches continue to replicate epistemological stances associated with global hierarchies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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