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Teaching Clinical Social Work from Social Justice Perspective: A Qualitative Study

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What does “social justice” look like
when sitting with clients?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Justice & Social Work: Definitional Ambiguity?

- Key definitions of social justice
 - Distributive justice (Rawls, 1971)
 - Domination, oppression, and social relations (Young, 1990)
 - Capability approach (Sen, 2009)
- Why do social workers struggle with social justice in practice?
 - Lack of definitional specificity (Reisch, 2002)
 - Professionalization project of social work (Finn, 2016)

Clinical Social Work Practice & Social Justice

- Maschi et al., 2011: Content analysis of conceptual work on common strategies of how to engage in social justice-informed practice
 - Reflective practice or critical consciousness
 - Egalitarian therapeutic relationship
 - Language and discourse engaged in practice
 - Ethics and values
 - Recognizing structural impacts on the client in assessment and treatment
- O'Brien (2010): Survey of social workers (n=191)
 - Advocating for a particular client
 - Did not engage in an agency or a policy level as often
- Morgaine (2014): Focus groups with social workers (n=17)
 - Most workers believed that every client (should) have the right to be treated fairly and have access to goods
 - No time for agency- or policy-level work for systemic changes

Clinical Social Work Practice & Social Justice

- McLaughlin (2011): Interviews with Canadian clinical social workers (n=18) on how they conceptualize social justice
 - Social justice and injustice reside in social systems (e.g., policy)
 - Social justice as fair and equitable allocation of resources
 - Social justice as the process of every person being respected and valued
 - When social justice is understood as a structural issue, clinicians did not feel as though they had much impact
 - When social justice is conceptualized as a resource allocation or a relationship with marginalized clients, clinicians saw a clearer link between their practice and social justice
- Challenges the assumption that social justice work is legitimate only when it is aimed at policy- or structural-level change

Current Study: Rationale & Purpose



Much of Canadian literature on critical social work, structural social work, or AOP focuses on macro practice



Dearth of empirical work on teaching clinical social work from a social justice perspective – much focuses on concepts related to culture, diversity, and cross-cultural practice (Varghese, 2016)



How do social work educators teach clinical practice from a social justice perspective?

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

- REB approval from the University
- Purposive and snowball sampling, using various listservs
- Individual interviews with Canadian social work educators (n=12)
 - English-speaking
 - Have taught clinical practice at a CASWE-accredited school within the last year
 - Any rank or status (e.g., tenure-track, contract)
- Data collected from educators across 6 provinces

Participants

Gender	10 women	2 men
Highest Education	6 PhDs	6 MSWs
Age	35 (min)	67 (max)
Race	10 White	2 Racialized
Academic Position	8 full-time faculty	4 contract instructors
Years of Teaching	3 (min)	17 (max)
Years of Practice Experience	8 (min)	40 (max)

Data Analysis



Inductive qualitative analysis (Merriam, 2002), using Grounded Theory coding methods (Charmaz, 2006)

- Initial coding (n = 30)
- Focused coding (n = 3)
- Constant comparative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)



Audit trail of all research processes



Debriefing and consultation with the research team

RESULTS

Emergent Themes

01

Integrating **social theories** in conceptualizing clinical practice

02

Engaging in **transformative pedagogies**

03

Navigating professional commitment within **contemporary practice and education contexts**

1. Integrating Social Theory

I bring social theories to bear on the psychological work... I want (students) to pay attention to the client's narrative and identify how the discourses have influenced that narratives... getting to truly understand the client's experience within the context of social discourses and structural conditions.
(02)

1. Integrating Social Theory

This whole thing where we are sitting down in this therapy room and doing this thing called counseling is (just) one way of working on healing ... [We need to] recognize and explore multiple ways of healing and ones that are more culturally relevant. (12)

2. Transformative Pedagogies

We must be careful about how we speak about those who have different experiences than our own ... It certainly poses challenges when you are a white person standing in front of the room. The challenge (for a white educator) is how does one invite voice, invite contribution, in a respectful manner that doesn't ask [racialized students] to represent their entire race. (11)

2. Transformative Pedagogies

[We] look at the history of how that particular approach (e.g., CBT) was developed and the context in which it was development, and why it may have developed and what kind of knowledge might be marginalized or eclipsed by it. (06)

2. Transformative Pedagogies

[When using simulation, students experience discomfort in] address(ing) sexual orientation... or anything around diversity and social justice issues... [simulation] helps students become more comfortable with the discomfort of the work and understand where some of that discomfort might be coming from. (01)

What is required of you (as a clinician) and what are you asking of (the client)? And what does that mean for you in terms of ethical obligation to the client? And how do you enact ethically your role as someone who has been asked to help? (02)

3. Navigating Contemporary Contexts

What employers expect (students) to have is the traditional clinical practice...to make them job ready...
The structure of the work of the social worker is really limited to very, very short term clinical intervention.
(09)

Limitations

01

Small sample despite
concerted recruitment
effort

02

The study does not
adequately reflect:

- Francophone
colleagues across
Canada

- Indigenous and
racialized educators

03

Is clinical social work
an enactment of
whiteness?
(Lee & Bhuyan, 2013)

TAKE-AWAYS FOR EDUCATORS

Pedagogical Examples

- Use of critical social theory
 - Case scenario with a complex therapeutic relationship and explicating it from the perspective of power and social relations, using critical race theory
- Transformative pedagogies
 - Include those written by queer, trans* scholars, POC, Indigenous scholars in the syllabus
 - White educators critically engages their own positionalities in discussing their clinical work with racialized clients
- Critical appraisal of conventional practice theories and models
 - Discuss how a particular clinical model might and/or might not work when working with clients from marginalized communities

Pedagogical Examples

- Active learning processes that model the uncomfortable, uncertain, and unpredictable nature of clinical work
 - Use experiential teaching methods, such as the use of simulated clients, focusing on reflection and constructive feedback – *Experience alone does not teach students!*
- Greater need for institutional support
 - Capacity building among faculty in Lunch & Learn
- Help students navigate tensions in practice contexts
 - Include a detailed description of agency and larger political contexts in a clinical case study
- Is power always structural? Is “total change” the only change?
 - Pose questions on how students might use their personal, cultural, and relational power to resist against the hegemony of Whiteness and Eurocentric values



Thank You!

- This project was generously funded by Carleton University Faculty of Public Affairs

- This presentation is based on the upcoming publication:

Asakura, K., Strumm, B., Todd, S., & Varghese, R. (In Press). What does social justice look like when sitting with clients?: A qualitative study of teaching clinical social work from a social justice perspective. *Journal of Social Work Education*



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SIM Social Work
RESEARCH LAB

Thank You!

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Please see our past and current work on clinical social work education and practice at the SIM Social Work Research Lab web-site:

<https://carleton.ca/socialwork/simlab/>