Introduction

Teaching for Social Justice and Social Action

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Social justice education involves promoting critical awareness of social inequalities and developing skills that work against these inequalities. This article describes a general theoretical framework for social justice education, describes general strategies for facilitating students’ social justice awareness and engagement, identifies challenges to social education, and highlights articles in the special issue that address these themes.

KEYWORDS civic engagement, social action, social justice, social problems, university education

Social justice is a critical component of community psychology because its pursuit facilitates the key community psychology tasks of promoting wellness and eliminating oppressive conditions for marginalized groups (Prilleltensky, 2001). Prilleltensky (2001) defined social justice as “Promot[ing] fair and equitable allocation of bargaining powers, resources, and obligations in society in consideration of people’s differential power, needs, and abilities to express their wishes” (p. 754, emphasis in original). Community interventionists need to be trained in skills and methods that will facilitate community members’ participation and engagement in the larger society, and community psychologists may be involved in the education and training of students to critically analyze societal inequities and work for social justice. Some have argued that universities should adopt such a transformative vision and become fully committed to social change in a way that provides students with knowledge about social inequality and social change to promote larger societal democratic processes (Prilleltensky, 2001; Rhoads, 2009). In this introductory article, we briefly provide a theoretical framework...
for incorporating social justice into university education, summarize general strategies and challenges for doing so, and highlight the articles that follow that address this theme from different perspectives.

In recent years, global social justice movements, such as the “Arab Spring” pro-democracy movements, the Occupy movements protesting economic inequality, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activism around marriage equality, have flourished and brought media attention to social inequalities and injustices around the world. Within this larger global context, university educators have a unique and timely opportunity to foster student engagement with ongoing social movements and enhance student knowledge to promote global citizenship and social responsibility (Rhoads, 2009). Training students for social justice confers benefits both to the community and to the students themselves. Benefits to students include the opportunity to put their own values into action (Goodman, 2001; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002); enhanced self-efficacy, motivation, and intentions to engage in social justice efforts (Goodman, 2001); increased cultural knowledge and the opportunity to develop interpersonal and participatory intervention skills (Goodman, 2001); being able to live in a more fair and just society (Goodman, 2001; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002); and engaging with marginalized others in genuine, empathic, caring, and collaborative relationships (Freire, 1970). Students also may experience enhanced psychological well-being through activism participation, including enhanced life satisfaction, personal growth, and social well-being (Klar & Kasser, 2009).

The foundations of social justice education are drawn from multiple disciplines and traditions, including community psychology, feminist psychology, counseling psychology, and critical psychology (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007; Goodman et al., 2004; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Vera & Speight, 2003). Many social justice–oriented educational and pedagogical methods utilize the framework developed by Paulo Freire (1970). Freire strongly criticized traditional methods of education, which he said mirrored an oppressive society as a whole. In traditional education, the teacher is the expert, and the students are passive recipients of the “correct” information; that is, the information that serves the interests and functions of the dominant interest groups within society. In contrast, he described a liberatory and emancipatory process as one in which teachers engage in dialogues with students, students act as subjects (not objects) in their education, students critically analyze both theories and the proponents of those theories, and students consider how theory and information relate to their own circumstances and lives. This process requires that the teacher facilitate the dialogue with (not to) the student (Freire, 1970).

A key tenet of social justice education derived from Freire’s model is the importance of developing awareness of oppressive social conditions, termed conscientização, or critical consciousness. Awareness of oppressive conditions (whether affecting oneself or another), are presumed to be necessary
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and conducive for social action. Multicultural and social justice educators have similarly stressed the importance of self-awareness. This includes knowing one's own attitudes, beliefs, values, and cultural worldviews, and how one's power and privilege affect one's own worldview (Constantine et al., 2007; Goodman, 2001; Goodman et al., 2004; Vera & Speight, 2003). Similarly, as grounded in feminist scholarship, social justice education encourages students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds to express their “voice.” This entails having individuals know and express their lived experiences, perspectives, desires, and beliefs.

However, enhancing critical consciousness in students may be difficult because it requires students to confront difficult or upsetting information and circumstances involving social injustices or inequalities. This may provoke discomfort, anxiety, guilt, or anger. In turn, these emotions may pose threats to one’s self-image and may cause one to hold even more strongly to previous worldviews, engage in victim-blaming, or even exercise their power in community settings in an attempt to ward off anxiety and preserve a positive sense of self (Goodman, 2001; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2002; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Cognitive biases, such as the confirmation bias, may further contribute to the maintenance of stereotypical or prejudicial ideas and victim-blaming (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). In addition, university students are a privileged group by virtue of their increased level of educational attainment, and thus, may have greater difficulty confronting information that they might perceive as challenging their identity or achievements (Goodman, 2001). Resistance to social justice–related material also results from strongly held beliefs in individualism, colorblindness, views of the United States as a meritocracy, or valuing competition and individual achievement (Goodman, 2001). This resistance may be manifested through classroom verbal challenges or provocative statements; challenging the credentials, competency, or motivations of the instructor; and denial or disengagement from class assignments, readings, materials, or class discussions (Goodman, 2001).

Given these challenges, educators should support and facilitate students’ awareness through this process. This may be fostered through the use of inter-group dialogues, in which people from distinct social groups engage in conversation around social injustices or problems and their impact on group members. Group discussions promote participants’ understanding of multiple perspectives, provoke reflection around social identities, and allow participants to constructively resolve inter-group and interpersonal conflicts (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Other strategies include providing frequent feedback to students, inviting exploration of complex issues, using self-reflection papers or writing exercises, analyzing resistances as they manifest in the classroom, and presenting social issues as problems to be discussed and explored by the class (Goodman, 2001; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). In particular, Dunlap (2000) highlighted how reflective papers can become safe and productive places where students can
grapple with personal reactions around issues of difference and oppression in ways that are consistent with the course material. This also provides instructors a venue to provide support and feedback in a more private setting that would not cause shame or concerns of reprisal from classmates. This exploration process also may involve instructors providing students with supplementary resources so that students can better understand how their own identities and experiences can serve as a powerful determinant of their worldview as it relates to broader issues of social inequality. These readings can sensitively address White privilege (McIntosh, 1990), racial identity (Helms, 1990), and how different forms of diversity intersect with the distribution of resources, rights, and opportunity (Adams et al., 2000).

Social justice education also involves connecting awareness, knowledge, and theory with action (also termed praxis; Prilleltensky, 2001). Ideally, if one holds the value of social justice, one should also use that value as a foundation for action to reduce oppression (Prilleltensky, 2001). Service learning courses are key for teaching students real-world social intervention skills and bringing people into contact with people from marginalized groups. Service learning involves student engagement outside of the classroom with community organizations consistent with the course material. Students then reflect about their service work through class discussion and written assignments. Service learning has been viewed particularly beneficial because of its emphasis on community engagement, addressing real needs in the community, and developing mutually beneficial university–community partnerships (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004). Moreover, the process of student reflection on their community work in service learning courses can promote critical awareness of both one’s own social positions and identities, and knowledge around worldviews, perspectives, and life stories of diverse groups within the community (Bringle et al., 2004).

In fact, service learning can be tailored to maximize its connection to social justice themes (Meyers, 2008, 2009). First, faculty members can ensure that placements involve working with marginalized populations so that students gain relevant first-hand experiences to shed preconceived stereotypes. Instructors often need to direct students’ attention to both individual-level concerns as well as the broader societal dynamics that are evident in the placements. Second, service learning may serve as a springboard for related civic action. For instance, students may engage in legislative advocacy to promote social policies that would benefit people who are served by their placement sites. Courses can also enlarge the scope of service learning by allowing students to interview community members to identify relevant issues, conduct a related policy analysis, identify potential allies to collaborate in addressing the community concern, and then disseminate findings to influence change (Sen, 2003).

In addition, group intervention skills can be encouraged both inside and outside of the classroom. Students can become engaged with campus
student organizations that work for social change (Rhoads, 2009). For graduate students in counseling psychology, clinical psychology, counseling, or social work practice, social justice methodologies can be incorporated into clinical training by teaching them how to empower clients, facilitate clients’ community connections, work for fairer policy and political changes that will benefit their clients, engage in advocacy on behalf of their clients, and minimize power differentials present in therapeutic settings (Goodman et al., 2004; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Vera & Speight, 2003). Finally, community participatory research and qualitative research methodologies are key strategies for empowering people from marginalized groups. Students can be taught these research methodologies through dedicated course work, research assistantships, or field placements. Participatory research and qualitative research methods involve collaboration with community members as “co-researchers”; they each minimize power differentials through co-creation of research questions and understandings of study phenomena, shared decision making, and valuing of community members’ own experiences, expertise, and voice (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002).

The articles in this issue contribute to understanding these roles and process. The articles by McAuliff, Williams, and Ferrari, and Torres-Harding and colleagues present the role that student club involvement, collegiate sense of community, and religious and spiritual values can have to impact student’s attitudes toward social justice. Similarly, Johnson-Hakim and colleagues present information about the factors that facilitate and impede student engagement in campus life. This has important implications for understanding what universities can do to promote student campus and civic engagement. The articles by Matteo and Browne, Pitner, and Freedman each discuss and address important barriers to becoming aware of the realities of marginalized groups. Browne, Pitner, and Freedman discuss how community members might resist information around racial health disparities, which has important implications for understanding how educators might address resistances and rejection of factual information in the classroom. Similarly, Matteo describes how stigmatizing attitudes change as a result of different types of intervention in the classroom that are designed to counteract negative attitudes around people with mental illness. Finally, Ji and colleagues present evidence regarding the effectiveness of a course designed to teach students how to be allies to the LGBTQ community when delivered by heterosexual and homosexual instructors. These studies better the understanding of those factors and interventions that may enhance students’ critical awareness of social justice issues and may facilitate student engagement and skill development in social advocacy. While these articles address a variety of approaches and social issues, each contributes to knowledge about the processes by which students become aware of challenging social problems, how students can become engaged in social justice activities, and what educators can do to facilitate this civic engagement. Research should continue to focus on understanding the
processes, barriers, and pedagogical strategies that allow students to develop critical consciousness, social justice skills, and facilitate social action. Ultimately, this will develop students’ ability to serve as social change agents and enhance civic engagement for social change in their communities.

REFERENCES


