



Voices From the Field: Social Workers Define and Apply Social Justice

Carole J. Olson , Caroline Reid , Norma Threadgill-Goldson , Holly A. Riffe & Pamela A. Ryan

To cite this article: Carole J. Olson , Caroline Reid , Norma Threadgill-Goldson , Holly A. Riffe & Pamela A. Ryan (2013) Voices From the Field: Social Workers Define and Apply Social Justice, Journal of Progressive Human Services, 24:1, 23-42, DOI: [10.1080/10428232.2013.740407](https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2013.740407)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2013.740407>



Published online: 27 Dec 2012.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 892



[View related articles](#)



Citing articles: 5 [View citing articles](#)

Voices From the Field: Social Workers Define and Apply Social Justice

CAROLE J. OLSON

*Department of Sociology, Social Work, & Criminology, Morehead State University,
Morehead, Kentucky, USA*

CAROLINE REID

*Department of Anthropology, Sociology, & Social Work,
Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, Kentucky, USA*

NORMA THREADGILL-GOLDSON

*Department of African American Studies, Eastern Kentucky University,
Richmond, Kentucky, USA*

HOLLY A. RIFFE

*Department of Social Work, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights,
Kentucky, USA*

PAMELA A. RYAN

Department of Philosophy, Morehead State University, Morehead, Kentucky, USA

Social justice is embraced as a central mission of social work, yet how the profession defines it lacks clear and common understanding. This qualitative study explored the concept of social justice as perceived and applied by social workers in diverse practice settings. Focus-group participants were asked five primary open-ended questions. Key phrases and terms were identified and grouped into four themes: variation in meaning of social justice, confronting injustices, practice reality, and professional responsibility. The findings suggest that social justice as understood and practiced in the field is compatible with theoretical conceptions in the literature, but a predominant understanding remains lacking.

KEYWORDS *social justice, social work, social work values, social workers*

Address correspondence to Carole J. Olson, Department of Sociology, Social Work, & Criminology, 355 Rader Hall, Morehead State University, Morehead, KY 40351, USA. E-mail: c.olson@morehead-st.edu

Social justice has long been embraced as a central mission of social work and a principle that constitutes the profession's organizing value and moral responsibility (Chu, Tsui, & Yan, 2009; Marsh, 2005; Swenson, 1998; Wakefield, 1998; While social work's values and interests overlap with those of other professions (e.g., psychology, medicine, ministry, education), it is the only profession "that identifies social justice as its central organizing value," lending social work its uniqueness and "competitive niche" among the various helping professions (Marsh, 2005, p. 293). Yet the manner in which the profession specifically defines social justice has been described as being conceptually murky with no clear or common understanding (Galambos, 2008; Longres & Scanlon, 2001; Reisch, 2002; Wakefield, 1998). A review of the social work literature over the past several decades serves to illustrate this point. Definitions of social justice are often vague and complex. Social justice is interlaced with the concepts of diversity, equal rights, individual liberty, social responsibility, and resource allocation (e.g., Segal, 2011; Snyder, Peeler, & May, 2008; Van Soest, Canon, & Grant, 2000). It raises complex questions concerning the balance between individual liberty and societal obligation. Reisch (2002) notes that the concept of social justice is easily obscured and questions the likelihood of developing a common meaning of the term, observing that "proponents of diametrically opposed visions of society, secular and religious, march under the banner of social justice" (p. 343).

Social justice occupies a prominent place in the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW; 2008) code of ethics as one of six core values in which the profession is rooted, the others being service, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Emanating from the value of social justice is the ethical principle "Social workers challenge social injustice," for which a definition is offered:

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. (NASW, 2008)

Galambos (2008) argues that this statement is a guide for conduct, not a definition. She suggests that the "definitions and application of social justice to professional and accreditation standards, the curriculum, and our practice environment suffer from a lack of clarity" (p. 2) and that the "the profession is not clear about the meaning and application of social justice" (p. 4). Resolution of this conceptual issue is identified as a priority for the profession (Galambos, 2008; Reisch, 2002; Wakefield, 1998). This is no easy task, given

that social justice raises complex issues and has been a subject of ongoing debate for thousands of years (Jackson, 2005; Miller, 1999)

Given this controversy, the current authors attempt to, first, provide a brief overview of the literature examining the definition of social justice for social work and, second, look to social workers in the field to understand how social justice is defined and applied in their daily lives. Finally, we engage in qualitative analysis to identify what appears clear and unclear about social workers' sense of social justice, and how these findings may contribute to the definition of social justice for social work.

DEFINING SOCIAL JUSTICE

The category of justice to which discussions in social work usually refer is distributive justice, which refers to the way economic and social goods, services, rights, and opportunities are distributed in a society. By way of comparison, another major category of justice is retributive, which involves consequences concerning those who commit injustices and those who have been harmed by them (Bent-Goodley, 2008; Iannone, 2001).

There are many competing theories of distributive justice spanning libertarian to socialist perspectives (e.g., Pojman, 2006; Roemer, 1996). In tracing the conceptual history of social justice, Jackson (2005) suggests it is a term that has developed to describe a particular modern conceptualization of distributive justice. While noting that theories of distributive justice go back at least two millennia, Jackson relates that the term *social justice* was introduced into scholarly discourse only in the late 19th century, evolving alongside the social sciences and notions of how it may be technically possible within an industrial, commercial society to eradicate poverty through redistribution of wealth. Miller (1999) relates that this liberal notion of social justice also arose in response to socialist challenges concerning private ownership of land, industry, and other means of producing wealth. According to Jackson, what distinguishes social justice from other concepts of distributive justice is that it refers to a social rather than an individual obligation; involves meeting people's needs as a matter of justice rather than charity; and places responsibility on a central authority, presumably government, to redistribute resources and alleviate poverty, need, and inequality.

Social work scholars often refer to Rawls's (1971) theory of distributive justice—elements of which are characterized as “the ideological basis for the modern welfare state” (Pojman, 2006, p. 138)—as being most compatible with social work ideals because of its emphasis on distributive principles that benefit society's least advantaged members. Among these scholars, Wakefield (1988, 1998) has provided some of the most definitive discourse. Based on Rawls's “justice as fairness” principles and concept of the “social minimum” (a minimally acceptable level of basic goods and opportunities to which everyone is entitled), Wakefield (1998) argues that

“distributive justice demands that no member of society be allowed to fall below a certain level of [economic, social and psychological] goods” (p. 28). Wakefield (1998) advocates for minimal distributive justice, “a narrower and more precise idea” (p. 26) than social justice, to serve as social work’s central organizing value, or the mission that defines it as a profession. Social work at its essence is concerned with ensuring that each individual has access to a minimally acceptable level of economic, social, and psychological goods and with helping people rise above that minimally acceptable level (Wakefield, 1988, p. 194). These goods include housing, medical and mental health care, educational and employment opportunities, and protection from abuse, exploitation, and deprivation. While social work encompasses myriad skills practiced in countless settings, it is this central mission of minimal distributive justice that unites the profession’s many branches, encompasses its traditional tasks, and makes sense of its disparate activities across the micro-macro spectrum (Wakefield, 1988).

TRANSLATING SOCIAL JUSTICE INTO PRACTICE

How social workers understand social justice has implications for how they view their roles in promoting it (see, e.g., Mullaly, 2001). As noted by Finn and Jacobson (2008), translation of social justice into concrete practice is fraught with challenges, given the concept’s broad and ambiguous meanings. Social workers may be committed to social justice in the abstract yet disagree on specific issues of application. Scholars have linked social justice to social work practice along the lines of multiple foci, among them: difference, dominance, and oppression; feminism; empowerment; and advocacy (Finn & Jacobson, 2008; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Parker, 2003; Smith, Chambers, & Bratini, 2009).

It is incumbent upon social work scholars and educators to understand and articulate ways contemporary social workers perceive and practice social justice. Interestingly, while there has been considerable discussion among social work scholars regarding social justice, there have been few attempts to explore the ways social workers in the field utilize the concept in their daily work. The current study represents an effort to hear the voices of practicing social workers who work to apply and promote social justice in their daily lives. In doing so, we hope this knowledge will inform our discourse on what social justice work actually comprises.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative methodology using focus groups. Eligibility for participation in the focus groups required a BSW or MSW

degree and current practice in a social work setting. Participants were drawn from a total of five areas—rural, small town, small city, suburban, and urban—in a Midwestern state. Six focus groups were conducted in 2009; each group averaged seven participants and lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes. The size and format of the focus groups followed recommendations in the literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Research Questions

The following research questions generated the information obtained in this study. Each focus group was guided by the following five questions:

1. How would you define social justice?
2. Can you give me an example or two of social injustices in your communities?
3. Can you give me any specific examples (or tell me a story) about how social justice techniques have been implemented in your community to solve an issue of injustice?
4. There's been a lot of talk about responsibility lately; how do you think responsibility fits into the discussion we've been having?
5. Is there anything that we haven't discussed that should be added?

Measures

In addition to asking the above questions, researchers elicited and probed new areas mentioned by participants, allowing naturally occurring themes to emerge (Fern, 2001; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). The research team also obtained demographic and employment data (e.g., age, race, length of time in practice, and setting of primary practice) for each of the participants.

Procedure

The research team used a snowball sampling approach (Neuman, 1997) through personal and professional contacts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994). The participants were of diverse backgrounds and worked in varying practice settings, which resulted in achieving maximum variation in the sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). E-mails were sent to social workers inviting them to participate in a study “to better understand the lived experiences of social workers with regard to social justice” and to participate “in a focus group . . . to share their thoughts about how social workers define and participate in social justice.”

Following an approved human subjects' protocol, study procedures were explained to participants, and informed consent was obtained on the

day of the focus group. As an incentive to participate and to allow for uninhibited discussions, all groups were conducted in private rooms and light snacks were provided. Each group was audio-recorded and immediately transcribed. The data were entered into a computer-assisted qualitative design software program, ATLAS.ti 5.0, which assisted in organizing and analyzing the data and in coding and identifying emerging themes (Muhr, 2004). Analysis of the data resulted in several themes and concepts. The four-member research team read all transcripts in detail, and one transcript was coded by all the researchers for the purpose of establishing uniformity of coding and generating a code list. The process followed the constant comparative method of grounded theory, comparing and refining codes throughout the data analysis process with the goal of data reduction and the development of themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Ryan and Bernard (2003) themes may come from “already-agreed-upon professional definitions, from local common-sense constructs, and from researchers’ values, theoretical orientation, and personal experience with the subject matter” (p. 88). Researchers then discussed all codes and developed consensus regarding the content and definitions of a coding scheme. Inclusion of all team members in these discussions helped validate interpretation of comments and themes. Independent data coding and finding a high degree of inter-rater reliability enhanced the credibility and authenticity of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The code list developed was used for re-coding the remaining transcripts which re-generated additional codes.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

The study included six focus groups with a total of 41 social work practitioners from diverse settings in urban and rural communities in one Midwestern state. Their practice settings were mostly hospital/medical (34%); substance abuse treatment (15%); and public schools (12%), with the remainder from domestic violence and homelessness programs, juvenile justice, mental health, protective services, community development, administration, and one church. The majority of the participants (66%) held MSW degrees and the rest BSW degrees. Eighty-eight percent self-identified as white/Caucasian and 12% as African American or Hispanic/Latino. Ages ranged from 21 to 65 years, with the median age between 25 and 35. The average years of practice was 10. The participants worked in varying community localities: urban, 23%; suburban, 11%, small cities (defined as less than 150,000 residents), 20%; small towns (less than 50,000), 34%; and rural, 11%.

By way of comparison, the racial makeup for this study's participants was similar to that of NASW's regular members, at 87% white/Caucasian (NASW, 2003). However, our participants were generally younger, less educated, and less experienced than NASW members, of whom the median age is 50; 91% hold MSW degrees, and the typical member has 16 years of social work experience (NASW, 2003). NASW is the largest organization of professional social workers, but its membership is voluntary, so it may not be representative of social workers generally.

Major Themes

Four major themes (along with several sub-themes) emerged from the interview data: (a) variation in meaning of social justice, (b) confronting injustices, (c) practice reality, and (d) professional responsibility (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Major Themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Major Concepts
Variation in meaning of social justice	Variant 1: Conventional	Typical concepts
	Variant 2: Moral obligation	Right thing to do Codified in law
	Variant 3: Value-based	Subjective Ideological perspectives
Confronting injustices	Conventional actions	Advocacy (micro/mezzo/macro) Agenda building Knowledge building Grassroots intervention
	Nonconventional actions: Circumventing/ manipulating the system	
Practice reality	Consequences of injustice for clients	Impact of injustice ingrained/sustained Clients endangering selves to access resources
	Community barriers to social change	Insensitivity, incompetence, ineffective policies Ethnic stereotypes and other forms of discrimination Interprofessional conflicts
	Personal risk and burnout	Inadequate time for advocacy or follow-up Resignation, frustration, apathy
Professional responsibility	Professional issues	Social justice as ideal of profession Practice skills (e.g., empathy, listening, critical thinking)

VARIATION IN MEANING OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Variant 1: Conventional. When asked how they define social justice, the dominant view of participants was consistent with conventional expectations. Many participants started with concepts such as fairness, equality, equal opportunity, and equal access to resources, particularly health care. As the conversations progressed, references to freedom, advocacy, human rights, social responsibility, and civil liberty emerged. One participant distinguished fairness from equality:

I think of it as more than equality; it's fairness, because something might be equal, but it's still not fair because this person didn't have the opportunity. So, do we want to be equal, or do we want to be fair? Because this person might need more than the other person, so it's not equal, but it ends up being fair.

It appears this participant supports the idea that social justice sometimes requires treating people differently, or unequally, in order to achieve fairness of opportunity.

Participants discussed the connection of social justice to the distribution of society's resources, generally embracing the idea that everyone is entitled to a decent standard of living and well-being. One informant stated that everyone should have "equal access to resources that people need in order to have a healthful life," while another added, "Everyone is entitled to certain basic needs being met, including their emotional and relational [needs]."

There were frequent acknowledgments of the difficulty encountered in providing equal access to resources and opportunities when funding and resources are limited. Some participants associated the meaning of social justice with the issue of responsibility, acknowledging both government as well as private-sector responsibility in meeting the demand for scarce resources, as represented in this statement:

It doesn't always come from the government. Sometimes we need things in our community, tapping into the resources of local businesses, perhaps, and for-profit arenas where they can help fill the gap, because I think there will always be an issue of competing for these limited resources.

Variant 2: Moral obligation. Morals and values quickly emerged as sub-themes of defining social justice. One member stated that it is "the right thing to do" and equated action with "moral obligation," adding that any action is based on the "legal framework of our society." That is, according to this view, society's moral obligations are codified in our legal system. Another participant noted that social justice involved working for the common good.

Participants seemed to think that moral obligation differs from a value-based ideological perspective in that morals reflect social standards of right and wrong, or what people owe one another as a matter of justice.

Variant 3: Value-based. Values were characterized by participants as subjective and open to a variety of interpretations, as in the statement from one person that “what is social justice to me is not going to be social justice to everyone else.” Some participants viewed social justice as a concept that has meaning only in the context of a particular ideological perspective. According to one participant, social justice values overlap with social work values, but often those same social justice issues are debated and defined differently by people with differing ideological perspectives (e.g., as regards the issues of abortion and same-sex marriage).

CONFRONTING INJUSTICES

Participants confronted perceived social injustices using a number of approaches that are consistent with conventional expectations—categorized below as “conventional actions”—including advocacy with micro, mezzo, and macro systems; agenda building; dissemination of knowledge; grassroots intervention; mass community action; and strategic planning. An additional emergent theme concerns actions that may be seen as resting outside of conventional expectations and are categorized below as non-conventional actions.

Social injustices that participants identified in their work with clients included clients’ being denied access to services; discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and personal conditions exacerbated by poor socio-environmental circumstances, such as homelessness, mental health problems, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system; and chronic conditions of poverty, joblessness, and poor health care. Participants noted discriminatory policies impacting specific groups; for example, “gays and lesbians are denied the opportunity to adopt [children] . . . [which is] legally sanctioned discrimination.” When faced with situations that participants perceived as unjust, particularly when those injustices occurred within their own agencies and institutions, social workers had to make decisions about how to intervene.

Conventional actions. Conventional actions included advocacy for change in institutional care, such as nursing homes or residential substance-abuse programs. Some participants reported being responsible for addressing issues of discrimination toward women in drug treatment and their lack of access to quality care. Additionally, they felt responsible for change in community perception of people with histories of substance abuse. “So we’ve done a lot of work around that [community perceptions] in the hospitals and stuff, advocating for our clients in that area and trying to get rid of that stigma that we talked about with drug users.”

Community prevention and education programs were implemented to confront social injustices. A rape crisis center implemented a long-term program in the high schools with the goal “. . . to decrease violence. Not just sexual violence, but pretty much any violence” by creating a system that establishes a critical mass that promotes community safety and change. The participant likened this change effort to those that promoted change in attitudes considered racist in this society. An outreach advocate was hired by an agency to raise community awareness regarding human trafficking. Knowledge building, agenda building, and lobbying were directed toward policy decision makers in various settings, such as schools, hospitals, local agencies, and programs. Elected officials also were seen as essential to change.

Participants noted that systematic attempts to tackle social injustices necessitated the development of concrete long-term strategies to address injustice in service delivery, particularly for people who are homeless. One participant related how her community developed a “. . . ten-year plan to open up our low income housing [and] make some of it transitional apartments” for individuals and families that are homeless so they could establish residences and thus be able to access other social services sooner.

One participant referred to community-level change as “maximizing the democracy that’s available to you.” For example, to curtail the illegal drug use and trade in a community, social workers focused on the owners of properties that were being used for drug dealing and the owners’ legal responsibility to bring the buildings up to code. The code-enforcement policies were utilized to dissuade the use of abandoned buildings for the illicit drug trade.

An example of mezzo-level consciousness-raising that may have a ripple effect in the community was related by this participant:

I always find it very challenging and interesting when I go do presentations, like, with the Rotary Club or Exchange Club—these clubs that are primarily older, white men. And here I am talking about domestic violence. What I try to do is humanize it, because everybody in that room has a mother, a sister, or daughter. It’s changing people’s thinking on things, and being able to do that on whatever level you possibly can has to trickle up or trickle down at some point, right? Hopefully, when he goes back to the bank after lunch today, somehow he’s going to put that message out again.

Effective micro advocacy strategies also were employed to challenge social injustices. One participant gave an example of advocating for clients with severe and persistent mental illness who were being discriminated against because of their diagnoses:

I advocated for the patients to be able to live in the most independent types of settings and be able to engage with work places that offer supported employment . . . anytime I work with a patient or a client, you know, they have a name, and they have an identity, and just because they have a medical issue that's not who they are.

Non-conventional actions: Circumventing/manipulating the system. Participants noted that conventional actions did not always work for the best interests of the client and vividly discussed their efforts to make viable change that often entailed circumventing or manipulating rules and regulations. For instance, one worker used professional influence to circumvent policy and redirect the outcome in a case that benefited an indigent hospice client:

If a person dies in a given county, and there is no money for burial, the county's going to pay for the burial. . . . But you get buried wherever they tell you. The patient wanted to be buried next to his wife in his home county. Although against agency policy, we had a hospice bed that became available in his home county, so we transferred him so that he could die and be buried in his home county.

The following is an example of manipulating the system and perhaps stretching ethical boundaries for the benefit of clients:

. . . if you're on Social Security . . . and you die on September 29th you don't get your Social Security check for that month. . . . The doctor had recommended hospice [thus discontinuing aggressive care], and the family said, "but we have nothing to bury her with and we need that check." So I remember asking the doctor if he could hold off a couple of days with his hospice order until that month passed and they—the family—could get the check to bury the person with.

PRACTICE REALITY

Practice reality refers to adverse circumstances participants observed regarding their clients and communities that they lacked resources and methods to change. It also includes the effects of these frustrations on the social workers personally. These discussions emerged spontaneously from participants' responses to our questions. Frequent references were made to the lack of economic resources and the resulting frustration for the client and social worker, as represented in this statement:

I think that a lack of funding is a huge deal. I know a lot of programs have been cut or diminished, and they can't offer services to families, and as social workers it's hard to find people the help they need when it's

not available. And these families become frustrated, and they're looking at you, saying, "You're supposed to help me."

Three thematic subcategories that emerged within the context of participants' practice realities were "consequences of social injustice on clients," "community barriers to working for social change," and "personal risk and burnout."

Consequences of social injustice on clients. According to participants, consequences of social injustice included serious and long-term impacts of chronic social and economic conditions, such as poverty, joblessness, and inadequate access to health care, on individuals, families, communities, and society at large. Examples included family disengagement, child maltreatment, seemingly unending cycles of poverty and need, self-endangerment, and client feelings of futility. "People come to feel hopeless because we [members of society] are not taking care of each other." One participant described the fatalism she perceived among some members of a previously self-sufficient rural culture that for recent generations has been caught in long-term poverty due to chronic under- and unemployment:

In this area, I mean in Appalachia, 70 years ago you had all these very poor families that were taking care of themselves, and that is not happening now. They had so much pride in their family, they had a huge garden, they were always clean, you know, all these different things. They made sure they were going to school and learning. . . . And we've gotten in these very sedentary mindsets that whatever is going on now . . . this is just how it is . . . we're all just, you know, not trying to do any better. . . .

Participants noted that children and older adults are especially vulnerable populations when they are dependent on impoverished adults. For instance, a medical social worker stated that the hospital sees ". . . an inordinate number of children who come into the ER for abuse; nine out of ten are children whose families are receiving government medical assistance." In this case the social worker connects the abuse to poverty, even though it may be that more affluent victims of abuse are seen in other contexts. Another stated, "I work with pediatrics and new mothers, and on a daily basis I see these little kids going home to these families where, you know, no one in the family is healthy."

Other participants gave examples of people endangering themselves to qualify for resources. One social worker gave an example of a homeless woman who came into a hospital emergency room having purposely overdosed on Zoloft in an effort to qualify for disability. The participant quoted the woman as saying, "If I get my disability check first then I could find a place to live."

Another described this incident concerning a pregnant woman:

[She] had been in a relationship, ended the relationship, found out she was pregnant, I think [the man who impregnated her] ended up committing suicide. . . . Her plan was to have an abortion, but because of her morning sickness she'd missed so much work she lost her job; she didn't have money. So she went on a drug binge trying to abort the baby. So by this time she wants drug treatment, she wants an abortion, but if she's not pregnant she loses her [Medicaid] which will cover drug treatment. So she has to stay pregnant to get the drug treatment because if she had the abortion then she gets no drug treatment.

Some participants spoke of how poverty exacerbates the cycle of illegal drug use and judicial system involvement, as in this example:

We tend to prosecute people really quick [for illegal drug possession], and then people go to jail or prison, and [afterward] they can't get a job, and then when they finally get a job they can't make enough money to [support] the family, they can't stay in treatment. I mean, it's just a mess.

Community barriers in working for social change. Many participants related that there are no easy solutions, no quick fixes, in addressing perceived social injustices. They noted numerous barriers, including other professionals and organizations working with the client system that impede social justice work. For example, participants noted the following factors in other professionals and social programs that hampered their efforts: insensitivity toward vulnerable groups, families, and clients; treating only the symptoms of a problem and not the source; "diagnosing without assessing"; incompetence; lack of creativity and motivation; and ineffective policies. Examples are found in these statements: "It's easier [for the client] to keep the addiction than get treated" and "We have one [homeless] shelter, but people can only check in after 5 o'clock . . . and they can only get up to 30 days of service."

Ethnic stereotypes. Other barriers to social justice included judgmental and discriminatory attitudes especially encountered in local communities that are predominantly white/Caucasian and lack ethnic diversity. One participant stated:

What we're trying to do is reach out to the Hispanic population here in [city name], and a lot of times there's an assumption that they're undocumented and they're not worthy of the equality that is granted to everyone else as a citizen.

Interprofessional conflict. Other community barriers to social justice involved conflict with other professionals regarding service provision and

attitudes regarding care, and the lack of political will on the part of some politicians and decision makers to address insufficient resources. However, some participants noted that real social change comes from efforts initiated by grassroots interventions, as one participant shared:

If I wanted more money in social services, where would I get it from? And I think that's what our legislators are facing. You can rant and rave all you want and push for this, and maybe today this group gets it, the next day that group gets it, and then with the next president, somebody else gets it. I mean, it's constantly changing, and to me any type of real social change has to be grassroots because that's the only way it ever makes it up to the legislators.

Personal risk and burnout. Some participants voiced that social workers themselves may “lack conviction and courage and can be a hindrance to change.” They may be afraid to take risks, and some may not “. . . agree about what's the right change.” This was amplified when a participant responded in the following way to another participant's story:

That is really putting yourself out on the line, and that is awesome, and it's great, and I'd like to think I would do the same thing, but there's also—it's kind of scary to make that many waves, kind of scary to make that much noise and to try to make that much change—that's scary.

One respondent noted the constraints on practitioners' time in the struggle to promote social justice: “When you're already working 50 hours a week, how do you make time to go to Capitol Hill and be, like, ‘this is what we need, this is what's going on?’”

Many participants recognized personal hurdles that interfered with their abilities to continue exerting themselves in promoting social justice. For example, participants related feelings of disenchantment and apathy, which they likened to symptoms of burnout. Many spoke of states of chronic frustration and futility, sometimes overlooking underlying social justice issues or simply not having time to address “so many problems.” One participant explained how it may be difficult for social workers to stay motivated in their work:

We tend to get overwhelmed at times. . . . We're always working with someone else's issues, you know, it does tend to wear people down, and I think that's the burnout . . . after a couple years [social workers] are ready to give it up and move on to another profession.

Another participant related,

I think you have professionals that are totally disenchanted. You know, people are so burned out and worn out with the continuous presentation of these family units and just the day-in and day-out, the revolving door of these families where somebody's addicted or someone's in jail. . . .

Other participants revealed how confronting countless difficult situations may require them to protect their emotional well-being and personal health:

I think whichever aspect of the field we work in, we hear horrible stories every day that after a while you have to be able to somewhat distance yourself emotionally so that you are able to sleep at night and you don't have ulcers. . . .

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Despite the feelings of risk, frustration, and vulnerability to burnout, participants expressed commitment to their professional and ethical responsibilities as social workers and their "ideal to create more fairness and greater equality." One stated, "You have to kind of remind yourself, you know, in the face of conversation with people, what your purpose is and not get blinded by the system frustrations, because we deal with those."

Others took comfort in their practice skills and values. "As the social worker [on the medical team], at least I think I had good training to have some degree of empathy." Another medical social worker related,

God gave me two ears and one mouth, so I listen a lot, and I figure the more I listen, the more I can really hear what they're saying. . . . See, if I were in this situation, and I didn't have family support, I might be in the same situation, there but for the grace of God. So you try to tailor each case individually so you don't get in a rut—"Oh, here's another COPD, oh, here's another this, another that"—and that keeps you from . . . looking [only] at the diagnosis and [not] the person. . . . And that's what keeps the challenge up.

Critical thinking and problem solving were emphasized with this example:

Here's a drug addict, here's how everybody deals with him; what can you do differently with someone with this kind of problem? So we have that obligation, I think, to think outside the box and not get stagnant in our approach and our work, because [if] you do that you will get burned out and frustrated.

Last, a participant reasoned,

Yeah, we're dealing with people that most times caused their own problem, but it's not my job to correct that problem. It's to show them what options there are, because, like we said earlier, sometimes they don't know what the options are, and even when you give it to them, they think, "God, do I really want to do that?" But if they're a challenge, and as long as they're a challenge, I'm going to keep doing this job because I feel like there are some people you can make a difference with and some you can't, but at least you give it your best shot.

DISCUSSION

One finding of the current study is the overall compatibility between participants' definitions and applications of social justice and the social work literature on the topic. For instance, participants spoke of fairness, equal rights and opportunity, social responsibility, resource redistribution, and decent standards of living. They used the "language of social justice" (Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001), such as empowerment, advocacy, and rights. Participants' narratives further suggested that they practice and promote social justice in concert with the profession's value of social justice as defined in the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008) and cited early in this article. The narratives reflect other core values of social work as well, which perhaps should fall under the banner of social justice, such as service ("Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems") and the dignity and worth of the person ("Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person"; NASW, 2008). This consistency may be a reflection of their social work educations, or that people who hold the values and beliefs espoused by our participants and NASW are drawn to the profession, or a combination. Nevertheless, this demonstrates "that even in conservative times, the social justice legacy of the profession remains strong" (Reisch, 2002, p. 348).

The social justice concepts and practices that emerged from the focus groups were compatible with the social justice literature and values of the profession, but a second finding concerns the lack of a predominant or consensual definition of social justice, supporting the observations of other authors that social work lacks a clear and common understanding of this concept. Participants' definitions were vague and broad (e.g., values, morals, fairness, equal rights). This vagueness may be a reflection of the lack of conceptual clarity in social work education regarding social justice (Galambos, 2008; Reisch, 2002). There is indication that social work educators are themselves sometimes at a loss to provide more than broad definitions of social justice based on varying understandings of the concept (Longres & Scanlon, 2001). An implication of this finding for social work educators generally is that when they refer to social justice in the classroom, they should not assume its meaning is simple or obvious to students.

As regards our fourth question to focus groups, “How do you think responsibility fits into the discussion?” (i.e., beyond its application to defining social justice), participants realized that social workers cannot shoulder the entire burden evident in situations of social injustice, but that alleviation of these circumstances is the responsibility of the combination of client, social worker, community, and government. However, even with this understanding, one respondent noted in her reference to intergenerational poverty and abuse that “at some point, the problem is on us.” In this case, the “us” may be social work’s imperative to assume a leading role in macro-level policy development and implementation.

Finally, spontaneous group discussions gave voice to the personal frustrations and vulnerabilities that hamper social workers’ perseverance in the struggle for social justice and pose a threat to retention in the profession. This may be attributable to social workers’ advocacy of social justice as informed by a liberal paradigm, that is, theories of justice that seek to equalize the impact of society’s burdens and benefits, while also working in conjunction with social programs that are under siege, and in a society that can appear dominated by neoliberal and conservative views of social welfare. This is consistent with Mullaly’s (2001) discussion of the contextual changes of the last several decades that have resulted in reductions in social expenditures at a time when social and economic needs have increased, leaving social workers “caught in a social service system that is under-funded, understaffed, overloaded with demand and operated along industrial production lines. . . .” (p. 306). At the same time as participants voiced frustration and vulnerability to burnout, they recognized their own obligations and prerogatives as autonomous professional social workers to use the resources they have at their disposal—resources that include their social work knowledge, skills and values—to meet the tangible and intangible needs of their clients as well as they can.

Study Limitations

This study was conducted in a single, Midwestern state with a small sample of social workers; therefore, any conclusions can be considered only for this group and may not generalize to the broader population of social workers. In addition, the questions for focus groups were intentionally worded in a broad and general manner with the goal of eliciting spontaneous views and generating broad discussions. Consequently, words like community can mean neighborhood or region, and responsibility may mean individual or societal. However, a disadvantage of this approach is that our questions did not attempt to generate responses to specific aspects of social justice, for instance, in regard to its application to practice situations in which issues of social justice may be especially prominent. It should be noted that, despite this limitation, participant responses reflected a diversity of views regarding

the meaning and application of social justice. Last, the participants were given the opportunity to define social justice but also to discuss injustices. This may have biased their later discussions toward negative associations of social justice.

Future Directions

Our participants appeared to embrace and practice social justice consistently with the values of the profession, but this study did not identify a concise or predominant definition of social justice based on social workers' lived experiences; in fact, our findings reflect a lack of clarity. However, it is part of an important discussion concerning how social justice should be conceived. As social work proceeds into the future, it needs a coherent, defensible concept of social justice. Social justice may contain our moral obligations and our values all rolled up into one, as our participants related, but it may be time we defined our endgame. We need to know what goal we seek and what we want our concept of social justice to do. To shy away from this exercise leaves our stated mission open to derision by political commentators who dismiss social justice as ideological code words for socialism or communism (e.g., Goodstein, 2010) and criticism from other scholars who view social work's social justice mission as tantamount to political indoctrination in the classroom (National Association of Scholars, 2007). If we can reach a clearer definition of social justice, we will have clearer goals to attain and better measurements of progress toward that defined goal. This will help to advance social work knowledge in relation to efforts to attain a socially just society.

REFERENCES

- Bent-Goodley, T. B. (2008). Social and economic justice. In K. M. Sowers & C. N. Dulmus (Series Eds.) & B. W. White (Vol. Ed.), *Comprehensive handbook of social work and social welfare: Vol. 1. The profession of social work* (pp. 419–440). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (1994). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (2nd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Chu, W. C. K., Tsui, M., & Yan, M. (2009). Social work as moral and political practice. *International Social Work, 52*, 287–298.
- Fern, E. F. (2001). *Advanced focus group research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Finn, J. L., & Jacobson, M. (2008). Social justice. In T. Mizrahi & L. E. Davis (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of social work*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Galambos, C. (2008). From the editor: A dialogue on social justice. *Journal of Social Work Education, 44*, 1–5.

- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing.
- Goodstein, L. (March 11, 2010). Outraged by Glenn Beck's salvo, Christians fire back. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/12/us/12justice.html>
- Gutierrez, L. & Lewis, E. (1999). *Empowering women of color*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Hawkins, L., Fook, J., & Ryan, M. (2001). Social workers' use of the language of social justice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, 1–13.
- Iannone, A. P. (2001). Justice. *Dictionary of world philosophy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jackson, B. (2005). The conceptual history of social justice. *Political Studies Review*, 3, 356–373.
- Kitzinger, J., & Barbour, R. S. (1999). Introduction: The challenge and promise of focus groups. In R. S. Barbour & J. Kitzinger (Eds.), *Developing focus group research: Politics, theory and practice* (pp. 1–20). London, UK: Sage.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Longres, J. F., & Scanlon, E. (2001). Social justice and the research curriculum. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 37, 447–461.
- Marsh, J. C. (2005). Social justice: Social work's organizing value. *Social Work*, 50, 293–294.
- Miller, D. (1999). *Principles of social justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Muhr, T. (2004). User's manual for ATLAS.ti (2nd ed.). Berlin, Germany: Scientific Software Development.
- Mullaly, B. (2001). Confronting the politics of despair: Toward the reconstruction of progressive social work in a global economy and postmodern age. *Social Work Education*, 20, 303–320.
- NASW. (2003). *Practice research network: Demographics of social workers*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialworkers.org/naswprn/default.asp>
- NASW. (2008). *Code of ethics of the national association of social workers*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/codeNew/code.asp>
- National Association of Scholars. (2007). The scandal of social work education. Retrieved from <http://www.nas.org/polPressReleases.cfm>
- Neuman, W. L. (1997). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Parker, L. (2003). A social justice model for clinical social work practice. *Affilia*, 18, 272–288.
- Pojman, L. P. (2006). *Justice: An anthology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Reisch, M. (2002). Defining social justice in a socially unjust world. *Families in Society*, 83, 343–354.
- Roemer, J. E. (1996). *Theories of distributive justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Ryan, G., & H. R. Bernard. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods*, 15, 85–109.

- Segal, E. A. (2011). Social empathy: A model built on empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility that promotes social justice. *Journal of Social Service Research, 37*, 266–277.
- Smith, L., Chambers, D-A, & Bratini, L. (2009). When oppression is the pathogen: The participatory development of socially just mental health practice. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 79*, 159–168.
- Snyder, C., Peeler, J., & May, J. D. (2008). Combining human diversity and social justice education: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Social Work Education, 44*, 145–161.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Swenson, C. R. (1998). Clinical social work's contribution to a social justice perspective. *Social Work, 43*, 527–537.
- Van Soest, D., Canon, R., & Grant, D. (2000). Using an interactive website to educate about cultural diversity and societal oppression. *Journal of social work education, 36*, 463–479.
- Wakefield, J. C. (1988). Psychotherapy, distributive justice, and social work. Part I: Distributive justice as a conceptual framework. *Social Service Review, 62*, 187–210.
- Wakefield, J. C. (1998). Psychotherapy, distributive justice, and social work revisited. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 69*, 25–57.