Empowering Students to Promote Social Justice: A Qualitative Study of Field Instructors' Perceptions and Strategies

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Abstract:

This qualitative study examines field instructors' perceptions of social work practice that promotes social justice. The author conducted 17 in-depth interviews with qualified field instructors using grounded theory methods to elicit perceptions of the meaning of social justice among field instructors and pedagogical strategies related to empowering students in the promotion of social justice. Findings reflect field instruction goals and tasks based on the lived experiences of social work practitioners providing the practicum experience. This study offers a framework for social work field instruction that employs exposure to diverse clients and manifestations of injustice, focused discussion, and role modeling as educational strategies. It also provides a theoretical frame, rooted in empowerment, for field instruction that centers on student values socialization, validation through experience, building critical thinking skills, and emphasis on the reflexive action.

Introduction

Social justice in social work

Social workers claim social justice as a defining value of the profession and as a goal for practice, research, and education. As a broad concept, social justice in a society is represented by fair and unbiased treatment, freedom from discrimination, the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression, and the redressing of inequality for members of historically oppressed groups through the creation of equal opportunity (Barsky, 2010; Reisch, 2002; Young, 2001). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has established the promotion of social justice as an essential goal "to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (NASW, 1999, para.1).

American accreditation standards for social work education are defined by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), including the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS),

which address the social justice mandate. The organization specifies that "social work's purpose is actualized through its quest for social justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons" (2008, p. 1). The EPAS set forth the expectation that all social workers "understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination; advocate for human rights […]; and engage in practices that advance social justice" (2008, Educational Policy 2.1.5).

Practice behaviors often associated with social justice include advocacy; empowerment of clients through consciousness-raising, skill-building, and resource development; community education and organizing; legislative and media activism; social movement participation; policy analysis and development; violence intervention; diversity promotion; and program development and evaluation (Birkenmaier, 2003; Finn & Jacobson, 2008). Social justice-promoting practice has been theorized for all levels of social work intervention, including clinical practice (Aldarondo, 2007; Johnson, 1999; Mitchell & Lynch, 2003; Parker, 2003; Stuart, 1999; Van Wormer, 2004).

Social work education must prepare students to enter a value-driven, applied profession in a vast array of settings and with diverse areas of specialty. Although educational mandates and necessary practice competencies are set forth, there is little empirical evidence related to how the overarching value of social justice is made manifest in social work programs. Barsky (2010) warns of a lack of consistency across the United States in teaching social work values. De Maria (1992) cautions that an absence of focused attention within social work education to social justice limits social workers' efforts toward building upon a largely unrecognized foundation. As with challenging oppression broadly, promoting social justice within social work education must be purposeful and proactive to be successful.

Field education
The field practicum is widely regarded to be the cornerstone of social work education, as it provides students with both the crucible of learning through direct experience and the opportunity to translate theory to action (Bogo, 2005; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Lager, 2004; Wilson, 2006). Social work students regard the field experience as the most critical piece of their professional preparation (Mallick, 2007). Social work field education must promote evidence-based practice and contribute to professional values socialization, including the pursuit of social justice (CSWE, 2008, Accreditation Standard 2.1).

The role of the field instructor is complementary to, but very different from, that of the classroom instructor. Important tasks for the field-based educator are to assess student strengths and needs; promote student self-awareness; act as a role model; facilitate safe exposure to and experience with diverse populations; make connections between theory and practice; encourage critical thinking; clearly define learning objectives with the student; become and remain competent in supervision techniques; attend to professional, agency, and school standards and policies; foster students' unique

strengths and interests; enhance student self-efficacy; and engage students in reflection and integration of professional values and ethics (Hendricks, Finch, & Franks, 2005; Mallick, 2007). Supervision provides a reflective process for the learner and a vehicle for the reinforcement of values (Barsky, 2010; Caspi & Reid, 2002).

Social work field education, although widely viewed as a crucial component of professional preparation (Mumm, 2006; Wayne, Raskin, & Bogo, 2006), has received a lack of attention in terms of systematic, empirical research (Noble, 2001; Raskin, Wayne, & Bogo, 2008). Most research focused on field education centers on student learning, preferences, or satisfaction with placement rather than on instruction strategies employed by those responsible for facilitation of student learning (Bogo, 2005). In the absence of empirically-tested educational models and resources for field instructors, social workers filling this role may rely on instinct and experience to facilitate student learning (Caspi & Reid, 2002; Short, et al., 2004).

While self-reflection and value integration are critical elements of field education (Birkenmaier & Berg-Weger, 2007; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Hendricks, et al., 2005; Rogers, Collins, Barlow, & Grinnell Jr., 2000), there is little research directed at examining the experience of confronting intersections between personal values and professional roles (Bogo, Raphael, & Roberts, 1993; Hantman, 2006). Research on social justice-promoting practice also tends to focus on post-educational behaviors rather than on social justice pedagogy (De Maria, 1992), and few studies exist that explore the social justice learning process (Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006). Evidence is lacking as to how field-based learning contributes to this process. The overwhelming majority of published discourse around social justice is theoretical rather than empirical, especially in terms of education (Birkenmaier, 2003; Finn & Jacobson, 2008).

Empowerment theory as a framework for field education
The field instructor may be thought of as a "model of lived empowerment" (Brownstein-Evans, 2006). Empowerment theory offers an ideal framework for an examination of not only the *what* of social justice, but the *how*. It provides a lens through which we can evaluate whether and how social workers are equipped and enabled (i.e. empowered) to meet professional imperatives around social justice and provides a vehicle for the examination of key factors involved in the process.

Gutierrez, Parsons, and Cox (1998) highlight four important components of empowerment: 1) the attitudes, values and beliefs that impact self-efficacy and capacity for empowerment; 2) the importance of validation through collective experience; 3) an emphasis on knowledge and skills for critical thinking and action; and, 4) action itself or reflexive action/praxis. These theoretical constructs provide one way to illuminate important processes and goals of field education as it pertains to the promotion of social justice, including the development of insight into one's own values and capabilities; enhanced knowledge and awareness of self and others; learning through shared experience; and

the interplay of action and active reflection. It is through this lens that the findings of this study will be presented.

Field instructors are uniquely situated to demonstrate social work practice that embodies the values and goals inherent to the social justice mandate. The purpose of this study was to explore field instructors' perceptions of the process of knowledge-building around field instruction methods that foster student empowerment for social justice-promoting practice. The following research question guided the study: How do social workers perceive their engagement in and promotion of social justice in practice and field education?

Method

Grounded theory methodology was utilized to develop an understanding of how social work field instructors empower students to understand and promote social justice in practice settings. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) three-phase model for planning a naturalistic inquiry provided an initial structure to the research process. The phases were as follows: 1) orientation and overview, characterized by exploration of what is known and most salient, and how best to approach the project; 2) focused exploration, or the information-collection phase characterized by recursive data collection and analysis through a constant comparison process; and 3) member checking, or the elicitation of participant feedback on interpretations of the data provided. Phases two and three frequently overlapped and were mutually informative. To test initial credibility and dependability of study materials, two pilot interviews were conducted.

Sampling and participants

This study was conducted at a large Midwestern university's school of social work, which provides graduate concentration work in either clinical or community and organizational social work. Sampling for this study was purposeful and included efforts to achieve maximum variation of participants while seeking out those participants with the most direct experience with the phenomenon under study in order to elicit the most pertinent and information-rich data (Creswell, 2007b; Padgett, 2004). Participants were recruited from the pool of active field instructors in cooperation with the Field Coordinator via email messages and brief presentations at field instructor orientation sessions. Participation inclusion criteria were the possession of an MSW degree from a CSWE- accredited institution and having served as a field instructor within the year prior to participation. Field instructors included in the study provided field education within both generalist and concentration-level practica. Demographic information was collected to provide context and to assist with efforts toward maximum variation. See Table 1 for participant characteristics and practice areas.

Data collection and analysis

The mode of data collection for the study was a one-time interview conducted with each of the 17 social work practitioner-field instructors who participated.The semi-structured interview guide

consisted of broad, open-ended, questions designed to encourage participants to share their own unique perceptions while targeting the content area of the inquiry (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Questions were constructed using empowerment theory as a framework but were exploratory in nature in order to allow participant experiences and perceptions to emerge. Interviews were conducted primarily at the participant's place of employment (*n*=10) with additional locations including public establishments (*n*=2), the researcher's office (*n*=1), and via telephone (*n*=4). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. Upon completion of transcription, a summary of the content of each interview was provided in writing to each participant for review and member checking. Participants were offered the opportunity to engage in a follow-up interview or to provide comments concerning any information that they might wish to add, correct, or clarify.

Inductive data analysis occurred concurrent with data collection using Atlas.ti software for grounded theory (Hatch, 2002). By analyzing data as they were collected, it was possible to benefit from a recursive constant comparative method, which allows for a back-and-forth interplay between raw data and interpretations of meaning (Hatch, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Sampling continued concurrently with data collection and analysis until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Findings

Data were analyzed for the perceived meaning and operationalization of concepts pertaining to social justice and social work practice as well as for pedagogical themes. These perceptions will be presented first to establish a context for defining social justice, rooted in participants' lived experience. Next, strategies of field instruction described by participants fell into three interactive categories: *role modeling, focused discussion*, and *facilitated exposure to client experience and injustice*. Further, themes emerged that were reflective of constructs key to empowerment theory as discussed above:1) socialization to the attitudes, values, and beliefs that impact self-efficacy and capacity; 2) the importance of validation through collective experience; 3) enhancement of knowledge and skills for critical thinking and action; and, 4) action itself and reflexive action/praxis.

Perceptions of social justice in social work practice

Participants viewed social work as a vehicle for acting on the social justice value. They perceived theirs as a key role in helping students visualize this value in everyday practice and for establishing the importance of social justice as more than an abstract theoretical concept. Participants were asked to articulate their perceptions of the meaning of social justice in the context of their own practice. Sometimes their statements mirrored profession-wide concerns centering on the attention given to social justice and its meaning:

It's probably something that I don't give a lot of thought to, not that that's good. It's probably a bad thing, um, because that's kind of what we do, that's kind of what we fight for each day, if you think about what we, why we're here and doing what we're doing. (Sienna)

Unfortunately, it seems that despite, or perhaps because of the overarching significance of social justice to social work, the term can be difficult to explicitly define. Participants also brought attention to a variety of populations they define as vulnerable or disadvantaged, and as within the purview of social justice efforts, to explain its meaning:

Social justice is helping to promote equality irregardless [sic] of the background – race, culture, sexual identity, economic, you know help promoting equality, or that where the person can develop satisfaction in where they are and what they're doing […] I think a lot of times when that word is mentioned, a lot of times we go to, you know, oppression of minorities, which I believe very much so, but at the same time […] broadening that definition of what social justice is. I think we have had a very narrow mindset of what social justice is. (Regina)

Recognizing power and privilege is critical to grasping the meaning of social (in)justice and integrating this value perspective into practice. Participants spoke not only of client powerlessness, but also their own power and privilege:

It's a power differential in and of itself when you are in a more therapeutic role with someone […] you have to really guard that. I think you have to really tread, be cautious of the role and the power differential you have, and it was something that I thought a lot about when I was first working in the field, especially because I worked in mental health and there was such a difference in power. (Tessa)

Building on perceptions of who is affected by social injustice, participants also discussed the impact of powerlessness and inequitable social stratification.The impact of injustice, according to participants, may be a lack of access to basic needs, discrimination in employment or housing, social stigma, and/or the inability to self-determine. At an essential level, injustice may be thought of as any barrier to a person or group's ability to access opportunity and to achieve according to potential. Participants also recognized the broad, societal consequences of unaddressed social injustice:

You know I am just very sensitive in how I do that but bringing it home and making it our problem rather than their problem. Seeing it as a society issue, it's not just a child's issue, that is the social worker's job to work with, that it is a society problem, it's a lot bigger than the child or the family, it's a society problem […] ignorance perpetuates the

injustice. (Kerri)

Perceptions of social justice-promoting practice included giving voice to those unheard, the protection of basic human rights, fairness at the interpersonal and institutional levels, balancing power, valuing inherent human dignity, and ensuring equal opportunity. One participant discussed social justice in formal terms:

> I see social justice in three primary ways: First there is the notion of distributive justice which looks at the distribution of a wide variety of societal resources.So for example […] we might look at how many men received a certain kind of benefit or service compared to women or minorities or populations at risk, other populations at risk […] I think of it also in terms of procedural justice, i.e. the fairness, the quality, the inclusion if you will of policies and procedures for people at risk.In some cases, institutional policies and procedures can serve to exclude others while including some, and so there's a kind of lack of fairness that occurs for people because of procedures that are in place. Finally, I look at this notion of interactional justice, which […] relates to the quality of interpersonal exchange that people receive in society. (Vincent)

In terms of looking at social justice through a distributive lens, participants recognized that it is not necessarily tied to receipt of the same benefits, but rather opportunities unfettered by oppressive structural forces. Participants embraced the idea of inclusive communities and of shared responsibility to ensure that those with no power are recognized and supported in having their needs met. In the words of Amaya, social justice would mean, "a world where everyone has access to being who they want to be." In this light, social justice is about:

> Creating a safe community that works for everyone without, without anyone left behind […] people living within the community and it's working for them – and that may not mean they are getting the same, but whatever they are experiencing, it works for them. That they don't have the experience of being apart or left out or neglected. (Jade)

> I have thought about that, what is social justice to me […] I feel that it is at the core of what social work is, but it's more than that, it's important to how a society functions for everyone but it isn't necessarily a value that is held by everyone […] that everyone has an opportunity and a chance to flourish, to have a life, to have a good life for themselves, not necessarily a particular life, but just a chance to have a life. (Jane)

When participants shared their thoughts on "doing" social justice, they talked about working to achieve fair and equitable outcomes for clients, including policy change. Examples include the de-

velopment of legislation meant to protect vulnerable persons and fair policies to guide agency work with clients; education for the community and other professionals on social justice issues; ensuring that basic needs are met and keeping people safe from harm; consciousness-raising with clients and client empowerment for social action; and competency-building for social workers. The following is one participant's reflections on policy and its place in the pursuit of social justice:

> Where I got involved in the policy piece of it is because I felt like that was a really great way to impact that and kind of equalize the power differentials that exist. For sure, I think power is the ultimate, the age old haves vs. have-nots [...] it's been the source of strife for generations throughout our history […] I am a believer in policy. I really feel like social workers have a responsibility to know about policy and advocate for policy that is equitable, that is social justice-oriented. (Tessa)

With perceptions of social justice and its promotion in social work established, participants also discussed their strategies for integration into field instruction.These will be discussed below in terms of how each strategy contributes to the theoretical processes of empowerment described above.

Field instruction strategies
With an established context of participants' ideas about social justice and its promotion in daily social work practice, field instruction strategies meant to communicate these concepts to students were explored. Three distinct but overlapping strategies emerged: 1) **role modeling** social justice-promoting practice behaviors; 2) **focused discussion** of self, experience, and social work values; and 3) **facilitating direct exposure** to diverse others and situations targeting key elements of social justice. Each facet contributes to the experiential learning process that is the essence of field education and highlights the process of empowerment outlined above (see Figure 1, depicting the relationship of instructional strategies to these empowerment processes).

Role modeling. Role modeling was identified as a primary tool for field-based instruction focused on the social justice goals of social work and was found to contribute primarily to the values socialization process as well as critical thinking skills development. Through role modeling, field instructors are able to provide students with examples of socially just practice behaviors and establish permission to apply social work tools such as the use of self. As Jade shared, "I let my humanity show so much, I want them to show their humanity to our kids."

As Kerri observed, the student is often the field instructor's "shadow," witnessing daily the behaviors of practitioners described above. She discussed the importance of anchoring her practice in social justice and modeling this commitment for others:

> I think we are not able to empower and work *with* our clients if we don't have social

justice as the context, and also if we are not advocating for, we are allowing society to stay in the status quo, nothing is going to change, and it's part of our job in social work to rock things up a little and to, you know, rock the status quo and do what we can to educate others that the status quo is not working. (Kerri)

As social workers model respectful and equitable behavior in the workplace for other profession-als, they provide an additional layer to this strategy as well and help students begin to envision and identify themselves as social justice advocates:

I think it's standing up against, going up against the grain and I think sometimes the whole of society is going this direction and it really just takes one person saying "I don't think that way, that's not OK," and then all of a sudden others go, "oh you're right, it's not." […] I think that's what social workers do, I think sometimes that's a piece of it, is the willingness to say, "I don't think that way," to not go with the flow and to know why you're not going with the flow and to be comfortable with that (Jodi).

For many, social justice-promoting practice starts with an examination of the self and recognition of one's own place in society's hierarchy of oppression and privilege:

I think that we are in a position of power whether we're at a hospital or a mental health center or corrections, you can misuse power very easy and maybe even the system kind of promotes that – we are the judges of what's best. (Jane)

I mean how ridiculous would it be for me to let's say, um someone was feeling, you know, or someone was in a situation that I deemed was discriminatory or unjust, you know, I'm not in it, but if I go over there and I assume like, this is the way it needs to be […] even just have an opinion about it without actually talking with them about their experience with the situation, I mean maybe I'm doing the same thing that the you know, perpetrator of social injustice was doing […] we have to have our own agendas in check, we have to have our own reactions in check. (Jade)

In this light, self-awareness and a commitment to the value of self-determination are important pre-requisites to the practice of social justice. Field instructors are able to model for students their applica-tion of such values in relation to client worlds. Much of what participants described in demonstrating social justice-promoting practice centered on the empowerment of clients through education and the sharing of professional knowledge and power. For instance, in child welfare:

Whoever has the most money wins […] I mean, even when we go to court, and the lawyers are in these nice suits and I tell my clients, "Dress up. Wear something nice,"

> […] And you can tell, especially when a kid goes into court and they have a suit on and the judge goes, "Do you have something to say?" and they are like, "yeah, I do." So we always try to empower our kids too, "Go in, this is your court case. You need to say what you want. And if you disagree with something you need to disagree." (Heidi)

In this example, the social worker is in a position to share insight into a complex system, to expose ways in which systems create injustice, and to equip clients to function successfully within them. Participants also discussed specific mechanisms employed by their agencies that serve to facilitate client participation and representation, again providing students with working models of socially just practices:

> We have a policy council that is client-based […] they are pretty intricately involved in our organization, and I think that that's really a very, it's a great idea that isn't used a lot […] We also do a program here that teaches both staff, like our front line staff and the consumers, adult parents, how to be community leaders, how to sit on boards, Robert's Rules, all of that stuff, with the hopes that in their communities they will take more of a leadership role on the boards of education, on charity boards, and feel more – we try and help build the confidence level through giving them the information they need. (Jodi)

The importance of educating policy makers and the community at large was also emphasized by many as a necessary task in the fight for social justice.Attempts to alter the environment within which social work functions is one tactic utilized and demonstrated for students in the field. Along with this, participants recognized that their work is not easily categorized as either micro or macro, but that they may take up a variety of tasks necessary to address client needs:

> The social injustice I saw I guess was just all of a sudden, boom, their benefits were gone, literally overnight […] I threw on my suit and my heels and ran down to the capitol and walked door to door, um whether they were my legislator or not […] I got my numbers and went marching. (Sienna)

> There's laws out there that if they have a drug conviction that they can't receive um housing or Medicaid or some of those things that just perpetuates the cycle of poverty […] If a person is trying to do something and can't access or can't get help to get up off their feet, the pulling up by the bootstraps mentality, they're going to just stay stuck in the cycle, and so that's part of what we have to do and to educate, educate the community, educate other agencies, um, just educate people in general. (Regina)

Role modeling also occurs through appropriate field instructor self-disclosure around the process of

learning about injustice and how to respond in the social work context. As students become exposed to the realities of injustice as they manifest in violence, poverty, racial discrimination, lack of service access, etc., they grapple with the meaning of justice and their place in its pursuit. By providing students with concrete examples as well as relating their own experiences in practice, participants facilitate professional socialization:

> I think a lot of interns, and I was at some point, stuck in the white middle class box […] I think being able to see the bigger picture and being able to understand what your own personal beliefs are and how they correspond or collide with our values and ethics as social workers, and figuring how we are going to deal with those things when they do collide […] one girl kind of grew up like me, small rural town, not much diversity and really like, anti-welfare, anti-government handouts and that's how I grew up too, and so I really had to find a way to look at the big picture rather than, "Get off your lazy butt and work" – that's how I was taught, and obviously as social workers, we see it is much bigger than that. (Kerri)

In this way, use of one's own journey as a model helps students to develop self-awareness around their own limitations and biases as normal and to approach integration as a challenging but valuable process. Participants also applied self-reflective role modeling to encourage student self-care as the exposure process unfolds:

> When you are new to the field, I remember my first few years in the field, it was hard for me to separate things. I think it's important to learn that earlier because we will maybe see less burnout […] I encouraged her to take the weekend and really step away from the work if she could, if there was any way to separate herself out, is there anything you really enjoy doing […] I even tried to have her articulate what maybe she could do, didn't want it just to end with let me tell you what I do. (Tessa)

Role modeling is not about imitation, but integration of behaviors that can be utilized for the promotion of social justice. An important tool in the fight against injustice is caring for oneself and maintaining the ability to be a part of the struggle. Although some of what is termed role modeling occurs through instructor-student interaction, it is the use of one's own journey that makes these examples distinct from the use of discussion as explicated below.

Facilitating exposure. Across the board, participants discussed the importance of exposing students to injustice and to clients representing diverse characteristics and experiences.This element of field instruction was key to all four empowerment processes. The values socialization process and critical thinking skills are reinforced and validated through collective experience when students are exposed to the realities of injustice and the importance of social justice beyond the abstract, creating a natural-

istic context for the praxis of action and reflection. Jackie described the importance of empathy development through direct exposure for students working with survivors of domestic violence:

> I think there is also the, part of the ignorance is, well, who are those people? Unless they have known someone or experienced it themselves, they are able to say, well there is something wrong with those people. And because there is something wrong with them, they don't feel inclined to help them.

Several other participants also emphasized the importance of insight that may only be gained through direct experience:

> There is a book knowledge piece to this, but when it comes down to practice, it's about experiencing, doing it, but ultimately meeting people where they're at, and if you are at some lofty place, then you will never be where people are at. (Jodi)

> I definitely like it when they, when they go out there and take the bus and ride with the young people to pick up job applications […] Go live in their world, go listen to their music, walk the two miles that they walk to their GED class. (Jade)

The idea of equalizing power by building client knowledge and strengths is complemented by the desire to be where the client is as well, to repudiate expert status and an approach to professionalism that requires objective separation:

> I'm not a believer that just sitting in your office and having someone come to you one hour a week is all that effective.I think being with them as much as you can in their own environment and walking as much as you can in their shoes – you know, taking the bus to the social security office and waiting in line with them is much more powerful for both parties, the worker and the client, than having clients come to you […] I am a firm believer in that, I don't care how many letters you have after your last name. (Jade)

Exposure provides opportunities to gain insight and empathy into the lived experiences of clients and the impact of injustice. It also allows students to experience, confront, and learn to manage their own biases and emotional reactions when faced with real-world injustice. Jodi recognized the discomfort a student may feel during the practicum: "I think all of them encounter that sense of, I didn't know it could get this bad, or this is really painful." Facing injustice and seeking avenues for its confrontation are critical elements of the empowerment process that can take place for students, although it can be difficult:

> That is usually, at the very beginning, they sit through forensic interviews and then

they find out that very few cases are prosecuted. And they feel very outraged, and upset, and tears, and we have to deal with that and we talk about that as a social justice issue. It's a really, I feel like I, because of the nature of my agency, and my own personal journey, I feel like I am able to address that fairly well. (Kerri)

Several participants discussed facilitating exposure to clients in a targeted way that places the person first; in other words, they work to challenge assumptions through contact with clients on a human level, or as Heidi stated, "just sit down and ask them what their story is, get their perspective, and then come back and look at the file." An additional example further illuminates this strategy:

A lot of the students that I've taken really are, you know, middle class Caucasian people […] and aren't used to working with these clients any more than I was when I began and so really throwing them into the mix […] their very first assignment is I introduce them on our ward […] and I make them play spades for half the day. That's all they get to do […] they get to know people personally, and that's the whole point of it. Then after that I say, "What did you learn from those clients? Give me your impressions of those clients." I teach them to learn about people on a personal level, not from the description of what they've done or what they've been accused of. (Teresa)

Two participants discussed work with men who batter their intimate partners and the importance of exposing students to the dynamics of injustice. The work involves the deconstruction of socialized beliefs about gender inequality and a focus on those accountable for an injustice, as elaborated here:

We are constantly focused on injustice, oppression, in all areas, what society's messages are to our boys, to our girls, to you know, just in general the hierarchy of how our system is set up and how our families and communities and cities and towns and states and how all of those things are run and how it influences our behaviors and our actions […] I think we don't talk a lot about, in individual therapy or group-type therapies about how did this come into being? And what do you think society, how do you think society has a part in this and how can we better educate ourselves so that we are not so oppressive to others […] it gives me good insight about what messages are still out there and how injustice, oppression is being experienced by other people. (Naomi)

The importance of purposeful exposure of students to client realities, manifestations of injustice, and social work processes intended to promote social justice cannot be overstated and is the essence of field education.

Focused discussion. Participants in the study all highlighted the use of focused discussion with students as a fundamental tool of field instruction around social justice. Supervision is not only a

required component of field education, but it also provides essential opportunities for students to ask questions and for instructors to evaluate their progress. Within the broad scope of supervision, it was revealed that the participants make special efforts to discuss occurrences related to client diversity, experiences of oppression, and social worker efforts for client empowerment. Through this targeted supervision, field instructors promote values socialization and critical thinking and are able to offer validation for students around shared experience. By rooting student learning in the lived experiences of clients (first often facilitated through exposure), instructors are able to highlight justice concerns directly for students:

> [We] talk about what they are seeing in terms of maybe barriers to treatment, things that their clients are experiencing in their lives that are oppressive or control or a power differential or anything like that so we kind of focus on that part. (Naomi)

In addition to exposing students to client realities, supervisors use discussion to help orient new social workers to the broad environment within which we work. To paint a realistic portrait of social work in the wider professional context, participants were able to bring to light some potential hurdles for social justice efforts:

> I try to talk a lot about stuff that, barriers that you want to see when you are helping people and how to get around them and, I try to talk a lot about how to work with different, different people that you are going to run into, other social workers, not the clients, but I think people get really like, how do I deal with clients, clients, clients, and you definitely need that […] I have the least problems with my clients and the most with other professionals and other agencies. (Amaya)

In this example, the field instructor is facilitating a deeper understanding of not just client needs and dynamics, but of being a social worker and promoting social justice in a sometimes disempowering environment. Focused discussion appears to stem from both naturally-occurring and purposefully facilitated experience, allowing the student to build greater client sensitivity as well as self-awareness. In the following examples, participants talk about their efforts toward student self-reflection:

> I've been lucky that I've had students who can recognize it and have felt open enough to bring that to supervision, like let's talk through that, that they've struggled with different values that the client has and that its conflicting with their own so, and how to work through that and how to try to make sure that that's not overflowing in their therapy […] I've had students who come from larger cities, and dealing with the rural population has kind of been an eye opener […] I would say the most common is cultural difference. They are working with someone, um, you know, who is Wiccan, and they don't know much about Wicca and that religious aspect, and so they're strug-

gling because they have their perceptions, they come into supervision like, "I've got this witch in my office," and I'm like, "slow down, let's look it up, let's see what it's about" and so they're like, "oh! Not at all what I thought it was about!" (Sienna)

I talk about that a lot: meeting them where they're at, not where you're at […] When I'm hearing frustration, when I'm hearing um, some kind of transference or I'm hearing just you know, burn out or "I don't know what to do," I think sometimes that what's coming into play is the differences in, "this is what I think should happen, this is where they're at," that provides an opportunity to kind of build on that self-awareness and build on re-framing, you know, a lot of times using re-framing for understanding. (Regina)

Due to the intense, emotional and sometimes personal nature of injustice, it is imperative for students to be provided the opportunity to debrief, reflect, share concerns, and integrate experiences with their existing worldview:

Kind of talking more about bringing it back to the client situation – well, what could be, these are the issues, they don't have a job, they are on welfare, they might become homeless, let's look at some other situations that could be going on, let's look at the bigger picture of why this could be besides just they are lazy and don't want to work. (Kerri)

Field instruction strategies are informed by participants' own journeys in social work and contextualized by their daily practice behaviors. They are then enacted through student exposure to injustice, modeling justice-promoting actions at all levels of potential client intervention, and focused discussion aimed at the integration of values (personal and professional) and knowledge (from theory to practice).

Discussion

The overarching purpose of field instruction as conceptualized by the findings of this study is student empowerment for social work practice that promotes social justice. This inquiry focused on how those responsible for facilitating that process, the field instructors, endeavor toward that end. Findings illuminated one specific element of field education, the values clarification process, wherein students are able to increase their level of self-awareness and to reflect critically about personal and professional values and their reconciliation of the two (Barsky, 2010; Reamer, 2006). The three broad strategies represented in the model contribute to this clarification process through instruction strategies that offer key learning experiences and work reciprocally. Additionally, the empowerment processes of validation, critical thinking skills development, and reflexive action are manifested via one or more of the instructional strategies described.

This study offers a number of implications for social work education and research as well as insight into the contexts in which perceptions of social justice are formed and practice efforts undertaken. In addition, it adds needed empirically-based knowledge to a most critical topic for the social work profession.

Theoretical implications: The meaning of social justice
Arriving at a definition of social justice is a challenge not yet resolved. Participants in the study helped to operationalize social justice in a way that is rarely done in the literature (Abramovitz & Lazzari, 2008; Birkenmaier, 2003). This study contributes to our collective understanding of the meaning of social justice by providing the perceptions of those anchored in the day-to-day struggle toward this end. It also adds to our ability to conceptualize social work field education as a process of empowerment for students/future practitioners seeking to manifest the guiding value of the profession.

Social work has rested primarily on a view of social justice as distributive, wherein social justice is measured in terms of outcome or receipt. An egalitarian approach, most reflective of contemporary social work, is marked by the importance of access to resources, taking a needs-based approach to deciding distribution, a focus on the most vulnerable first, and self-determination without obstruction (Abramovitz & Lazzari, 2008). The findings of this study support the value of an egalitarian distributive theory of social justice for social work. Participants spoke widely of the need to ensure that all persons' needs are met and to advocate for policy as well as direct services toward this purpose. Participant responses also clearly point to a collective focus on vulnerable populations and people who experience, in some form or another, discrimination, oppression, or lack of access to needed resources. This is also in line with professional policy and practice standards (CSWE, 2008; NASW, 1999).

Highlighted by these findings is the importance of identifying power differentials and the effect of oppressive forces on people in order to not only break these forces down within wider society, but also to ensure they do not impede the intervention process (Aldarondo, 2007; Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998; Swenson, 1998). The drive to ensure client access to resources and the ability to make use of opportunities and goods was complemented by participants' attention to procedural and interpersonal processes. Significantly, socially just procedures and processes emerged from this study as having equal or perhaps greater importance than attention to fair and equitable outcomes. This emphasis is well-fitted for social work, as it applies to direct practice and clinical work in addition to macro facets like policy change. For instance, as administrators and program planners, social workers can ensure that organizational policies promote fairness and in no way create barriers or discrimination for clients. Clinicians can commit to acting on social justice within client interactions and relationships. Use of nonhierarchical, non-elitist language, partnership with clients, and awareness of

power imbalances in client relationships are strategies that enable professionals to embody traits of commutative justice (Aldarondo, 2007; Birkenmaier, 2003). Application of the strengths perspective, empowerment theory, feminist practice models, and anti-oppressive practices are the paths to social justice at the micro level (Swenson, 1998).

Social worker empowerment: Implications for field education

Detlaff (2002) reports that students are often overwhelmed by the complexities of injustice and by the application of theoretical concepts to these challenges within social work practice. Field instructors, as well, are often confronted with the important task of facilitating field-based learning for students in absence of a model for doing so (Bogo, 2005). According to the field coordinator for this study's site, the social justice component in particular is one of the most challenging aspects of field instruction to operationalize in student learning contracts (S. Cary, personal communication, February 18, 2010). To assist in this process, instructors need organized models for managing students' field-based experiences, especially in light of the fact that they are also managing the many demands of full-time practice. This study offers one foundation for such a model, aimed specifically at operationalizing and contextualizing instruction strategies. The strategies offered here are applicable across practice levels and settings, and may be translated into the specific, measureable goals necessary for implementation and evaluation of student learning.

This study suggests several implications for field education and the empowerment of student social workers to engage in practice that promotes social justice. Specifically, the importance of self-reflection, critical thinking, exploration of values through shared experience, and the establishment of a context for taking action and reflecting upon action parallel the strategies offered here. Focused discussion between student and instructor is marked by application of critical thinking, attention to the self and responses to experience, and a process of pulling back the curtain on the structures that shape inequity. Students become immersed in the day-to-day events at the placement site, making the facilitation of exposure to client worlds and injustice as well as role modeling practice behaviors accessible tools for the instructor. Participants in this study noted that both intentionally created and naturally occurring opportunities to expose students to social justice concerns were utilized. Through such exposure, they noted enhanced student empathy and insight into client realities. Exposure to diverse clients, challenging environments, unjust policies, the impact of disparity, and social inequity also serves to crystalize thoughts and feelings experienced by the student and to focus salient issues for focused discussion.

Similarly, opportunities to role model behaviors that practitioners define as acting for social justice routinely occur in most practice settings and provide rich fruit for cultivation during supervision. This inquiry found that practitioners may demonstrate such behaviors directly with clients, but also in their interactions with other professionals, in policy advocacy, and in managing personal responses to injustice. Role modeling of choices and behaviors that aim to reduce oppression and

empower clients provides the student with validation and a vision for future action. The importance of the relationship and use of critical conversations within the supervisory relationship are utmost, and if well-utilized, result in transformation, not only cognitive acquisition (Todd & Schwartz, 2009). The strategies outlined here reflect existing elements of effective educational supervision. A learning process in which the instructor serves as a role model, links observation and experience to theory, is supported by the environment, enhances student autonomy, and attends to the learners' affective responses is likely to result in successful educational outcomes (Caspi & Reid, 2002). Raising issues of self-care, facilitating student participation in critical events as well as day-to-day natural occurrences, drawing student attention to potential or actual value conflict, and connecting specific experiences to broad social work processes and goals are all elements of effective field instruction (Birkenmaier & Berg-Weger, 2007). Concerning the educational process surrounding value socialization, reflection on one's own professionalization, assumptions, and biases is critical. Elicitation of students' thoughts and feelings as they are exposed to new experiences, as personal value systems are challenged, and ethical imperatives manifest in the real world is most vital (Bogo & Vayda, 1998). This empowerment process then allows the student to emerge from the field practicum with an enhanced level of ethical sensitivity, increased self-awareness, the ability to critically examine new situations, and tools for action toward social justice.

Strengths and limitations of the study
Efforts were made to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. Qualitative research does not seek to be generalizable, but rather aspires to the enhancement of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as delineated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Strategies employed included member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, use of the constant comparison method, establishment of an audit trail, and use of thick, rich description.

One limitation of this study relates to sampling. Participants self-selected for the study by responding to listserv messages and announcements at field instructor events, and interview data is based on self-reporting. Although efforts were made toward maximum variation, the sample shows limited diversity of race and gender. The essential purpose of grounded theory inquiry is to reveal new information and formulate theory and not to produce a widely representative sample. As a result, the findings have limited transferability beyond similar demographic, geographic, and organizational contexts. Future research should continue to explore the constructs and processes represented in the emergent model in other settings and with different participants to build confidence around transferability.

Conclusion

This study provides direction for social work education and research focused on social justice. Findings suggest directions for field instructor training around strategies for operationalizing and incorporating social justice in any practicum setting and the translation of existing practice

behaviors into instructional resources. Research implications include further exploration of barriers to empowered practice, effectiveness of enhanced field instructor training, the impact of EPAS for the social justice component in field education, and the need for evidence-based decision-making around social work education. Further inquiry into the actual practice behaviors of social workers in the area of social justice-promoting practice should be explored. The value of operationalizing and explicitly describing such behaviors cannot be overstated, as evidenced by the century-old debate over the exact nature of social justice. Making social justice practice concrete, attainable, and relevant across concentrations and practice settings can only serve to enhance its manifestation on behalf of clients. As Perlman aptly noted in 1976, a value such as social justice has "small worth except as it is moved, or is moveable, from believing to doing, from verbal affirmation into action" (p. 381).

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Table 1.

Participant characteristics (N=17)

Age	26-66 (Range)	39 (*M*)
Years post-MSW experience	3-34 (Range)	13 (*M*)
Licensed Clinical Social Worker	Yes = 13	No = 4
Years served as field instructor	<5 = 8	>5 = 9
Field instructor within last year	Yes = 17	No = 0
Gender	Female = 15	Male = 2
NASW member	Yes = 4	No = 13
Self-described race	White = 15	African American = 2
Current area of practice	Child advocacy center	
	Community mental health (2)	
	Domestic violence shelter	
	Early childhood education administration	
	Employee assistance	
	Hospice/Palliative care (2)	
	Job support and mentoring for at-risk youth	
	Maximum security inpatient psychiatric	
	Medical/Hospital social work	
	Private adoption agency	
	Private child welfare agency	
	School social work	
	Teen transitional housing	
	Wellness/health promotion	
	Women's substance abuse treatment	

Figure 1.