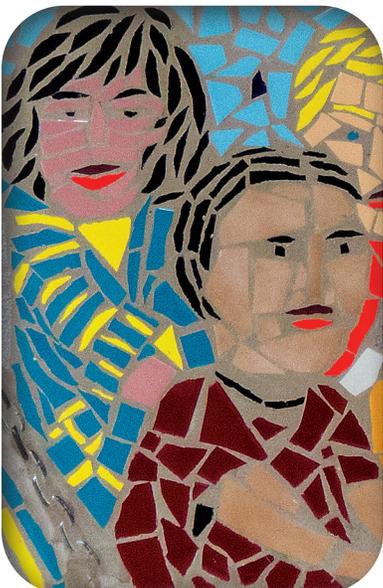
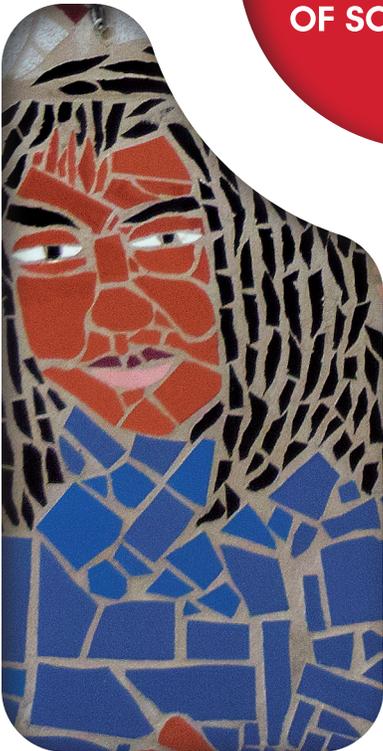


UNIVERSITY of  
**HOUSTON**  
GRADUATE COLLEGE  
OF SOCIAL WORK



# PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL WORK

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# **Perspectives on Social Work**

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## EDITORIAL – Advancing Social Work Education in *Perspectives on Social Work*

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Social work doctoral students are committed to driving the field of social work forward and advancing social justice through their research, advocacy, and recommendations for enhancing social work education. The research and voices of social work doctoral students offer crucial insight into efforts to enhance social work education at all levels, from baccalaureate to doctoral. As a student-led doctoral student research journal, *Perspectives on Social Work* strives to be an outlet for social work doctoral students to share their scholarship, participate in the peer review process and engage with other students through networking and training. *Perspectives on Social Work* aims to provide experiences that support doctoral student growth and serve as a platform for research and scholarship that centers social justice across all areas of social work practice and education.

This issue of *Perspectives on Social Work* features three articles that highlight the significant contributions that social work doctoral students are making to enhance social work education. Pachner and colleagues (2022) present findings from a qualitative study exploring how students understand intersectionality in the context of an undergraduate social justice course. To support students' growth and ability to advocate for social justice, Pachner et al. (2022) identify specific recommendations for teaching these concepts in the classroom, such as empathy building and addressing power imbalances. Bartholomew et al. (2022) describe the creation and formation of a student-led social work doctoral student speaker series. The authors highlight the opportunities that a speaker series offers to doctoral students to build presentation skills, connect with the community and social work practitioners, and create space for dialogue on social justice-related topics. Lastly, Janse van Rensburg (2022) explores and advocates for the inclusion of fat studies scholarship, which addresses sizeism and body size discrimination, in social work education. With an emphasis on social justice and human rights, Janse van Rensburg (2022) advocates for social workers to learn about fat studies in their classroom- and practice-based education and provides a framework for integrating fat studies in social work education. As illustrated by these articles, *Perspectives on Social Work* offers space for social work doctoral students to promote research and discourse on efforts to enhance social work education and practice.

*Perspectives on Social Work* seeks to grow our social work doctoral student pool of authors and peer reviewer network to further our mission of providing opportunities for students to bolster their scholarly writing skills and to gain exposure to the publication process. It is through the incredible efforts of our doctoral student peer reviewers, authors and editorial board members that *Perspectives on Social Work* is able to publish each issue and highlight doctoral student research. We hope our platform continues to support the research and contributions of social work doctoral students as they work towards advancing social work values and social justice in research, practice, policy, and education.

Caitlyn Mytelka, LMSW  
University of Houston  
*Editor*

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## Exploring Undergraduate Students' Understanding of Intersectionality in a Social Justice Class

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### Abstract

Social work programs are uniquely poised to implement intersectionality as a tool to understand oppression and the lived experience, and support students in becoming advocates for social justice. This teaching note aims to evaluate students' understanding of intersectionality in the context of privilege, oppression, and injustice, and offer teaching recommendations for social work educators to address identified barriers. Utilizing a convenience sample of undergraduate students enrolled in a social justice class, a qualitative design was employed in a pre- and post-test conducted through an open-ended writing prompt regarding the degree of familiarity with intersectionality. Analysis used grounded theory strategies and revealed the value of self-reflection and a variety of teaching methods that helped students understand intersectionality. Students were most successful in articulating intersectionality when relating the concept to their own lives. However, some students showed a cursory, superficial understanding leading to multiple recommendations including integration of empathy building and self-reflection exercises.

*Keywords:* intersectionality, undergraduate students, social justice, oppression, BSW education

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## Exploring Undergraduate Students' Understanding of Intersectionality in a Social Justice Class

### Black Feminism and Intersectionality

Intersectionality elucidates the effect of multiple, overlapping marginalized identities and power dynamics within and between groups (Crenshaw, 1989; Mitchell, 2014), as well as how power affects differing dimensions of identity (Cho et al., 2013). Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term

intersectionality in 1989 when she highlighted the unique and specific discrimination faced by women of color working at General Motors. The inequity in how these women's experiences were marginalized in legal proceedings formed the basis of the conceptualization of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1989, 1991) explained that being viewed either as Black or as woman by the legal system left out the subtle oppression and injustice faced by those who were *both* black and a woman.

Although Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989, it was not a new idea. The concept can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Sojourner Truth, a woman of color, held her well-known speech "Ain't I a woman" pointing out the intersections of race and gender (Bowleg, 2012). But most importantly it is entrenched in Black Feminism, which emphasized that the experiences and needs of women of color are distinct from those of white women (Arya, 2012) and which advocates for including gender, race, class, and sexuality as important aspects for understanding women of color's lived experiences of oppression and injustice in patriarchal white society (Campbell, 2019). Famous Black Feminists and activists that shaped and defined Black Feminism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century include bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Alice Walker (Campbell, 2019). More recent Black Feminist movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), highlight the continued protest of Black Americans against systemic inequality, marginalization, and white supremacy (Bell et al., 2021).

Black Feminism and movements, such as BLM, are of particular importance for social work, given that they underscore the urgency for social work to increase awareness and to concentrate on social inequalities (Campbell, 2019). Given the rise in visible hate speech and hate crimes in recent years in the U.S. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.), it is imperative to teach about interconnecting and coinciding systems of oppression and inequality (Santos & Toomey, 2018). Social workers – and social work educators – are advocates for justice and equity. As educators, the ethical obligation is to not only develop anti-oppressive practitioners but also advocate and educate for justice (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2021). This is in line with Black Feminism, which maintains these ethical principles and can help social work educators and students to better understand intersectional identities (Campbell, 2019) and the phenomenon of oppression and discrimination experienced by those with multiple marginalized identities.

### **Definition of Intersectionality**

As a framework for understanding the interconnectedness of identities to inform advocacy for justice and reform (Fujimoto & Luna, 2014; Runyan, 2018), intersectionality informs social work practice. Yet, there is no singular, accepted definition of intersectionality resulting in what Collins (2015) labelled as a "definitional dilemma" (p. 2). Bell (2016) described intersectionality as "the social, economic and political ways in which identity-based systems of oppression and privilege connect, overlap and influence one another" (para 4). Miller and Garran (2016) furthered the concept by stating intersectionality:

Describe[s] the relationship between these factors [socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation and citizenship/immigration status] because it captures the connections and junctures that occur both inside a person (manifested in his or her identity) and society (as evidenced by inequities and disparities in power and privilege) (p. 172).

Understanding coinciding systems of oppression and inequality is critical (Santos & Toomey, 2018) and using intersectionality in social work education helps contextualize discussion about gender and race in the context of power (Cho et al., 2013) as well as the discussion about marginalized status and identity.

## **Intersectionality within Social Work Education**

Social work programs are uniquely positioned to teach about intersectionality. One could posit that understanding the ways in which individuals experience the world based upon their unique constellation of identities and experiences is central to each of the nine competencies from the Council on Social Work Education that form the foundation for social work education. At the baccalaureate level, social work programs often house elective courses that may be pre-major courses or general education courses for the broader student body. Often, these are social welfare and/or social justice courses that are of interest to social work students as well as those from multiple disciplines. Bubar and colleagues (2016) argue that social workers must be aware of their own position within societal systems of oppression to understand intersectionality. Having interdisciplinary interactions may not only help facilitate this process but can also authenticate varying perspectives on intersectionality. Borrowing from Barr and Low's (2011) definition and construct of interprofessional education, there is a possibility to create unique learning opportunities in the classrooms when there are students from multiple disciplines engaged in learning together. The authors highlighted the ability to "learn with, from, and about each other ... facilitating interaction, exchange, and co-reflection" (p. 2). Social work students and students from other disciplines enter classes with different backgrounds related to topics important in the study of social justice – intersectionality among them.

On the one hand, this diversity of students provides social work educators with a robust opportunity to facilitate an engaging learning environment. On the other hand, educators must keep in mind that establishing a good learning environment for students with differing identities and backgrounds can be a challenge when teaching about intersectionality (Wallin-Ruschman et al., 2020). It is important to consider that traditional means, such as co-reflection, may not be helpful for all students. For instance, Wallin-Ruschman et al. (2020) described in their qualitative study about teaching intersectionality that it was difficult for students of color, who were the minority in the class, to share and discuss their intersecting identities. The authors therefore emphasized the importance of educators keeping power imbalances in the classroom in mind as well as the need to critically evaluate their teaching so that education can facilitate social change.

### ***Teaching Intersectionality***

Incorporating intersectionality in the social work curriculum can be challenging (Williams & Job, 2017). While there is limited research on intersectionality in social work courses, Craven (2019) discussed how intersectionality in Women and Gender Studies is used both as a tool and a method. Ferré and de Zárate (2016) used a "Relief Map" as a method for research on intersectionality while other authors recommended specific readings and tasks related to intersectionality (Goldberg & Allen, 2018; Naples, 2009), including reflective writing (Robinson, et al., 2016), discussions and conversations (Goldberg & Allen, 2018; Grzanka, 2017; Lee, 2012), field work assignments (Grzanka, 2017), collaborative teaching (Pliner et al., 2011) and collaborative learning that focuses on students' knowledge as well as opinions (Alejano-Steele et al., 2011). Hanna (2019) recommended the use of free write/journaling and creativity as a path towards understanding intersectionality. No matter the vehicle for teaching intersectionality, whether students begin to understand and identify with the construct is of paramount importance. Thus, we sought to evaluate our own nascent work in teaching intersectionality in a Social Justice Foundations (SJF) undergraduate social work course taught at a large, public, mid-southern university. In this exploratory study, we wanted to investigate how students grasp intersectionality in the context of privilege, oppression, and injustice, and to understand the value of a variety of teaching methods to support students in their learning. Finally, we hoped to investigate why students may struggle with articulating the concept in order to provide recommendations for social work educators. The research questions guiding this study were:

- 1) How familiar are students with the concept of intersectionality before teaching about it?
- 2) How does the educational experience enhance and deepen the students' understanding of the concept at the end of the semester?

## **Methods**

This study intended to examine students' familiarity with the concept of intersectionality as well as how students understand and perceive intersectionality after learning about it in class. Utilizing the above-described definitions, intersectionality was introduced within the first two weeks of the semester in the SJF course and then applied throughout the semester. The students learned about intersectionality as well as other concepts such as privilege, oppression, and discrimination. A variety of methods were used to help students assimilate the knowledge. Discussions and lectures about power, oppression, racism, sexism, inequality, and privilege were used to foster and deepen their understanding of intersectionality and its connection to social justice. Additionally, students listened to a bell hooks podcast on racism/sexism, read from both popular media and academic sources, and had opportunities to engage in discussions. Furthermore, they were asked to actively seek an opportunity to step outside their own "comfort zone" and to connect with people, organizations, and communities with whom they do not interact daily, followed by a written reflection. The goal of this assignment was to expand their understanding of how others experience the world and to challenge their stereotypes, bias, and perceived norms. Last, a case study and reflective writing was utilized to help students better understand the concept of intersectionality.

This study used secondary data collected from student assignments in a three-credit hour elective SJF course offered to students of all majors and taught by the faculty of the College of Social Work. IRB approval was given for this research after the semester's completion because data was gathered as a regular part of the course itself and was considered secondary data. A convenience sample of students enrolled in the SJF course during the Spring 2018 semester (N = 65) was utilized. A qualitative design was employed to analyze student responses to open-ended writing prompts at the beginning of the semester and after eight weeks.

### **Sample Selection and Data Collection**

Data was collected at two points during the semester, Time 1 (T1) during Week 2 and Time 2 (T2) during Week 8. Prior to assigned readings on intersectionality, students were asked at T1 to indicate their familiarity with the term "intersectionality" in an online discussion on Canvas with the following writing prompt: *Prior to this class, were you familiar with the term intersectionality? If so - where and in what context was it used?* A total of 59 students decided to answer this question at T1 (90.8 %). At T2, the students' understanding of intersectionality was measured through a direct assessment (Center for Teaching Innovation, 2021), when they were asked to discuss intersectionality on their mid-term exam: *Explain the concept of intersectionality. What does this mean to you and how does this idea help you to understand the complexities of oppression and marginalization in the US? Use examples.* Students chose from several different prompts, thus not all students answered the question; ultimately 39 students (60%) chose to respond.

### **Data Analysis**

After the completion of the semester, the students' responses were anonymized to remove any personal identifying information from the data. Using strategies from grounded theory, the open-ended responses were then examined and categorized (Barbour, 2014), seeking to identify students' perceived

understanding of intersectionality at T2. Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) framework guided this research in that the meaning is constructed by the participants (the students). To identify themes, strategies such as analytic memos about emerging categories and potential themes as described by Creswell (2013) were utilized. A thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodological approach was employed to provide a six-step approach in developing a comprehensive understanding of the data. To enhance validity and trustworthiness (Bailey, 2018), this study approached triangulation by involving multiple researchers for the data analysis.

## Results

The sample consisted of students (N=65) enrolled in a social justice elective course. Demographic data from T1 provided a snapshot of the students. The students represented a total of 37 different undergraduate majors and were fairly well distributed, with the majority of students being either seniors (38.3%) or freshman (25%). The age range was between 18 and 25 years, and most students were female (75.4%) and Caucasian (72.3%). The course was slightly more diverse than the university's overall undergraduate student body, with 36.7% of the students representing a minority group (based on race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or a constellation of these). Given that students' responses were anonymized before the analysis, no demographic information are available for quotes chosen.

### **Familiarity with Intersectionality at the Onset of the Semester**

Students' overall understanding of intersectionality was quite limited at T1. When asked to indicate their familiarity, 41 (68.3%) of students stated a lack of knowledge regarding intersectionality while 18 (30%) had varying self-identified degrees of familiarity, from knowing what it means to having heard of it in different contexts (previous coursework).

### **Students' Understanding of Intersectionality throughout the Semester**

Three themes were identified at T2 concerning the students' understanding of intersectionality over the course of a semester. Specifically, some students articulated the role of self-reflection and a holistic understanding of the concept while others reflected missing pieces of the puzzle as their orientation to learning intersectionality.

#### ***Self-Reflection***

Students who used their own identities to personify the concept of intersectionality showed a better developed sense of understanding. Starting with oneself seemed to guide an understanding of their own intersecting identities and associated privilege and oppression:

...It is the intersection of multiple identities in a person which can hinder that individual socially...Multiple aspects of my identity as a black and as a woman leave me to be unfairly treated and judged. These outworld and central aspects of my identity and many others can cause oppression...

This student was clear about her own identity and what role oppression and intersectionality plays. Another student described aspects of her identity that are simultaneously privileged and oppressed: "For example, because I am a woman of color, I may be subject to oppression and prejudice. However, my status as someone who is middle class, Christian and will receive a college degree will give me privilege...". Another student explained intersectionality as:

how socially made stereotypes such as class, race, sex, age etc. play into your experience. For me I am privileged because I am white, but I am also female, therefore I do have to consider negative social experiences due to being female.

By learning about the concept, it seems that awareness of identity helped some students understand and connect with intersectionality.

### *Holistic Understanding*

Other student responses at T2 revealed that learning more about oppression, discrimination, privilege, and power throughout the course of the semester helped them connect with intersectionality to holistically understand the concept. A holistic understanding was hereby defined as the ability to connect the content of the different classes discussing those topics with intersectionality, thus comprehending intersectionality with all its dimensions/as a whole instead of only focusing on separate parts (see Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Those students who talked about different aspects of one's identity, oppression as well as the connection of identity and oppression, showed a good understanding of intersectionality. For instance, one student stated that "...An African American low socioeconomic status, female experiences racism because of the color of her skin, classism because of her diminished income and sexism because of her gender ...". This student not only talked about intersecting identities but also gave concrete examples to understand the oppression that results from these identities. Another student pointed out that intersectionality "is the concept that people are affected by multiple different types of oppression at the same time, but this may impact others differently". This student highlighted that oppression does not look the same for every person, which is an important component for understanding intersectionality as a whole, while another pointed out the incongruity of simultaneously experiencing oppression and privilege: "...I am a white, gay gender fluid, able-bodied, poor person. A person not either fully oppressed or fully privileged. Each independent identity holds different power". Additionally, it was clear that the reading and discussion of Crenshaw's original work on intersectionality helped students understand the concept. For example, one student described intersectionality as:

when there is more than one factor that someone is discriminated against, such as being black and a woman. This concept shows just how devious and complex racism can be on an institutional level. In the article we read about intersectionality, black females were discriminated against in the workplace for being a double minority, but because jobs were open for white women, black men, their claims were seen as unjust.

This student understood the systems that are in place, such as the complexity of racism on an institutional level. In sum, students understood we cannot assume oppression or privilege is applicable to every person without considering other dimensions.

### *Missing Pieces of the Puzzle*

Despite multiple ways of learning, some students still maintained a superficial grasp of intersectionality at T2. Their description was, in general, about oppression, privilege, or different identities, without connecting those things together. For instance, students described intersectionality as "the categorization of a group of people" or as something that "takes away power". Another student connected it with inequality while some of the students deconstructed the word intersectionality and solely described something that connects and intersects without fully connecting it to other concepts. Similarly, a student acknowledged the complexity of privilege, injustice, and racism, defined as: "how one issue connects to the other almost like a spider web... helped me understand how complex racism privilege and injustice is". While those definitions are superficial, they do highlight the missing pieces that are relevant to a complex concept like intersectionality. Some students failed to articulate the value of intersectionality and

did not fully understand that oppression is caused by the way that institutional and structural racism, sexism, and heterosexism are acting upon people with intersecting identities who are continually marginalized by actions, words, or policies; resulting in a more simplified explanation.

## **Discussion**

Social justice and intersectionality are certainly connected. Knowing and understanding the idea of intersectionality helps to not only see and understand the injustices many individuals are facing in today's society but to also act accordingly. The rise of hate crimes and extremism (Federal Investigation Bureau, n.d.; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2020) and the associated acts of hate and violence presents a need for college students and soon-to-be professionals to understand the impacts of marginalization and oppression on humanity. It is important to equip students with a framework, such as intersectionality, that supports them in growing into advocates for social justice.

The purpose of this teaching note was to explore how students comprehend intersectionality as they studied privilege, oppression, and injustice and learned that privilege contributes to the oppression of intersecting identities. We hoped to better understand what teaching methods best supported students with learning about intersectionality and to acknowledge potential reasons for why some students did not gain a full understanding of the concept in order to provide future teaching recommendations. Findings suggest that the multitude of assignments, lectures, discussions, and readings helped students better understand social justice within an intersectional context. Students who used self-reflection and related intersectionality to their own sense of identity, privilege and oppression, in sum, intersectionality, seemed most successful in grasping the complexity of the concept.

Robinson et al. (2016) identified critical self-reflection as essential to questioning beliefs about race, gender, or other social categories. Self-reflection is also a key element of cultural relativism with the presumption that awareness minimizes bias and the impact on relationships with others. Moreover, the intentionality of using a variety of teaching methods helped students understand the differing and complex aspects of intersectionality and the influences on the individual and the society, thus creating a more holistic understanding of the concept. In particular, the utilization of specific real-life examples seemed to foster the students' comprehension. Cheshire (2013) highlights that having an honest conversation with students about these topics as well as including their own identity is crucial.

Nevertheless, some students struggled to fully comprehend the complex facets of intersectionality despite the multitude of learning experiences. They often simplified the concept of intersectionality and did not always understand that privilege adds to the oppression of the intersecting identities, thus failing to grasp the connection. These answers are of particular importance to faculty as they suggest that without, and sometimes even despite, teaching, a risk of oversimplification and categorization remains. Conversations about privilege, oppression, racism, or marginalization are challenging not only for students (Henry, 2005) but also for educators (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). For instance, Wing Sue et al. (2009) stated that instructor biases or the instructor's race can impact discussions about race, racism, and other difficult topics. The authors hereby focused on white faculty and recommend that white educators consciously recognize emotions, personal challenges or anxieties during difficult conversations while establishing a safe environment for the dialogues to take place. In particular, social work educators are hereby responsible for initiating those conversations in order to promote the social work competencies (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). In addition to that, it is important to evaluate student learning, to identify best teaching practices and to provide recommendations for future classes led by social work educators. We have to be cognizant of our ability to teach about the importance and beauty of each identity a person holds as well as teaching about the multifaceted ways in which society enacts injustice upon those with multiple marginalized identities.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations for teaching social justice and intersectionality to undergraduate social work students emerged from this study: (1) incorporate empathy building exercises that facilitate learning about the critical aspects of intersectionality, (2) be intentional about creating classroom spaces where critical questions about observations and preconceived notions of “the other” may be challenged and discussed within a supportive and inclusive dialogue, (3) use a broad array of teaching and learning methods, (4) engage in peer education to facilitate fundamental connections and understand intersecting identities and the intersectional nature of marginalization, (5) teach intersectionally – not falling prey to the delivery of content on “this population” or “that group” of people – even though textbooks and models often use this format for the dissemination of knowledge, (6) learn from students – continue to engage them in the feedback loop, ensuring they are engaged and involved in their own exploration and understanding of intersectionality, (7) make sure students understand the connections between identity, oppression, discrimination, privilege and power, and do not focus on just one, (8) discuss more examples of intersectionality within the classroom in order to ensure students are capable of applying the concept to real life situations, and (9) be aware of power imbalances in the classroom (e.g., students with marginalized identities), as well as how an instructor’s race can influence learning outcomes.

Social work practitioners must understand the impacts of marginalization and oppression, and equipping students with a framework, such as intersectionality, supports them in growing into advocates for social justice. By acknowledging the vast difference in understanding intersectionality and being able to apply the concept, social work faculty were able to create opportunities for more in-depth exploration and understanding.

## Limitations

This exploratory study has several methodological limitations. First, the results are restricted to a nonrandom, small sample size, utilizing a convenience sample. Thus, generalizability cannot be inferred. Further, the study is exploratory, and data was primarily collected for the purpose of evaluating what students learned. Therefore, the questions utilized might not have been optimal for conducting a qualitative analysis. Additionally, demographics of the sample were not collected at T2, which did not allow an analysis of how the intersectionalities of students may have impacted their understanding of the concepts. Last, the conceptualization of the study was done after the completion of the semester, which might have created some methodological issues. Although student learning regarding the concept of intersectionality did occur, determining how that occurred or what pedagogical approach was most effective could not be determined in this analysis.

## Conclusion

Intersectionality is a powerful concept inseparably connected with social justice, and concomitantly, social work. Intersectionality is an unfamiliar concept to most students yet necessary to understand the lived experience of others. The findings revealed the importance of self-reflection and the variety of teaching methods that can facilitate the students’ understanding of intersectionality and its role for social justice. However, the results also indicated that despite multiple ways of learning, some students only gained a superficial understanding of the concept. Social work educators must be intentional when teaching about intersectionality and should incorporate empathy building and self-reflection exercises to better facilitate an understanding of intersectionality.

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## **Social Work Doctoral Students and Academic Presentations: Results from a Student-Led PhD Speaker Series**

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### **Abstract**

With the original program goals of developing PhD students' presentation skills, disseminating their research, and providing an opportunity to network with other professionals, two doctoral students created, developed, and implemented a monthly colloquium series within their school of social work. Supported by a social work faculty member and the recruitment of additional social work faculty stakeholders, a speakers series emerged. In August 2019, a monthly "colloquium-style" speaker series was launched, allowing doctoral students to present and share their research. This paper chronicles the creation, development, and implementation of the student-led program. Furthermore, this paper covers challenges and opportunities faced during the program's implementation and the outcomes, plan for sustainability, and implications for social work PhD education programs.

*Keywords:* communication, doctoral education, social work research, student development

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## **Social Work Doctoral Students and Academic Presentations: Results from a Student-Led PhD Speaker Series**

The transition that occurs when doctoral students first venture into PhD coursework and complete early research projects can lead to an increase in self-confidence. The increased confidence is an amalgamation of self-realization and accomplishment that leads to a new identity — doctoral scholar. Presentations affording doctoral scholars the opportunity to share and discuss their research with audiences are one way to exhibit this new identity. At the basic level, the opportunity to practice public speaking improves communication and presentation skills that will be a valuable resource in their future careers. Additionally, doctoral education research suggests that social work doctoral students should seize opportunities to present within their program to provide the necessary experience in shaping and improving skills (Lightfoot et al., 2021; Živković, 2014).

Furthermore, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE) strongly suggests that students should present a minimum of two to three times at conferences before completing their degree (Harrington et al., 2013). However, presentations encompass more than merely speaking to audiences. The ability to effectively communicate research information and connect to diverse audiences provides a unique challenge for newer doctoral scholars. Simultaneously, doctoral students must learn to socialize

and engage with PhD faculty in academic forums as “the doctoral socialization process prepares students for professional service during and after completion of the terminal degree” (Freeman, 2014, p. 274). Scientific scholars posit that, to communicate with lay audiences effectively, opportunities for doctoral scholars to practice are essential as such training rarely exists in programs (Clarkson et al., 2018). Moreover, learning to present in academic settings and beyond is increasingly important, and learning this skill is part of “becoming a doctor” (Manidis & Addo, 2017).

Beyond improved communication skills, colloquium style presentations can also benefit a social work PhD student’s education through public discourse. The act of presenting one’s research and engaging with wider audiences facilitates a pedagogy of dialogue that allows many social justice-related issues to be deliberated. This dialogue can further the student’s self-reflection, which in turn, has the potential to expose and drive new civic engagements (Isgro & Deal, 2013). The learning that can take place through public discourse, as it relates to social justice, aligns with the National Association of Social Worker’s *Code of Ethics* (National Association of Social Workers, 2008) and the Council on Social Work Education’s *Commission for Diversity and Social and Economic Justice* (Council on Social Work Education, 2021).

With this issue in mind, we, two social work doctoral students, set out to develop and implement a program that would allow us and our PhD classmates an opportunity to improve public speaking, share our research, and create a forum for public discussion surrounding our research. Through the support of a social work faculty member and guidance from social work stakeholders, the *Indiana University School of Social Work’s Doctoral Scholars Speaker Series* emerged. Although colloquiums are not new in university settings, our student-led speaker series is unique, innovative, and easily replicated. Through our model, a student-led colloquium/speaker series benefits PhD students by allowing them to showcase their scholarly identity, with support from their social work departments.

## **Formation**

At the end of the 2018-2019 academic year, JBB engaged his mentor JMC about a program for PhD students to present their early research findings. With the support of his mentor and a preliminary plan in place, JBB recruited a fellow PhD student, KMM. JBB and KMM determined that the identification of key objectives was a crucial first step. They were able to engage and recruit social work faculty stakeholders guided by the following objectives: (1) offer PhD students an opportunity to develop a presentation and practice presenting it, (2) provide PhD students an occasion to describe and disseminate recent research findings, and (3) establish an event for PhD students to network with fellow researchers, practitioners, and interested community members.

## **Development**

The presentation program team reached out to the PhD program director. After presenting an early proposal draft, the team gathered important feedback. The School’s PhD program director was quickly on board and collaborated with students in creating the program’s title, the *Doctoral Scholars Speaker Series* (DSSS). Later, students and stakeholders presented the program proposal to the School’s Dean. Although minimal materials were needed to implement the program, the Dean approved the program and allotted a small budget (\$500) to assist with any needed materials.

The DSSS was set to occur on the third Thursday of the month (August through May) at 3:30 pm (EST). The team worked with the marketing staff of the school to advertise the program by strategic placement of flyers throughout the school and circulating the flyer through social work faculty, MSW, and PhD program listservs. Presenters and faculty were also encouraged to distribute the flyer to interested practitioners, researchers, and organizations that might benefit from the presentation content. To further

encourage attendance and enhance the benefit of attendance, continuing education units (CEUs) were provided to licensed behavioral health providers.

The faculty stakeholders on the finalized program team consisted of four social work faculty that included JBB's mentor, JMC, the Director of the PhD program, the Director of the MSW Program, and a nationally recognized policy expert to assist/advise doctoral students JBB and KMM. Weekly meetings were held during the first two months of program development to discuss strategies, scope, recruitment of doctoral students, budget, implementation process and sustainability. It was decided that JMC would be the full-time faculty liaison for the DSSS.

## **Implementation**

Second-year PhD students and above were recruited to participate in the DSSS. Many students were eager to participate and felt that participating in the DSSS provided them an opportunity to practice and gather valuable feedback from faculty, researchers, and other attendees. Initially, the DSSS sessions were conducted in person. However, beginning in November 2019, in-person and online (Zoom) attendance were available. The ability for persons to participate either in-person or online continued through February 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the DSSS to cease in-person participation. Since March 2020, the DSSS has remained online.

## **Sustainability**

Our sustainability plan was crucial for our program to continue beyond the inaugural year. The sustainability plan focused on a second-year PhD student to oversee and coordinate the program. This concept allows a current PhD student to contact scheduled presenters easily. The identified coordinator is also available to the doctoral students to assist in completing the necessary paperwork for CEUs and help with any technical issues encountered before and/or during the presentation. Furthermore, coordinating the DSSS allows the student coordinator to include the service on their curriculum vitae (CV). For the inaugural year of the program, JBB was the coordinator. In the second year of our program (2020-2021), our coordinator, DWC, was able to keep presenters connected through the encountered challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, DWC also had to manage many of the nuanced online issues that arose due to the increasing use of virtual online platforms. Future PhD students who are interested in coordinating the DSSS will apply for the position, with the DSSS faculty liaison and PhD program director reviewing and selecting the best applicant.

## **DSSS and COVID-19**

The COVID-19 global pandemic negatively impacted institutions of higher education and academic programming in the United States (U.S.) and abroad (Marinoni et al., 2020). From shifting instruction to an online format to the cancellation of commencements, COVID-19 forced the academy to restructure itself and adapt to the pandemic's uncertainty. The DSSS was not immune to COVID-19's impact, and it too had to adapt to ensure sustainability.

When the DSSS was launched in 2019, sessions were conducted in person and on campus. In March of 2020, due to the pandemic, the DSSS was forced to shift to a virtual format. Zoom was first chosen as the platform for the program. While Zoom provided greater accessibility to the DSSS, issues regarding both security and participant entry to sessions were sometimes burdensome. Any individual with access to the meeting's link could enter and disrupt DSSS proceedings. While this never occurred, its potential served as an unnecessary stressor for the program and forced facilitators to address the prospect.

Although COVID-19 and the transition to a virtual format presented numerous challenges for the DSSS, unexpected positive outcomes also occurred. The reach of DSSS was greatly expanded, and greater access to DSSS sessions was achieved. When the DSSS first launched, participation in a session required in-person attendance on the university's campus. With sessions moved to Zoom and Google Meet, individuals who would not be able to attend a DSSS session in the past were able to participate. Participants from across the state and other states in the U.S. attended numerous DSSS sessions. Even as institutions of higher education and academic programming "return to normal" in the Fall of 2021, the DSSS will continue to operate virtually on the Zoom platform.

## Evaluation

A total of 378 students, faculty, staff members, and community members attended 19 presentations over two academic school years. Upon a DSSS session's conclusion, participants were asked to complete an evaluation. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the evaluation was completed in person. Qualtrics was used during the pandemic, with the Qualtrics link conveniently posted in the "chat" feature of Zoom or Google Meet allowing for immediate confidential responses. Questions on the evaluation covered numerous areas, including an assessment of the presenter's delivery of content, the session's impact, a participant's knowledge, demographic information, and perceptions and thoughts about the DSSS program and future attendance. Of the 378 attendees, 175 (46.3%) evaluations were completed for 19 DSSS sessions.

One question that elicited an unexpected result was what drew participants to attend a particular DSSS session. Free CEUs are a proven incentive that increase registration for continuing education events (Kurzman, 2018). Thus, it could easily be assumed that the provision of free CEUs for licensure by participating in a DSSS session would be the primary draw for participants. This assumption was not the case, however. While 27 (15.4%) participants stated that free CEUs were the number one reason for attending a DSSS session, 92 (52.6%) participants stated that the topic of the DSSS session is what drew them to attend. Topic as the drawing factor for participants illustrates the power and potential of a program like the DSSS. DSSS highlights the diverse research interests and scholarly work of doctoral students and provides a platform for said knowledge to reach an equally diverse audience. See Table 1 for titles of previous DSSS sessions. Table 1 also illustrates the wide range of topics and research interests of Doctoral Scholars. Unlike many academic conferences that have a primary aim and focus that limits the topics presented, the DSSS offers an eclectic array of topics that impact every level of social work practice. Furthermore, the DSSS can serve as a monthly touch point for community practitioners seeking to maintain licensure and explore topics relevant and timely to their continued service to others and society.

**Table 1**

### *DSSS Presentation Titles*

Academic Year	DSSS Presentation Title
2019-2020	<i>Community Matters: Structural Pathways to Well-being</i>
	<i>An Interprofessional Collaboration in Addiction Education: Social Work Facilitating Training for Medical Residents</i>
	<i>Clinical Conceptualization of Addressing Pornography Use in Treatment with Adolescents: The Value of Qualitative Research</i>
	<i>Liver Transplantation: The Lived Experience Through a Trauma Theory Lens</i>

	<i>Ableism: Are You Engaging in Inclusive Practice?</i>
	<i>Sustainable Development Goals and Grand Challenges for Social Work: A Comparative Analysis</i>
	<i>Working with the Community: Ethics and Considerations for Community Engagement</i>
	<i>Ethical Considerations for Working with Older Immigrants Experiencing Social Isolation</i>
	<i>Reciprocity and Kinship Family Relationships</i>
	<i>When Opposites Attract: Engaging Social Work and Criminal Justice Students Through an Innovative and Collaborative Project to Promote Interdisciplinary Education</i>
2020-2021	<i>Homelessness: Trauma, Dehumanization, and Gratitude</i>
	<i>Structural White Supremacy: An Exploration of Social Dominance</i>
	<i>Exploring Lived Experiences of Social Workers Serving the Dying</i>
	<i>Examining Police Social Work</i>
	<i>Ethics in Policy &amp; Social Work Advocacy</i>
	<i>Ethical Consideration for Sub Saharan Africa Social Workers</i>
	<i>Combating Loneliness: How Social Workers Can Mitigate the Effects of People Who Feel All Alone</i>
	<i>Implications of Independent International Labor Migration of African Mothers in the Diaspora</i>
	<i>Social Work's Role in Organizational Leadership</i>

Another significant motive for attendance at a DSSS session was the presenter themselves. Sixty (34.3%) participants stated that the presenter led them to be a part of that month's presentation. This indication is important as it helps solidify the desired culture of a DSSS by creating a space in which students can present their scholarly work and practice their presentation skills in a safe and supportive environment.

Early in a doctoral student's academic career, students learn that they will advance through their education and beyond, with the expectation of communicating new knowledge to others (Grant & Tomal, 2015). This expectation can be a challenge for many doctoral students while being deep in coursework and academic self-discovery. A DSSS provides support during a critical time of a doctoral student's professional development in which they are discovering their voice within the academy and their research agenda. Presenting at a DSSS session and having peers, faculty, and community partners state that they were motivated to attend because of who facilitated the presentation contributes to building a student's confidence that they are an emerging expert in their field of inquiry.

Finally, the question asking participants whether they would attend a future DSSS event also illuminates the power of the DSSS. Of the 175 participants who completed the evaluation, 143 (81.3%) stated they would very likely attend a future DSSS session. This feedback from attendees highlights the effectiveness

of the DSSS, thus achieving the program's objectives of providing an outlet for doctoral students to disseminate and describe their research and connecting social workers and other practitioners with doctoral scholarly work.

## **Discussion**

We identified three main categories of outcomes that the DSSS accomplished in its two years of operation. First, we acknowledge how the DSSS has supported education on a variety of social topics that can be leveraged towards social impact. Second, the DSSS promotes student engagement in service to the university and promotes university exposure. Third, the DSSS promotes a pedagogical practice for doctoral students, which allows them to develop skills in presenting and disseminating social work knowledge and create a space for public discourse on social justice-related issues.

While 230 CEU certificates were issued to DSSS participants, attendees' number one reported reason for participating was because of the topic offered. This indicates that attendees were primarily motivated to be better social workers. This superseded the incentive of receiving CEUs, which is traditionally and anecdotally considered to be the primary motivator for attendee engagement. Importantly, this demonstrates that there is a desire within the community for knowledge on social topics in which the doctoral presenter (and thus the university) can provide to the community. Additionally, the DSSS reached beyond the local and state communities and attracted people from outside of the university's state. The impact of the DSSS had a large and broad reach.

The DSSS also provided the doctoral presenter the opportunity to be in service to the community and their university. These sessions were attended by the broad community, the hosting school of social work, and faculty from other disciplines. The presentation provided an interdisciplinary space for knowledge construction and dispersion. As the presentations were offered online during the COVID-19 pandemic, the reach of the presentations expanded further, providing greater exposure for the student, school, and university. Furthermore, many social work presenters focused on social justice topics and created community space around key social problems and systemic issues by fostering critical dialogical engagement.

Additionally, the DSSS provided a pedagogical opportunity for doctoral students to engage in skills and learning that are not offered in the classroom. While doctoral students often engage in speaking in the classroom, they do not always practice public speaking in a more open forum. The DSSS provided an experience for doctoral students to develop a presentation, practice public speaking, present their expertise, and build their social rapport by adding an entry to their Curriculum Vitae. Furthermore, pedagogically, doctoral students were able to set the stage for open discussions that center around their research, which often revolved around social justice issues. Through rich discussions that occurred during their presentation, the doctoral student was able to further practice critical reflexivity that may have been unavailable without the DSSS.

Lastly, scholars who presented received survey feedback from the attendees, which consisted of community members, social work professionals, university faculty, and staff. The survey feedback was required to administer CEUs for the presentation and was provided to the presenter after the session. The survey let attendees evaluate the effectiveness of the presenter in communicating and teaching their key objectives. Space was also provided on the survey to elicit open-ended feedback, which university faculty used to give specialized notes and constructive criticism on the topic. Importantly, faculty that did not teach doctoral courses attended these sessions, giving students feedback from a research-oriented perspective.

Schools of social work across the U.S. and beyond could greatly benefit from implementing a colloquium or speaker series within their programs. Regardless of what it is titled or what degree program it is established within, the benefits are numerous. The spotlight that is placed on a student and their research topic, and extending to their program, school, and university, can bring a renewed or heightened awareness of vital social work interests.

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# Making Space for Fat Studies in Social Work Education

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## Abstract

Embracing equity, diversity, and inclusion, the field of social work centers human empowerment. However, fat studies scholarship has yet to be broadly accepted and applied in social work education. Grounded in personal experience, this article discusses the importance of adopting fat studies scholarship into social work education. Adopting Trevithick's (2008) conceptualization of social work knowledge, this article develops a framework for social workers to contribute to fat studies activism, and reviews pedagogical strategies for implementing such activism into classroom settings.

*Keywords:* social work education, fat studies, critical reflection, social work

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## Making Space for Fat Studies in Social Work Education

An often-overlooked topic in social work curriculum and practicum education is the issue of how society privileges certain body sizes. This article seeks to put social work in conversation with fat studies. Fat studies scholarship in Canada is gaining recognition. Engagement with fat studies scholarship has become ever more important in a world where inequity is becoming widely acknowledged, intersectionality is popularly understood, and social justice approaches are widely cited. Social work, with its commitment to understanding and undermining structures which oppress persons due to their diversities, has lagged in engaging with critical understandings of body size, shape, and weight.

Rooted in personal experiences at a Canadian Master of Social Work program that approached social work with a structural lens, this article grounds itself in a reflexive positionality, critically reflecting on the problem of a social work education that does not address weight normativity, fat studies, and body diversity. Trevithick's (2008) framework of social work knowledge is then adopted to identify ways in which fat studies can be implemented in social work education. By implementing fat studies in social work education, a more holistic understanding of privilege, oppression, and intersectionality can be achieved in social work scholarship and practice.

## Colonization and the Roots of Sizeism

Social work is a regulated profession which “has a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and/or living in poverty... committed to human rights as enshrined in Canadian law” (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW-ACTS], 2005, p. 3). However, it has been acknowledged that Canadian social work has developed out of a history of oppressive, colonizing,

assimilating, and normalizing regimes (McCauley and Matheson, 2018). Social workers were directly involved in reinforcing a “normate,” “the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics” (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 10). These normative characteristics include being white, protestant, thin, straight, cisgender, and able-bodied.

Colonization in Canada by France and Britain brought regimes of classism, a distinction between and discrimination against those who are in a certain socioeconomic status. It is here that the roots of systemic racism in Canada are found. Canada adopted a prejudice against persons who are not white into laws, regulations, institutions, and societal norms. Colonizers came from lands where persons “sought to rein in their own bodies they foregrounded the seemingly chaotic and perverse of select populations overseas” (Forth, 2012, p. 226). With this racism and classism stemmed body size discrimination. As Harrison (2019) points out, “the emerging white middle class was looking for ways to assert and maintain a dominant position in relation to immigrants, and body size became a key point of comparison” during industrialization and urbanization in North America (Harrison, 2019, p. 25). It is in history that the idealized normate body was created.

### **Social Work and the Normate**

Racism and colonialism are historically imbedded in Canadian social work. As a colony of the British Empire, the dominant society in Canada became white and Protestant by means of othering Indigenous persons, regulating their land, and attempting to destroy and assimilate all things Indigenous (Lawrence, 2003; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Furthermore, social work’s foundation in Canada is based on Eurocentric social welfare institutions with the intentions of colonization (Jin Lee & Ferrer, 2014). With the import of British standards of living, “the colonial project” took effect: an erasure of Indigenous culture and history (Jin Lee & Ferrer, 2014, p. 6). Social workers were, and continue to be, directly implicated in this colonial project (Blackstock, 2009).

With colonialism came Eurocentric body standards and moralistic attitudes toward eating behaviours. Harrison (2019) describes that in early colonization, Indigenous ways of eating were frowned upon, and that body-size standards became a way of distinguishing white middle class dominance. Racism and body size became intertwined with evolutionist thought, and thinness was conflated with evolutionary status (Harrison, 2019).

While social work is positioned to address social and political issues, white supremacist normativity has been identified as “a master narrative in social work practice, research, and education” (Almeida et al., 2019, p.151). Social workers have taken active roles in normalization projects; taking on an active role in practicing, researching, and educating in a weight-normative paradigm. Social workers have continued to demonize the fat body, researching “obesity” prevention and treatment, as well as promoting targeted practices and interventions (Delgado, 2013; Eliadis, 2006, p. 86).

While the social work profession has begun to accept its role in past and current colonization projects, there has been little recognition of how current practices that promote and project white, Eurocentric body, beauty, and food choice standards onto the vulnerable can serve to perpetuate continued colonialism and inherently oppress body diversity. As Wilson et al. (2020) identified:

We have a tendency in social work to look back at the practices of previous generations of social workers as a type of cautionary tale for our students, and as an argument for the progressiveness of contemporary practices. What is lost in this pedagogical strategy, however, is the ability to see contemporary best practices, including social justice approaches, as also in need of interrogation (p. 92).

In the next section, I discuss my personal history of eating disorders, which allowed me to critically think about accepting and embracing fat studies as a social work scholar. I do acknowledge that using eating disorders as a “proxy” can be criticized as it can “efface, reduce, and oversimplify the voices and the lived experiences of fat activists and fat activism” (Kuyvenhoven, 2016, p. 113). However, I believe that this experience is necessary to overview in a call to integrate fat studies into social work education.

### **My Positionality and Critical Reflection on Social Work Education**

I entered my education in social work with an eating disorder. Hidden in my back pocket, she came with me everywhere: to class, to the gym, slept with me, showered with me, prohibited me from meeting up with my classmates and potential friends for dinner or drinks. She isolated me, told me to fear the fat bodies that I saw around me. She told me to fear the fat on my own body. She was, and still is, there.

She was the reason I entered social work. As a teenager and young adult, I cycled in and out of hospital-based programs, therapies, nutrition counseling, dietitians’ offices, and even experimental treatments for eating disorders. Social workers had been there, and I wanted their life. They seemed to have it together, to understand what I was going through as temporary, fixable, something I could ‘get over’. I believed, if, like them, I could help others, I would find greater happiness in my own life.

There was some truth in that. However, when I entered my Master of Social Work program with no background knowledge about social justice, I was shocked. Social work is a profession which is committed to social justice: The CASW-ACTS *Code of Ethics* (2005), Value 2, instructs registered social workers to pursue social justice to practice ethically. Additionally, the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE-AFCFTS) (2014), a regulating body whose responsibility is the accreditation of schools of social work, is guided by its first principle that directs the pursuit of social justice to be infused in social work education, scholarship, policy, and practice.

### **Eating Disorder from a Structural Lens**

My initial foray into social work included the study of sanism, mental health, and social work education (Poole et al., 2012). These studies allowed me to explore and better understand the oppression and control of persons with mental health diagnoses, and the discourse between the biomedical and anti-sanist, structural interpretations of mental health. Sanism is the systematic normalization of mental health stigmatization. Sanism results in “microaggressions”: “multiple, small insults and indignities,” which normalize the idea that persons with mental health disabilities are unable to care for themselves (Kalinowski & Risser, 2005, p. 1 in Poole, 2012, p. 21). While stigma is often discussed within the social work literature, Poole (2012) argues that this discussion can contribute to sanism, minimizing the larger structural oppressions and contributing to the biomedical perspective of mental health as a sickness.

Understanding mental health as a structural issue, rather than as an individual issue that I needed to address, challenged my previous beliefs about social workers and the social workers who had “helped me”. I had encountered many social workers in my eating disorder treatment settings. I want to acknowledge that the work done in hospital-based eating disorder programs is difficult work – and each social worker I encountered made me want their life and did help me survive. However, in Canada there are many issues with this publicly funded program, including the small number of programs available, the long waitlists for programs, the insistence of weight as a metric for determining treatment type and length, and their failure to address diet culture and overall stigmatization based on body size, shape, and weight (Dolan, 2018). They had individualized my problem, made it something which I had to own. My problem was perceived as something caused by my individual physiology, psychology, and behaviours. While the treatments had helped me gain general functioning in the world by addressing the physiology,

psychology, and behaviours, it failed to acknowledge the structural roots of my issue. I still suffered with a smaller, more manageable eating disorder.

### **Embodying Hypocrisy**

During my Master of Social Work program, I woke up at 5:30 a.m. daily before class began. I had to get to the gym for 6 a.m. right when it opened. Every. Day. I spent 1.5 hours sweating, pumping, drowning out my own groans by blasting music in my ears. Surrounded by mirrors, I could see and question: Do I look good enough? Does my body look fit enough? Can you see my cellulite? Does this mirror make me look fat? What do the other people think of me? And my thoughts did not only center around me. Because I was so focused on food, weight, and shape, I would look at others and wonder: What do they eat? If I work-out like that, could I look like her? Why is she wearing that? I was a fat oppressor. I would covertly judge others based on their body size, determining whether they were “worthy” of my attention. Worthy of space in the gym, in my mind, in the world.

I went to class hours later and listened and actively participated in discussions about embracing a non-judgmental attitude, about diversity, about stigma and oppression and marginalization— something we social workers are obsessed with ending. I could talk the talk: challenge the dominant narratives that promote a white colonial way of knowing in research, promote inclusive methodologies where the research question is something that the (marginalized) community wants, challenge discourses that are deficit-focused into strengths-based narratives of populations. Yet, in my mind, body size did not count. Every reading, every practice example, every “practical” guide to understanding social work, oppression, marginalization, and social justice skipped discussions of the importance of Fat Studies: a field which uses body size, shape, and weight for “wide-ranging theorization and explication of how societies and cultures... have conceptualized all bodies and the political/cultural meanings ascribed to every body” (Wann, 1998, xi, in Dolan, 2018, p. 4). There were discussions on racism, colonialism, classism, ageism, ableism, heterosexism, sexism, sanism. While these types of marginalization and oppression were deserving of attention and education, discussion of size, shape, and weight was determined undeserving. What impact did this have? Well for me, personally, I went on oppressing others and oppressing myself. Judging a person’s worth based on body size and engaging in conversations about food, weight, and shape with others definitely harmed me and left collateral damage in my path.

### **My Introduction to Fat Studies**

Embodying a radical approach to social work was therefore impossible. It was not until I was introduced to a critical pedagogical tool which incorporated “radical love,” “disseminat[ing] critical knowledge that understands at multiple levels and relieves suffering” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 9). Using Harrison’s (2013-present) podcast, *Food Psych*, I was called to unlearn and relearn. There was a name to the structural roots which had fed the eating disorder in my back pocket for so many years: “diet culture”. A community of activists was working to replace the flawed societal messages about body size, shape, weight, and food behaviours: “fat activists”; and they were reclaiming the term fat as a neutral descriptor (Rothblum, 2012, p. 4). They were problematizing the “health-promotion” that weight loss promised (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009, p. xv). They were advocating for the de-stigmatization of body size, shape, and weight, calling out oppression and discrimination (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009).

Of course, I was still indoctrinated with diet culture, described by Harrison (2019) as:

a system of beliefs that equates thinness, muscularity, and particular body shapes with health and moral virtue; promotes weight loss and body reshaping as a means of attaining higher status; demonizes certain foods and food groups while elevating others; and oppresses people who don’t match its supposed picture of “health” (p. 7).

To this day, I still struggle with challenging my deep-seated beliefs, living in a country that accepts and promotes white supremacy, patriarchy, hetero-normativity, cis-normativity, ableism, sexism, rape culture, and diet culture. I must continue to practice critical self-reflection, critically examining my beliefs about beauty, appearance, size, shape, and weight, an obsession that steals my attention and ability to work towards other meaningful work and relationships (Wolf, 1997). I am still distracted by diet culture, and see many colleagues, social workers, and social justice promoters get sidelined by projects to control their body size, weight, and shape or food habits out of a belief that it is moral and ethical (Stein & Nemeroff, 1995; Rich & Evans, 2005). Social work programs, paid for through tuition fees, require unlearning and learning. However, when social workers are not given adequate skills to address common injustices faced in society, they may need to take on that learning as unpaid labour. Only when social workers incorporate this learning into their education can they work toward undermining systems of oppression in society.

### **The Current State of Fat Studies in Social Work Practice**

Unpaid labor is recognized as a way to take advantage of people who work in fields that rely on employees' altruism (Baines, 2004). Baines et al. (2017) explain that this unpaid labour is on a spectrum of compelled to coerced, where coercion poses "a threat to one's livelihood or education should workers fail to participate or do a good job" and compulsion "is conceptualized as little or no threat to one's employment per se but may be a threat to one's sense of self as a good or moral person" (p. 629). Social workers are not put into conversation with fat studies during their formal education. They are put into a moral and ethical dilemma, where they are required to learn how to address issues of size, shape, and weight oppression, and are inadequately prepared. Unwaged labour to address size, shape, and weight oppression may not adequately identify, analyze, and resist; in fact, some learning may perpetuate harm. Practically speaking, social workers will encounter fat clients and will require skills to protect others against fat oppression and diet culture. However, social workers may not undergo this unpaid labour by educating themselves about issues of sizeism and fat oppression. When encountering fat clients, social workers may think they are "helping" by perpetuating oppression and discrimination, insisting fat bodies become the thin ideal (Friedman, 2012, p. 62). In the educational setting, including fat studies in the social work curriculum will ameliorate the need for social workers to engage in unwaged labour to educate themselves on social justice for fat people. There is, therefore, an established need for social workers during their education to critically engage with fat studies, to work towards individual empowerment of clients, and to contribute to actively dismantling oppressive structures.

### **Combating Sizeism through Social Work Education**

Social work education in Canada consists of classroom curriculum and field education (CASWE-AFCFTS, 2014), and often holds space for interrogating issues of racism, colonialism, classism, ageism, ableism, heterosexism, sexism, and sanism, among other social issues. As reviewed above, social work education often overlooks privileging and oppression based on body size, shape, and weight. Social work, which has been a historic tool of colonization and normalization, continues this work by maintaining a status quo: either in neglecting to include discussions of body size privileging or in working against the work of fat activists and allies by promoting health-ist attitudes which match body size with quality of life. Social work knowledge is constructed by a multiplicity of experiences and is influenced by many different disciplines. Trevithick's (2008) framework of social work knowledge acts as a framework to deconstruct the knowledge necessary for social workers to contribute to fat activism, beginning with social work education welcoming fat studies into its curriculum.

### **Social Work Knowledge Framework**

Trevithick (2008) argues that there are many ways social work knowledge is created, passed on, and used. Using a framework approach, the author argues that social work knowledge is created, continued, and used through theoretical; factual; and practice, practical, and personal avenues.

### **Fat Positive Theories in Social Work**

According to Trevithick (2008), theoretical knowledge in social work can be categorized into three overlapping subtypes. First, there are “theories that illuminate our understanding of people, situations and events,” which integrate theories from other disciplines into social work knowledge (p. 1219). To put social work into adequate conversation with fat studies, the theories that are integrated must be critically examined prior to adoption, as Trevithick (2008) warns many theories brought into social work knowledge carry ideological assumptions that are not well understood to the generalist social worker. A social worker who aims to work in a hospital or clinical setting (rather than an activist or human rights policy setting) would benefit from learning theories such as the Health at Every Size® approach, which identifies that health can be achieved without weight loss being held as a panacea, acknowledging that status quo prescription of weight loss serves to perpetuate weight stigma and weight-based oppression in the medical system (Bacon, 2010). The Health at Every Size (HAES)® approach is “a necessary step toward unpacking the many layers of stigma that fat people experience” (Friedman, 2012, p. 54). In a health-promotion setting, without learning basic skills in weight-neutrality and fat positivity imbedded in fat studies, social workers are at risk of implementing stigmatizing theories which promote weight loss as a health promoting behaviour. As an alternative, social workers in clinical settings can apply a HAES® approach, “seek[ing] to develop critical consciousness about harmful social relations and about how to reconstruct these relations in equitable ways” (Carniol, 2010, p. 60). Without HAES® or other fat-positive theories in social work knowledge, comprehensive critical consciousness will not be achieved in social work education.

### **Using Theory to Challenge Social Injustice**

The second type of theoretical knowledge which Trevithick (2008) identifies within social work knowledge are “theories that analyse the role, task and purpose of social work” (p. 1218). These theories challenge the profession to adequately address the disadvantaged populations which they seek to empower. While these theories are “fraught with disagreement”, all social workers are held accountable by ethical standards informed by theories that analyze the role, task, and purpose of social work (Trevithick, 2008, p. 1220). After all, social work is led by its pursuit of social justice (CASW-ACTS, 2005; CASWE-AFCFTS, 2014). The CASW-ACTS (2020) *Scope of Practice Statement* furthermore identifies that:

Social work practice responds to needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities and addresses barriers and injustices in organizations and society. Social work focuses on improving health and social well-being using the social determinants of health framework when delivering services, navigating systems, and advocating for equitable access to and improvement of the multiple dimensions that impact health and well-being. Social work engages people and communities to address life challenges and traumatic events (p. 1).

Grounded in ethics and an understanding of a scope of practice, it is integral that social work engages with fat studies to address the “barriers and injustices” intertwined with and resulting from size-based oppression, weight stigma, anti-fat rhetoric, and diet culture (CASW-ACTS, 2020, p. 1).

## Practice Approaches to Uphold Size Diversity

Finally, theoretical knowledge can be built from “theories that relate to direct practice, such as practice approaches and perspectives” (Trevithick, 2008, p. 1218). This knowledge is made up of (1) approaches for working in direct practice settings and (2) perspectives for a social worker to apply (Trevithick, 2008).

Due to the widely recognized nature of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) throughout the field of social work, this practice will be used as an example of how to integrate Trevithick’s framework into a theoretical approach. CBT is a treatment process that involves collecting information and monitoring the results of skills or interventions and making future treatment suggestions and decisions based on the collection of that data. CBT, as an “evidence-based practice” is highly prized in our neoliberal society. The evidence for CBT derives both from the research on a population and individual level. Population-wide, studies indicate that specific populations can address specific issues within a timely manner using this manualized approach. Evidence is also gathered on an individual level and used to make changes to an individuals’ thoughts, behaviours, and emotions (Payne, 2014). CBT often acts as a tool of empowerment, helping people address core beliefs around worthlessness. However, CBT and other approaches applied in social work settings must be considered with caution because an individualistic focus fails to consider the role of oppression (Payne, 2014). Without considering the role of oppression, the validity of targeting certain behaviours for change cannot be critically examined. There are a number of books, programs, coaches, and professionals that use cognitive-behavioural approaches to promote weight loss. This includes *The Cognitive Behavioral Workbook for Weight Management: A Step-by-Step Program* (2009), which may address some key core beliefs that undermine an individual’s ability to address distorted thoughts (Laliberte et al., 2009; Laliberte et al., 2014). However, it appears that the overall goal in this program is to control, fix, or cure a societally unacceptable body. This brings social work back to its colonial roots while complying with capitalist agendas that are looking to assimilate, normalize, and promote a multi-billion-dollar diet industry (Gudzune et al., 2015). As Friedman (2012) states:

in other words, rather than empowering fat people, we should make them thin. If they (we) do not want to be thin—well, then, fat people get what they deserve. An avoidance of the structural nature of size oppression does not acknowledge that many (if not most) fat bodies are here to stay (p. 57).

Social work often adopts perspectives and values from sociological, contextual, or political analyses of events or behaviour (Trevithick, 2008). These perspectives and practice theories can involve “exaggerating or overstating a particular feature...evident in a particular situation” (Trevithick, 2008, p. 1222). Trevithick (2008) lists a number of perspectives within social work knowledge, including anti-oppressive practice, anti-racist, feminist, radical, and social model of disability, among others. Therefore, it is only logical that social work and fat studies work toward the same goals under similar perspectives, such as anti-oppressive practice and radical, progressive, activist perspectives. For example, the structural approach to social work, a radical and anti-oppressive approach, analyzes the:

socio-economic or structural context of individual problems and the power arrangements and the economic forces in society that create and maintain social conditions that generate stress, illness, deprivation, discrimination, and other forms of individual problems... [and] emphasize[s] the importance of diverse identities (Carniol, 2010, p. 60).

However, the inclusion of a perspective that forefronts the fat liberation movement and works to end weight, shape, and size discrimination and diet culture has only been addressed by a limited number of scholars and activists in Canada. As social workers and social work scholars, we must contribute to the field of fat studies in order to broaden a fat studies perspective in social work.

## **Factual Knowledge to Uphold Fat Rights and Freedoms**

The second major facet of social work knowledge according to Trevithick (2008) is factual knowledge. Employing a postmodern frame, it is important to distinguish between a “fact” and the concept of “truth,” acknowledging that truth is a partial and contextual construct. Rather than truths, factual knowledge is comprised of societal assumptions and agreements surrounding five key areas: law and legislation; social policy; agency policies, procedures, and systems; specific groups of people; and, specific personal and social problems (Trevithick, 2008). Trevithick (2008) acknowledges that it is unknown how much factual knowledge, outside of understanding the factual knowledge around the role of social workers in general, is needed prior to practice. Social workers must be able to critically examine factual knowledge prior to applying it in practice because accepted truths in society have been known to maintain a status quo and to stigmatize, oppress, and assimilate (Young, 1992). When integrating fat studies into social work praxis, social workers must be critical of the factual knowledge that is promoted as a status quo in society. Understanding the underlying goals and objectives of current laws and legislations to tackle an “obesity epidemic” in Canada must be problematized by social workers (Holmes, 2009, p. 223). We have a responsibility to advocate for fat persons’ “life, liberty, and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof” (*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, 1982).

Understanding how to gather factual knowledge around law and legislation, social policy, and agency policies, procedures, and systems is often covered in social work education through accreditation standards, which require that students in social work develop critical research skills and participate in policy analysis and development (CASWE-AFCFTS, 2014). The accreditation standards set for Canadian schools of social work also hold that core learning objectives provide knowledges on the structural implications and outcomes of these laws and legislations on “disadvantaged and oppressed groups... to participate in efforts to change these” (CASWE-AFCFTS, 2014, p. 12). To address this, many social work curricula interweave literature from a variety of critical lenses, highlighting various types of oppression and marginalization rooted in neoliberalism.

As discussed previously, the specific groups of people and the specific personal and social problems surrounding size, shape, and weight-based oppression can go unacknowledged in a social work setting. Literature included in social work education can also work against social justice agendas promoted by fat activists, as much is published in line with biomedical frames of obesity and framing body size as a personal or social problem, rather than a problem of social exclusion and stigma. Obesity is framed as a psychological and individual issue, something to be feared and cured (Shinan-Altman, 2016). This absolves the responsibility of social workers in evaluating assumptions around fatness, health, status, and morality. Fat studies must be better integrated into social work educational curriculum to train social workers in understanding fat persons as a specific, marginalized, group of persons who face societal and internalized oppression (Prohaska & Gailey, 2019). With these skills, Canadian social workers can work towards understanding and undermining the political issues that create barriers in inclusion, equity, and equality for fat persons.

## **Informal Knowledge to Challenge Attitudes**

Trevithick (2008) describes the importance of practice, practical, and personal knowledge in social work, as it includes the cyclical approach to knowledge acquisition, creation, and utilization. It includes the use of both theoretical and factual knowledge in practice, as well as the “personal knowledge and life experience that practitioners have acquired and, importantly, the personal knowledge that service users and carers have gained” (Trevithick, 2008, p. 1226). It is theory-practice integration. Based on Trevithick’s approach, the incorporation of essential advocacy and anti-oppressive fat studies literature in social work knowledge through education must then be applied in a practice setting.

Formal knowledge is acquired through instruction, through application requiring practice in problem-solving and demonstrating, and through the use of critical decision-making in educational settings. Here, social work educators should apply theories and facts that work towards size, shape, and weight-centered social justice by applying our knowledge of human rights and equity seeking. Knowledge can also be acquired through “more accessible and immediate knowledge sources and more personal and interactive points of contact” and acquired through social workers’ practice experiences (Trevithick, 2008, p. 1229). It is here, from colleagues, other professionals, clients, or persons in the community, that social workers may acquire productive or unproductive theories and facts contributing to size, shape, and weight stigma. Before entering the practice setting, social workers require grounded knowledge in fat studies to be prepared to challenge size, shape, and weight-based oppression.

Knowledge may be transferable: theories and facts can be used in new contexts. This means that a social worker who understands the general underpinnings of other major social justice movements (for example, racism, sexism, colonialism, or homophobia) may be able to apply the same understanding of oppression, marginalization, and discrimination to other contexts. There is no guarantee this knowledge transfer will occur. One meta-analysis of women who identified as feminists found that:

consolidated feminist identity that likely exists among those who proclaim themselves to be feminists, and who have had a significant amount of experience with their feminist identity, helps protect against extreme dissatisfaction with the body that can result when one internalizes unrealistic cultural ideals (Murnen and Smolak, 2009, p. 193).

However, a general survey of social work students found that “many participants held negative attitudes toward people who are obese” (Lawrence et al., 2019, p. 386). The authors of this study advocated that social work education take an active role in including discussions of “overweight” and “obesity” stigma in cultural competency trainings (Lawrence et al., 2019, p. 388).

Canadian social work institutions must begin to employ fat studies while addressing the theoretical, factual and practical facets of social work knowledge. Social work is not only a profession but is also an academic discipline which engages in scholastic work, including research, theoretical development, education, and learning using disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge (Watts & Hodgson, 2019). By not addressing weight, shape, and stigma within social work pedagogy, social work institutions cause harm to people of all sizes. To remedy this harm, fat studies must be applied within existing curricula and coursework and brought into the practicum experiences that are obligatory in social work education.

### **Integrating Fat Studies into Social Work Education**

Any registered social worker in Canada is educated in an accredited Canadian school of social work. Schools are accredited by a body called the CASWE-AFCFTS (2014), which identifies core learning objectives for students in social work, as well as standards at the Baccalaureate level for generalist practice and at the master’s level to reflect advanced levels of knowledge and skills in major areas of practice.

Core learning objectives herald to pedagogical strategies including Bloom’s revised *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* which underscores the importance of cognitive, emotional, and action-based knowledges which must be taught (Watts & Hodgson, 2019). The core learning objectives identified by CASWE-AFCFTS (2014) promote the use of a backwards design, developing curriculum based on outcome measures, to meet core cognitive, emotive, and action-based knowledges. The core learning objectives are the following (specifics removed):

1. Identify as a professional social worker and adopt a value perspective of the social work profession...
2. Adhere to social work values and ethics in professional practice...
3. Promote human rights and social justice...
4. Support and enhance diversity by addressing structural sources of inequity...
5. Employ critical thinking in professional practice ...
6. [Conduct] research...
7. Participate in policy analysis and development...
8. Engage in organizational and societal systems' change through professional practice...
9. [Work] with individuals, families, groups, and communities through professional practice... (CASWE-AFCFTS, 2014, pp. 10-12).

While CASWE-AFCFTS (2014) can promote the integration of fat studies into specific social work courses, the broad learning objectives, such as promoting human rights and social justice, and supporting and enhancing diversity, the lack of clarity in these core learning objectives surrounding “types” of oppression makes it difficult for standard integration of fat studies into social work curricula. To address this shortcoming, it is integral that CASWE-AFCFTS acknowledge the systemic marginalization of fat persons in Canadian society and identify diet culture as a systemic oppression that is linked to other racist, colonial, patriarchal, and heterosexist structures that hinder social justice.

Curriculum at schools of social work use a backwards design for developing courses based on learning outcomes (Bracy, 2018). It is therefore up to each school independently to converse with fat studies. Fat studies can be included in curricula by including the work of academic and non-academic fat studies activists in social work coursework and syllabi. It is also essential that Canadian schools of social work prioritize fat studies scholars in hiring processes and promote research and funding in these areas. Finally, developing specific special-topics courses in fat studies within schools of social work and including other courses that highlight fat studies can address this gap.

Another integral component of social work education is the application of coursework knowledge into social work practice. This is addressed through field education. CASWE-AFCFTS (2014) identifies how many hours each student must complete in an accredited program and leaves the school responsible for independently creating a field education curriculum for “students to acquire, apply, and demonstrate knowledge and skills congruent with social work values and with the core learning objectives for students” (CASWE-AFCFTS, 2014, p. 15). Each school independently develops a manual and verifies appropriate matches between students, instructors, and settings. Historically, and currently, there are inappropriate matches between students and settings: students being placed within settings that are laden with diet culture, fat stigma, and overall sizeism. In Canadian schools of social work, students are placed at weight loss programs (which include children and adults) that are partially covered by Ontario’s provincial health insurance. A placement such as this has no place in a practicum setting that is mandated to “adhere to social work values and ethics” (CASWE-AFCFTS, 2014, p. 10). Providing free labour (paid for by the student’s fees) for a product of diet culture, which may harm the student placed as well as the clients in the program, works against the tenets of social justice, which social work is ethically responsible to promote. Incorporating fat studies in social work education and eliminating inappropriate practicum settings reduces the risky unpaid labour that social workers must employ while navigating a world embedded in diet culture and fat oppression.

### **Social Work as an Avenue for Liberating the Fat Body**

While there are many opportunities to place social work in conversation with fat studies scholarship, one such way is to incorporate fat studies into the social work knowledge base that universities use to train future social workers. Though being trained in a structural social work program in Canada is not

universal, many social workers lack adequate engagement with fat studies literature. Social work knowledge in fat studies in its current state, deriving from unpaid labour and chance, is inadequate. Social workers therefore may be unknowing culprits of continual oppression in society, perpetuating size, shape, and weight-based oppression. Through clinical, policy and organizational work, social workers have the skills and opportunities to advocate for equal rights for fat persons. By including theoretical, factual, and practical knowledge deriving from fat studies scholarship in social work education, social workers can continue to work in line with their ethical codes – striving for social justice and equity.

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The logo features a large, stylized letter 'U' in a dark red color. The 'U' is composed of four rounded rectangular segments that meet at a central white circle. Inside this circle, the text 'UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON' is displayed. 'UNIVERSITY of' is in a smaller, grey, sans-serif font, while 'HOUSTON' is in a larger, bold, red, sans-serif font. A thin horizontal line is positioned below 'HOUSTON'.

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