Human Rights and Social Work Field Education: Exploring Student Perceptions

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Abstract

Social workers and social work education have been historically committed to addressing social justice as a core component of social work practice. The concept of human rights as a broader framework for social justice has been a recent focus in social work education in the United States. This focus has included a renewed examination of the preparation of social work students for human rights practice, particularly in field education. This study seeks to understand the perception of human rights among social work students, how they feel their social work education has prepared them for human rights work, and the opportunities that they identify in field to practice from a human rights perspective. Results indicate that students report loss of agency in their placements and an uncertainty about the human rights education they have received. Implications for social work education and field are discussed.

Keywords: Human rights, Social Work, Field

Social workers and social work education have been historically committed to addressing social justice as a core component of social work practice (Solas, 2018; Poulin, Matis, & Witt, 2019). In fact, social work educators often emphasize the importance of social justice in areas such as clinical practice, advocacy for clients, and approaches in teamwork and therapy (Reichert, 2001). The concept of human rights as a broader framework for social justice has been a recent focus in social work education in the United States (Chiarelli-Helminiak, Eggers, & Libal, 2018; Poulin, Matis, & Witt, 2019). This focus has included a renewed examination of the preparation of social work students for human rights practice, particularly in field education (Murray-Lichtman & Levine, 2019). This qualitative study sought to better understand student perceptions of human rights as well as opportunities for human rights practice in field education experiences.

Social Justice and Equal Opportunity: Core Values in the Social Work Profession

The social work profession has long challenged inequalities among individuals and groups (Reichert, 2001; Solas, 2018). This historical approach to challenging discrimination and unequal distribution of resources helped the social work profession gain the status of being advocates of social justice and equal opportunity (Poulin, Matis, & Witt, 2019). A major difference between social work and other helping professionals is that it moves beyond the focus on individual issues and seeks to bring about change on a more global level (Reichert, 2001). The National Association of Social Work (NASW) lists five areas within its priorities of social justice including voting rights, criminal justice/juvenile justice, environmental justice, immigration, and economic justice (2019). While the social work profession has historically called on its workers to rally for social justice, achieving this priority has fallen short within the profession (Reichert, 2001; Solas, 2015). Perhaps this is due to scholars' suggestions that more than one meaning is attached to the term of social justice (Morgaine, 2014; Solas, 2015; Reichert, 2001). Consideration of the broader perspective of human rights may provide further clarity.

Establishment of Human Rights

Human rights and its definition have been evolving beginning with *The Cyrus Cylinder* in Persia 539 B.C. which declared people had the right to choose their own religion. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* was developed in France in 1789 which stated that all citizens are equal under the law. Eventually, this would lead to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) in 1948. The UDHR has provided a guideline for human rights work for decades. Following World War II, human rights became a global concern and the prevention of future crimes against humanity became a worldwide mission (Flowers, 1997). The UDHR contains 30 articles granting rights to everyone in countries signed into the United Nations. These rights are typically organized into three groups: 1) civil and political rights (religious, voting, speech, due process, and ownership freedoms), 2) socio-economic rights (education, housing, nutrition, health, employment), and 3) collective rights (environment, trade, natural resources, cultural heritage, and economic development) (Özler, 2018; Beydili & Yildirim, 2013). Understanding human rights can provide a broader framework for recognizing issues of social justice.

Grand Challenges for Social Work and Social Work Education

To spur social work expertise, education, research, and practice, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare created the Grand Challenges for Social Work in 2016. Meant to fortify a call to action for the social work profession, the goal is to address major social problems being experienced in the nation (Barth, Gilmore, Flynn, Fraser &Brekke, 2014). Three areas of focus in the Grand Challenges are: 1) individual and family well-being 2) stronger social fabric, and 3) a just society (Grand Challenges for Social Work, n.d.). In keeping with the move toward social justice and human rights, Grand Challenges for Social Work lists advancing social justice as an important component of the social agenda aimed to shape a more equal society (Dessel & Crabb, 2011; Murray-Lichtman & Levine, 2019).

While social justice has long been an explicit value of social work, the concept of human rights has only recently gained traction in social work education in the United States. (Chiarelli-Helminiak, Eggers, & Libal, 2018). Recognizing that social justice and human rights are similar but not equal concepts, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) incorporated the language of human rights into its 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (Chiarelli-Helminiak, Eggers & Libal, 2018). Increasingly, social work programs have tried to infuse human rights into the curriculum but have sometimes faced push back within their departments. This increase in human rights being explicitly identified in curriculum may be a result of CSWE's increased efforts to identify human rights in the accreditation process. However, when examining findings on the efforts to include a human rights perspectives in undergraduate and graduate social work courses in the United States, it was found that incorporation of human rights throughout the social work curriculum has been an uneven process that is often based on individual faculty interest. Additional themes that emerged included a lack of clarity in defining and differentiating human rights and social justice, challenges with infusing human rights into social work curriculum, but also support for the importance of a focus on human rights. It is particularly important to note the finding that one of the most significant challenges to effective integration of human rights into social work curriculum was the lack of familiarity that faculty, including adjunct and field faculty, have with human rights concepts and their application to practice (Mehrotra et al., 2017; Chiarelli-Helminiak, Eggers, & Libal, 2018). This lack of familiarity with a human rights framework for practice may in part be due to the historical marginalization of macro content in social work programs (Chiarelli-Helminiak, Eggers & Libal, 2018).

Social Work and the Micro/Macro Divide

The majority of the educational accreditation standards for social work programs in the United States concentrate on micro-level practice (LaTosch & Jones, 2012). Standards such as assessing client strengths, collecting and interpreting client data, and implementing evidence-based interventions to achieve client goals are examples of the micro driven standards of the EPAS. Considering the wording of the EPAS, it is not unreasonable to suggest that practice with individuals and family-client-systems is prioritized over macro practice (LaTosch & Jones, 2012). While the inception of social work as a profession may have reflected a dual, micro-macro focus, micro social work would eventually find a strong footing in the earlier part of the 20th century with the publication of works such as *Social Diagnosis* (1917) by Mary Richmond (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). While macro-focused social work would eventually resurge and officially gain backing by the Council on Social Work Education in 1962, macro work continues to be underrepresented in social work education and practice (Mehrotra, et al., 2017).

Data available from CSWE in 2012 shows that less than 10% of MSW students are enrolled in specific macro practice areas (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014).

Field as Signature Pedagogy

Field education is now considered the signature pedagogy of the social work profession (CSWE, 2008). As such, field education needs to ensure that learning opportunities are provided in the practicum for students to acquire the knowledge and skills to address human rights and social justice needs (Mehrotra et al., 2017; Murray-Lichtman & Levine, 2019).

Literature outlines a framework for social justice practice in field education, however, it does not address human rights specifically within its context (Chiarelli-Helminiak, Eggers & Libal, 2018). Much of the literature on field placements and human rights takes a traditional social justice approach. The Delors Commission identified four pillars of education: learning to know; learning to do; learning to live; and learning to be (as cited by Lenhart & Savolainen, 2002; Delors, 1996). According to Lenhart and Savolainen (2002), social work was identified as a profession needing additional education in human rights by the Delors Commission. Field education, as the "learning to do" pillar, needs to ensure that appropriate macro learning experiences are provided. Experiences for students in macro policy practice, such as human rights issues, are often limited. This limitation inhibits the development of confidence and self-efficacy. Additional experience supports growing self-confidence and skill which promotes a sense of self-efficacy, practice interest and engagement (Holden, Anastas, & Meenaghan, 2004, Manit & Hylton, 2017).

Barriers in Field Education

Specific barriers to providing meaningful social justice and human rights field experiences have been noted in the following areas: field agencies, student interest, retaining placements, and integration in curriculum (Mehrotra et al., 2017; Murray-Lichtman & Levine, 2019). Social work students often do not receive the appropriate encouragement within their educational programs to promote social justice change in their practicums due to an outdated structure of social work education (Mehrotra et al., 2017; Murray-Lichtman & Levine, 2019). This transitions over to students' interest as well as willingness and courage to speak up against social justice issues during their field practice (Mehrotra et al., 2017). Strategies to address these limitations are to both include social justice and human rights curriculum in field as well as create projects in field placement that explicitly address human rights and social justice (Levine & Murray-Lichtman, 2018).

This study seeks to understand the perception of human rights among social work students, how they feel their social work education has prepared them for human rights work, and the opportunities that they identify in field to practice from a human rights perspective.

Methods

This study used a qualitative design with a content analysis approach. The interviews were conducted with students enrolled in the social work programs at a large public university in the western United States. The university has both a bachelor's and master's program in social work, which have been accredited by CSWE for many years.

Participants

Participants were self-selected into the study. Students were recruited using a survey (which is not in this study). Initially, we intended to do a quantitative survey; however, we found almost no difference in responses about human rights. This may have been acquiescent response since many of the questions may have had obvious "social work" answers. To better understand the perceptions of students, we wanted to conduct follow up interviews. At the end of the survey, students were asked if they would like to be part of a qualitative study by volunteering for an interview. Students who indicated interest were contacted to schedule interviews. All of the students interviewed had been admitted to the social work program at the university and had begun their field placements.

Rigor

The interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes each. An electronic service was used to transcribe the interviews and then the transcripts were checked manually for accuracy. Interview transcripts were read by multiple research team members to develop codes from the data. The codes were used to extract quotes from participants that were then used to develop the themes in the results.

Two researchers read the transcripts separately and coded each interview. Their codes were compared in developing the themes, finding overlapping codes and themes.

During the interviews, we explored student attitudes about and experiences with human rights in greater detail. For instance, students were asked how they would describe the phrase human rights and how they defined human rights differently from social justice. Students were also asked about the responsibility of social workers in obtaining human rights for everyone. Finally, students were asked to describe how their social work education and their field placements have prepared them to practice human rights in social work effectively.

Results

There were a total of eight participants interviewed for the study. All the interviews were done with students from the BSW and MSW programs. Four of the participants were undergraduate students and four of the participants were graduate students. The average age of the students was 26. See table 1.

Table 1: *Participant Demographics*

Gender	Age	Program	Field Placement Type
Female	26	MSW	Education
Female	30	MSW	Child Welfare
Female	24	MSW	Child Welfare
Female	34	BSW	Non-profit
Female	23	BSW	Non-profit
Female	22	BSW	Juvenile Correctional Facility
Female	28	BSW	Correctional Facility
Female	22	BSW	Non-profit

Analysis of the data resulted in three themes: 1) Understanding of human rights and social justice 2) "Just an intern at field placement," and 3) Broader, hands-on educational experience with human rights.

Understanding of Human Rights and Social Justice

In the interviews, we wanted to explore how students defined human rights and how they viewed human rights and social justice together. While we had a range of responses, we also had some commonality as well.

When asked to define human rights, students largely said that human rights was a broad term for things that people should have access to. For instance, Sofia said, "I think I would describe human rights as a right that every human has regardless of sex, gender ethnicity." Veronica described human rights as something that "belongs to everyone." Alison, however, defined human rights in terms of having access to things. She said, "I think of having access to stuff that every person should have access to, even if that's something like birth control or having access to health care." Karmen gave a detailed answer:

> The ability for different peoples and populations really to exert their inherent freedoms, which consists of many things, beliefs, state of being...if you're gay, bisexual, whatever the term that they prefer to use then, I think that's okay. Also, I guess the right to be free from like oppression and injustices like criminal behavior activity.

Students were asked to identify something that they consider a human right. Healthcare was the first choice for half of the participants. Veronica said that access to education was a human right. Cristina talked about farm workers being able to receive food assistance and other types of welfare.

> For farm workers, you know, they're, most of them are low income and when they are being denied certain rights such as medical or such as like food stamps, you know, that's also a human right. Cause they have that eligibility to apply for that and when that's kind of neglected.

Access to water was also mentioned more than once. Sofia said:

> Water because everybody needs that to survive. It often takes me back to thinking about immigrants when they're crossing and Border Angels with what they do out there in the desert and drop off water. It's a human right.

When students were asked about human rights and social justice together, some felt they were identical, while some thought they were definitely not the same, and others gave a more middle ground response. Cristina said that social justice and human rights are not different from each other. Alison agreed, saying she feels "like it might be kind of like the same." She went on to explain that she could not explain how the two would be different. Karmen also agreed, saying that human rights and social justice "tie into the same thing." Jasmine, though, felt they were not the same thing. She described social justice as "the pursuit of equality and human rights." Cristina and Sofia both described the terms as "intertwined" with each other with Cristina saying that "because if you have a situation where you're facing the social justice issue, it has to do with human rights." Sofia went further, removing social justice and human right from the concept of equality:

> I think [social justice and human rights are] intertwined with each other. But when I think about social justice, I think about equity. Growing up I thought about equality. However, some people are more disadvantaged than others. And so therefore, when I think about social justice it's providing those who don't have necessarily that extra privilege.

Finally, we asked students to discuss human rights and social justice in the context of their practice, they discussed the challenges that social workers face. Lucia discussed the need to be an advocate, "Like if you see that something like a specific group is not getting certain rights that other groups are benefiting from, that's something that needs to be dealt with, I think in that aspect."

Cristina added to this by saying that advocacy "has to do with like a whole nationwide issue like in different countries." Sofia expressed the urgency she felt with regard to human rights:

> I feel like human rights, it's, you absolutely need it. And there's no, there's no doubt. I mean, however, we're still at a point in our lives that we're still constantly fighting for even human rights. I mean we have people; we have kids in cages so I, our freedom, they haven't done anything wrong. So yeah, I guess it's a, it's a battle.

"Just an intern" at my Field Placement

The second theme emerged as we talked about experiences students had in their internships with regard to human rights. As we talked about their placements and their work. ,Many students expressed their frustration with feeling a sense of powerlessness at their internship when they encountered things they wanted to see changed. For example, Camila described an incident at the juvenile justice facility where she was placed.

> So, I was going into the unit and as soon as the door opens, I see one of the deputies walking upstairs and he yells at one of the inmates, tells him, 'get back to your fucking cell you fucker!' ...like there's other ways to talk to people, but I don't know if it was already tension, is that the way they talk? But I just didn't think that was appropriate for them to do that, you know they might think they have the power because that's part of their job, but they shouldn't be treating other people like that.

Camila stated she did report this incident to the supervisor who said he would look into it. She felt that she had been heard and her concern would be addressed. Not all participants have felt heard in their concerns though. Veronica described a meeting between the social worker whom she shadowed and a parent who only spoke Spanish. They had an interpreter there because the social worker did not speak Spanish, although Veronica does. During the meeting, Veronica was asked to sit at the side of the room and not at the table where the meeting was being conducted. While she listened, she knew the interpreter was not correctly telling the mother everything the social worker was reporting. Veronica reported:

> But as an intern I felt like I couldn't say anything at that moment because it wasn't my place, I guess...In that meeting I wasn't even on the table. I was like in the back, you know, just observing so that like that had an effect too. Because like, since I wasn't at the table, I felt like I was just out of place if I were to have spoken up about it. But yeah, so the mom got the wrong communication because the translator wasn't expressing what the social worker was saying at the moment.

Veronica went on to describe that she reported this concern to her supervisor. She was told to make a report online about the situation but was told that nothing would come of it because the county had a limited number of interpreters.

Concerns about how they were treated or made to feel during their placements were repeated several times. The phrase "just an intern" was used in nearly every interview at least once. For instance, Sofia said:

> I feel like at times we're constantly told, no, you cannot. You can't do this, you're just an intern. Or sometimes I guess there's no trust between what we can do and our field instructors or maybe even the coordinators here limiting our skills or, cause there are certain things like we can't do.

Sofia went on to describe that she feels unheard at her placement:

> I feel like we're often overlooked, seen as unprepared or not knowing what, or not really having a voice. I feel like if they took the time to say, okay, let's brainstorm, what would we do or what would you do?

Veronica also provided an example:

> I feel like our place, the placement could, I guess like it just encourage us interns, not to call us, just interns, you know, like I feel like in all my placement they introduced me as like, 'Oh, this is [Veronica] the intern' or my intern...not introducing me as the intern and like actually like allowing me to, to express like my concerns right then in there and yeah, I guess like empowering me so I can empower others.

While other participants expressed concerns about being called "just an intern," they also reported feeling empowered at their placements in some situations. Jasmine reported that she felt that her view on the impacts of social work had shifted in a positive way because of her internship. Lucia and Cristina also felt empowered at their placements. Lucia discussed that her placement helps LGBTQ immigrants and she has worked closely with some of the people served by her agency. Cristina reported that her placement does a good job with empowerment and human rights at the micro level.She said, "It's more on the individual level, not like a broader level where I'm working with like communities and like different States and all that stuff. Like to make like a big social change." Karmen reported similar sentiment that she also felt empowered at her placement:

> So, learning all this kind of stuff really prepared me to work with like different kinds of people. Cause I know when I'm working in a different type of job I'll have, I'll be able to look for resources even though they'll be different than the ones that I'm working for now I know where to go to.

Broader, Hands-On Educational Experience with Human Rights

Students were also asked about their educational experience and preparation with human rights and social justice. We consistently heard that the program was largely focused on micro-practice and that the students would like to have more opportunities to learn about macro work. For instance, Sofia said, "Not really. I feel like we have talked about [human rights and macro practice] just on the surface, but not really gone into depth about how we can, we can solve those problems." Lucia agreed stating that she felt her classes only briefly touched on human rights or macro work. Cristina said that her classes were focused on how to meet the needs of clients at the micro level.

Students also expressed a strong interest in learning more about international information to expand their knowledge beyond the region and the country. Alison mentioned that a group of graduate students from the social work department presented research at the International Consortium for Social Development conference in Indonesia in the summer of 2019. She would like to see department offer more opportunities like this to increase student engagement with macro practice. Cristina wanted to have more exposure in the curriculum about injustices that happen internationally in other countries and informed about how we can be involved to address these issues. Lucia said:

> Like we didn't really talk about specific things [related to human rights], especially in other countries. I feel like I don't really have the knowledge of what's going on in other countries and like what they're struggling with. Yeah, it's focused more here and specifically more in California, like the issues that we have.

> Students were asked for what they would add to the curriculum or change about the curriculum in order to address these concerns. Sofia mentioned that she was taking a communities class now in her last semester in the MSW program. She would have preferred to take that class during her first year because she felt introduced her applying social work practice and integration into the community. Sofia explains:

> I remember for the first day of class we talked about how to present yourself in our community? How do you blend in and how do you, how do you come in? And we talked about culture. So, I feel like that's something that I would appreciate at the beginning and learning about the resources versus now that we're at the end.

Several students discussed having a class on human rights and advocacy. Alison discussed the need for a better understanding of views from around the world.

> So I feel like sometimes there is a certain level of understanding and respect for different cultures and peoples. But at the same time, I think sometimes our own views of things in the world, like, you know, around the world, the views of peoples around the world kind of conflict. Right. So, I think that's the thing that would have to be kind of overcome. Right? That's a little barrier.

Other students wanted workshops or assignments specific to human rights. Cristina said, "We should focus on projects that have to deal with like learning more about different countries and different issues within different states so that way we're more culturally informed." Camila wondered why we didn't have workshops on human rights when we have workshops on many other topics like motivational interviewing. She felt there was only so much that could be learned from a textbook and that we needed to have hands-on experience to learn the topic well. Lucia echoed this stating that events like Lobby Days at the state capitol, the border trip to the US and Mexico border to volunteer, and Bring Your Own Ballot to encourage voter participation on campus should be mandatory events that every social work student has to do something like them.

> Students also emphasized the value of faculty sharing educational opportunities outside of the classroom. Veronica mentioned a faculty member sent an email about a deportation protest opportunity that really sparked an interest.

> I want to say it was last semester where he [faculty] told us about the protest, about the family that their dad got deported and then he got released and they had that protest. I feel like that's like a human rights or a social justice issue. And I like just being informed about that. So, I think there's some professors that like...push, not push, but inform us about it.

Veronica went on to describe the importance of faculty informing students about events in the community and ways they can engage in advocacy. Alison also talked about the importance of faculty sharing their experiences with human rights.

> There are some professors that have shared like maybe they were raised in another country and they've had to deal with more pretty significant human rights issues. And just hearing their stories is kind of eye opening, I think. So, the ability for the professors to be transparent with the stuff that they've had to deal with, I think it's very important.

Discussion

Results from this study provide several useful insights for social work practitioners, field supervisors, and faculty. When presented with a list of topics, students will broadly agree that they are all related to human rights. It is quite possible this acquiescent response or social desirability, as social work students are primed to know that social workers should advocate for human rights and social justice. Because the quantitative survey had such little variation in responses, no significant differences were found.

> The qualitative data provided a much richer exploration of the topic. Students had a challenging time providing definitions for human rights. While access to healthcare and clean water are good examples of human rights, the concept encompasses much more. The United Nations defines human rights as any right inherent to all people. While some of the students did provide a definition close to this, having freedom was also cited by several students. Jasmine called human rights having "access to freedoms." Camila also described human rights as "being free." Discussion about what human rights means and how to identify matters of human rights should be included across the curriculum.

Students also struggled to differentiate between human rights and social justice. Most of the students, even when they recognized there is a difference, came up short in defining that difference. Jasmine may have come close for many by describing social justice as the pursuit of human rights. Aryeh Neier, founder of the Human Rights Watch, describes human rights as focused on the exercise of power over people while social justice examines the distribution of wealth and resources (Saiz & Yamin, 2013). Discussions in policy classes should seek to define the differences between human rights work and social justice. While this work may overlap, they are not synonymous.

Many of the students felt disempowered in their field placements. It is interesting to note that only undergraduate students reported a feeling of empowerment in their placement while all of the graduate reported at least some feeling of loss of empowerment. Students commented on the language used to describe their work ("just an intern") and reported feeling like they could not speak up when things were going wrong. This lack of agency within their placements is concerning.

Other students did report that they felt like they made a difference in their placements and were able to advance human rights. Lucia and Camila both discussed vulnerable populations (LGBTQ immigrants and incarcerated juveniles). While Camila had some concerns at her placement regarding the treatment of the youth, she felt like she was heard when she voiced her concerns.

For social work faculty and field supervisors, we should work to ensure that all our students feel safe to raise concerns or speak out when things are being done inappropriately. This may mean not referring to students as "interns" or making sure that students have a place at the table (literally) during meetings. Beyond that, we want to ensure that students can come to field instructors, field liaisons, or other faculty if they have a concern that is not being addressed in their placements.

Students provided considerable feedback on possible changes for the program. Nearly all the students discussed the need for more macro-level content that addresses human rights, particularly abroad. While students thought that human rights were sometimes discussed in class, they felt that the teaching of macro views on human rights was drowned out by the focus on micro content. Social work programs needs to examine the course content across their program to account for where macro-level human rights work is taught. By students accounting, not only should this potentially have its own class, it should also be infused across the curriculum into multiple classes and outside activities.

As we consider these results, I am heartened by the strength of the advocacy of our students. In recent years, we have taken students to the US-Mexico border to volunteer, to Indonesia to present at an international conference, and coordinated a voter outreach drive. We have witnessed student advocacy increase and their calls for more opportunities to engage with communities, here and abroad, have only increased. While we recognize the areas of opportunity to grow, we celebrate the impacts we have made.

Limitations

Future studies on perceptions of human rights may need to be less direct in asking about the concepts under consideration. Qualitative studies are not generalizable and may only reflect the perceptions of the students who volunteered and responded. Several of the students who volunteered for interviews have worked closely with first author of this paper. Further research would be necessary to understand the experiences of all the students in the program with regard to human rights and their social work practice.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences and perceptions of social work students in field placements regarding human rights and social work practice. The qualitative data provided keen insight into students' thoughts on human rights, social justice, field placements, and their social work education. Social workers continue to stand at the forefront of the fight for a world where every person is treated with inherent dignity and worth.

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