Walk the Talk of Power, Privilege, and Oppression: A Template Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Social justice is a hallmark of social work practice. The call to end oppression and discrimination are voiced in the Grand Challenge, Achieve Equal Opportunity and Justice, the National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics preamble, and the Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. However, none of these operationalize how social workers develop the capacity to fulfill this goal. This study sought to develop a framework for how social work educators assess power, privilege, and oppression learning via course assignments. Data were collected from assignments (N=94) in core foundation and required concentration courses (N=40). Template analysis was employed over four cycles of coding. Findings identified four levels of social justice content: implicit; low-explicit; medium-explicit; high-explicit.

Social work is grounded in the value of social justice. This is enumerated in the social work competencies that guide social work education; the social work code of ethics, which direct social work practice, and the grand challenges, which are a call to action to the profession of social work. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017) preamble states that one of social work's missions is to promote social justice and social change. The preamble also specifically states that social workers must "strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice" (p. 1). The Code of Ethics, which includes ethical principles and ethical standards, states that social workers are called to challenge injustice (NASW, 2017). Although the importance of social justice is clear in the Code of Ethics, how to incorporate that importance into the curriculum is not clearly explained. However, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) notes that the curriculum must be inclusive of diversity and understood from an intersectional lens, including "age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status" (p. 14). The CSWE shifted the EPAS in 2008 from a model of curriculum design (topics students should be educated in) to a curriculum focused on outcomes (what students should know) and integrated curriculum design. This was a new approach that focused on students having the skills to incorporate and use social work values and knowledge and promote individual and community well-being. Implementing a competency-based approach meant that schools would be assessing students' competence of fundamental skills to effectively practice social work (CSWE, 2015; Holloway, Black, Hoffman, & Pierce, 2009). Although the EPAS were updated in 2015 and continued the competency-based approach, the CSWE does not provide guidance on ways to assess such competencies.

The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare's (n.d.) grand challenges for social work are a call to action to the field of social work to harness the collective power of researchers and practitioners to address social problems. One of the 12 challenges is aimed at achieving equal opportunity and justice, to work toward "a just society that fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers pathways for social and economic progress"

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(para 2). Social work education is a direct answer to this call. By providing educational opportunities that are steeped in social justice content, schools of social work have the opportunity to produce social justice advocates who continue to challenge social injustice and serve as agents of change toward social and economic equity.

Literature review

Although calls for the commitment to and the infusion of social justice into social work education are clear (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, n.d.; CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2017), and ample research exists on the benefits and importance of diversity in social work education (Daniel, 2011) there is a lack of research on how to most effectively integrate the concepts of diversity and social justice into course content, syllabi, or assignments (Mehrotra, Hudson, & Self, 2017). Thus, there is little clarity on how to effectively infuse such topics into classroom instruction (Teasley & Archuleta, 2015). Furthermore, schools can take several paths toward diversity content integration in the curriculum: (a) Institute a stand-alone course that covers social justice and diversity content, which may or may not be a required course; (b) infuse topics on diversity throughout a program's curriculum; (c) employ a combination of a specific course and infusion across the curriculum; or (d) integrate social justice and diversity content using mini courses or workshops (Deepak, Rountree, & Scott, 2015; Hong & Hodge, 2009; Ledoux & Montalvo, 1999). These multiple styles and mechanisms for meeting the EPAS (CSWE, 2015) standards and social justice aims of the profession may further muddle the process of how best to approach incorporating diversity content into social work education programs. Finally, although intersectionality is noted in the EPAS, the recognition of intersectional identities, especially how power and oppression are multiplied in intersecting identities, is an important concept that may often be left out of the curriculum.

In a national study of social work social justice courses, 26 syllabi from 31 schools were examined (Hong & Hodge, 2009). Findings indicate that courses integrated content of diverse groups (i.e., racial minorities, women, LGBT people) but did not address many relevant oppressed identity groups (i.e., people experiencing homelessness and poverty; Hong & Hodge, 2009). A comparable study noted related findings, with more courses focusing on race, gender, and ethnicity and less or none that mentioned homelessness, advocacy, or human rights (Teasley & Archuleta, 2015). This is an alarming finding given the history of social work and the following specific directive: "The primary mission of the social work profession is 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, 2017, p. 1).

Although these studies provide an understanding of how social justice is conveyed in syllabi, they do not offer solutions or suggestions on how to maximize the infusion of social justice content through the syllabus. In this vein, another study examined how African American students perceived the integration of diverse content in a human behavior course before and after the CSWE mandated the infusion of diversity content (Bowie, Hall, & Johnson, 2011). Researchers found no statistical differences in perceptions when comparing students who were enrolled before the new standards were released and after regarding diversity content in the course (Bowie et al., 2011). Although this study was not directly related to the new competency-based approach to social work education, the study's finding of no statistically significant differences in perceptions of diversity content prior to the CSWE mandate to infuse diversity content and after the mandate to infuse this content may allude to social work educators' struggles to incorporate diversity and social justice into courses. Longres and Scanlon's (2001) study of research course syllabi in BSW, MSW, and PhD classes found that no syllabi, including assignments, had any mention of social justice, even though professors described themselves as being committed to social justice and infusing it into their classroom.

A study that examined perceptions of effective delivery of diversity and social justice content found that assignments were valuable in pushing students to engage in critical thinking and action (Deepak et al., 2015). Specifically, course assignments provided students with the opportunity to integrate their intellectual

(course material) and emotional responses (students' own processes of learning about how their identity affected their views on the content) to the course material (Deepak et al., 2015). MacDonald's (2013) inquiry into an advocacy course assignment about HIV/AIDS policy showcased how assignments can be used to challenge unjust ideals while simultaneously assessing the EPAS core competencies. Qualitative findings from this study illuminate how the course assignment urged students to engage in diversity (EPAS Competency 2); specifically, students reported that the assignment pushed them to think about diversity outside just race or ethnicity and examine their own biases (MacDonald, 2013).

An additional study examined if course assignments facilitated an increased capacity to recognize diversity as a strength and allowed students to feel engaged with social work skills and the values and ethics of the profession (Rahill et al., 2016). Findings indicate that the course assignment was successful in helping students examine past lessons learned, think about themselves, their biases, their positionality, and the biased messages they receive from society (Rahill et al., 2016). Finally, Mapp (2013) used a research methods course assignment not only to infuse qualitative methodology skills but also as an opportunity to educate students about social justice. Students said that the assignment increased their understanding of oppression and social justice in ways they previously had not understood. They further noted that through the assignment they were able to expand their knowledge of structural barriers and their own biases (Mapp, 2013).

These examples provide evidence that course assignments can be used to assess student learning on the core social justice competencies in the EPAS (CSWE, 2015). In light of the fact that social work programs are mandated to infuse content on diversity and social identity, racism, privilege, and oppression (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997) into the curriculum and are required to assess student competencies related to this content, further research is needed to understand how course assignments can be used to challenge students and assess their competence for meeting this hallmark of the social work profession. The current study addresses this need for further research by evaluating MSW course assignments (*n*=94) to determine how specific assignment directions can be used to challenge students and create an assessment point for social justice competency.

Methods

Study context

As noted earlier, social justice content can be infused across the social work curriculum and in a course that specifically addresses the topics of social justice, diversity, power, privilege, and oppression (PPO) (Hong & Hodge, 2009). The current study site ascribes to both of these methods, infusing social justice into all course content across the curriculum while also offering one core course, required for all students, that specifically addresses PPO. The study site is located in a private, research-intensive, midsize university in a metropolitan area of the mountain region of the United States.

Data collection

Data for this study were drawn from existing syllabi from MSW courses and did not involve human subjects, therefore no institutional review board approval was necessary. In the spring term of 2017, we contacted the lead professor in each core foundation MSW course and each required concentration theory and method MSW course to request them to e-mail us the PPO content in their course assignments. Specifically, they were asked to identify specific elements in assignments that address PPO content or learning, including assignment components that challenge students to

(1) address social justice values, (2) demonstrate critical thinking about PPO content, and (3) demonstrate critical thinking about addressing PPO content, (4) or others that you may identify. Please copy and paste these into a Word document and send them to us via email.

By the end of summer 2017, we received a total of 94 assignments from 40 courses.

Sample

The sample consists of 94 assignments from 40 MSW courses. The 40 courses incorporated a range of topics including clinical skills (assessment of mental health, prevention, substance use), policy, and research and evaluation.

Analysis

Our positionality

Atteberry-Ash, a doctoral student and adjunct faculty who is well versed in social justice and the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression, served as the primary analyst. Nicotera and Gonzales, faculty members who are also well versed in social justice and the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression, supervised the analysis process and were integral to the analytic process and research team. For the purpose of full disclosure, Nicotera and Gonzales both had course assignments that were included in the sample of syllabi, and having the doctoral student serve as primary analyst allowed them to *bracket* (Creswell, 2007) their own views on their assignment content. Findings support this bracketing as the content of their assignments cut across the thematic categories that resulted from the analysis.

Template analysis (King, 1998, 2012) was employed in a series of analytic steps described next. All documents were loaded into the Atlas.ti (version 8.1.3; Scientific Software Development GmbH) computer program for analysis. Prior to the first cycle of coding, Atteberry-Ash completed a preliminary reading of the data to familiarize herself with the content.

In Step 1, the first cycle of coding applied an a priori template developed by the research team. These initial a priori codes were used to identify content that related to diversity, social justice, power, privilege, oppression, cultural competence, and multiculturalism. For example, data segments in assignments that referred to or directly stated the a priori codes were coded as containing social justice content.

After this first cycle of coding, the team met and came to a consensus on the coded data segments. This process resulted in uncovering two types of content: (a) content that implied or suggested that students explore ideas related to social justice and (b) content that explicitly challenged students to examine socially just content. As a result, the template was amended to include the code *implicit*, which was defined as assignment directions that alluded to the concepts of power privilege and oppression without directly using the terms. The code for *explicit* was defined as assignment directions that explicitly stated that students attend to social justice, power, privilege, or oppression. For example, one segment that was coded implicit might be, "What strengths will your social identities have on your development as a social worker?" whereas a segment that was coded explicit could be, "How does neuroscience intersect with issues of diversity, power, privilege, or oppression?"

In Step 2 the new template developed in Step 1, with codes defined as either implicit or explicit, was applied to the data. After the second cycle of coding, the team examined how Atteberry-Ash had applied the template for coding data segments as either implicit or explicit. Further examination of the data segments resulted in clarifying the implicit and explicit codes and concretizing the definitions of each code. The process uncovered gradations in the explicit code with three subcodes—low, medium, and high. No gradations were uncovered for the data segments coded as implicit.

The new template defined the subcodes for explicit in the following way:

- Low-explicit was defined as PPO content covered as in name only, that is, these assignment directions gave students the opportunity to respond at a theoretical, abstract, or removed level to the PPO aspect of an assignment.
- Medium-explicit was defined as PPO content covered from a more systemic approach, challenging students to consider structural issues of oppression's effect on client systems but did not include how their own biases or identity may affect their approach to social work practice.

Table 1. Summary of implicit social justice content.

Implicit Description	Examples
Alludes to the concept of power privilege and oppression but did not use those terms to describe the content or context for the assignment	1. Describe two strengths and identify how your interviewee's cultural and social identities serve as strength in their life. 2. What are the dimensions of the underlying social condition(s)? 3. Examine the characteristics of the sample of participants in this study. How well do you think the sample of participants in this study reflects the population of people that would most benefit from this intervention? Please defend your answer.

- High-explicit was defined as everything in medium-explicit with the addition of challenging students to engage in a personal examination of their own identities and how client systems might perceive them based on these identities and affect the relationships they create with client systems.

In Step 3, the final coding cycle, the template developed in Step 2 was applied to the data, after which the team met to review the newly coded data segments. This resulted in the final template and results of the analysis. The final template of findings and example excerpts from different syllabi are provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Limitations

The research team did not request the entirety of every course assignment; instead lead faculty were asked to copy and paste the material in their submission they felt was relevant to power, privilege, and oppression. Therefore, it is possible that some assignment content was overlooked when faculty copied and pasted from their course assignments. As an aside, it is also a strength that the lead faculty identified this content as an outsider to a course assignment may actually be more prone to overlook this content or make generalizations about power, privilege, and oppression content where none is intended. Also, these are findings from one institution; therefore, they may not be transferable to other schools of social work. This study only included assignments from required foundation and concentration courses; assignments in elective courses may reflect social justice content differently.

Findings

As noted previously, the analysis resulted in a final template with four categories of how social justice content was being conveyed through assignments: implicit, explicit-low, explicit-medium, and explicit-high. Overall, 43 assignments received explicit codes (low, 19; medium, 16; high, 8) and 51 were coded implicit. Each of these categories are explained in more detail in the following.

Implicit social justice content

Assignments that received the implicit code generally did not include the a priori codes, such as power, privilege, oppression, diversity, or social justice, but alluded to them. Assignments coded as implicit would often ask students to simply describe a community using demographic statistics or used words such as *multiculturalism* or *diversity*. Content that received the implicit code generally did not link to how concepts such as multiculturalism or diversity may be related to or driven by power, privilege, oppression, or other socially just concepts. The following are two examples of implicit content: "What modifications might you need to make in terms of delivery as you work with diverse family systems?" and "Discuss any cultural or client value issues that may be pertinent with your case."

Table 2. Summary of explicit social justice content.

Level of Explicit Social Justice Content	Level Description	Examples
Low	Uses the words *power, privilege,* or *oppression* but does not specifically note how or why, allowing students to respond in superficial ways or textbook approaches. It does not require them to reflect on personal or professional identities or any social justice assumptions they have that may affect how they respond in the assignment.	1. Consideration of the social construction of how the problem is influenced by themes of power, privilege, and oppression. Consider impacts of important identity factors such as socioeconomic status, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identification, ageism, classism, imperialism. 2. How does systems theory address issues of diversity, power, privilege, or oppression? 3. Includes respectful discussion of the client in terms of cultural and social justice issues.
Medium	Engages students in examining how identities shape and affect how people or communities might be treated. Engages them in a broader structural examination of power privilege, and oppression. Does not engage students in examining how their own individual identities affect the people they serve.	1. Provide a social justice, multicultural, feminist analysis of the case. What issues of power, oppression, gender, race, sexual orientation (or identity), physical ability, and so on, are pertinent in this case? What considerations should a therapist make when working with this family, that is, cultural, hierarchical, place in time, age, and so on. Discuss how the effects of oppression, discrimination, trauma, and historical and current effects of oppression on client systems guided your treatment planning and interventions in this case. 2. Discuss the cultural and social justice implications relevant to how social workers may use the developmental theory to understand how difference shapes the lives in this case. 3. As part of the final paper, students examine "cultural or other historical contributions to thoughts and beliefs." This calls for students to look at the roles of sexism, racism, heterosexism, and other sources of bias in shaping people's negative beliefs about themselves.
High	Includes everything in medium but also requires students to have a higher level of understanding how their own identities and biases affect their response on the assignment and challenges them to interrogate how their social identities affect the assumptions they make about a client, theory, policy, or case example. Also requires students to examine assumptions and have a high level of understanding of their own identity and how others perceive that identity.	1. Describe how differences and similarities because of your social identities and interviewee's social identities that create experiences of power, privilege, and oppression may have influenced what you assumed about your interviewee (e.g., differences or similarities related to gender; age; faith, religion, spirituality; culture; race; sexual orientation; social class; and physical-cognitive capacity). 2. As such, the overarching purpose of the assignment is to examine how cultural bias, cultural relativity, and cultural contributions contribute to racial, gender, and other disparities in mental health assessment and diagnosis. In addition, one component of the assignment is "identification of personal bias and next steps." Students are instructed: "Based on your research for this paper, course readings, and class discussion, make an honest appraisal of how your own biases might come into play when making a mental health diagnosis, and what steps you can take to manage your bias and prevent doing harm to a client." 3. What are your identities that hold power in relation to the community? What are areas of your identity that may be targeted in relation to the community?

Explicit social justice content

Most commonly, content coded as explicit-low simply mentioned social justice, power, privilege, diversity, or oppression in the assignment, omitting details students may need to reach critical

thinking levels that may be necessary to understand and examine topics related to social justice. As the most commonly used explicit code, assignment content coded as explicit-low generally contained content similar to the following:

> [The] student's presentation showcases respectful discussion of the client in terms of cultural and social justice issues or Journals should include a reflection on social work ethics, the diversity of practice that is being represented, as well as the human rights and social justice that you are perceiving in the daily visits to service providers.

In addition to naming social justice, power, privilege, or oppression as explicit-low, content coded as explicit-medium tended to push students to examine how the identities people hold influence their lives, or also, at a more global level, how identity may influence how communities are interpreted and treated. However, content coded as explicit-medium did not ask students to examine or interpret their own identity and how it may affect people or the communities they plan to serve. Examples of explicit-medium include

> Consider all the people affected by the problem, either negatively or positively. Be sure to identify effects on populations of concern to social workers, for social justice or other ethical reasons. Consider the needs, hopes, views, experiences, and beliefs vulnerable populations might have about the problem.

> Issues of power, privilege, and oppression, and self-determination should be incorporated. Projects should give consideration to the ways in which the conceptualization and representation of PWD [persons with disabilities] has evolved and the reasons behind identity group development within this underrepresented population as a whole.

Generally, content coded as explicit-high included the components of explicit-low and explicit-medium with an additional emphasis to challenge students to consider their own identities and how these may influence any biases or assumptions the students may hold. For content coded as explicit-high, instructions in the assignment included prompts for students to incorporate an analysis of their own identity, and instructions tended to be clear, concrete, and offered step-by-step instructions for the assignment: "This assignment gives you an opportunity to build on the exploration of your experiences of power, privilege, and oppression, as well as your unique identity/positionality in relation to the assignment and community."

Discussion and implications

It is evident that educators in schools of social work strive to include content and teaching on power, privilege, and oppression that support educational and professional values and goals. Yet, to do so effectively, it would be beneficial to support instructors in the development of course content and assignments to ensure this is achieved through student understanding, outcomes, and application to practice. In addition, students' learning may be enhanced when assignments are transparent so that they can make clear connections between social justice and social work practice (Funge, 2011). Assignments that are transparent in this regard may also make the assessment of student learning more meaningful while also enabling instructors to provide concrete feedback and support for student learning (Nicotera & Kang, 2009). Otherwise, invaluable learning and preparation may be lost and ultimately hinder client and community success (Mapp, 2013; Rahill et al., 2016).

Findings from this study highlight the critical importance of supporting instructors not only with their teaching but their course assignments and professional development in assignment creation that challenges students to address issues of power, privilege, and oppression. Administrators of schools of social work are encouraged to attend to the development of assignments across the span of the course (i.e., progression of course content so that scaffolding of assignments is done in a way that follows the intended outcomes of the course). This could be accomplished through delineation of implicit and explicit social justice content in assignments by tailoring them across the trajectory of course content. For example, assignments that have

implicit instructions can be used to create teachable moments, such as when students miss making implicit connections (Deepak et al., 2015; Singh, 2017). Such teachable moments could arise as individual feedback on an assignment or as class discussions after the assignments are completed, for example, telling students about how easy it is to miss opportunities to apply social justice to assignments and by extension in social work practice. Assignments with explicit social justice content can be used to assess where students are in terms of comprehension of specific concepts such as recognition of microaggressions. Finally, using more explicit social justice content in assignments allows instructors to self-assess their own content delivery. For example, if students are missing explicit instruction in assignments, instructors can redeliver material or find more direct ways to teach the material in subsequent classes.

In a parallel fashion, our findings stress the importance of challenging instructors to clearly convey and engage with the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression, which are reflective of the social work competencies, the NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics*, and the grand challenges. We recognize that all social work educators (including ourselves) are on their own trajectories in terms of unlearning isms and recognizing the power that accompanies training future social workers. Therefore, professional development on assignment creation should be done in parallel with education aimed at moving instructors along their trajectory toward a stronger embodiment of social justice. This is important because our capacity to evaluate student learning on social justice is linked to our own capacity to deeply understand the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression. In essence, we are suggesting that as social work educators we should not ask our students to do anything we are not willing to do ourselves.

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