Exploring Values and Actions: Definitions of Social Justice and the Civic Engagement of Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Despite the centrality of social justice to social work education and practice, the field has lacked clear definitions of the concept leading students to have varying perspectives of understanding and the implication for actions. Understanding how students define and conceptualize social justice has implications for how faculty teach about social justice and challenge student perspectives. This paper utilizes survey data (n=73) collected from undergraduate students enrolled in a social justice minor affiliated with a school of social work in a large public university to understand how these students a) understood social justice, and b) how this understanding influenced their actions. Using a mixed methods approach, we first develop a grounded theory of students' definitions of social justice based on open-ended survey responses. Second, we statistically test the relationship between definitions of social justice and forms of civic engagement. In the paper, we present context-specific definitions of social justice and show that different understandings of social justice connect to different types of civic engagement. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings, and implications for teaching and future research.

Keywords: social justice, social work education, civic engagement, definitions and actions, undergraduate actions

Introduction

Despite the importance of social justice as a concept, the term is ambiguous. Often there is a great deal of rhetoric around the concept of social justice and use of the term without a precise definition or articulation of what it means or how one pursues it. Moreover, we find that scholars discuss social justice as a concept without specific connections to actions and practices. The unevenness in understanding, or even in the discussion about the term, can lead to a wide breadth of definitions—from activism and organizing to mobilization and protests, to services and supports, and voting and political engagement (Reisch, 2002).

Within social work, we have a broad

understanding of social justice and often identify it as a core component and value of our field (NASW, 2017). However, social justice is not always clearly articulated within programs or is articulated in different and sometimes contradictory ways (Hong & Hodge, 2009), and there is similar confusion among social workers engaged in direct practice (McLaughlin, 2011). In the midst of the current wave of campus activism (Wong, 2015) it is imperative that social work—a place on campus for social justice work—understands what social justice means, especially for its students. It is especially important that social work educators and practitioners clarify and contextualize the definition of social justice (Gasker & Fisher, 2014; Reisch & Garvin, 2016).

Understanding how students define and conceptualize social justice is vital for social work educators. Definitions and conceptualizations of social justice also impact social work students' training in social work practice and how social work educators deal with student conflicts that emerge around tensions between theory and practice. There has been little research to date focused on understanding how social justice ideas are perceived by students affiliated with social work educational programs and how these definitions shape actions in and outside of the classroom.

This paper uses survey data collected from undergraduate students enrolled in a social justice minor affiliated with a school of social work at a large public university to understand how these students a) understood social justice, and b) how this understanding influenced their actions. In particular, we explored three specific research questions: 1) How do undergraduate students in a social justice-oriented academic minor define social justice? 2) Do these definitions influence what actions the students consider social justice activities? 3) How do differences in definitions of social justice and social justice activities relate to the civic engagement of undergraduate students?

This paper extends the conversation that others (e.g., Gasker & Fischer, 2014; Reisch & Garvin, 2016; Garcia & Van Soest, 2006) started

but focuses on undergraduate students in a social justice minor. We chose undergraduate students because they are an age group that has been civically active both historically and contemporarily (Barnhardt, 2014; Wong, 2015). Additionally, college campuses are often viewed as places where students form notions of civic duty. Many have argued that collective action is the result of questions that students develop during their time in college (Barnhardt, 2014). In particular, we aim to gain a better understanding of how undergraduate students concerned with social justice understand the concept, what they consider to be a social justice action, and the activities in which they participate. This paper situates these questions in previous literature on definitions of social justice, social justice activities, and civic engagement. Next, we discuss our methodological choices and survey results. Finally, we will consider the implications of our findings for future research, teaching, and practice.

Background

Reisch and Garvin (2016) argue in the preface of their book *Social Justice and Social Work* that despite the fact that the Council on Social Work Education requires social work programs to teach social justice as a core concept there is still a lack of clear understanding. They write: "despite the powerful social justice rhetoric, there is still considerable confusion and ambiguity about how to translate these values into practice" (p. vii).

The origin of the concept of justice traces back to biblical and other ancient writing, and often these earliest notions related to the concept of equality, or the reduction of inequality for certain groups. Later definitions of social justice articulated by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle introduced ideas including human well-being and resource allocation but did not connect the term to equality among individuals. While certain individuals should experience a certain level of equality among their peer group they did not believe that all individuals were fundamentally equal (Reisch, 2002).

In *Social Work Practice for Social Justice*,

Garcia and Van Soest (2006) argue that social justice has been "historically contested" and lacking a common understanding creates a challenge for the social work field moving forward. They also cite Reisch's (2002) frame that multiple different understandings of social justice lead to "some claiming to be for social justice while others accuse them of not being for social justice" (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006, p. 3).

Within the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), social justice is described not through some vision of what constitutes social justice, but through an understanding of social *injustice*. The Code of Ethics states:

> Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

This framing within the Code of Ethics links to an understanding of justice that is rooted in equal rights and opportunity. It builds on Rawls' (2005[1971]) understanding of justice. He argued that "all social values- liberty and opportunity, income and wealth and the bases of self-respect-are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values, is to everyone's advantage" (2005[1971], p. 61-62).

Also embedded in the NASW Code is a different framing of social justice that is rooted in an understanding of power, privilege, and transforming the way society operates in order to address systematic discrimination and oppression.

This perspective on social justice seeks to change one's individual and societal recognition about power and oppression- aiming to raise awareness, consciousness, and transform actions to address inherent inequalities. This understanding of social justice closely ties to understanding power, privilege, and oppression. It also tends to focus on the intersecting dimensions of social identities such as racism, sexism, and homophobia (Garcia and Van Soest, 2006). Gasker and Fisher (2014) explored a set of professional social work documents to examine how the definitions of social justice within these documents connected to utilitarian, conservative, and liberal egalitarian theoretical perspectives of justice. They concluded that none of the documents defined social justice in ways that completely mapped onto one of these conceptual categories. In response to this conclusion Gasker and Fisher argue for a more context-specific understanding of social justice terms.

If, as Reisch and Garvin (2016) suggest, the idea of social justice is always evolving, then perhaps it should come as no surprise that the Code of Ethics, and thus the field of social work as a whole, contains within it layers of interpretation of the concept of social justice. How then does this historically contingent and inconsistent understanding of social justice theory influence action in the world? More specifically, how does this historically contingent and contradictory understanding of social justice theory play out for undergraduates, who are often forming activist identities (Barnhardt, 2014)? Understanding the perspectives of undergraduate students becomes important because they are often the leaders of significant social movements (Barnhardt, 2014). Also, it is important to explore the connections between perspectives of related terms. For example, understanding social justice perspectives, and our analysis of them, frame and influence the civic engagement actions that one may take (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006). As such it is also important to understand how civic engagement is understood and conceptualized relative to social justice.

Our analysis of the literature, however, suggests that there has been less conceptual

development exploring the relationship between social justice and civic engagement. Indeed, as a term, civic engagement lacks a singular universal definition. While there may not be a singular universal definition of civic engagement, many scholars link the term to the idea of public work or actions that impact public matters (Levine, 2007; Sanchez, 2006; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). For example, Sanchez (2006) argues that political participation is most often defined as a set of activities citizens utilize to influence the structure of government, the selection of government officials, or the policies of the government. Similarly, often civic engagement definitions include voting in political elections as a measure of activity (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Uslaner & Brown, 2005; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Some studies have begun to measure civic engagement more broadly and make the link between social justice, social work, and civic engagement. For example, Pritzker, Springer & McBride (2015) looked at a range of civic behaviors in college students that spanned from voting and more traditional notions of political engagement to attending protests, organizing around social justice issues and joining social action groups, more conventional ideas of social justice activities. Few studies in social work have articulated the relationships between social justice perceptions and actions, especially with college students. This understudied area is where our paper contributes.

Methods

We used a mixed methods approach to address our research questions. First, we developed a survey that contained closed-ended questions to gain information about the students, their activities, coursework, prior experiences, current voting practices, and perspectives on social justice. These questions included previously developed and validated measures of civic participation, standardized questions found on nationally representative surveys of college students, and some original questions about the core concepts of interest to this study. The basic demographic questions, questions about the students' familial and education background, were drawn from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (Eagan et al., 2017), a nationally representative longitudinal study of American higher education systems (Eagan et al., 2017). The CIRP is considered one of the most comprehensive sources for information on college students (Eagan et al., 2017). Students' civic engagement on and off campus was measured using a validated scale of political participation (Pritzker, Springer & McBride, 2015). This scale listed specific actions and asked respondents whether they considered these actions to be examples of social justice activities. In addition to the closed-ended questions, respondents were asked an open-ended question about how they defined social justice. They were not given any prompts for this question and allowed as much space as they needed to define the term. Before administering the survey, focus groups were conducted to solicit feedback and clarify any confusing questions.

Data collection

Surveys were administered to current students and recent alumni of the undergraduate social justice minor via email and through the program newsletter. Participation in the survey was optional. Current students were reminded of the survey in their seminar classes and follow up emails were sent to solicit increased participation. We administered the survey from February 2015 through November 2015. We received 73 responses out of a population of 300. The program had approximately 120 recent alumni and 180 enrolled students at the time of the survey. Because students entered and exited the program while the survey was ongoing, 300 represents a reasonable high-end estimate of the population that received the survey. This created a response rate of 24.3%. We did not collect any identifying information and did not link up to students' academic records in any way. The survey was entirely voluntary with no incentive or connection to academic performance. The survey was sent out via email twice and mentioned in mandatory classes associated with the minor. The survey was set up in Google Forms

(widely used by the university and accessible only via an official university email address) to make sure that participants could only submit one survey per student ID (which was not recorded by the researchers). The project was granted exempt status by the University's Institutional Review Board.

Qualitative analysis plan

The open-ended qualitative definitions of social justice were coded using an inductive approach guided by grounded theory. We chose grounded theory because it allows researchers to rigorously construct new theory from their data rather than trying to make their data fit pre-established definitions (Glaser, 1992). It also allows researchers to integrate participants' voices into the construction of new theory (Glaser, 1992). Grounded theory was especially useful for this study because it was unlikely that a single static definition of social justice was going to emerge from our study. Using grounded theory allowed us to gain a context-specific understanding of how individuals in our study conceptualized social justice. The qualitative responses were read independently by two researchers. Each researcher identified and labeled common themes within the responses. Initially, the survey asked respondents to define three terms: social justice, community action, and social change. However, because there was so much overlap between how individuals defined these terms the definitions were collapsed to focus specifically on social justice. After the initial round of coding, the two researchers met to discuss any differences in codes. Then a final codebook was developed, and the responses were recoded.

Quantitative analysis plan

The survey yielded a relatively small but usable sample size. As our primary interest was in understanding the relationship between multiple categorical variables, we used Fisher's exact test to determine the independence of the variables. The more common chi-squared tests would have been inappropriate because some expected values fell below five. We ran logistic regressions to check if the relationships identified with Fisher's exact test remained when controlling for basic demographic factors. The co-linearity of many demographic factors combined with the small sample size made the logistic regressions highly sensitive to model specification (as checked through the model robustness procedure developed by Young and Holsteen (2015) and as a result, are not reported in this paper.

Results

Respondent demographics

Our sample consisted of 73 respondents who were currently enrolled or had recently completed the social justice-themed minor. The sample was 84.3% female, 11.4% male, and 4.3% non-cis gendered individuals. Racially, 69.5% of the sample identified as White, 10.2% of the sample identified as Black, 3.4% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.7% identified as Latinx, and 15.2% identified as Biracial. Most students in the sample were born in the United States and were United States citizens (94.3%). Respondents mostly came from a public high school background (82.2%) though some did attend private (15%) and charter (1.4%) high schools. Fifteen percent of the sample identified as first-generation college students while 37.1% had at least one parent with an advanced degree. The racial and SES demographics of this sample are roughly representative of the undergraduate population at this university. Finally, 91.4% of the sample was registered to vote. These raw numbers for each demographic are also listed below in Table 1.

Definitions of social justice

The results suggested that students viewed social justice through two lenses: (1) type of approach (process & outcome); (2) level of approach (internal & external). Outcome-based approaches defined social justice as a tool/utility to create equal access and equal opportunity. These definitions were not as concerned about how the outcomes were achieved as long as they resulted in greater equality or equity. The specific outcomes mentioned by respondents using this frame included economic outcomes, human rights, racial equality,

Table 1
Sample Demographics

Variable	Frequency
Birth Year	
1986	1
1991	2
1992	6
1993	17
1994	14
1995	16
Year in Program	
1st year	0
2nd year	12
3rd year	25
4th year	27
5th year	3
Alumni	6
Race	
White	41
Black	6
Asian/Pacific Islander	2
Latinx	1
Multiracial	9
Gender	
Female	49
Male	18
Non-CIS gender	3
Educational Background	
Attended Public High School	51
Attend Private High School	9
Attended Charter High school	1
First Generation College Student	
Yes	10
No	51
Residency Status	
Domestic Student	66
International Student	4

and expression of identity. Process approaches viewed social justice as a form of knowledge, awareness, and critical consciousness. The logic of these responses suggested that as individuals and institutions implemented socially just decision processes, it would result in socially just outcomes. Internal approaches saw social justice as an activity to change opportunity or consciousness of individuals. External approaches defined social justice relative to a more significant societal or social change objective.

Within our sample, thirty-nine individuals defined social justice as using an outcome-based approach and believed that it took place on an external level. An additional twelve respondents defined social justice using a processed-based approach and identified it as taking place at an external level. Three individuals viewed social justice through a process lens and thought it took place on the internal level. Finally, three definitions had definitions that spanned across multiple categories.

Most respondents defined social justice as something that occurred externally. Fifty respondents defined social justice as something that took place on an external level compared to four respondents who felt it took place at an internal level. An additional three respondents defined social justice as something that takes place on both the external and internal level. An additional sixteen individuals filled out our survey but did not define social justice.

While there was also a divide between individuals using outcome-based and process-based lenses to define social justice the difference was not as large. Forty respondents defined social justice using an outcome-based lens, while only seventeen individuals used a process lens to define social justice. We expand on each type of definition below. Specific examples of each type of definition are in Table 2.

Outcome-based external definitions of social justice

Outcome-based external definitions of social justice were the most common type of social justice definitions within our sample. Most of these definitions defined social justice as something that ensured equal access to opportunities or outcomes at the institutional level. Several of these definitions stressed the importance of equal opportunity for everyone despite differences in social identity. Other definitions of social justice also focused on the importance of equality and equity. Additional definitions of social justice within this category focused on creating change within institutions to ensure that all groups have equal access to opportunities and resources. These definitions focused on reducing inequality and oppression

Table 2
Definitions of Social Justice

Level of Definition	Type of Definition		Total
	Outcome based definitions	Process based definitions	
Internal:	0	3 Examples: • "understanding everyone's stories, having empathy, and sharing experiences to create common understanding." • "valuing the worth and dignity of every human being, regardless of social identities they may hold, including gender, sex, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, ability, religion, nation of origin, body size, etc."	3
External:	39 Examples: • "Allowing all people, despite differences in social identity, to have the same opportunities. Social identity shouldn't be ignored, but it shouldn't be a hindrance towards inequality for all." • "As equality-- not equity, as people are different and need different things-- but equality, as no one deserves greater life changes more than another. Social justice ensures that people are treated equally and fairly."	12 Examples: • "I think of social justice as working to create change in positive ways for groups that are historically and current discriminated against or marginalized, both as a member of those groups or an ally to those who belong to those groups." • "Social justice is a way of thinking everyday. Striving to create change and solve problems through inclusive discussion is necessary for social justice."	51
Multiple level definitions	1 Example: • "A belief that society should be equal and fair for all and the actions that people take to ensure justice in these terms."	2 Examples: • "Combining community action and social change to make up social justice, but also working toward a common goal and making a difference. It is more than voluntary. It's a lifestyle, wanting to help others in a hands-on way toward equal representation," • 'Promoting a society that does not have disparities or systemic discrimination. Understanding what this means for everyday interactions, on the micro level, is essential for understanding how to affect the macro level."	3
Total	40	17	57

but focus on the work needed for the social level. Common themes that emerged in the respondents' definitions included the presence of equality for all groups. Some defined equality in terms of opportunities, while others felt that equality must be present in outcomes. These definitions did not mention the need for institutions themselves to be socially just; instead, they focused on producing a result of equality.

Process-based external definitions of social justice

Process and externally oriented definitions were the second most common type of social justice definitions offered by our respondents. These definitions focused on creating awareness of systemic inequalities within society and the process of reducing them. These definitions also tended to focus on changing the attitudes within society. Rather than just focusing on equity of outcomes and resources, these definitions focus on transforming the attitudes and thought processes within social institutions. These definitions also often mentioned dialogue and action as a part of the process of changing attitudes. Through dialogue and action, respondents believed that external institutions could be transformed to produce a more socially just society.

Process-based internal definitions of social justice

Only three respondents assessed social justice using a process framework and as something that occurred on the internal level. A common theme running through each of these definitions is that an individual's understanding of others' struggles can lead to an outcome of empathy, value, and respect for all. For these respondents, they defined social justice as the development of mutual respect within individuals.

Multiple category definitions

Three respondents in the sample provided definitions that spanned across the internal and

external levels of approach. One explanation used an outcome-based lens by focusing on equality and fairness for all but noted that these values should be present both at the macro level and within individual actions. Two more respondents defined social justice using a process-based lens but also applied their definition across both the micro and macro level arenas. Each definition talked about making transformational shifts within large societal institutions and within individuals and their everyday actions. More than other respondents, these students emphasized social justice as a praxis that occurs or can occur, on multiple levels simultaneously.

Student civic engagement

Table 3 reports each type of civic engagement, and whether or not students thought each item was a social justice action and whether they engaged in that action. Some of the more common forms of civic engagement that were also considered social justice actions included paying attention to the news, attending activist meetings, and volunteering. Some of the forms of civic engagement least likely to be either participated in or seen as social justice

actions include contacting elected representatives, volunteering for class credit, voting, and donating money to a group or cause.

To assess how conceptions of social justice (internal and external, process and outcome) related to forms of civic engagement, we used a series of Fisher's exact tests to examine the distribution of responses for each type of civic engagement by each conception of social justice. We used the Fisher's exact test given the relatively small sample size of our survey. We tested each of the four possible outcomes of the form of civic participation against the four conceptions of social justice. For example, in the case of researching a social justice problem, Fisher's exact test was run for each of the four possible responses to this form of civic participation (not participating and not considering it a social justice action, action only, considering it social justice only, and both considering it social justice and taking action) against all four conceptions of social justice (outcome, process, internal, external).

Based on this analysis, we found that only a few of the relationships were statistically significant. Table 4 reports the statistically significant results from the Fisher's exact tests.

Table 3
Civic Engagement, Social Justice and Action, Row Totals

Form of Civic Engagement	Item not social justice, action not undertaken	Undertake item action only	Item defined as social justice only	Both define as social justice and act	Total
Paying attention to news articles or media stories	6.76%	29.73%	2.70%	60.81%	100%
Researching a social justice problem	10.81%	18.92%	13.51%	56.76%	100%
Followed or joined an organization dedicated to social justice on social media	13.51%	9.46%	27.03%	50.00%	100%
Contacted the media about a social justice issue	14.86%	0.00%	85.14%	0.00%	100%
Contacted elected official who represents you	83.78%	16.22%	0.00%	0.00%	100%
Contacted elected official who does not represent you	90.54%	9.46%	0.00%	0.00%	100%
Attended a meeting on a social issue of importance to you	6.76%	6.76%	20.27%	66.22%	100%
Joined a club or group dedicated to a social cause	8.11%	2.70%	40.54%	48.65%	100%
Attending a protest	4.05%	4.05%	52.70%	39.19%	100%
Organized your own project or action related to a social justice issue	12.16%	0.00%	59.46%	28.38%	100%
Voting	17.57%	12%	39%	31%	100%
Donating money to a cause or organization	17.57%	12.16%	31.08%	39.19%	100%
Volunteering for an organization (not for class credit)	5.41%	2.70%	24.32%	67.57%	100%
Volunteering for an organization (for class credit)	17.57%	8.11%	35.14%	39.18%	100%

Table 4
Civic Participation and Understandings of Social Justice

Form of Civic Participation	Neither defined as social justice nor acted upon	Action only	Definition only	Both defined as social justice and acted upon
Researching a social justice problem		External(-)*		
Followed or joined an organization dedicated to social justice on social media	External(-)*			
Joined a club or group dedicated to a social cause	Outcome(-)† Process (+)†			
Organized your own project or action related to a social justice issue	Outcome(-)† Process(+)† Internal(+)* External(-)*		Process(-)† Outcome(+)† Internal(+)* External(-)*	
Voting			Process(-)† Internal(-)†	
Volunteering for an organization (not for class credit)	Internal(+)†			
Volunteering for an organization (for class credit)			Outcome(+)* Process(-)*	Outcome(+)** Process (-)**

†: p<.10   *: p<.05   **: p<.01
(-) less likely than expected
(+) more likely than expected

The second column in Table 4 focuses on respondents who do not consider a particular type of civic engagement to be a form of social justice and do not participate in this type of civic engagement personally. Students with an externally-oriented conception of social justice are less likely be in this category for A) following or joining an organization on social media, and are less likely to be in this category for B) organizing their own project or action related to a social justice issue. In contrast, internally-oriented students are more likely be in this category for A) organizing their own social justice projection or action, and B) to volunteering. Outcome-oriented students are less likely to be in this category for A) joining a club or organization and B) organizing one's own event or action. In contrast, process-oriented students are more likely to be found in this category for the same two types of civic engagement, A) joining a club or organization and B) organizing one's own event or action.

Columns three through five report whether or not students engaged in the form of civic engagement, understood the action to be a form of social justice or both. Students who maintain an externally oriented conception of social justice are less likely to research an issue and less likely to consider organizing their own project or action as a social justice action alone without taking real action. On the other hand, students who report an internally-oriented conception of social justice are more likely to consider organizing one's own project and less likely to consider voting as a social justice action.

Outcome-oriented students are more likely to consider organizing their own project as a social justice action, more likely to consider volunteering

for class credit to be a social justice action, and more likely to consider volunteering for class credit to be a social justice action and do such volunteering. On the other hand, students with process-oriented conceptions of social justice are less likely to see organizing their own project or action as a social justice action; are less likely to consider voting to be a social justice action; are less likely to see volunteering for class credit as a social justice action; and less likely to both think of volunteering for class credit as a social justice action and engage in such action themselves.

We find that there are statistically significant correlations between the conceptions of social justice held by students, the forms of civic engagement they understand to be social justice actions, and the types of civic engagement in which they participate. Assuming that ideas and ideals drive human action in the social world, these results indicate that social workers interested in social work practice need to be concerned about how conceptions of social justice may inform types of social work practice.

Discussion and Observations

While it is not possible to make generalizations from our small, non-random sample, the finding connecting individual conceptions of social justice to specific forms of civic engagement is noteworthy. Following in the vein of Reisch, and Gasker and Fisher this paper develops a context-specific definition of social justice for undergraduates in a social justice-oriented undergraduate minor. This demographic is especially important given the role of college campuses and undergraduate education to the development of social justice ideologies (Barnhart, 2014). While we cannot make claims about the broad distributions of these relationships in society, or even among undergraduate populations, our data shows that there is some connection between the conceptions of social justice articulated by the students and the types of civic engagement that they consider to be social justice actions and/or the forms of civic engagement in which they participate. Our claims imply that one of the goals of social work education should be helping social work students

clarify and understand how their conceptions of social justice can shape their practice. Furthermore, it implies that contemporary social work practice could itself be informed (or misinformed) by the multiple, conflicting understandings of social justice within the profession itself.

Second, some may be surprised that more than one-third of undergraduates came with a more process-oriented approach rather than an outcome-oriented one. This finding suggests that social work education may be more fruitful if we meet students where they are concerning understanding social justice rather than attempting to approach this contested terrain from a more outcomes-oriented perspective. This may also link to their stage of development in which students are often questioning social identities and becoming exposed to new ideas about power and privilege. One suggestion from our survey is that faculty may want to consider a focus more on connecting multiple understandings of social justice and linking process and outcome-oriented concepts. For example, Reisch and Garvin's (2016) text on social work and social justice helps students make connections across multiple perspectives of social justice and links those understandings to social work practice. Pyles (2014) similarly provides frameworks to connect the understanding of utilitarian framing of social justice issues to transformational approaches and practices.

Third, although related to actions, it is interesting to note that regardless of perspective, traditional notions of political engagement—voting, holding media accountable—were not actions that students took. For example, only 16% of students reported contacting their elected representatives but none saw it as a social justice action in and of itself, and 30% did not consider voting to be a social justice action. Again, this finding might be a function of student age (even being able to participate in voting), lack of experience with the political process, or their perspective on the efficacy of the political process. Given the political context in the United States and countries globally, it may be that college students are less apt to see the electoral political process (locally or nationally) as a place for action or a place that is

responsive to social justice issues. Similarly, we are interested to know if the lack of action toward the media has any connection to the rise in social media as a platform instead of traditional media or news sources. In any case, while more research needs to be done to explore these issues further, this does suggest the importance of understanding the link between social justice, social work students, and political engagement.

Our discussion must be understood within the context of our study's limitations, similar to the limitations of many non-experimental studies with small samples. We cannot, and do not attempt to, make any claims about the population distribution of the conceptions of social justice we identify. Likewise, we cannot make any explicit causal claim about the relationship between conceptions of social justice and actual social justice practices because it is not possible to randomly distribute individual conceptions of social justice.

Conclusion

The purpose of our study is to advance our knowledge in two fundamental ways. First, our research suggests that the field of social work should avoid purely "top down" conceptions of social justice derived from theory and philosophy and develop a "bottom-up" understanding of how student activists understand social justice, a folk conception of social justice. We need a better understanding of how students define and articulate social justice and to tease apart the purposes and meanings that they attach to the term. Indeed, this resonates with other scholarship that states that varying definitions of social justice and civic engagement can relate to an individual's own experiences and attitudes (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

Second, we demonstrate that there are relationships between these conceptions of social justice and the actions these students take in their lives. Conceptions of social justice appear to have a life of their own; they are constructed and reconstructed over time and influence the social justice actions people take in the world. This idea suggests the possibility of a reflexive relationship

between social justice conceptions and action, one influencing the other, developing in tandem over time. While this is important, it does suggest that students need opportunities to critically discuss conceptions of social justice and discuss actions and to be able to see the connections between the two.

The implications of these conclusions for social work and specifically social work education are profound. If individuals' conceptions of social justice are both distinct from theoretical models taught in social work programs and can shape how people engage in social action, then a line of research identifying and communicating a conception of social justice that supports empirical best practices is needed. Conceptions of social justice do not merely provide the endpoint goals of social work, or even inform the methods used to get there, but it appears they may also shape the actions people take. A theory of social justice then can be both simultaneously outcome and processed-based, and, if so, we must be able to help support students in critically grappling with the complexity and multi-dimensional frameworks that influence social justice conceptualizations.

In addition, this study raises questions for future research on social work students, social justice values, and action. Although ours was a limited sample, the fact that many students did not perceive voting and political engagement to be a social justice action should be of note for the field. While this may be related to student age and/or experience with the political process, we do think that it raises important questions about the relationship between electoral politics and social work. Given the current political climate, this study highlights the need for more scholarship around political social work as a practice and the placement of a curriculum on electoral politics and voting within social work education.

Gaining an understanding of these issues will help social researchers, educators, and social work practitioners have a clearer understanding of what individuals mean when they discuss social justice and how these definitions link to specific actions. How people understand social justice

and action is directly related to what they do. By understanding how students define social justice and how they translate their ideas into actions social work educators, researchers, and practitioners can develop curriculum and interventions that will promote lifelong activism.

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