Measuring Undergraduate Social Work Students' Knowledge and Understanding of Privilege and Oppression

Allessia P. Owens-King[1], Becky Anthony[2], Victoria M. Venable[3], Jennifer R. Jewell[4]

ABSTRACT: The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) expects practitioner training to include strategies for effective practice with individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds (CSWE, 2015). Additionally, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) sets standards for cultural competence and professional conduct in an attempt to eradicate unfair treatment (NASW, 2001). To align with these accreditation and professional organization guidelines, schools of social work need to be more deliberate about teaching diversity, inclusion, social justice (Greeno, Fedina, Rushovich, Moore, Linsenmeyer, & Wirt, 2017). Social work educators aim to train students on diverse client needs and to promote equality. Yet, there is limited research on the effectiveness of educational efforts regarding students' knowledge or awareness of equity issues. Educators must begin to proactively assess the extent to which students are prepared to work with diverse clients and advocate for social justice. To this end, this research study measures the impact of a course created to explore the concepts of privilege and oppression on undergraduate social work students. An online survey was designed to answer three (3) research questions about students' knowledge, understanding, and values concerning diversity. Findings from this research project can inform social work course development, curriculum enhancements, and diversity education efforts. Examining the effectiveness of social work educational efforts in these areas is particularly urgent, given our current social climate in the United States, where respect for differences is undervalued.

Keywords: diversity, privilege, oppression, social work education

1. Introduction

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation standards and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) professional guidelines encourage educational institutions to instruct students on diverse client needs and to promote social justice. To this end, faculty

---

[1] *Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Salisbury University, USA*
[2 & 3] *Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Salisbury University, USA*
[4] *Professor, School of Social Work, Salisbury University, USA*

introduced a stand-alone course to the bachelor's social work curriculum, a course devoted to privilege and oppression subject matter. In the past privilege and oppression, concepts were integrated into other course curricula, principally in social work practice with individuals, families, and groups as well as social work practice with communities. The present study outlines the resulting impact of the course on undergraduate social work students' grasp of privilege, oppression, power, and other diversity concepts. Examining the effectiveness of social work educational efforts regarding privilege and oppression helps fill gaps in our knowledge base around instructional approaches. Efforts in these areas are particularly urgent, as we prepare students to enter the profession given our current social climate where respect for differences is often undervalued.

The current social climate in the United States is riddled with intolerance, judgment, ethnocentrism, and various other "isms." Consequently, social work educators should not presume that social work students are knowledgeable and prepared enough to appropriately navigate these issues in practice, which often stem from unrecognized privilege and systemic oppression. In fact, we assert that social work educators should assume that students are less aware than they need to be about mainstream privilege and systematic oppression to be effective in practice. By taking this position, social work educators can proactively address social biases that can damage rapport, alliance building, and collaboration, which lie at the heart of social work intervention (Abrams & Moio, 2009). As social work educators, we hope that results from this study can be used to inform teaching strategies and future curriculum changes to ensure that social work students have the foundational knowledge needed to engage diverse clients and communities.

Theoretical basis

The social work profession highlights the importance of diverse perspectives when providing support to underserved and traditionally marginalized groups. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) expects that practitioner training includes strategies for effective practice with individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds. Social work educators are expected to provide opportunities for students to self-reflect and utilize their own self-knowledge to shape personal anti-oppressive and anti-racist social work practice (CSWE, 2015). In addition, The International Federation of Social Workers (2012; 2018) affirms that social workers need an understanding of how oppressive injustices impact people at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels of care. These guiding social work organizations highlight the need for schools of social work to not

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

only teach diversity and social justice concepts but also encourage student self-reflection on their privileges and oppressions and how this shapes their current worldview.

Social workers with unacknowledged and unchecked bias can negatively impact client recovery as a result of countertransference and the use of inappropriate color-blind approaches in treatment (Loya, 2011; Thorn, & Sarata, 1998). A biased social worker can make persons of color reluctant to self-disclose, which hinders the establishment of a therapeutic alliance and treatment progression (Hall & Jones, 2017; Priester, Pitner, & Lackey, 2019; Williamson, 2012). Social work educators' must help students understand that acknowledging the social context in which behaviors occur may improve clients' insight, which in turn may assist with client progress after treatment has ended. Furthermore, social work students must understand that acknowledging one's privilege does not constitute pity toward the client's circumstances. On the contrary, it can invoke the practice of advocating on behalf of clients and may help the practitioners to better attend to the needs of clients.

Critical Social Work Theory

The course examined throughout this study incorporated critical social work theory (CSWT) to help students' grasp privilege, oppression, power, and other diversity concepts. Critical social work theory (CSWT) grew from various critical theories that include critical race theory (CRT). CRT is a framework used by social scientists to examine the political and social impact of race on power dynamic, policy, and personal interactions (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2017; Kolivoski, Weaver, & Constance-Huggins, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Mutua, 2010; Tate, 1997).

Like CTR, CSWT acknowledges that social and interpersonal problems are oftentimes a result of oppression, institutionalized inequalities, microaggression, overt aggression, and injustice within societies (Payne, 2018; Sue, Nadal, Capodilupo, Lin, Torino, & Rivera, 2008). Furthermore, CSWT supports the position that social work students should respond and act to eliminate institutionalized oppression (Abram et al., 2009; Wallengren Lynch, Ryan-Bengtsson, & Hollertz, 2019; Kolivoski et al., 2014). This theory also aligns with fundamental tenants of the social work profession, namely, respect for diversity, promoting inclusion, and upholding social justice.

Educators who incorporate Critical Social Work Theory into their social work courses can help students explore personal privilege and experiences with oppression then begin to identify and speak out against unjust practices and policies within the profession. In addition to utilizing CSWT as a guiding theory in social work courses, professors have a responsibility to create safer

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

spaces to help students critically reflect on their own experiences and cultures while also providing a space where students can discuss diversity (Hollinrake, Hunt, Dix, & Wagner, 2019). Professors also need to model the process of lifelong learning, as highlighted by the social work code of ethics (NASW, 2017). They can do this by helping students see that social work educators are self-reflective and challenging their own privileges (Hill-Collins, 2002; Gines, 2015). Instructors of the course examined for this study utilized CSWT to guide instruction, assignment development, and discussions both face to face and online.

Research support

In 2002, Bronstein, Berman-Rossi, and Winfield suggested that students and faculty had differing viewpoints about the quality of learning occurring on the topics of privilege and oppression. Specifically, professors felt that they were teaching more content than students reported learning. This study highlights an ongoing conversation continued within social work education. For instance, Bhuyana, Bejana & Jeyapalb (2017) suggested that social work students often fail to identify the connection between social justice theories and practice application. The authors indicated that graduate students experienced a disconnect between the social justice concepts learned in class and the application to direct social work practice.

Furthermore, students felt that the skills needed to combat oppression were not valued as much as clinical skills, such as the utilization of cognitive-behavioral theory interventions (Bhuyana, Bejana, & Jeyapalb, 2017). For some students, this disconnect to practice could cause them to devalue social justice education, including topics of privilege and oppression. Additionally, students might focus their learning more on clinical skills in hopes of securing employment after graduation and unwittingly neglect developing skills that would make them strong advocates for clients and communities.

In a study conducted in 2017, CSWE (2018) reported that over 50% of bachelor's and master's students in the United States identify as white. Therefore, it becomes imperative that social work students, especially those from the dominant racial group, such as white students in the United States, become aware of their privilege and actively engage in critical self-reflection (Lee & Greene, 2003).

Previous studies (Davis, 2019; Miller, Donner, & Frasher, 2004) noted that students who had taken a class about privilege and oppression or had participated in social justice advocacy-based activities were more likely to understand systemic racism. However, the first-time white

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

social work students learn and engage with concepts of privilege they can be resistant to the idea that they have social power in the form of privilege (Davis, 2019). This resistance means that these students might be unable to critically self-reflect and that they also might shut down from this learning opportunity, thus limiting their ability to better understand people from other identities, including systematic oppression and its impact (Miller, Donner, & Frasher, 2004).

One way to address this concern is for social work educators to learn where the students are starting from in terms of their understanding of privilege and oppression. Educators should work with students where they are with the ultimate goal of fostering students' skills, so by graduation they are actively advocating for social justice (Davis, 2019).

Levine-Rasky (2000) suggested that even if white students "own" their privilege, they tend to feel that they have then finished their work around this topic. This feeling leads students to decrease their critical self-reflection and reduces the likelihood that they will be lifelong learners around the topics of privilege and oppression.

These studies suggest that more research is needed on how to educate students to fully apply knowledge of privilege and oppression at various levels of practice. In addition, professors need to evaluate diversity courses and the content of privilege and oppression in the overall social work curriculum to determine how to deliver this content to students so that it is perceived as applicable to social work practice.

Furthermore, Petracchi and Zastrow (2010) suggested that schools of social work also need to provide evidence to show the effectiveness of these courses and how they help students increase their understanding of these concepts. For social work programs, this suggests a focus on diversity content, including stand-alone privilege and oppression courses, such as Social Work 309: Privilege and Oppression discussed here. The study presented here measures the impact on students' knowledge, values, and understanding after completing a social work course focused on privilege, oppression, and other diversity issues. The investigators want to assess students' grasp of these concepts as they related to social work practice.

Research Questions

This current pilot study used a quantitative online survey design to measure the following research questions:

1.   To what extent are social work students knowledgeable about working with people culturally different from themselves?

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

2.   To what extent do social work students understand diversity and social justice issues?

3.   Do social work students embrace values associated with diversity and social justice?

The purpose of this pilot study is to measure students' grasp of oppression, power, privilege, and other diversity issues. There is a need to assess the extent to which students are prepared to work with diverse clients and advocate for social justice. Furthermore, this information is needed to determine the student's self-awareness and ability to overcome biases. Information gathered will inform program-wide diversity of education efforts.

Methodology

A purposive sampling method was utilized in this pilot study. The target population was undergraduate social work students enrolled in a privilege and oppression course over three academic years (AY) 2017, 2018, and 2019. The surveys were administered each spring semester on two occasions, the week before class began (pre-week) and during the last week of the semester (finals week). Participants were asked via email to complete the online survey. Neither participation nor lack of involvement in the study impacted the students' grades nor standing within the program. The online survey was 100% voluntary for enrolled students.

Participants reviewed and signed an informed consent document before participating in the online survey. To ensure participant confidentiality, results were linked only by a student selected 4-digit number. All data was stored on the Survey Monkey platform, which is password and firewall-protected (Survey Monkey, 2013). Also, Survey Monkey offers technical support around data management to further ensure data security, participant privacy, and confidentiality (Survey Monkey, 2013). The methodology was reviewed and approved on October 14, 2016, by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Course Description: Privilege and Oppression

A privilege and oppression course was added to the BASW curriculum of a regional comprehensive university in the fall of 2016. The goals of the course include raising awareness and increasing familiarity with people different than oneself by challenging students' beliefs and assumptions. Topics covered in the course include but are not limited to oppressive institutional

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

practices, institutional oppression, "isms," reflection on personal privilege, power, and lack of power. This course differs from all other courses in this specific social work curriculum because it 1) explicitly acknowledges power dynamics in the classroom, 2) emphasizes student and instructors' unique experiences, culture, worldview, and perspectives and 3) focuses on self-disclosure and creating a safer space for discussion of sensitive topics.

Furthermore, this course differs from other courses in the BASW curriculum by utilizing a flipped classroom format. Students received recorded lectures before class meetings so that during class, the focus is on student reflections (affective learning style), self-disclosure regarding assignments, and faculty-led diversity activities. This course also differs from others in the BASW curriculum because assigned readings are pulled from a variety of textbook sources that allow students to explore privilege and oppression from multiple perspectives. The reading content is supplemented with relevant journal articles, interactive web-based activities, and timely videos.

The following is an example assignment used for both online and face to face discussions of implicit bias. The required material and resources for this prompt included Vernā Myers' TedTalk (2014), the cycle of socialization (Harro, 1982 as cited by Adams & Bell, 2016), Trainer Bubble (2015), Project Implicit Social Attitudes (2011), Employers Network for Equality & Inclusion (n.d.), and Teaching Tolerance, (n.d.).

Students, based upon your required readings and videos for this week:

- *How would you define the term implicit bias?*
- *What were the results of your Implicit Bias tests (provide results for each "test")?*
- *Are you surprised by these results? Why or why not?*
- *As you consider the cycle of socialization for yourself, pick two of your test results and reflect on how your cycle of socialization influenced your test scores?*
- *With the Vernā Myers' TedTalk in mind, review your Implicit bias test results. What will you do to challenge yourself to overcome your biases, grow in this course, and in your professional life?*

Another example assignment used as an online activity regarding the topic of white privilege is noted below. The required materials for this prompt include various pages from the Rothenberg (2016) text, and Tim Wise's "White Like Me" movie (Wise, 2013).

Students, after watching the video "White Like Me" and the assigned readings, please answer the following questions:

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

- *What is privilege? Who has it? Who does not?*

- *What were the messages you heard growing up about your race? Other races?*

- *Do you think these messages about race are based on physical characteristics and differences assigned at birth or are filtered through cultural beliefs?*

- *Do you believe the United States is an oppressive society? Why or why not?*

- *How can people with privilege affect society in ways, people without privilege cannot?*

- *Name some examples where white people receive certain advantages – either unconsciously or consciously – that people of color do not receive.*

- *What are some of the costs of racism for white people?*

Measures

This study utilizes a quantitative approach. Participants completed an online survey, which includes demographic questions and slightly modified items from the Diversity and Oppression Scale (DOS) (Windsor, Shorkey, & Battle, 2015; Victoroff, 2005).

The Diversity and Oppression Scale is a 25-question, multidimensional scale designed to measure students learning about diversity and oppression. Researchers report an overall internal consistency score for DOS of $α$ = .80+ (Windsor et al., 2015). The DOS has four subscales that measure student's knowledge of oppression they include 1) cultural diversity self-confidence, 2) diversity and oppression, 3) social worker/ client convergence, and 4) social worker responsibility (Windsor et al., 2015, p. 58). The response options were on a 5-point Likert- type scale (1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree slightly, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree slightly, 5 = completely agree). High scores reflect high student learning.

In the present study, DOS subscale questions were relabeled for clarity into three concise areas: knowledge of oppression (cultural diversity self-confidence), understanding regarding oppression (diversity and oppression), and values in relation to oppression (social worker/ client convergence and social worker responsibility). An additional seven questions, developed by the investigators, were added to the post-test questionnaire which appraised the course content and gauged student experiences within the course.

Participants

Spring 2017 was the first time this privilege and oppression course was delivered to students. The participants' responses discussed here were among the first three cohorts, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019. Over two hundred (n=254) social work students completed

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

the pre-test questionnaire while over one hundred (n=111) completed the post-test questionnaire. Detailed analysis of pre-test and post-test data will be discussed in future publications. The results section for this article focuses on matched pair responses. Although the response rate was less than 10% of the eligible students, there were more than 30 respondents, which allows researchers to extract useful information from the responses (Abu-Bader, 2006).

Data cleaning revealed that a relatively small number of students, thirty-nine (N= 39), completed both pre-test and post-test questionnaires between 2017-2019. There were thirteen (n= 13) matched pairs in 2016-2017 along with eight (n=8) in 2017-2018, and eighteen (n=18) matched pairs in 2018-2019. The average age of matched pair participants was twenty-six years (m= 26), while the majority of participants (77.80 %) self-identified as Caucasian American/white and single (79.80%). Additional demographic details are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographics Matched Pairs N= 39	
Age	
mean (sd)	26 years (10.41)
min/max /median/ mode	18/55/ 21/20 years
Gender	
Female	37 (94.90%)
Male	2 (5.10 %)
Race	
Caucasian American/White	31 (79.50 %)
African American/Black	7 (17.90%)
Two or more races	1 (2.60%)
Marital Status	
Single	34 (87.20 %)
Married	2 (5.10%)
Divorced	2 (5.10%)

Results

Data Inspection

Upon visual inspection of variable distributions and calculation of Fisher's coefficients of skewness and kurtosis, all outcome variables met assumptions for the use of the *Dependent t-test,*

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

a parametric test (Abu-Bader, 2011). To meet the data normality assumptions, all coefficient scores must fall between -1.96 and 1.96 (Abu-Bader, 2011, p. 114). Because of the small sample size, the authors' utilized a non-parametric test *(Wilcoxon-signed ranks)* to confirm findings (Abu Bader, 2011). All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS version 26.

Matched Pairs

Reported below are the scores for each subscale (knowledge, understanding, and values) for all matched pairs (N=39). See table 3 for the matched pairs analysis.

Results indicate that students' overall comprehension of diversity topics improved as a result of the privilege and oppression course. Knowledge about diversity issues was higher after taking the course (m= 94.71; sd=11.78) compared to knowledge level prior to the course (m= 85.34; sd=11.37). Students' overall comprehension of diversity topics rose 9.33 points. This suggests students have more information about diversity content by the end of the course. The dependent t-test illustrates a statistically significant difference in students' pre-test scores compared to post-test ($t_{(df=38)}$ = -5.16; *p* < .05). Wilcoxon-signed ranks results (z = - 4.03; p < .05) confirm findings of increased knowledge for participants.

Student responses indicate that this course significantly increases student *knowledge* about working with people culturally different from themselves. The dependent t-test illustrates a statistically significant difference in students' pre-test scores compared to post-test ($t_{(df=38)}$ =   -4.82; *p* < .05). Student's knowledge of privilege and oppression topics rose 7.10 points by the end of the semester. Wilcoxon-signed ranks results also indicate the significant intellectual growth among students (z = -3.73; p < .05). The average level of knowledge on these issues rose (m= 40.79; sd=6.68) compared to knowledge level before the course (m=33.69; sd= 8.91).

Likewise, there was a significantly higher level of *understanding* about privilege and oppression topics after completing the course. The dependent t-test shows a significant difference in level of understanding at post-test ($t_{(df=38)}$ = -5.09; *p* < .05). Student participants' level of understanding about privilege and oppression rose 2.94 points by the end of the course. Wilcoxon-signed ranks results confirm students' improvement in this area (z = -3.99; p < .05). (m = 30.15; sd= 5.36) compared to their level of understanding prior to the course (m = 27.20; sd = 5.91).

In contrast, there was no statistically significant difference in participants' *values* associated with privilege and oppression. The dependent t-test indicate that no significant

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

difference in values at post-test ($t_{(df=38)}$ = 1.22; *p* > .05).   These results are consistent with Wilcoxon-signed ranks results (z = -1.27; p > .05) that show no change in values for participants by the end of the course.

Table 3. *Dependent t-test* Pre-test and Post-test on Privilege and Oppression Information					
Level of Privilege and Oppression Information	N	m	sd	t	p*
Comprehension of diversity topics (total score)					
Pre-test	39	85.38	11.37	-5.67	.000
Post-test	39	95.71	11.78		
Knowledge of privilege and oppression					
Pre-test	39	33.69	8.91	-4.82	.000
Post-test	39	40.79	6.68		
Understanding of privilege and oppression					
Pre-test	39	27.20	5.19	-5.09	.000
Post-test	39	30.15	5.36		
Values related to privilege and oppression					
Pre-test	39	24.48	4.04	1.22	.228
Post-test	39	23.76	3.82		
*significant p-value < .05					

Because the sample was mostly homogenous, no statistically significant differences were found based on demographic characteristics.

The following displays the matched pair scores for each cohort, AY 2016-2017, AY 2017-2018, and AY 2018-2019, individually. There were thirteen (n=13) matched pairs in 2016-2017 along with eight (n=8), and eighteen (n=18) matched pairs in 2017- 2018 and 2018-2019, respectively. Because of the small sample size in each academic year, the data did not fulfill normality assumptions for parametric analysis *(*dependent t-test); therefore, the authors utilized a non-parametric test to examine participant responses *(*Wilcoxon-signed ranks). Reported below are scores for all completed subscales (knowledge, understanding, and values) for each academic year (AY).

As noted above, in 2016-2017, there were thirteen (n =13) matched pairs.   Results

indicate statistically significant improvement in students' comprehension of diversity topics following the privilege and oppression course. Familiarity with diversity issues was higher after taking the course (m= 98.76; sd= 10.87) compared to knowledge level prior to the course (m= 87.84; sd= 10.68). Students' overall comprehension of diversity topics rose 10.92 points. The dependent t-test shows a statistically significant difference in students' pre-test scores compared to post-test ($t_{(df=12)}$ = -3.65; *p* < .05). Wilcoxon-signed ranks results (z = -2.59; p < .05) confirm these findings.   Additionally, 2016-2017 students reported significantly higher *knowledge* regarding privilege and oppression topics after completing the course (mean = 40.69; sd = 6.18) compared to knowledge level prior to the course (m = 32.15; sd = 9.91). Their knowledge level increased an average of 8.54 points from a moderate level to a high level of knowledge about diversity and oppression issues. Wilcoxon-signed ranks results (z = -2.55; p < .05) indicated expanded knowledge among the 2016-2017 cohort about working with people culturally different from themselves.

Students report significantly higher *understanding* of privilege and oppression topics after completing the course (m = 33.92; sd = 5.21) compared to the understanding level prior to the class (m = 31.46; sd = 5.12). The student's understanding level increased an average of 2.46 points. Although students' scores improved, the participants' scores remained in the moderate category for level understanding about diversity and oppression issues. However, Wilcoxon- signed ranks test results (z = -1.93; p > .05) did not confirm a deeper understanding of diversity and social justice among students after completing the course.   Similarly, the *values* of the students in the 2016-2017 cohort were not significantly impacted by the course. Pre-test and post-test reports about values were nearly identical at the end of the course. Pre-test (m = 24.23; sd = 3.74) and post-test (m = 23.15; sd = 3.64) reports nearly identical mean values at the end of the course.

In 2017-2018 there were eight (n = 8) matched pairs. For students in the 2018 cohort, overall familiarity with diversity issues was higher after taking the course (m= 96.87; sd= 10.56) compared to knowledge level prior to the course (m= 82.87; sd= 11.31). Students' comprehension of diversity topics rose 14.00 points. The dependent t-test results show a statistically significant difference in students' pre-test scores compared to post-test ($t_{(df=7)}$= -3.18 ; *p* < .05). Because of the small sample size for this cohort, the Wilcoxon-signed rank test was run to confirm the results (z = -2.10; p < .05).

The 2017-2018 respondents reported higher levels of *knowledge* about diversity and oppression topics after completing the course (m = 44.50; sd= 4.75) compared to knowledge level

prior to the course (m = 35.37; sd = 9.82). Likewise, the mean scores for students *understanding* diversity and social justice increased from 24.25 at pre-test to 28.12 at the post-test. Similarly, *value* scores increased from 23.25 at pre-test to 24.25 at the post-test. However, no statistically significant changes were uncovered with the 2018 data alone; as confirmed by Wilcoxon-signed ranks results of (z = -1.55; z = -1.89; z = -.76; p > .05) respectively. This outcome is likely because of the insufficient sample size, n = 8 matched pairs.

In 2018- 2019, there were eighteen (n =18) matched pairs. There was a statistically significant improvement in students' comprehension of diversity topics after completing the privilege and oppression course. Overall, awareness of diversity issues was higher after taking the course (m= 90.83; sd= 12.25) compared to familiarity level prior to the course (m= 84.72; sd= 12.15). Students' comprehension of diversity topics rose 6.11 points. The dependent t-test illustrates a statistically significant difference in students' pre-test scores compared to post-test ($t_{(df=17)}$= -2.40 ; *p* < .05). Wilcoxon signed ranks results (z = -2.02; p < .05) confirm these findings.

Students report significantly higher *knowledge* about privilege and oppression topics after completing the course (m = 39.22; sd = 7.38) compared to knowledge level prior to the course (m = 34.05; sd = 8.08). Wilcoxon signed ranks results (z = -2.17; p < .05) indicate a change in knowledge levels. Furthermore, students reported significantly higher levels of *understanding* about diversity and oppression topics after completing the course (m = 28.33; sd= 4.72) compared to the understanding level prior to the course (m = 25.44; sd = 4.28). The student's understanding level increased an average of 2.46 points. Wilcoxon signed ranks test results (z = -3.01; p < .05) confirmed a deeper understanding of social justice topics among students after completing the course. Likewise, the *values* of the students in the 2019 cohort were significantly impacted by the course. Pre-test average scores (m= 25.22; sd= 4.54) and post-test scores (m= 23.27; sd=3.93) reports. Wilcoxon signed ranks test results (z = -2.15; p < .05) confirmed a change in student values around diversity and oppression topics among students after completing the course. However, the lowering of average values scores suggests that students may have come to realize that they have more to learn.

Discussion

This study used a quantitative online survey design to measure the extent to which social work students are knowledgeable about working with people culturally different from themselves.

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

Also investigated were social work students' level of understanding regarding diversity and social justice issues and students' ability to embrace values associated with diversity and social justice. Overall, social work students had a low to moderate level of knowledge about people culturally different from themselves and other diversity-related topics. By the end of the course, students report holding more information about diversity and oppression topics. Likewise, social work students' level of understanding regarding diversity and social justice topics increased after completing the course. On the other hand, social work students reported no change in values associated with diversity, oppression, and social justice topics.

The current social and political climate in the United States is such that inclusivity and respect for differences are often unobserved**.** This reality places an urgent charge on social work educators to provide students with information and experiences they need to develop a genuine understanding of diversity and inclusion.

A social work course, SOWK 309: Privilege & Oppression, was developed to serve as an introduction to concepts of cultural diversity, race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, age, class, sexuality orientation, physical and mental abilities, pluralism and conflicts caused by ethnocentrism, discrimination and prejudice for undergraduate social work students. The results of this study indicate that over three years, students who experience the course do have a positive shift in their knowledge and understanding of privilege and oppression.

It might be expected that students who are drawn to social work as a major already have a certain level of knowledge and sensitivity to content relating to diversity. And this could be the reason for the average pre-test scores for students in this study, which may be interpreted as relatively high. But, the results of this study confirm, what the authors suspect, that social work students have room to grow and adjust how they perceive themselves and others. The authors assert that social work educators must assume a level of unawareness about mainstream privilege and systematic oppression among students, which needs to be transformed as they move through a social work program.

Social Work educators must go beyond integrating diversity content into courses; we must also create specific courses at both the BASW and MSW level focused on diversity topics. We must teach culturally appropriate interpersonal skills and advocacy strategies social workers need to support underserved and traditionally marginalized populations (Greeno, Fedina, Rushovich, Moore, Linsenmeyer, & Wirt, 2017). Dedicated courses can build on the social justice content already integrated into practice courses and help students embrace cultural humility and

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

collaborative practice. Furthermore, educators need to determine students' self-awareness and ability to overcome biases. The literature states that within an inclusive learning environment, students find value in a teacher that recognizes and responds to both their academic and social identities (Hockings, Cooke, and Bowl, 2008). This means that educators must develop strategies and curriculum that take into account the diverse needs and interests of students. Failure to provide this within the classroom can lead to students developing a superficial understanding of diversity, a lack of student engagement during the learning process, and a decreased likelihood that new ideas and beliefs will be internalized (Hockings, Cooke, Yamashita, McGinty, & Bowl, 2008).

Teaching a course similar to the one discussed here requires both a technical exploration of privilege and oppression, along with personal and reflective exercises that likely work to expand the students' superficial understanding of the topics. Students are expected to investigate, identify, and critique their own biases, relationship to various social identities, and the resulting connections to various institutions that have historically promoted systemic oppression. This type of self-reflection, when done in a safe academic environment, can be useful in facilitating insight and cultural humility for budding social work practitioners. Moving social work students beyond a strictly academic relationship with this type of content is imperative for social work educators.

Interestingly, students' values did not improve within the aggregated match pairs and in the individual years of results. At first glance, this is somewhat discouraging because it would seem that a course like this would improve students' values towards privilege and oppression, or at the very least, refrain from creating a negative impact. But, upon further investigation, these results may also be in line with the other positive findings in this study.

Further analysis of the questions that were used to create the values subscale indicates they focus on two areas: The role of social workers in addressing privilege and oppression (group 1) and Social Worker effectiveness when connecting with a similar/dissimilar client (group 2). Students' responses to the first subgroup questions were likely positive as they were reasonably intuitive. Nearly all students with a social work major would be able to deduce that social workers should be advocating to keep social work programs, further educating themselves, and understanding the effect of culture in a person's life.

But the questions in the second subgroup deal with the effects of a homogenous social worker/counselor based upon gender, sexual orientation, and race. At the pre-test, students appeared to disagree with those statements strongly. It appears that before the course, students

believed that the effectiveness of counseling should not be affected by those factors. Yet, after completing the course, a notable shift away from disagreement occurs. It seems that students may have begun to agree, or became more neutral towards those statements. The course may have caused students to become more knowledgeable about other cultures or groups, which led to students appreciating the idea that the provision of services by someone who identifies as having the same race, gender, or sexual orientation could be beneficial to the client. Students may have to come to value the idea that a client may feel safer, more connected to, and understood by someone who has had similar life experiences. This type of value or idea shift would have caused the students to answer as disagree at post-test, which would have caused their scores to be lower. This type of development is very encouraging, especially considering the homogenous nature of the sample. This finding might indicate that students were able to move away from a perspective on social work practice rooted in a limited and ethnocentric view of others (Aronson, 2017; Helms, 1990; Ponterotto and Park-Taylor, 2007), towards the development of a culturally humble and self-aware position of engagement (Hook, 2014).

Limitations

The study discussed here had several limitations. First, although participation in this study was voluntary, the study responses are from students who were required to take the course. The study had a meager sample size. This design did not capture the responses of students who did not complete the survey; therefore, limiting the generalizability of our conclusions.

Second, results should be considered tentative because of the small sample size. The small sample size was likely a result of the timing of the post-test. The investigators will need to consider adjusting post-test data collection from finals week to the last week of class. Finals week is traditionally a time of high pressure and anxiety making students less likely to participate in a research study. Third, although over 100 students completed the post-test, the number of matched pairs was relatively small, N=39. There may have been problems with the identification code creation questions. The investigators may have asked students to create code that was difficult to remember, and as a result, students did not recall their pre-test identification code at the time of the post-test. This limitation provides information that will be used in future research so better to capture student experiences at the end of the course. Fourth, the relabeling of concepts in the DOS measure may have inhibited the ability to accurately assess each of the areas of interest: knowledge, values, and understanding. The researchers are aware that modifying the

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

instrument may have impacted its psychometric properties but felt that it was an accessible and appropriate tool to include despite these adjustments based upon what is available in the literature. Further research, including the adjusted operationalization of the concepts, is warranted.

Conclusion

Assessing diversity and difference in social work course learning is essential to well-trained social workers. The pilot study discussed here assessed the effectiveness of a newly developed undergraduate social work course focused on privilege, oppression, and other diversity issues. The study outcomes show that social work students taking this course gained knowledge and understanding of privilege and oppression topics.   The assignment prompts provided can be used to inform social work course development, curriculum enhancements, and diversity education efforts within social work programs. Findings from this pilot project support the creation and refinement of stand-alone privilege and oppression courses paired with continued integration of diversity topics throughout the undergraduate and graduate curriculum.

References

Abu-Bader, S. H. (2006). *Using statistical methods in social work practice: A complete SPSS guide*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books

Abu-Bader, S. H. (2011). Advanced and multivariate statistical methods for social science research with a complete SPSS guide. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books.

Adams, M., & Bell, L. A. (2016). Teaching for diversity and social justice (Cycle of Socialization). Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

Abrams, L., & Moio, J. (2009). Critical race theory and the cultural competence dilemma in social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education, 45*(2), 245.

Aronson, B. (2017). The White savior industrial complex: A cultural studies analysis of a teacher educator, savior film, and future teachers. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis, 6*(3), 36-54.

Bhuyan, R., Bejan, R, & Jeyapal, D. (2017). Social workers' perspectives on social justice in social work education: When mainstreaming social justice masks structural inequalities. *Social Work Education, 36*(4), 373-390. Doi:10.1080/02615479.2017.1298741

Bronstein, L.R., Berman-Rossi, T., & Winfrield, B. (2002). Beyond cultural specificity: Teaching the

Allessia P. Owens-King, Becky Anthony, Victoria M. Venable, Jennifer R. Jewell

impact of oppression on all clients' lives. *Journal of Progressive Human Services, 13*(2), 43-59.

Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] (2015). Educational policy and accreditation standards. Retrieved from https://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/Standards-and-Policies/2015-EPAS

Davis, A. (2019). Historical knowledge of oppression and racial attitudes of social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education, 55*(1), 160-175. doi: 10.1080/10437797.2018.1498419

Delgado, R., Stefancic, J., & Harris, A. (2017). *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition): An Introduction*. New York: NYU Press.

Employers Network for Equality & Inclusion (n.d.) What is Unconscious Biases? Retrieved from https://www.enei.org.uk/diversity-inclusion/unconscious-bias/

Gines, K. T. (2015). Ruminations on twenty-five years of Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. Ethnic & Racial Studies, 38(13), 2341–2348. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1058505

Greeno, E.J., Fedina, L., Rushovich, B., Moore, J.E., Linsenmeyer, D., & Wirt, C. (2017). "They tippy toe around the race issue": The impact of a Title IV-E program on culturally informed practice for child welfare students. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*(4), 1374-1382. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12355

Hall, E.L., & Jones, N.P. (2017). A deeper analysis of culturally competent practice: Delving beneath white privilege. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 28*(3), 282-296. https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2017.1344949

Helms, J. E. (1990). *Black and white racial identity: Theory, research, and practice (*ed.). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Inc.

Hill-Collins, P. (2002). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Hockings, C., Cooke, S., & Bowl, M. (2008). Learning and teaching for social diversity and difference in higher education: Towards more inclusive learning environments. *Research Briefing,* 41. London, TLRP.

Hockings, C., Cooke, S., Yamashita, H., McGinty, S., & Bowl, M. (2008). Switched off? A study of disengagement among computing students at two universities. *Research Papers in Education,* 23(2), pp.191-201.

Hollinrake, S., Hunt, G., Dix, H., Wagner, A. (2019). Do we practice (or teach) what we preach?

Developing a more inclusive learning environment to better prepare social work students for practice through improving the exploration of their different ethnicities within teaching, learning, and assessment opportunities. *Journal of Social Work Education, 38*(5), 582-603. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2019.1593355

Hook, J. N. (2014). Engaging clients with cultural humility. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, *33*(3), 277-280.

International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW]. (2012). Global Standards. Retrieved from https://www.ifsw.org/global-standards/

International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW]. (2018). Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles. Retrieved from https://www.ifsw.org/global-social-work-statement-of-ethical-principles/

Kolivoski, K. M., Weaver, A., & Constance-Huggins, M. (2014). Critical race theory: Opportunities for application in social work practice and policy. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services,* 95(4), 269–276.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record,* 97, 47-68

Lee, M.Y. & Greene, G. J. (2003). A teaching framework for transformative multicultural social work education. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 12*(3), 1-28.

Levine-Rasky, C. (2000). Framing whiteness: Working through the tension in introducing whiteness to educators. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 3,* 272-292.

Loya, M. (2011). Color-blind racial attitudes in white social workers: A cross-sectional study. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 81*(2-3), 201-217. https://doi.org/10.1080/00377317.2011.589341

Miller, J., Donner, S., & Frasher, E. (2004). Talking when talking is tough: Taking on conversations about race, sexual orientation, gender, class, and other aspects of social identity. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 74,* 377-392. doi:10.1080/0037731040951772

Mutua, A. (2010). Law, critical race theory, and related scholarship. In P. H. Collins & J. Solomos *The SAGE handbook of race and ethnic studies* (pp. 275-305). London: SAGE Publications Ltd doi: 10.4135/9781446200902.n14

Myers, V. (2014, December). How to overcome our biases? Walk boldly toward them [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/speakers/verna_myers

National Association of Social Workers [NASW] (2001). Standards for Cultural Competence in

Social Work Practice. Washington, DC: NASW

Payne, M. (2018). Applying critical social work theory in practice. *Issues in Social Work*, 2017, 169-193. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.4467/24496138ZPS.17.011.8006

Petracchi, H.E. & Zastrow, C. (2010). Suggestions for utilizing the 2009 EPAS in CSWE-accredited baccalaureate and masters curriculums- Reflections from the field, part 1: The explicit curriculum. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 30(*2), 125-146. doi:10.1080/08841231003704761

Ponterotto, J. G., & Park-Taylor, J. (2007). Racial and ethnic identity theory, measurement, and research in counseling psychology: Present status and future directions. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 54*(3), 282-294.

Priester, M.A., Pitner, R., & Lackey, R. (2019). Examining the relationship between diversity exposure and students' color-blind racial attitudes and awareness of racial oppression. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 28*(2), 229-245. https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2017.1344948

Project Implicit (2011). Project Implicit Social Attitudes. Retrieved from https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/

Rothenberg, P. S. (2016). White privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism (5th ed.). New York: Worth Publishers

Sue, D. W., Nadal, K. L., Capodilupo, C. M., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., & Rivera, D. P. (2008). Racial Microaggressions against Black Americans: Implications for Counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development,* 86(3), 330–338.

SurveyMonkey (September 9, 2013). Security Statement. Retrieved from: https://www.surveymonkey.com/ mp/policy/security/

Tate, W. (1997). Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. *Review of Research in Education, 22*, 195-247.

Teaching Tolerance. (n.d.). Test Yourself for Hidden Biases. Retrieved from https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/test-yourself-for-hidden-bias

Thorn, G. R., & Sarata, B. P. V. (1998). Psychotherapy with African American Men: What We Know and What We Need to Know. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development,* 26(4), 240–254.   https://doi-org.proxy-su.researchport.umd.edu   /10.1002/j.2161-1912.1998.tb00202.x

Trainer Bubble (2015, August 18). Prejudice – Unconscious Biases and Pre-Judgement. Retrieved

from https://youtu.be/d8dvbWrjuto

Victoroff, J. (2005). Introduction to the oppression questionnaire (OQ). Retrieved from http://www.humiliationstudies.org/documents/VictoroffOppressionQuestionnaire.pdf

Wallengren Lynch, M., Bengtsson, A., & Hollertz, K. (2019). Applying a 'signature pedagogy' in the teaching of critical social work theory and practice. *Social Work Education*, 38(3).

Williamson, M.E. (2012). The reluctance of African-Americans to engage in therapy (Master's thesis). University of Nebraska. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1218&context=cehsdiss.

Windsor, L., Shorkey, C., & Battle, D. (2015). Measuring student learning in social justice courses: The diversity and oppression scale. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 51(1), 58-71.

Wise, T. (2013, September). White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son [Video file]. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/oV-EDWzJuzk