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# Social Justice Education: Impacts on Social Attitudes

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## **Social Justice Education: Impacts on Social Attitudes**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*Paramount to multicultural social work practice is acquiring a comprehensive understanding of oppressed and vulnerable populations who often lack access to healthcare and economic resources. A practitioner's self-awareness of social attitudes can provide a foundation for developing cultural competency skills. Using a pretest posttest design, social attitudes of Master of Social Work (MSW) students enrolled in a required social justice course were examined (N=85). A repeated-measure MANOVA indicated significant main effects on: 1) within subject factor of time on students' cognitive attitudes towards racial diversity, affective attitudes toward racial diversity, and women equity following students' exposure to the social justice course, and 2) between subject on the racial diversity affective subscale. Implications for practice are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *social attitudes, social justice, discrimination, oppression, equity*

## INTRODUCTION

Everywhere we turn, if we take the time to look, we see the result of our socialization and its historical context which may often shape attitudes and behavior. Delicately woven into this framework is a power structure which is largely unseen and unspoken. It determines who has power, who has privilege, and who does not (Adams et al., 2000). This structure may impact access to resources, services and an equitable and fair lifestyle.

It is imperative for the social worker to understand the social arrangement which has been instituted for many lifetimes that delineates between those in power and those who lack it. The populations served by social workers must constantly struggle within this arrangement. Just as it is crucial for clinicians to be mindful of practice issues in their work, so, too, is it essential to be self-aware of attitudes and belief systems, especially regarding pre-formed ideas and judgments of others. The inadequacies of our own socialization process are often perpetuated through internalized and unconscious forms of oppression, discrimination and prejudice. As advocates of marginalized populations, social workers need to think critically about the different forms of oppression and to understand how they may be influenced by them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Recently, education and training for counselors and social workers has focused on ensuring multicultural competency (Browne & Mokuau, 2008; Chae, Foley, & Chae, 2006; Murphy, Park, & Lonsdale, 2006; Snyder, Peeler, & May, 2008; Sue, Zane, Nagayama Hall, & Berger, 2009; Tomlinson-Clarke, 2000; Walls, 2009). Multicultural competence includes sensitivity and knowledge of issues experienced by marginalized and oppressed groups. These include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, culture, age, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and religion (Chae et al., 2006).

The Council on Social Work Education (2008) requires inclusion of diversity and social and economic justice material in the social work curriculum to build cultural competency skills. Yet, achieving this goal can present challenges to students and educators (Chae et al., 2006; Van Soest & Garcia, 2003; Walls, 2009). The material provokes many reactions based upon the student's world views and experiences which may cause discomfort and difficulties in discussions. Student indifference as well as active resistance presents barriers to covering the material (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Sue et al., 2009). Sometimes discussion and presentation of

the material can reinforce strongly held stereotypes and supports the reasons why dialogue has been avoided (Katz, 2003). Additionally, sometimes faculty may also experience discomfort about facilitating class discussions and disseminating course material to students (Walls, 2009). Often, they may themselves lack the knowledge or the skills in managing controversial and potentially explosive discussions (Bolgatz, 2005; Nagda et al., 1999). It is crucial for students to be in a safe environment where they can share and process their own experiences and develop a broader knowledge-base as well as comfort level regarding such topics (Nagda et al., 1999; Van Soest & Garcia, 2003).

Race and gender issues are thought to be socially constructed and have economic and historical bases in the United States (Lorber, 2000; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Rothenberg, 2004). These forms of oppression continue to marginalize people of color and women and prevent them from fully participating and contributing to our society in meaningful ways. Ponterotto et al. (1995) describe prejudice in the form of race and gender as “[transcending] national boundaries and represents a universal phenomenon” (p. 1017).

Confronting and discussing the different forms of oppression can be a charged activity and is often avoided because the process can be painful, time-consuming and ultimately extremely challenging (Miller, Hyde, & Ruth, 2004). We need to learn how to engage in dialogue, even when it is or becomes difficult (Bolgatz, 2005). If we are able to have open, honest and forgiving conversations on race, we could build a repertoire of dialogue and language from which we could draw while discovering and teaching each other. Thus would begin the process of dismantling all forms of oppression for a more just and equitable society.

Research has begun to support the importance of culturally competent interventions with findings that indicate positive outcomes (Sue et al., 2009). A number of pedagogical methods have been discussed in the literature in terms of their efficacy in developing multicultural competency. In particular, having an experiential component, especially in the form of interactive dialogue has shown to have a positive impact on building competency skills (Chae et al., 2006; Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Sanner, Baldwin, Cannella, & Charles, 2010). Some of the literature supports the integration of diversity material throughout all aspects of the educational program through different courses, supervision, and practica (Dickson & Jepsen, 2007). Other findings indicate that infusion alone is not enough to build skill levels (Walls, 2009). At the very least, a course with both didactic and experiential components can improve

competencies with other research indicating that a single course can indeed make a difference (Chae, et al., 2006; Murphy et al., 2006). Clearly, further empirical inquiry is necessary to determine effective frameworks for diversity education (Snyder et al., 2008).

Teaching methods for multicultural material need to be more fully examined for effectiveness and to be consistent with evidence-based practices (Walls, 2009). Dickson and Jepson (2007) suggest utilizing a systematic approach to incorporating content throughout the curriculum and in supervision. In fact, the training environment or the classroom culture was found to be the most significant predictor of multicultural competencies (Dickson & Jepsen, 2007). A combination of lecture and dialogue can assist students in beginning to understand issues of diversity (Sanner et al., 2010).

This study examines if a required social justice course in the social work curriculum makes a difference in student attitudes. The hypotheses were:

1) There would be an expected increase in students' attitudes toward racial cognitive, racial affective, and women's equity between pretest and posttest, following the students' exposure to the social justice course.

2) There would be an expected increase in students' attitudes toward racial cognitive, racial affective, and women's equity between pretest and posttest and it would not differ based on students' race.

## **METHODS**

### ***Design and Procedures***

A one-group pretest-posttest design was used to determine if Master of Social Work (MSW) students' self-rated social attitudes would increase after a social justice course. The authors received university Institutional Review Board approval prior to conducting the study. This study was completed at one suburban campus of a large university and five sections of students in the social justice course were administered both the pretest and posttest. The pretest was administered at the beginning of the semester and the posttest was administered the last day of class. The one-semester course is discussed below.

### ***The Course***

The course, Social Justice: Practice with Organizations and Communities (hereafter referred to as Social Justice), examines "how organizations and communities serve as a lens for

understanding oppression, unequal access to resources, and economic and social justice. This class focuses on how systemic oppression and social justice emerge in agency, organizational and community settings” (p.1). Students must be matriculated and in field placement in order to enroll in this course in this MSW program. Course content for all sections adhered to the same master syllabus which included the use of the same textbooks and required content to be covered, ensuring consistency across all sections. In order to assure that this course content is delivered consistently throughout the different sections, a university social work faculty member is responsible for discussing the course master syllabi with the professors who teach different sections.

This course begins with examining the larger structural context of oppression and social justice in the United States and how this impacts social work practice. The different forms of oppression explored are racism, sexism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism and ableism. A model of oppression is presented and used throughout the semester, examining the different levels where social oppression is maintained and operationalized through individuals, institutions, society and through conscious and unconscious attitudes and behaviors (Adams et al., 1997). Students are given the opportunity to take an inventory of their own social attitudes and how they either contribute to or attempt to dismantle social injustices. The pedagogical framework utilized throughout the semester is a combination of lecture and experiential activities, including classroom discussions, films, small group activities, reading, journaling, and written assignments.

The course focuses largely on facilitating service delivery at the agency, organizational and community levels. Professionals’ roles, values and ethics, oppression and social justice are included. Within the conceptual framework of the oppression model covered in the first half of the course, developing a macro change effort is utilized in the second half of the course. This macro change project incorporates the social work processes of assessment, planning, intervention and evaluation within organizations and communities with specific focus on how oppression and social injustice emerge within these venues.

### **Measures**

***Social Attitudes:*** The Quick Discrimination Index (QDI) was used to assess attitudes toward racial diversity and women’s equality (Ponterotto et al., 1995). The QDI is a 30-question Likert-type scale with each item ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The

scale has three subscales which measure: 1) cognitive attitudes towards racial diversity/multiculturalism (cognitive); 2) affective attitudes towards more personal contact/closeness with racial diversity (affective); and 3) attitudes towards women's equity (women's equity). Coefficient alpha for these subscales have been reported across many studies and was within acceptable ranges: The racial cognitive subscale with range of .80 to .90 (median = .85), racial affective Subscales with range of .70 to .87 (median = .77) and women's equity subscale with range of .47 to .76 (median = .71) (Ponterotto, Potere, & Johansen, 2002, p. 203).

The cognitive subscale measures actual cognitive thinking on racism and equal rights in education and the workplace, with 9 items and possible scores ranging from 9 to 45. Sample items include: (1) I think the school system, from elementary school through college, should promote values representative of diverse cultures; and (2) I believe that reading the autobiography of Malcolm X would be of value. Observed alphas for the racial cognitive subscale for the current study were 0.81 for both pretest and posttest.

The affective subscale, measures comfort in interactions with people of different racial backgrounds, with 7 items and possible scores ranging from 7 to 35. Sample items include: (1) My friendship networks is very racially mixed; and (2) I would feel o.k. about my son or daughter dating someone from a different race. The observed alphas for the racial affective subscale for the current study were 0.73 at pretest and 0.67 at posttest.

The women's equity subscale, measures attitudes toward women's equity, with 7 items and scores ranging from 7 to 35. Sample items include: (1) I think feminist perspective should be an integral part of the higher education curriculum; and (2) I feel (or would feel) very comfortable having a woman as my primary physician. The observed alphas for the women's equity subscale for the current study were 0.63 at pretest and 0.67 at posttest.

*Course Content Achievement:* The Social Justice Course syllabus contained eight objectives and there were eight corresponding questions in the post-test. Students were asked to rate how well they thought the course objectives were achieved using a scale of 0 (*not at all achieved*) to 4 (*completely achieved*). An overall score was computed ranging from 0 to 32, with a higher score indicating a greater level of achievement on the course objectives. This measure was used as a fidelity check to ensure all material was covered. The observed alpha for the course content scale for the current study was 0.95 at posttest.

***Analysis***

All the data was entered into SPSS for data analysis. If data were missing for the computation of the attitude score for less than 20% of the items a case mean imputation was used. First, univariate analyses were conducted and then the hypotheses were examined using multivariate analysis. Dichotomous nominal level variables [gender (1=female), and race (1= Non-minority white/Caucasian non-Hispanic)] were dummy coded prior to entering them into the analysis.

A repeated-measure MANOVA was used. A significant main effect on the within subject factor of time would support the first hypothesis that is an increase in students' attitudes toward cognitive, affective and women equity between pretest and posttest, following the students' exposure to the social justice course. To support the second hypothesis, that the increase in students' attitudes toward cognitive, affective, and women's equity between pretest and posttest would not differ based on students' race, we would expect no significant main effect for the between subject of race nor race by time interaction. An analysis that also examined differences by instructors for the course was completed.

**RESULTS**

The 85 respondents were predominately female (85.9%), Caucasian (72.6%), and Christian (67.1%). Age was evenly distributed: 20-29 (31%); 30-39 (32.1%); and 40-49 (26.2%) and over 50 years of age representing 10.7%. No additional data were collected on students' demographic variables.

The repeated-measure MANOVA showed a significant main effect on the within subject factor of time on students' attitudes toward cognitive, affective and women equity between pretest and posttest, following the students' exposure to the social justice course (See Table 1). An analysis that also examined differences by instructors found no significant differences by course instructor.

**Table 1:**  
*Analysis of Variance for Impact of Social Justice Course on Students' Attitudes*

	df	F	$\eta$	p
Between Subjects				
Non-minority	3, 81	4.71	.15	.004**
Within Subject				
Time	3, 81	2.79	.09	.046*
Non-minority x Time	3, 81	2.58	.09	.059

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01

With respect to the second hypothesis, that the increase in students' attitudes toward cognitive, affective, and women's equity between pretest and posttest would not differ based on students' race, there was an effect for the between subjects. Table 2 presents the data that indicated no differences between pretest and posttest for the cognitive and women equality subscales, by racial groups. However there were differences between pretest and posttest for the affective subscale. Minority students had the same mean affective subscale scores at both pretest and posttest, however, non-minority students' affective scores increased between pretest and posttest.

**Table 2: Group Means Between Subjects Effects by Racial Group**

	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	F	Sig
<b>Cognitive</b>				
Minority	35.56 (4.82)	35.89 (4.66)		
Non-minority	33.52 (5.82)	35.33 (5.32)		
Combined	34.21 (5.64)	35.49 (5.11)		
			1.52	.221
<b>Affective</b>				
Minority	28.00 (4.14)	28.00 (3.43)		
Non-minority	25.13 (4.73)	26.07 (4.62)		
Combined	25.94 (4.73)	26.61 (4.39)		
			5.52	.021*
<b>Women's Equity</b>				
Minority	27.21 (4.35)	28.33 (4.22)		
Non-minority	28.69 (3.36)	28.93 (3.41)		
Combined	28.27 (3.70)	28.76 (3.64)		
			1.60	.210

\*p&lt;.05, \*\*p&lt;.01

**LIMITATIONS**

There are several limitations to this study. The findings are based on students' self-reports and they may have given socially desirable responses, especially given the sensitive nature of the material. This study also lacked a comparison group which would have allowed contrast between groups that had taken the course, and those that did not. Additionally, for data analysis, the racial categories were grouped by minority and non-minority, which may fail to capture differences between minority groups. Ideally, a future study would compare students who have taken the course verses those who did not. Finally, this course was a required course for this particular university and it may be different for schools that do not require courses of this type. The findings cannot be generalized to other settings; however, they do raise the need for further research.

## DISCUSSION

These findings indicate that non-minority students' cognitive and affective attitudes can be impacted by a social justice course. Minority students did not show change between pre- and posttest, but their pretest scores were higher at pretest. The fact that minority students did not show a significant change in attitudes compared to the non-minority students who did is an interesting finding though not surprising. This may indicate the difference in experiences faced by minorities. They live their everyday lives in the context of racism which is entrenched in our society (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Katz, 2003) and ever-present in their development (Tatum, 1997). Non-minority students often do not need to think about how racism affects them on a daily basis, especially given the effect of white privilege (Jensen, 2005). These findings show promise that a course can indeed effect attitude changes, and shows support for including such content in social work programs.

Further exploration is worth conducting to better understand the impact of education and the instructional method used for raising self-awareness of social attitudes and social change. Examination might include the extent of the change, if it persists or diminishes over time as well as contributing factors. Discontinuity or repeated measures designs might enable a more thorough understanding of the issue. Further study on instructors and educational instruction of the material would supplement the knowledge in this area.

The social construction of race and gender is embedded in our society and our socialization process (Snyder et al., 2008; Sue et al., 2009). When people consciously monitor and assess their attitudes, it can engender a transformation in feelings, beliefs and actions (Devine, 1989). Although, the process of stereotyping has been a tool humans have used for ages to aid in survival, it does not mean that the belief systems cannot be changed (Smolkin, 2004). Knowledge and education can be useful in reversing the effects of racism and sexism and the long-held beliefs that perpetuate systems of advantage based upon social identities (Rothenberg, 2004; Tatum, 1997). Of critical importance is raising self-awareness of the helping professional (Browne & Mokuau, 2008). This can begin at the academic level with bachelor's level and master's level social work students, especially since many social work programs require a course in social justice and macro practice. Social work schools need to continue to emphasize the importance of diversity education, including areas of aging, racism, sexism, to help students understand oppressed and vulnerable populations who often lack access

to healthcare and economic resources. Diversity education needs to be incorporated throughout the curriculum to emphasize its importance, as well as providing students with experiential experiences in the classroom and in the field.

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