

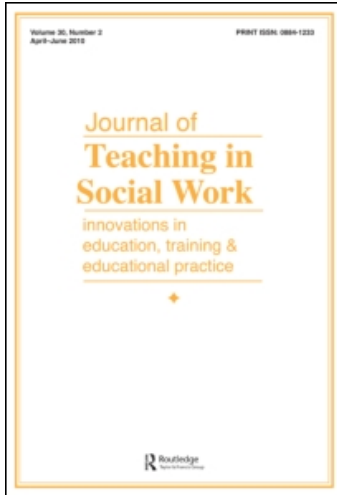
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### Challenging Perceptions of Academic Research as Bias Free: Promoting a Social Justice Framework in Social Work Research Methods Courses

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## **Challenging Perceptions of Academic Research as Bias Free: Promoting a Social Justice Framework in Social Work Research Methods Courses**

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*The required research courses in social work education are, perhaps, one of the more difficult content areas in which to infuse direct teaching and knowledge acquisition of multiculturalism. The study presented in this article examines the outcomes of systematically addressing social justice within a required master's level social work research methods course. The study tests the efficacy of a two-part teaching module that seeks to increase student abilities for critical consumption of academic research (n = 88) as it relates to the notion of bias neutrality. Results suggest that students decreased in their belief that academic research is necessarily bias free over the course of the class, and that students from marginalized groups showed a significantly larger decrease than did other students.*

**KEYWORDS** *social justice, research methods, social work research, social work education*

One of the hallmarks of social work education is its emphasis on socially just practice. Toward the goal of developing such practitioners, social work educators infuse content on diversity, oppression, and privilege across the curriculum. The required research courses in graduate social work education are, perhaps, one of the more difficult content areas in which to infuse direct teaching and knowledge acquisition of multiculturalism. The study presented

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in this article examines the outcomes of systematically addressing social justice within a required master's level social work research methods course. The study tests the efficacy of a two-part teaching module that seeks to increase student abilities in critical consumption of academic research as it relates to the notion of bias neutrality. Developed to encourage students to apply a critical social justice framework for consuming academic research, the module introduces students to the vulnerabilities of "scientific neutrality" to the social identities and cultural biases of the researcher. The activities challenge students to become "socially just" consumers of social work research, and to explore the influence of culturally biased research on social work practice interventions.

The call for increasing social justice and multicultural content within social work research courses is borne out in the literature. In their examination of the social work literature from 1970 to 1991, Tully and Greene (1994) found that only 2% of the 454 articles relating to multiculturalism they reviewed pertained to research. The literature provides examples in which research methods instructors have assisted students in developing a more culturally sensitive approach to academic research by offering elective courses in specific methodologies that are viewed as more culturally responsive—such as participatory action research (McNicoll, 1999) and ethnography (Thornton & Garrett, 1995). This important and needed approach, however, fails to address the need for required research methods courses to examine the effect of positionality in scholarly research. Given that many—if not most—MSW students will take only the required research methods courses during their graduate program, this gap is particularly disconcerting.

A search of recent scholarship related to social work education confirms that typical research methods courses seldom address how issues of privilege and marginalization influence the research enterprise and the resulting recommendations for practice. Longres and Scanlon's (2001) study of social justice within the social work research curriculum reaches similar conclusions. Combining interviews with researchers and social work research instructors with a content analysis of BSW, MSW, and PhD research course syllabi utilized at a large, public university, they found that social justice content was largely absent from course syllabi. They noted that "although no respondents formally addressed justice [within their social work research methods courses], all systematically discussed diversity and 'vulnerable populations' and some believed this was tantamount to addressing justice" (Longres & Scanlon, 2001, p. 461). Longres and Scanlon go on to underscore the importance of explicitly addressing social justice within the social work research curriculum, and suggest that "students may never make a connection between research and justice . . ." (p. 461) if this is not done. Their findings are in concert with many multicultural and anti-oppression scholars who argue that discussions of diversity and traditionally marginalized populations are not equivalent to addressing issues of power, privilege, and oppression (Goodman, 2001; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Razack, 2002).

One group of social work scholars who have conceptualized the need for multicultural and social justice content in research methods courses is Uehara, Sohng, Nagda, Erera, and Yamashiro (2004). They document the dearth of scholarship dedicated to incorporating social justice within social work research education, and then provide a critical perspective as the foundation for addressing this need. Their approach is further explored in the next section.

Beyond the works noted here, the scholarship and research linking social justice with teaching social work research methods is limited. However, the literature within social work and other related disciplines provides ample support for the necessity of making this connection. The following literature review provides an overview of this support.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The explicit promotion of social justice as a core value distinguishes social work from other helping professions. However, the challenge of promoting cultural competence and issues of justice within research and education on research is not limited to social work, but rather is a concern across the social science disciplines (see, for example, Fiske as cited in Hackney, 2005; Henderson, 1998; Hunter, 2002). As such, this review begins by outlining some of the epistemological concerns that raise the issues of power and privilege in the conduct of research—concerns that we suggest are critical for inclusion in required social work research methods courses. Following that we briefly identify ways in which issues of cultural competence have been addressed in social science research education and examine conceptual frameworks for doing so within the field of social work. We then examine the idea of critical reflexivity as a particular strategy for recognizing the positionality of the researcher and the researched, and complete the literature review by linking the teaching module with this scholarship.

### Epistemological Concerns

Hunter (2002) sets down the central epistemological concern when she notes that issues of power and race affect “nearly every aspect of how researchers conduct their research” (p. 119). She poses the following queries as she examines the influence of various racial epistemologies on the research process: “Who has the authority to know?; How does one know?; and What counts for knowledge?” (pp. 126–127). Arguing that these epistemological concerns have not been addressed in the way scholarship is conducted, Henderson (1998) notes that “research through the 1990s has not de-centered many of the white, male, heterosexual, affluent, non-disabled standards” (p. 158).

Similarly the notion of objectivity as the normalization of these privileged standards has been raised by various scholars. Hunter (2002) cautions that the assumed neutrality of the positivist method discounts the power position of the researcher and its influence on her or his relationship to the researched. Gordon and Meroe (1991) note that “too many times ‘objectivity’ has served as a mask for the political agenda of the status quo, thus marginalizing and labeling the concerns of less empowered groups as ‘special interests’” (p. 28). The failure to acknowledge the positionality of the notion of objectivity has, as Smith (as cited in Hunter, 2002) documents, caused harm to communities of color when researchers have assumed that the positivist paradigm would provide “truth and objectivity” as a path to creating “value free and objective” results (p. 135).

Similar epistemological concerns have been raised in feminist scholarship. Feminist approaches to research have made a contribution to considering privilege and power within the research process, but have not “revolutionized our theory or practice” (Henderson, 1998, p. 158). However, feminist methodologies as well as some qualitative approaches to research have created a venue for questioning the biases that stem from the presumed power and status of the researcher and the academy (O'Connor & O'Neill, 2004). Such questioning has brought the notion of “self-awareness” or acknowledgment of one’s position within a power structure into the research process. As Tetreault (1993) points out,

Multicultural scholars maintain that knowledge reflects the social, cultural, and power positions of people within society, and that it is valid only when it “comes from an acknowledgement of the knower’s specific position in any context, one always defined by gender, class, and other variables.” (p. 142)

### Social Science Research Education and Conceptual Frameworks

A number of strategies have been used to address issues of cultural competence in social science research courses. Various research techniques (e.g., participatory action research, ethnography, grounded theory) have been taught with the aim of improving cultural competence and acknowledgment of power differentials within the research endeavor. Outside of research methods courses, efforts are made to create measures that are culturally relevant to specific populations or demographic differences, including, for example, examining the culture-specific meaning of specific questions (Duran & Walters, 2004; Haddow, 2003; Harachi, Choi, Abbott, Catalano, & Bliesner, 2006) and examining factor structures of measures for different cultural and demographic groups (Choi & Harachi, 2002; Choi, Mericle, & Harachi, 2006). However, because it is not common for MSW-level social work students to enroll in advanced methodology or statistical

courses, the strategies and knowledge garnered in these courses that seek to foster awareness of cultural competence issues in research methods are largely unavailable to the majority of master's level graduate social work students.

Given that it is the aspiration of social work educators that graduates will employ evidence-based approaches in their practice arenas, it is critical that graduate social work students acquire the ability to be critical consumers of research. Since many graduates will work in situations where they will not be directly involved in conducting research, the development of this skill in critical thinking about published research may be as important as teaching them to apply research methods. In social work practice courses students are exposed to methods for increased self-awareness so as to develop practice strategies that are culturally competent (see, for example, Kondrat, 1999). Along with a few other voices in social work (Fook, 2001; Uehara et al., 2004; White, 2001), we suggest the need for parallel strategies within the research education process.

Developing social work research methods curricula that challenge students to integrate methodological knowledge and skills with socially justice inquiry is no small task. "[P]reparing social workers to become competent at critical multicultural inquiry requires going beyond infusing and revamping content in extant research curricula. Instead it requires a deep re-visioning of the content and structure of social work research curricula" (Uehara et al., 2004, p. 117). Such a revamping does not, the authors note, suggest tossing out the common forms of qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and analysis, but rather implies the need for a conceptual and theoretical approach embedded in critical multiculturalism. This approach assists students in uncovering the social and institutional power dynamics that position researchers and the academy as expert knowledge producers whose research findings are unquestioningly assumed to be generalizable to all social groups (Uehara et al., 2004).

The critical approach outlined by Uehara et al. (2004) is akin to Banks's (1996) notion of transformative education in which students are taught to understand how knowledge is constructed, taught to recognize how that knowledge may be differentially developed when it is viewed through the lenses of different cultural and ethnic groups, and supported in taking action on social issues discovered in the process of their learning. Toward that end, Uehara and colleagues (2004) delineate five themes as central to transformative multicultural research curricula: "1) critical theorizing about culture and power, 2) dialectic intergroup dialogue, 3) participatory action research, 4) anti-discriminatory/anti-oppression inquiry, and 5) praxis" (p. 118). One strategy for addressing the need for anti-discriminatory or anti-oppression inquiry and praxis is through the use of critical reflexivity.

## Critical Reflexivity

Hunter (2002), a sociologist, suggests that “reflexivity or self-reflexivity is a tool [by which] to reduce bias in studies and to help researchers become more aware of their assumptions” (p. 133). Likewise, social work scholars Fook (2001) and White (2001) refer to similar processes as a means to reduce researcher or practitioner biases through an increase in awareness of social privileges and the assumptions inherent within those privileged statuses. While Fook defines critical reflexivity as “the ability to recognize the influence of the researcher’s whole self and context (social, cultural, and structural) on every aspect of the research, and the ability to use this awareness in the research process itself” (p. 127), White is more explicit, noting that she prefers to use the term critical reflexivity to “denote a form of destabilization, or problematization of taken-for-granted knowledge and day to day reasoning. Treated in this way, reflexivity becomes a process of looking *inward* and *outward*, to social and cultural artifacts and forms of thought which saturate our practices” (p. 102). Operationalizing what she expects to see in students’ reflective diaries if they are achieving this critical reflexivity, she argues that they will “reflect upon the narrative forms themselves and upon their socio-cultural origins and effects” (p. 102).

These conceptualizations of critical reflexivity are similar to Uehara et al.’s (2004) view that “objectivity does not mean escape from cognitive and moral presuppositions, but rather an explicit recognition of them” (p. 116). In other words, exposing “taken for granted knowledge and day to day reasoning” (White, 2001, p. 102) that shape one’s biases and actions. White’s notion of looking inward and outward is similar to Kondrat’s (1999) discussion of moving beyond the interior self that occurs in self-awareness to recognizing the structural aspects that shape the self, biases, and the unconscious actions that perpetuate the very power dynamics that create the marginalized and privileged statuses we strive to eliminate through our practice and research.

We suggest that the development of critical reflexivity in MSW students meets the goals of Uehara et al.’s (2004) anti-discrimination or anti-oppression inquiry. Through this development, students learn to recognize research questions that “primarily focus on understanding the culture of ‘others’ [and move toward asking and recognizing] questions aimed at apprehending oppression in its myriad, concrete forms, and manifestations” (p. 121). Uehara et al. provide the following example of this kind of query: “[Q]uestions about ‘homosexuality’ are refocused as questions about how heterosexuality operates as an institution of control for heterosexuals and gays” (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1993 as cited in Uehara et al., 2004, p. 121). Likewise, O’Connor, and O’Neill (2004) demonstrate how research questions can evolve when attending to assumptions of power and privilege. O’Connor notes how her own dissertation research question progressed from “Why

are caregivers resistant to services?’ to ‘How does the private experience of caring interface with the use of formal support services?’” (p. 26).

### The Current Study

The conceptual frameworks for transforming research methods curricula provided by Uehara et al. (2004), Banks (1996, 2006), and Banks and Banks (2004) lay the foundation on which to develop social work research curricula that integrate the justice mission and values of our profession. However, scant scholarship exists that tests the efficacy of teaching social justice content in the research methods curricula, an issue that extends to social work practice curricula as well (Wodarski, Feit, & Green, 1995). Clearly the absence of empirical studies that examine the effectiveness of teaching multiculturalism is not exclusively an issue for research methods courses. As Gutierrez, Fredrickson, and Soifer (1999) note, there is a “need for further research that takes a hard look [at] the effectiveness for methods for teaching about diversity and oppression in social work” (p. 417).

The teaching module, *Disrupting Power and Privilege in Research and Practice* (Nicotera & Kang, 2009), tested in this study was developed with the intention of encouraging students to become critical consumers of research. The general goal of the module is to have students question the “knowledge that exists” (Banks, 1996) so as to make connections between the production of knowledge for practice and its inherent links to the positionality of the researcher and the researched. This study is an effort to test changes in students’ abilities to recognize how bias and positionality influence research and the interventions related to the outcomes of that research even when that research is conducted within the parameters of the scientific process. More specifically, we assess changes in students’ abilities to assess research for 1) potential cultural biases and/or stereotypes, 2) the positionality of the researcher and the researched, and 3) the potential for the former two concerns to influence social work interventions that arise from research outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Students from five sections of the foundation year research methods course were included in the sample. The five sections were taught by four different instructors. Of the 121 students enrolled in the course, 94 students consented to participate in the study. However, due to missing data on either the pretest or posttest, 6 participants were excluded from the analysis. The final sample consists of 88 MSW students at a private university who were enrolled in the 2006 spring quarter required foundation year research methods course. See Table 1 for summary of demographics of sample.



**TABLE 1** Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables

Independent variables	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>
Gender (1 = <i>female</i> , 0 = <i>male</i> ) <sup>a</sup>	91.0	–
Race (1 = <i>person of color</i> , 0 = <i>White</i> ) <sup>b</sup>	15.7	–
Sexual orientation (1 = <i>LGB</i> , 0 = <i>non-LGB</i> ) <sup>c</sup>	4.5	–
Age	28.89	7.667

*Note.* LGB = lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

<sup>a</sup>Transgender was included as a third gender response category but no students identified as transgender. Percent given for gender is female.

<sup>b</sup>Person of color includes African American/Black; Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander; Hispanic; Native American/American Indian/Eskimo; and Biracial/Multiracial categories. Percent given for race is person of color.

<sup>c</sup>Percent given for sexual orientation is LGB.

## Measures

A pretest-posttest instrument was developed to assess the efficacy of the teaching module. The dependent variable, representing the degree of agreement with the notion that scientific research and the scientific process is by definition bias free, was constructed from seven questions. All seven questions, listed in Table 2, were answered using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Higher scores represent greater levels of agreement with the statement. The scores from the seven questions were summed and then divided by seven to give an average score on the 6-point Likert scale.

## Procedures

In order to examine the effectiveness of the Disrupting Privilege and Oppression in Practice and Research teaching module (Nicotera & Kang, 2009), a pretest-posttest design was used. All instructors followed the standard syllabus for the course, adding the teaching module by following the procedures described here.

During one of the first few class periods and prior to the teaching intervention, students completed the questionnaire described in the measures section as well as provided basic sociodemographic information. The questionnaire was completed a second time at the end of the quarter after students had been exposed to both parts of the teaching module. Students included a unique four-digit code that allowed the researchers to match the students' pretest answers to their posttest answers while maintaining their anonymity.

The Disrupting Privilege and Oppression in Practice and Research teaching module consists of two parts: Reading Between the Lines and Translating Research into Practice. The first module, Reading Between the

**TABLE 2** Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Dependent variable components (pretest)		
Scientific process allows researchers to conduct studies in a manner that is free from bias.	3.89	1.122
When I participate in research as a subject, I feel confident that my ideas and opinions will be represented in the results.	4.08	.829
Scientific research is free from the stereotypes that people in the general population make.	2.64	1.121
When I read an article in a scholarly journal, I can assume that the researcher followed the scientific process.	3.63	1.162
Social work interventions based on scientific research will be free from cultural biases.	2.74	1.028
The scientific process insures that the researcher and the participant have equal power in the research process.	2.93	1.105
If researchers follow the scientific process their findings will be free from bias.	3.32	1.056
Dependent variable components (posttest)		
Scientific process allows researchers to conduct studies in a manner that is free from bias.	3.40	1.363
When I participate in research as a subject, I feel confident that my ideas and opinions will be represented in the results.	3.64	1.141
Scientific research is free from the stereotypes that people in the general population make.	2.33	1.063
When I read an article in a scholarly journal, I can assume that the researcher followed the scientific process.	3.28	1.469
Social work interventions based on scientific research will be free from cultural biases.	2.64	1.069
The scientific process insures that the researcher and the participant have equal power in the research process.	2.02	1.058
If researchers follow the scientific process their findings will be free from bias.	3.25	1.090
Dependent variables		
Perception of research as bias-free (pretest)	3.32	.695
Perception of research as bias-free (posttest)	3.07	.852
Change in pretest and posttest score (posttest)	-.24	.742

Lines, was implemented during the third week of classes. During the week prior to administration of the module, students were randomly assigned to one of two groups. The first group received an article that examined the relationship between child home injury prevention and social class (Evans & Kohli, 1997). The second group received an article regarding pedestrian injuries among Hispanic children (Agran, Winn, Anderson, & Del Valle, 1998). Students were instructed to read the article prior to the next class meeting and were additionally given the outline for the in-class exercise that would be implemented the following week (See Appendix A). While two different articles were used in this study to allow for numerous issues and challenges to neutrality to emerge, instructors may wish to use only one article or possibly even more than two different articles depending on class size and level of sophistication of the students in the course.

During the next class meeting, the different groups met to discuss the articles they had been assigned using the outline that had been provided. Flipchart paper and pens were provided to the groups so that the key points of their discussion could be recorded and reported to the class as a whole. After approximately 30 minutes of group discussion the class as a whole was reconvened and the students presented their findings. The instructors facilitated the discussion, helping students make connections between the socially positioned (and most often unstated) assumptions that were embedded within the studies and the authors' interpretations of their findings.

During the final class period, the second part of the two-part teaching module—Translating Research into Practice—was implemented. In the week prior, students were encouraged to review their notes and findings from the first part of the module that was completed earlier during the quarter. Additionally, they were given an outline of the in-class exercise they would be doing the following week (See Appendix B). Students were again divided into their groups based on the readings they had completed and previously discussed. Flipchart paper and markers were again provided. In the groups, the students collaboratively designed a social work intervention that strictly adhered to the authors' interpretation of the respective study's findings.

Faculty consultation with the groups during the process was provided as the different groups struggled with the tension between social work values and ethics, and designing interventions that strictly adhered to the research findings. Students then presented their work to the class, highlighting the ways in which the study's findings were translated into social work practice, and the ways in which the resulting interventions adhered to, and departed from, social work values and ethics.

## Hypotheses

### PRETEST AND POSTTEST COMPARISON

As we anticipated that the teaching module would increase students' awareness about potential bias issues in scientific research, we hypothesized that the mean posttest score for the students in the sample would be significantly lower than the mean pretest score for the same group of students. These findings, should they arise in the analysis, would suggest that the teaching modules foster an increased criticalness about consuming social science research.

### CHANGE SCORE COMPARISON

Our second hypothesis concerned potential differences within the sample. It has clearly been documented that course content on issues of cultural competence, oppression, and privilege in social work education differentially

influence students with different social identities (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Pinderhughes, 1988). Students with privileged backgrounds may experience a sense of loss, shock, guilt, or shame, while students from oppressed backgrounds may report sadness, dismay, and pain (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997). Given that the teaching modules explicitly ask students to use critical thinking about how the privileged statuses of the researchers influence the research they conduct, and then how these influences can get incorporated into social work interventions, we predicted finding a differential shift for students from oppressed backgrounds than for students from majority, privileged backgrounds. We hypothesized that students from oppressed backgrounds would show more change than students from more privileged backgrounds. We speculated that the module would validate and affirm oppressed students' intuitive sense that neutrality is rarely truly neutral, while challenging privileged students' normative assumptions.

### Analysis

After completing descriptive statistics, Cronbach alpha coefficients of the dependent variable were examined to insure adequate reliability, and *t* tests were used to compare mean pretest and posttest scores, as well as to compare the change score for students from traditionally oppressed groups (students of color and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender students) with the change score for those not from these identity groups.<sup>1</sup> Data were analyzed using Stata 9.2.

## RESULTS

### Pretest and Posttest Comparison

The dependent variable, representing the degree of agreement with the notion that scientific research and the scientific process are bias free, was constructed from the seven questions previously described. Because the dependent variable was a composite measure, the reliability coefficient was examined to determine how well the seven questions hung together as a latent construct. The measure demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of .77 at pretest and .84 at posttest, both more than adequate reliability coefficients.

At pretest, 43.20% of the students had scores that ranged from 3.5 to 6.0, indicating some average level of agreement with the notion that scientific research was free from bias. This agreement dropped to 32.58% at posttest. The mean pretest score for the sample was 3.32 with a standard deviation of .69 and a range from 1.43 to 4.71. The mean posttest score was 3.07 and a standard deviation of .85. The range for the posttest score was 1.00 to 4.57. Comparing the mean pretest and posttest scores we find a *t*-test score of 3.08 which is statistically significant at the .01 level in the direction predicted.<sup>2</sup>

Next we created a change score by subtracting the individual's pretest score from his/her posttest score. This results in a dependent variable where larger numbers represent a greater shift toward increased disagreement with the notion that scientific research is necessarily bias-free. Larger numbers, then, represent the direction in which we were trying to effect change.

In the sample, we found an average decrease in score on the variable measuring belief that scientific research is necessarily bias free of .24 with a standard deviation of .7422. We had anticipated, based on the differential influence of work on privilege and oppression on students with various social identities (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997), that students from traditionally marginalized groups (students of color and lesbians/gay/bisexual/transgender students) would show a stronger change in the predicted direction. In the oppressed group, 77.78% of the students moved in the direction predicted, while only 57.75% of the students in the nonoppressed (White, heterosexual students) group moved in the direction predicted. The average change score for the oppressed group was .53 with a standard deviation of .8240. For the nonoppressed group, we found an average change score of .17 with a standard deviation of .7071. Using a *t* test to examine the difference between the two groups in the mean change scores, we find a *t*-test score of  $-1.87$  which is statistically significant in the direction predicted at the .05 level.

Both the difference in pretest and posttest scores, as well as the difference in change scores comparing marginalized students with other students, supported our hypotheses. These findings suggest that the Disrupting Privilege and Oppression in the Research and Practice module may have been at least partially effective in shifting students' perspectives on the neutrality of scientific research. At the end of the foundation research methods course, students appeared to perceive research more critically in terms of the positionality of the researcher and the potential ways in which assumptions and interpretations of results can be influenced by unstated issues of power and privilege. While the results are statistically significant, we would caution the reader not to conflate statistical significance with clinical meaningfulness. For example, even statistically significant differences between pretest and posttest scores cannot predict changes in students' future behavior concerning the issues addressed in this teaching module.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study. First, readers are cautioned about the generalizability of our findings which are based on a non-random sample of MSW students attending a private university who are not necessarily representative of first year MSW cohorts in other institutions. Next, the results of this study would be stronger if there were an available comparison group.

However, the vast majority of the first year MSW students in our program enroll in this required research class and the other potential comparison group, advanced standing students, is considered distinctly different due to their advanced standing status (Hyde & Ruth, 2002).

While epistemological concerns have not been addressed in the objectives of the course, individual instructors bring their unique proclivities for raising such concerns. As such, we cannot rule out the influence of the instructors' predispositions to raising epistemological concerns related to different methodological paradigms. Additionally, implementing part one of the module could further heighten instructors' sensitivity to these concerns, increasing the likelihood of addressing them during the weeks between the two parts of the module. Hence, we cannot account for these potential threats to internal validity.

Finally, students who participated in this study were simultaneously enrolled in other required courses related to clinical and community content as well as in their field placements. While these courses and field placements focus on practice and not on the consumption of research, it is feasible that students' knowledge of critical reflexivity in general was heightened due to other multicultural content embedded in other courses.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

This study contributes to the scholarship on social work education by testing the efficacy of a teaching module which was integrated into a required graduate level, foundation year research methods course. It addresses the need identified by numerous social work scholars who argue for the importance of documenting the effectiveness of teaching approaches and techniques within the discipline (Gutierrez et al., 1999; Wodarski et al., 1995).

The findings demonstrate that content about oppression and privilege can be successfully integrated into research methods courses by employing techniques that focus students' critical thinking skills on issues of position, power, and status within the context of consuming social science research. Raising epistemological issues about the research enterprise from a critical multicultural perspective (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997) can deepen students' understanding about the sociostructural framework within which academic knowledge is frequently created, and confront student naiveté regarding the notion of a bias-free social scientific process.

Engaging students in the process of developing social work interventions based on research findings, while interrogating the unstated privileged assumptions embedded within that research, exposes students to the tension between social work values and ethics, and much published scholarship. The teaching module tested in this study provides a structure that, when combined with instructors who facilitate the dialogue about these

issues of positionality, will, we believe, produce students with greater ability to critically consume the research that informs their practice. Similar or greater changes may have been achieved by exposing students to the strengths and limitations of various methodological paradigms such as post-positivism, constructivism, and critical theory, to name a few. Future studies might compare the modules tested in this study to other interventions to determine the most effective approaches to teaching this content.

## CONCLUSION

Much work needs to be undertaken if social work research methods classes are to become incubators of “socially just” practitioners who have the ability to critically engage academic research in such a way as to produce anti-oppressive practice interventions. Continuing to only “systematically [discuss] diversity and ‘vulnerable populations’” (Longres & Scanlon, 2001, p. 461), as appears to be the practice in many social work research methods courses (Longres & Scanlon), falls far short of that goal. Pointing the finger at ourselves in the academy by raising the difficult issues about the creation of knowledge, the positions of power held by those who create that knowledge, and our role in that process is necessary if we are to model the critical reflexivity that students need to learn as they move into the world with the commitment to disrupt structures of oppression.

Because many MSW students will take only the required research courses, issues of social justice in the research curriculum must not be relegated solely to elective and advanced methodology courses. To do so plays a part in perpetuating social work practitioners’ unintentional role in maintaining systems of stratification by failing to instill in them the ability to engage academic research in a critical dialogue. The call has been issued by scholars before us to meet the challenge of “revamping” research methods curricula in service to the values and ethics of social work (Uehara et al., 2004). Our hope is that the teaching module presented and examined within this study is one small step toward meeting that challenge.

## NOTES

1. While gender could have been a third identity category to be included in our “traditionally oppressed groups” categorization, a number of issues prohibited us from doing so. In the final sample only eight of the students were male, and of those eight, only four identified as heterosexual, White males.

2. For all *t* tests conducted in this study, homogeneity of variances were examined using an *F* test, Levene’s (1960) test which has been shown to be more robust under conditions of nonnormality, and Brown and Forsythe’s (1974) two alternative formulations (median, trimmed mean) of Levene’s test statistic. No instances were detected that required the use of *t*-test formulation for groups with unequal variances.

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## APPENDIX A

DISRUPTING PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE:  
Reading Between the Lines

This assignment asks you to examine the implications of assumptions that researchers make for the interpretation of their findings.

In your work group, discuss the article that you have been assigned to read, paying particular attention to the following three points. Ask someone to take notes on the themes in your discussion so that you can report them to the larger group later in the class. Keep copies of your notes as you will need them for an assignment later in the quarter.

1. What are the values that you think are represented in the research study? For example, what assumptions do you think the researcher is making about the topic of study? About the people in their sample?
2. How do you think that these values are represented in the way in which the authors discuss the study's findings?
3. What positions of privilege and subordination do you think are held by the researchers? By the participants?

## APPENDIX B

DISRUPTING PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE:  
Translating Research into Practice

Taking the knowledge that you gained from reading the article you were assigned, your discussion in your small group about the values and assumptions that the researchers are making, and our larger class discussion on both articles used for the Disrupting Privilege and Oppression in Research and Practice: Reading Between the Lines in-class exercise (Week 3), design a social work intervention that strictly adheres to the results of the study you read.

Using the flip chart and markers provided, develop a brief presentation (10 minutes) that your group will present in class outlining your intervention. Include in your presentation:

- a. the research findings
- b. the underlying assumptions on which the research (and therefore your intervention) is based
- c. how your intervention is supported by the study's findings
- d. how your intervention coincides and diverges from social work values and ethics