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Understanding How Family Science Interns Conceptualize Social Justice

Pauline Garcia-Reid

Montclair State University, garciareidp@montclair.edu

Bradley van Eeden-Moorefield

Montclair State University, vaneedenmobr@mail.montclair.edu

Bradley Forenza

Montclair State University, forenzab@mail.montclair.edu

Robert Reid

Montclair State University, reidr@mail.montclair.edu

Caitlin Eckert

Montclair State University

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Pauline Garcia-Reid, Bradley van Eeden-Moorefield, Bradley Forenza, Robert Reid, Caitlin Eckert, and David T. Lardier

Understanding How Family Science Interns Conceptualize Social Justice

Pauline Garcia-Reid¹, Bradley van Eeden-Moorefield¹, Brad Forenza¹, Robert J. Reid¹, Caitlin Eckert², and David T. Lardier Jr.¹

¹Montclair State University, ²Rutgers University SP-15104

This study examined the connection between social justice and internships in Human Development and Family Science. In particular, the study sought to provide additional clarity to current conceptualizations of social justice by adding the voices of undergraduate family science students. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 20 family science students who completed an internship that was part of a federally funded HIV/substance abuse prevention initiative. The initiative took place in an economically disadvantaged city in the northeast. Eleven themes emerged from the data and were organized according to the sensitizing concepts of (i) conceptions of social justice; (ii) exposure to social justice; (iii) synthesis of knowledge. Implications for education and training are discussed.

Keywords: social justice; internships; family science

The United States has witnessed some important social movements (e.g., civil rights, women's rights, LGBT rights). These movements advocate for social change that could promote fairness, equity, and human rights—all elements of social justice. Accordingly, some scholars suggest a need for increased inclusion of social justice theories and application in academic curricula. This could be helpful given the negative impact on people and families created by disparities and oppressions that continue to exist (e.g., Pittman, 2009; Storms, 2012). While social justice, which has been strongly influenced by the fields of feminism, multiculturalism, and interdisciplinary studies, has given birth to these need-based calls (Goodman et al.,

Authors' Note: Pauline Garcia-Reid, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Family and Child Studies, College of Education and Human Services and Robert D. McCormick Center for Child Advocacy and Policy, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Montclair State University. Robert J. Reid, PhD, is a Full Professor in the Department of Family and Child Studies, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University. Bradley van Eeden-Moorefield, PhD, is an Associate Professor. David T. Lardier, Jr. is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Family and Child Studies, Montclair State University. Brad Forenza, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Robert D. McCormick Center for Child Advocacy and Policy at Montclair State University. Caitlin Eckert is a Doctoral Student at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, School of Social Work. Please address correspondence to Pauline Garcia-Reid, Department of Family and Child Studies & Center for Child Advocacy and Policy, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07043; e-mail: garciareidp@mail.montclair.edu. This research was supported by Grant No. SP-15104 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP). The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP).

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2004; Mallinckrodt, Miles, & Levy, 2014), research has found that experiential learning such as service learning and internships has the capacity to promote strong social justice outcomes among students (Gillis & Lellan, 2010; Storms, 2012).

However, the lack of a well-developed understanding and conceptualization of social justice still pervades much of the academy (Buettner-Schmidt & Lobo, 2011). As such, studies that seek to understand the domains and boundaries of social justice as a concept and practice are needed if colleges and universities are to develop the most effective educational models and experiences for students. Currently, the majority of social justice research that exists focuses on graduate-level training as opposed to undergraduate training, especially in the areas of psychology (e.g., Burnes & Manese, 2008; Mallinckrodt et al., 2014) and counseling (Beer, Spanierman, Green, & Todd, 2011). However, there is a small body of research on undergraduate students that says exposure to social justice in education is related to reduced bias toward others and increased social advocacy aimed at creating a more just and fair world (Alimo, 2012; Hackman, 2005; Pittman, 2009; Storms, 2012).

The authors of this study contend that the field of family science is well positioned to provide social justice education and prepare undergraduate students to be agents of change. First, family science programs often emphasize multiple ways of knowing families and individuals over the life course in various sociocultural contexts. Family science programs focus on understanding marginalization, oppression, and the power structures that maintain these imbalances. Second, and unique from many other related undergraduate disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology), family science programs often include internship experiences. These experiences are considered transformative pathways by which undergraduate students assume professional roles and personal dimensions (Kolb, 1984). However, limited research has examined how family science interns are able to recognize the ways in which they could work democratically with diverse others to create just and inclusive practices and social structures (Bell, 2007), much less their general understanding of social justice. Therefore, this study sought to reduce the lack of knowledge about the connection between social justice and Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) internships. Hence, the authors' goal was to provide clarity to current conceptualizations of social justice by adding the voices of undergraduate family science students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many scholars argue that social justice has long been a part of society, especially as evidenced by major social movements (e.g., women's rights, civil rights) and social programming (e.g., welfare, disability services). Additionally, there is a well-defined literature documenting the multifaceted nature of discrimination and its impact on individuals and families, both directly and indirectly, through (in)equitable access to resources (Buckley, 1998; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003; van Eeden-Moorefield & Alvarez, 2014). However, conceptualizations and applications of social justice as a broader concept and its incorporation into education and other professional training are more recent (Burnes & Manese, 2008). As such, social justice theorizing remains in its infancy and needs more attention given to its conceptual development.

In fact, most literature suggests conceptualizations that do exist rarely are informed from research-participant perspectives and more from scholars, especially in psychology and counseling (e.g., Buettner-Schmidt & Lobo, 2011). The researchers believe this is an oversight that this study can help address with a sample of undergraduate family science students. As educational objectives begin to include social justice awareness and training, having students' voice their understandings is critical. Therefore, this article includes a review of literature on the theoretical conceptualization of social justice, a review of studies that focus on social justice in educational settings, and the authors' perspective on the appropriateness of family science for undergraduate social justice training.

Theorizing Social Justice

Social justice is a complex phenomenon and it has been regarded as generally pertaining to issues of equity and fairness (Miller et al., 2009). Its theorizing has been influenced by multicultural and feminist perspectives (e.g., Burnes & Manese, 2008). Generally, social justice has been described as both a process and a goal that is mutually shaped to meet the needs of all people (Bell, 2007). Also, social justice has been defined as the pursuit of social change or service to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, particularly people living in poverty (Witkin, 1999). Similarly, social justice can be theorized as an inclusive process, in which all individuals come together in an exchange of views and beliefs working for the common good of communities, by transforming social organizations and processes that contribute to power inequalities, oppression, and marginalization (Buckley, 1998; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003; Rawls, 2001; Vera & Speight, 2003).

One of the most comprehensive conceptualizations of social justice was suggested by Buettner-Schmidt and Lobo (2011), after they conducted a Wilsonian concept analysis of multidisciplinary publications appearing between 1968 and 2010. Such disciplines included nursing, health, economics, law, religion, and social work. They suggested that social justice is the:

Full participation in society, and the balancing of benefits and burdens by all citizens, resulting in equitable living and a just ordering of society. Its attributes included: (1) fairness; (2) equity in the distribution of power, resources, and processes that affect the sufficiency of the social determinants of health; (3) just institutions, systems, structures, policies, and processes; (4) equity in human development, rights, and sustainability; and (5) sufficiency of wellbeing (p. 948).

Although this conceptualization of social justice is fairly comprehensive, it fails to delineate some of its other components and levels at which they exist, thereby making it broader and more macrofocused.

At the highest level of abstraction, the concept of social justice is about each attribute above. The authors also agree with the alternative suggestion offered by Gillis and Lellan (2013), who state that social justice is about ensuring fairness and equity for all individuals, families, and communities, and each should be seen as a process and a goal (Bell, 2007). The authors contend that the processes and goals are dynamic and fluid, and can vary by context, including historical context (van Eeden-Moorefield & Alvarez, 2014). Fairness and equity (goals) should also be ensured in terms of rights, responsibilities (Buettner-Schmidt & Lobo, 2011), safety (Broido & Reason, 2005), and access to resources

and opportunities (Beer et al., 2011; Cohen et al., 2013; Moy et al., 2014). All of these concepts are linked theoretically to processes involving positive development, health, and well-being (Buettner-Schmidt & Lobo, 2011) for individuals, families, and communities. Social justice also includes values and beliefs (Broido & Reason, 2005), for example, believing that everyone should have access to education or health care and valuing all equally.

Moreover, social justice contains individual and collaborative actions that seek to empower oppressed populations and challenge injustices through transformations (Storms, 2012). Such challenges can include transitioning one's own values, beliefs, and actions that may represent biases, confronting others who may hold biased beliefs or who may engage in discriminatory and oppressive actions (Storms, 2012), and/or direct challenges to institutional power structures that perpetuate injustice (Beer et al., 2011; North, 2006). These types of social actions may be categorized as advocacy for social change. By extension, social action is a vehicle for challenging and transforming self, others, and systems/institutions that create and maintain power imbalances. Left unchecked, these imbalances serve to oppress and marginalize individuals, families, and communities and limit their access to resources and/or opportunities. Taken together, social justice is conceptualized as including goals of fairness and equity.

Social Justice and Educational Preparation

Some scholars argue that students should be exposed to social justice concepts and application throughout their college careers, across multiple courses and experiential initiatives such as service learning and internships (e.g., Storms, 2012). The rationale for social justice exposure is that society is more diverse and global than it once was, and that students in higher education should be prepared to work and interact in this evolving, interdependent context. The addition of social justice components to educational curricula could reduce potential biases and miscommunications, and provide students with the tools to be advocates for positive social change. Together, this should lead to a more just and democratic world.

Others suggest that social justice training can prepare practitioners (and future practitioners) to identify and work with individuals to alleviate problems related to social marginalization, rather than assuming such problems are intrinsic and pathological (Beer et al., 2011; Gillis & Lellan, 2013; Mallinckrodt et al., 2014). For example, someone without social justice training may work with a client who is depressed and assume his or her depression is solely biologically based and refer him or her for pharmacological intervention. A practitioner with social justice training may be more adept at assessing other potential sources of depression such as discrimination or the added stress due to the inability to access resources (Mallinckrodt et al., 2014). Such training models will likely prepare students to be scientists, practitioners, and advocates.

Research suggests that social justice education should include training in self-evaluation and critical consciousness, and experiential learning opportunities (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2007). These concepts are based in Freirean (1968 [2010]) philosophies that focus on challenging oppressive beliefs and empowering citizens/students toward social change and critical awareness (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Cohen et al. (2013) recommend that courses should focus on intersections, challenging false binaries (e.g., gender), and theory. However, almost all of this research is targeted toward graduate students.

Among research conducted examining the impact of social justice education on undergraduate students, results find that this training and experiential learning is related to increased awareness and engagement in social action (e.g., Alimo, 2012; Gillis & Lellan, 2013; Pittman, 2009).

In fact, experiential learning seems to be one of the most critical components of successful social justice education (Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Forenza, 2014; Moy et al., 2014). In Moy et al.'s (2014) qualitative analysis of school psychology students, the findings suggest that application of knowledge through service learning is critical for developing an understanding of social justice. Those students defined social justice as incorporating advocacy, awareness, and fairness—all elements in the conceptualization that was previously described. In one study focused on 274 undergraduate students, Miller et al. (2009) found support for Moeschberger, Ordonez, Shankar, and Raney's (2006) nonlinear model of social justice engagement. Specifically, the model suggests that key social justice learning processes include personal experience with oppression, witnessing oppression, becoming more aware of social inequities, belief in the ability to help create social change, perceiving a role in creating change, gaining more nuanced understanding of contextual influences on injustice, and acting as an advocate for change.

Social Justice Education and Family Science

The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) does not require all family science programs to adhere to specific curricula as found in some other disciplines (i.e., Council on Social Work Education). However, NCFR offers and oversees the Certified Family Life Education (CFLE) credential for which degree programs can apply for approval (see www.ncfr.org/cfle-certification). In doing so, graduates of approved programs are eligible for provisional certification through an abbreviated application process. Core coursework covering 10 content domain areas (e.g., families and individuals in social contexts, family law and public policy) must be met by degree programs that seek approval. There is an expectation that family diversity, fairness, and structural power and inequalities will be covered within many of these domains.

Unlike other programs (e.g., social work), social justice is not an explicit part of the CFLE mission. However, in a student's quest to critically understand families and individuals in a social context, he or she will encounter issues like institutional racism and social stratification. In exploring family law and public policy, students will gain knowledge of structural oppression and the unintended consequences of regressive taxation, school funding, and the like. It is possible that a student in CFLE may understand social (in)justice as being more "applied" than abstract. Even if the term is not expressly mentioned in the discipline's chief credential, it is an active part of the discipline's implied curriculum. It should be noted that—at the "local" level—token programs (e.g., the University of Oklahoma's Human Relations program) include "social justice" as a stated component of programmatic vision.

Although not all HDFS programs seek CFLE approval, the authors assume that family science curricula are fairly standard. Per Hamon and Smith (2014), undergraduate family science programs typically emphasize family and interpersonal relationships, an inclusive approach to studying families, and an applied learning component. In contrast to similar disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology), it is common for family science undergraduate students to engage in

internships and/or service learning experiences that promote social justice (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2007; Storms, 2012). These internships or service learning opportunities provide a vehicle to gain awareness of social justice in communities and to engage in advocacy efforts.

For CFLE-approved programs, students, and practitioners, the ethical principles put forth by the NCFR, Family Life Code of Ethics are guides (Adams, Dollahite, Gilbert, & Keim, 2001; NCFR, 2012). These are standards of conduct by which family scientists consider in ethical and professional decision making. Further, the preamble of the code urges social action/advocacy for laws and policies that reflect the field's changing knowledge. Again, this implicitly reflects aspects of social justice. The code's guiding principles provide a lens by which social justice can begin to be examined with individuals and family systems, and can serve as a call for family scientists to become involved in making life better for the marginalized at both the personal and professional levels. Principle VI states: "Family scientists are involved in improving society. [They] are advocates for individuals and families and participate in developing policies and laws that are respectful and empowering to them" (Adams et al., 2001, p. 8). Guidelines 6.01–6.02 further state:

Family scientists are concerned for the general welfare of all individuals and families in society. Whether as professionals or private citizens, they engage in family advocacy at the local, state, and national levels. [They] are encouraged to participate in developing laws and policies that are respectful of, and empowering to, all individuals and families and in modifying such policies and laws that are not (p. 8).

It appears that for many HDFS programs generally, and CFLE-approved program specifically, current coursework, goals, and ethics position the discipline well for social justice education, even if the construct itself is not explicitly mentioned. Adding an explicit social justice framework to HDFS programs could be helpful in advancing the work that the discipline does to strengthen and promote the well-being of all individuals, families, and communities. However, there remains a lack of empirical knowledge regarding the relationship between social justice and HDFS programs, especially in the area of internships.

This gap in HDFS assessment exists in spite of research that finds benefits of social justice education for allied professions like counseling psychology (Goodman et al., 2004), social work (Gilson & DePoy, 2002), criminal justice/corrections (Kadmon-Telias, 2003), and law (Liachowitz, 1988). In general, these disciplines have engaged in a dialogue or critique of the conceptualization of social justice, whereas the field of family science has remained relatively silent. Despite a lack of a direct mandate from the National Council on Family Relations, the advantages of providing a critical space early in students' professional preparation and throughout their coursework for examining social justice principles and practice seem apparent.

METHODOLOGY

Internship in a Family Science Program

The purpose of internships in family science is typically aimed at offering students a place for applying their capabilities and academic learning in a real-

world context. These field opportunities should inspire the development of positive professional attitudes and careers rooted in sound ethical practice (Adams et al., 2001). This study was part of a larger federally sponsored university-community initiative, in which undergraduate family science interns from a large public university in the northeastern United States were provided intensive training on the delivery of substance abuse and HIV/AIDS services targeting African American and Latino youth residing in an economically "at-risk" urban community (Garcia-Reid et al., 2014; Reid & Garcia-Reid, 2013; Reid, Yu, & Garcia-Reid, 2014; Reid et al., 2014).

There is a discussion on the term "at risk" among researchers. "At risk" is often interpreted as a deficits label, which "acts as a proxy in urban contexts for poor African American and Latino youth who are in need of intervention" (Kirshner, 2015, p. 163). Those using the term utilize quotation marks to recognize its association with pathology and oppression (Baldrige, 2014). Hence, the authors will continue to use quotation marks for "at risk."

This study examined social justice and its link to the HDFS internship site. Through the delivery of evidence-based prevention curricula, gaining knowledge of individual-, family-, and community-level needs, identifying resources and capacity for systemic change, and emphasizing linkages within the focal community, the interns are assumed to have encountered issues of social justice that they would not have otherwise encountered in a traditional classroom environment (Garcia-Reid et al., 2014).

Study Design

Retrospective individual interview methodology was used to gather intern perspectives related to social justice. Prior to initiating the interviews, IRB approval was obtained for the data collection procedures involving human subjects. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) served to guide the research team in the proper reporting of findings. The COREQ checklist was developed to promote explicit and comprehensive reporting of qualitative studies (interviews and focus groups). The criteria included in the checklist are intended to guide researchers in the reporting of important aspects of the research team, study methods, study context, findings, analysis, and interpretations (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007).

Recruitment Strategy and Participants

Under the direction of the project's coinvestigator, a masters-level researcher, who was also a member of the research team on the grant-funded initiative, coordinated the recruitment strategy. First, a list was generated of all interns who had served on the project from fall 2010 to spring 2013 ($N = 28$). The entire sampling frame was sent a recruitment flier by mail and telephone about the study to assess prospective interest. Of the 28 possible participants, 20 consented (response rate: 71.4%). Since many of them had secured full-time jobs and become geographically dispersed from the university, telephone interviewing was the preferred mode of data collection. Telephone interviews are considered a versatile data collection tool in which respondents are assumed to be relaxed, willing to talk freely, and willing to disclose intimate information (Chapple, 1999; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

Participants were at least 18 years old and provided verbal consent by telephone at the onset of the interview. Most participants were female (80%), White (45%), and Catholic (50%). The demographics shown in Table 1 are reflective of the university's demographics, which is mostly female (62%) and about half White (49%). At the time of interview, the mean age of research participants was 24 years old. Participants were (mostly) from urban and densely populated suburban locales, which is also reflective of the university's overall student body. More than half the sample (55%) indicated they had limited human service experience prior to interning, and none of them had received practical, preservice training in the promotion or advancement of social justice. It is noteworthy that the undergraduate student body from which the interns were from is comprised of approximately 40% first-generation college attendees (university admissions, personal communication, 2016).

Data Collection Methods

The telephone interviews were conducted in a secluded conference room. A graduate-level female moderator, without supervisory responsibility of the interns, facilitated the interviews. The moderator, who was also a member of the research team, had 3 years of experience conducting focus groups, face-to-face interviewing, and general data collection methods.

The semistructured interviews were conducted by telephone, while an audio-recorder captured the data. Questions were open-ended and allowed for queries to emerge from the moderator, as well as participant personal experiences and interpretations of social justice. Initial broad questions were followed by structured probing to encourage retrospection on factors related to the perceived relationship between social justice and student intern experiences. The interviews that were based on three sensitizing concepts (conceptions of social justice, exposure to social justice, and synthesis of knowledge) included the following questions.

- 1 How would you define social justice? (conceptions of social justice)
- 2 In what specific ways have your experiences shaped your definition of social justice? (exposure to social justice)
- 3 Please draw on at least two personally significant moments or experiences from your internship that influenced your understanding of social justice in action. (synthesis of knowledge)

TABLE 1: Characteristics of Participants (N = 20)

| | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 16 | 80.0 |
| Male | 4 | 20.0 |
| Race/ethnicity | | |
| White/Caucasian | 9 | 45.0 |
| Black/African American | 5 | 25.0 |
| Hispanic/Latino | 5 | 25.0 |
| Middle Eastern | 1 | 5.0 |
| Religious identification | | |
| Catholic | 10 | 50.0 |
| Protestant | 6 | 30.0 |
| Spiritual/Other | 3 | 15.0 |
| Muslim | 1 | 5.0 |

The interviews lasted approximately 45 min. They were audio-recorded (with the consent of participants) and resulted in approximately five pages of data per interview (1.5 spacing). Interview transcripts were deidentified and stripped of all identifying attributes at the individual level (e.g., name, gender, and race/ethnicity) before they were analyzed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis guided the qualitative results. Per Braun and Clarke (2006), this is an iterative process that began with researchers familiarizing themselves with data through an initial reading of the 20 transcripts. A masters-level researcher, under the direction of the coinvestigator, then read through the transcripts by case and by question to generate initial codes based on selected data. Subsequently, both researchers reviewed transcripts a fourth time to search for relationships among these initial codes.

Codes that could be collapsed into broader “themes” comprise the study’s results. Per Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), themes are the dominant feature of a phenomenological study such as this one. They evolve from the narrative data to tell a story, and were organized according to three sensitizing concepts (conceptions of social justice, exposure to social justice, and synthesis of knowledge). Saturation occurred after the analysis of eight to ten transcripts. Microsoft Office was used to organize and code the data.

To bolster the rigor and confirmability of analysis, a doctoral-level researcher also coded randomly selected transcripts. After discussion of the emergent themes, 100% agreement was reached among the three analysts. The authors believe that the findings inform and enhance a person’s understanding of the constructs under study, and provide logical generalizations to a theoretical examination of similar types of phenomena (Morse, 1999).

RESULTS

Conceptions of Social Justice

When considering how participants interpreted the meaning of social justice, the most palpable conceptualization pertained to *equality of resources* (the first emergent theme). For example, social justice was perceived as an attempt to make a socially, economically, and politically equal platforms for all individuals, despite race, gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or other identity (also known as *equality of opportunity*).

According to one participant, “Social justice is giving everyone a fair chance, no matter who they are or where they came from. Everyone deserves the same chance at achieving things in life.” Another stated, “Social justice means pretty much everyone is treated equally. You know, everyone has an equal shot to do things that they would like to do, no matter who (they) are, where they came from. Everyone should have the same shot at getting the same chance and an opportunity to succeed.” Related to the notion of equality of opportunity is the perceived effort to make sure everyone is represented accordingly and given the same opportunity to express himself or herself. As one participant said, “Everybody is heard, everyone is seen, and everybody has the same opportunity to pursue their dreams.”

Participants also agreed that social justice involves *identifying and addressing oppression*, by acknowledging barriers and intervening appropriately to diminish structural forces that promote *injustice*. As one participant indicated:

(Social justice) means making sure that everyone, no matter their background... (has) no barriers up for them to get the same kind of education, the same type of job (as people from majority populations... Social justice means) breaking down barriers for people who are seen as "less than" or simply as different.

Further indicative of social justice's necessity to identify and address oppression is the belief expressed by one participant that:

Social justice is really a verb because we need to work towards that, something we're working on. It's an action. It's a continuous examination of these injustices, and looking at why things aren't leveled, and hoping that we can get to a place where everybody has the same opportunity over and over and over again.

These quotes implicitly conceptualize social justice as both a *process and outcome*. In other words, participants described social justice as an ongoing pursuit (process) as well as a change to be affected (outcome; Table 2).

Exposure to Social Justice

In describing their exposure(s) to social justice, some participants indicated that they had always been interested in issues of social justice and fairness. For some, these interests manifested through *formative conversations* of inequality and oppression. As one participant stated:

My family would often discuss issues of fairness and social justice in my home. I grew up talking about many historical events like the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, and the many struggles of various groups who have fought for equality throughout the world in my home. It really shaped me—you know?

Other participants stated that their *coursework* provided them with greater insight into the conceptualization of social justice:

I received exposure to social justice and gained a greater understanding regarding its relevance (to) individuals, families, and society in many of my classes. It really made me think about issues of poverty and privilege, equity and injustices in ways that I had not done before.

All participants ($N = 20$) emphasized the value of being able to put into practice theoretical conceptualizations of social justice through their internships

TABLE 2: Qualitative Findings

| <i>Sensitizing concept</i> | <i>Emergent themes</i> |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Conceptions of social justice | Equality of resources; equality of opportunity; identifying and addressing oppression; process and outcome |
| Exposure to social justice | Formative conversations; coursework; applied learning |
| Synthesis of knowledge | Identification of structurally based problems; embodying emergent identities; pursuit of social change; facilitation of psychological empowerment |

in the “at-risk” community. “It all came together in the field for me,” said one participant. “I was able to apply what I learned throughout my coursework in a real-world context—it was great,” the participant concluded. To further illustrate the notion that *applied learning*—vis-à-vis the HDFS internship—exposed participants to social justice, participants articulated the application of social justice to specific instances encountered or observed through their placement.

For example, participants discussed how the absence of social justice (equality, etc.) could detrimentally impact the well-being of adolescents. Participants observed that lacking social justice could increase health disparities for this population. Participants agreed that lacking social justice could have a major impact on how some adolescents, who are already vulnerable, are treated by society. This negative conceptualization of “at-risk” adolescents may determine their future possibilities. As one intern indicated, “Individuals residing in marginalized communities are often the ones who are robbed of social justice, whether it’s because (they) are often looked at as uneducated or undeserving, they essentially remain invisible to society.”

Synthesis of Knowledge

Some participants identified social justice as being an imperative when working with “at-risk” adolescents. These participants were cognizant of the structural barriers (e.g., violence, crime, poverty) that often interfere with healthy youth development. As described by one participant:

Social justice definitely matters because there are so many oppressive factors that encompass the lives of youth from poor communities, and if you’re not looking from a social justice lens, then you might as well be like, “Well, they deserve to be there,” or like, “It’s the luck of the draw.”

Other participants indicated that they believed many individuals who are ignorant to issues of oppression and social (in)justice tend to dismiss youth from distressed neighborhoods. Through their internship, participants *identified structurally based problems* as impeding the lives of “at-risk” youth, as opposed to individual or pathological problems. As one participant explained, “I feel like sometimes people just brush these kids off because—‘Oh, you must be a bad kid because you live in a bad neighborhood.’” One participant discussed the need to engage in a community-level dialogue specific to social justice. “I realize that the community is contending with many pressing problems, but I also know that if something is not done, a lot of kids will just fall between the cracks,” the participant said.

Engaging in health promotion activities (e.g., the implementation of substance abuse and HIV/AIDS prevention trainings) was seen as a tangible way to promote health equity for the target population. In one participant’s words, “As we provided the adolescents with health promotion information that they could use to decrease health disparities, we were becoming social justice advocates. We were all, at the end of the day, in it together.” As this participant implies, interns *embodied emergent identities* of HDFS professionals-in-training (facilitator of health promotion), as well as advocates for social justice (bringing the real-world experiences of “at-risk” youth back to the university and beyond).

Social justice was also discussed by the sample in reference to the change-oriented activities they participated in throughout their HDFS internship. For example, facilitating health promotion workshops, organizing food drives, volunteering at local community centers, and participating at community health fairs were ways in which participants felt that they were in *pursuit of social change*. Their social change activities filled a vital service gap for the targeted youth. According to one participant:

Through the health education workshops that we delivered, we were providing the youth with real tangible information about some of the harmful effects of not using protection or—you know—protecting themselves. A lot of these kids were unaware of these things and we were able to bring this to them, which in turn allowed them to be more aware and to engage in healthier behaviors for both themselves and their sexual partners.

Another participant indicated that the discussions that took place with the adolescents during the workshops were a form of social justice in itself, which could potentially yield participation in social change activities among the focal youth. Workshop discussions allowed the adolescents to learn how to speak openly about risk reduction. This illustrates the participant's/intern's ability to *facilitate psychological empowerment* for clients. This theme of facilitating empowerment was discussed overtly in several participant interviews:

I couldn't say that it was one specific thing that could change someone's behavior on any given day, but I'd like to think that maybe with the discussions that we had and the health promotion workshops that we provided, maybe (the youth will) start to feel more and more empowered to discuss it—what they have learned—with other people, and put it into action in their own lives.

Like many of the interns who were interviewed, the act of providing education and information to the youth was considered a major catalyst for social change. Engaging in prevention activities with the adolescents provided a critical platform for social change efforts, as this allowed the interns to engage in a health promotion discourse with the targeted youth. Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined those engaged in social change as empowerment-based mentors or empowering institution agents. These "agents" bridge youth with valuable cultural resources, which ultimately increases positive development. As described by one participant:

I think we were actually providing students valuable, potentially lifesaving, information, which could empower them to protect themselves and others and maybe see things from a different lens. They may have actually taken them as like, "Oh, wow. I didn't know that," I've seen it with a lot of students who were actually very intrigued by what we were giving them. The community level activities that we were involved in like facilitating health fairs and attending coalition meetings also gave resonance and voice to the issues impacting youth.

Participants were able to begin recognizing their own sense of personal and collective power, as illustrated by one participant's quote: "The more knowledgeable and vocal we became about these issues, the better we were able to raise the discussion around (the youth). It was really fascinating and quite empowering for everyone including us." Many participants indicated that

elevating the discussion to the community level could potentially yield greater momentum in addressing threats to “at-risk” adolescents’ health and wellness, and could potentially motivate the possibility for social change in the targeted community.

DISCUSSION

The authors aimed to provide additional clarity to current conceptualizations of social justice by adding the voices of undergraduate family science students. Eleven themes emerged from the data and were organized according to the sensitizing concepts that elicited them. Participants conceptualized social justice as a construct that pertains to both the *equity of resources* (economic, political, and labor-oriented resources) and an *equity of opportunity* for all populations, regardless of identity (race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, etc.). Participants also conceptualized social justice as something that was both a *process and outcome*, which necessitated the *identification and addressing of oppression*, as well as oppressive forces.

While some participants were first exposed to issues of social justice through *formative conversations* during their childhood development, others were first exposed to the theoretical underpinnings of social justice through their HDFS coursework. All participants referred to having been exposed to issues of social justice through their *applied learning/internship* experiences at the placement site (a federally funded substance abuse and HIV/AIDS prevention initiative). Through this applied learning experience, participants illustrated a synthesis of knowledge about social justice. They *identified structurally based problems* as impeding the lives of intervention consumers (“at-risk” youth), as opposed to individually or pathologically based problems. As illustrated by the *embodying emergent identities* theme, participants saw themselves both as HDFS professionals-in-training and as advocates for social justice. Through their internship-based actions, participants illustrated and described an ongoing *pursuit of social change*, as well as the *facilitation of psychological empowerment* for the intervention consumers they served.

Implications for Education

Family science programs should be prepared to wrestle with the social, political, and environmental strains that fuel disparities and inequity. The historical underpinnings surrounding poverty, discrimination, and oppression have contributed to inequities experienced by many underrepresented populations. Family science programs should infuse specific evidence-based curricula into their programs, which should allow for the development of critical consciousness to occur and may serve to prepare students for the realities and challenges of advancing social justice. Such activities can include self-reflective exercises and discussions about diversity, power, oppression, and privilege. At present, it is not enough for social justice to be an implied component of HDFS curricula or applied learning experiences. Instead, this discipline of family and consumer sciences should be intentional in our promotion of social justice, so that students can understand and assume the totality of a professional family science identity.

Implications for Training

Interns in family science should be provided with opportunities at their internship sites to engage in applied learning activities that support the formation of social justice. University-community partnerships should ensure that there is congruency between academic programs and field sites in messages about social justice. Internship site supervisors may want to consider using a blend of formal and informal assessments to gauge each intern's skill level and prior knowledge of social justice education and advocacy.

Burnes and Ross (2010) suggest five guiding principles to help ground prevention and outreach efforts in social justice. In collaboration with the field site supervisors, the interns should be prepared to (i) identify social justice issues that affect the target population; (ii) conduct an examination of existing research to ensure best and ethical practices; (iii) meet with stakeholders to determine needs of the group; (iv) prepare workshops based on the needs of the target group; and (v) establish an evaluation format to ensure the appropriate follow-up. In this study, these principles described were followed and the findings appear to support the link between social justice and HDFS internships.

Limitations

Qualitative interview methodology was selected to address the research aim of this descriptive study for several reasons. In-depth interviews have been utilized effectively in studies that are more interested in the richness of the data rather than the breadth of information (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). Regarding the specific limitations related to this study, participants may have been concerned about possible breaches in confidentiality since the interviews were audio-recorded. As a consequence, participants may have been reluctant to disclose negative internship experiences. Similarly, the sample itself may be biased. While the sample's representativeness is similar to the parent university's representativeness, the sample and their contexts for practice may not be reflective of the full breadth of HDFS trends. Engaging in a more rigorous research design could help understand these relationships.

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