Brown Lettuce and Rodent Traps, Granola and Trees: A Qualitative Study of an Experiential Teaching Tool to Promote Socially Just Practice

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Abstract

We report on the experiences of 18 graduate social work students who participated in an experiential learning activity designed to promote social justice. Through exposure to diverse community settings, students developed an enhanced understanding of client worlds, a deeper sense of community disparities rooted in race and class, and a heightened commitment to social change.

Keywords: social work, social justice, values, teaching, experiential learning

Introduction

The National Association of Social Workers' (2008) *Code of Ethics* articulates the core values of the profession, sets standards for professional practice, and establishes guidelines for ethical decision-making. The *Code*'s preamble establishes social workers' responsibility for the promotion of social justice, asserting that the overarching mission of the profession is "to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (para. 1). In this regard, social work's professional mandate is clear.

Despite these directives, there is significant variation in how social workers define social justice and how educational programs prepare learners to engage in socially just practice (Barsky, 2010; Gasker & Fischer, 2014). Van Soest and Garcia (2008) argue the necessity for social work schools and departments to create an environmental context that includes social justice in ways that expand beyond the confines of the classroom. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) suggest that enhanced self-awareness allows social workers to be more effective change agents, explaining that we learn most from exploring the lived experiences of ourselves and others. Experiential learning opportunities can address both of these concerns by getting students off campus, into the broader community, and among individuals they may one day serve; systematic examination of experiential pedagogical strategies

to promote socially just practice, however, is rare (Havig, 2013).

In addition, the breadth of the social work profession, particularly its concurrent focus on serving both individuals and communities, is both a facilitator and a barrier to preparing a workforce committed to promoting social justice on multiple social levels. On one hand, social work students are encouraged throughout their education to make connections between micro- and macro-level social systems. On the other hand, the reality that most social work students express interest in careers focused almost exclusively on micro-level practice (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014) presents a serious challenge to instructors charged with the task of empowering students to promote social justice. Moya-Salas and colleagues (2010) suggest that the application of critical theory holds considerable promise as a strategy to bridge micro- and macro-level approaches to social work practice and, by extension, education.

Critical Theory, Critical Social Work, and Critical Consciousness

Since its earliest conceptualization (Horkheimer, 1937, 1972), critical theory has linked the personal and the political, shedding light on the ways in which social processes give rise to inequalities that are experienced in everyday life. Critical social work, a group of broadly defined practice approaches that are informed to varying degrees by critical theory, seeks to uncover and address the root causes of social disadvantage to bring about a more just society (Fook, 2003). Critical social work rejects the status quo; its goal is change: "Practice, as conceived by critical social work, must contribute to a transformation of everyday lives" (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005, p. ix).

Critical studies often seek to not only illuminate oppressive conditions and critique the status quo, but to also point to ways in which systems might change and improve upon existing structures (Creswell, 2007). Critical research calls for attention to the subjective experiences of participants, value-laden inquiry, and an intentional

aim of righting imbalances in power at all levels of society. The truth being investigated by such critical inquiry is how oppression is experienced and how disempowerment can be understood and rectified (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Critical inquiry in social work can be viewed as a necessary path first to self-scrutiny and then toward enhanced professional development, accountability, and service to client populations.

To prepare for such critical practice, social work students must first develop a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Nicotera & Kang, 2009). Critical consciousness-raising takes place as social work students gain a deeper understanding of how complex social, political, historical, and economic forces shape people's daily lives and how their behavior – both as individuals and as professional social workers – can bring about change (Bransford, 2011). Critical consciousness is pursued in many different ways throughout social work education as students learn to recognize both the mechanisms and consequences of oppression, looking for and working to rectify the "problems behind the problem" (Carroll & Minkler, 2000, p. 24). Saleebey and Scanlon (2005) argue for a critical social work pedagogy that would better equip new social workers to promote social justice. Such a critical approach to social work education would entail close examination of race-, class-, gender-based and other forms of oppression and privilege and their impact not only on social work practice, but also within the context of our personal lives and relationships.

Experiential Learning to Enhance Social Justice Learning: Experiencing Two Grocery Stores

As an initial step toward consciousness-raising around issues of social justice, a social work policy instructor at a metropolitan, public university in the southern United States offered 18 graduate social work students a learning opportunity designed to help them better understand and reflect upon how broader social inequalities are routinely experienced in people's everyday lives. Student

participants were asked to shop at two different grocery stores from the same chain in different locations of the same city. One store was located in a neighborhood in which most residents (nearly 80%) were African American; the other was located in a neighborhood in which most residents (over 90%) were Caucasian. The median household income in the latter was nearly three times that of the median household income in the former; similar disparities existed in terms of median home values and rates of unemployment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2011). After shopping in the two stores, student participants completed journal entries in which they compared and contrasted the stores and reflected on their overall shopping experiences, writing about what they learned, observed, and felt, along with how they thought that broader social, political, historical, and economic factors may have played a role in what they observed. Students' written reflections were discussed in a regularly scheduled class session, which was documented in notes completed by the course instructor.

What follows is a qualitative thematic analysis of instructor's notes and students' reflections completed as part of the so-called "two grocery stores" assignment. As is the case with most qualitative inquiry, our goal was not to generate broadly generalizable findings. Rather, we sought to better understand the impact of the assignment on students' learning and the extent to which it helped students meaningfully connect the larger social environment to individuals' daily realities. We posed the following broad research questions to guide our analysis: 1) What were students' thoughts and feelings about their visit to grocery stores in two culturally different neighborhoods? and 2) In what ways did students connect their observations and experiences at the two grocery stores to the broader social and cultural contexts in which the stores exist?

Method
Procedures
The data set analyzed in this study consisted of instructor's notes and students' de-identified

reflections, which were submitted to their instructor as part of the previously described assignment. Prior to subjecting any data to analysis, we submitted a research proposal to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which determined that this study was exempt from IRB oversight because it was being conducted in an established educational setting. Data were stored electronically on password-protected hard drives prior to and throughout analysis.

Participants
Participants included one foundation-level social work policy course instructor and 18 graduate social work students enrolled in a metropolitan, public university in the southern United States. The instructor was an African American female with approximately 22 years of social service experience, most of which was spent engaged in macro-level practice in underserved areas. Student participants self-identified as Caucasian ($n = 10$) or Black/African American ($n = 8$), and most ($n = 13$) were female. Students' prior employment varied in terms of both length and type; some reported multiple years of experience in social service settings prior to initiating graduate studies.

Data analysis
Two members of our research team (AD, KW) conducted a thematic analysis of instructor's notes and students' reflections, employing strategies presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke defined thematic analysis as a qualitative method that identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns or themes within a data set. Although there is some overlap with other methods that seek to identify patterns in data, thematic analysis is different in that it is not necessarily tied to any particular theoretical framework, making it a highly flexible method. Braun and Clarke (2006) provided a step-by-step procedure for conducting thematic analysis: 1) become familiar with the data, 2) produce initial codes from the data, 3) identify themes within the data, 4) review and refine themes, 5) define and further refine themes, and 6) write a report of the findings. As with other qualitative methods, this

method does not follow a linear process. It involves repeatedly going back to the data to see if they are accurately reflected in the selected themes, to ensure that themes are discrete from each other and yet internally consistent, and to check whether the overall analysis addresses the stated research questions.

To familiarize ourselves with the data, we separately read the instructor's notes and students' reflections and made notes on our initial impressions. Then we met together to discuss the data and to develop an initial coding framework to provide structure to our initial coding efforts. During subsequent phases of the project, we met face-to-face every two weeks for six weeks to clarify coding definitions and build upon our initial coding framework, eventually identifying, defining, and refining themes supported by the instructor's notes and student reflections. An in-depth description of these themes and supporting data are provided below.

Findings

As previously described, students were asked to compose written reflections following their visits to two grocery stores: one in a relatively affluent, predominantly Caucasian neighborhood (Store X), and one in a lower-income, predominantly African American neighborhood (Store Y). They were instructed to collect specific information about product availability and pricing and to reflect on their overall shopping experiences. In addition, they were asked to consider how social, political, historical, and economic factors might play a part in the outcomes they observed. They then participated in a classroom discussion, during which they shared their reflections. This discussion was described in the instructor's notes completed at the conclusion of the class session. Five key themes emerged from our analysis of students' written reflections and the instructor's notes: experiencing differences in atmosphere, detecting differences in presentation, observing disparities in variety and quality, reflecting on differences, and viewing differences through a social justice lens.

Experiencing differences in atmosphere

Students noticed a distinct difference in atmosphere between the two grocery stores. They wrote about atmosphere in terms of general feelings they experienced at the stores - both outside and inside. Student #4, an African American woman who had never been to Store Y before the assignment, commented that she knew she was getting closer to Store Y when she " began to see more liquor stores, more people walking with covered bottles, and more city buses. I also saw more empty buildings and vacant houses." This student also commented that there was "madness and confusion in the parking lot" and that people were entering through the exit doors and exiting through the entrance doors. Several students noticed a difference in cleanliness between the two stores. Student #1, an African American woman, said that Store Y "seemed to be neglected as far as maintenance." Conversely, student #11, a Caucasian man, found both stores "clean, well decorated, and inviting," although he noted that the different locations of the stores had an impact on the atmosphere the customer would expect. Student #13, a Caucasian woman, wrote that she felt uneasy at Store Y because "there were many more people, and it was far more chaotic." Student #15, a Caucasian woman, felt so uneasy prior to visiting Store Y that she took a friend with her and had the friend drive an older car. In addition, they both spent time "consciously" thinking what they would wear. Student #14, a Caucasian man, also commented on the importance of clothing. When he visited the two stores, he was dressed in "nice clothes with a tie" because of work-related business he had attended to earlier in the day. He recounted the reactions he received at the different stores: At Store Y, "I was obviously out of place. From the moment I stepped out of my vehicle at the 'lower end' store, I could feel the people staring at me, employees included. People in this area were suspicious to say the least. When I was in the 'upper end' store, I blended in and was promptly greeted by patrons and staff."

Many students found the atmosphere in Store X to be more appealing to shoppers. Student #8, an African American woman, wrote that this store appealed to a different (i.e., higher) social class and that there was a "friendlier atmosphere." She wrote that, at Store X, she felt she could easily get help if needed. Student #7, an African American woman, stated that Store X was "cleaner inside and out." Student #16, a Caucasian woman, indicated that Store X's "overall ambience was more pleasant," citing warmer lighting and colors used in the decor. Student #15 wrote that she went by herself to Store X and "[fell] in love" with it. Students had different reactions to the atmosphere outside of Store X. For example, student #4 said that Store X was "peacefully nestled among trees," while student #18, a Caucasian woman, felt that the store was "camouflaged by trees," and she got lost trying to find it.

Detecting differences in presentation

Students noticed differences in each store's presentation. That is, they noticed which things stores made easily visible and which things were hidden from view. Student #11 commented that the presence of law enforcement officers at Store Y had a negative effect on the shopping experience:

> [One thing] that surprised me was the security at [Store Y]. I saw two police officers in the store and a police car parked out front, but it did not look needed. The store was nice and safe, and it had nothing to do with their presence. The police presence almost made it seem like we were supposed to be looking over our shoulder, as if [Store Y] was where all the criminals were hanging out. It was just silly.

Store Y prominently displayed WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) stickers that indicated that a particular product would be paid for by the program. Student #9, an African American man, wrote, "I was very surprised at the lack of WIC

options or the expression of those options at [Store X]. Are they suppressing the reality that poverty exists in that part of [town]?" Pest control was also handled differently by the two stores. Student #6, a Caucasian woman, commented that, "the most significant aspect of my assignment was the discovery of industrialized rodent traps throughout [Store Y], something that was never seen at [Store X]." The food display was qualitatively different between stores as well. Student #17, a Caucasian man, noted that in the high-traffic areas in Store Y, "bulk packages of ramen noodles" were present, contrasted with "all-natural granola" in Store X. Students used words such as "impressive," and "well put-together" to describe the displays in Store X.

Observing disparities in variety and quality

All students commented on the third theme: differences in food selection and variety between the two stores. The most obvious difference was the size and placement of the organic section. Student #10, a Caucasian man, stated that in Store Y, there wasn't a specific organic section. Instead, "organic products were alongside non-organic [products] with signage pointing them out." Other students found an organic section in Store Y but indicated that it was very small in comparison to the organic section in Store X. Student #8 reported that Latino, organic, and vegetarian products were all placed together in Store Y and did not even fill an entire aisle. By contrast, student #17 reported that Store X had "ample shelf space," and had "numerous vegan, vegetarian, and non-[genetically modified] products [that had their] own refrigerated shelf space." Other students described the organic section at Store X with words such as "huge" and "better variety." Student #15 stated that "the deli and organic section was mouth-dropping impressive."

While most students found that the prices of products in the two stores were comparable, they reported differences in selection and quality – particularly in the meat and produce sections. Student #2, an African American woman, observed that Store X "offered a larger deli with [brand name] meats, a cheese bar, an olive bar, a larger organic

section, a larger salad bar, and is open 24 hours a day." Student #5, an African American woman, stated that the first thing she noticed at Store X was a sign on the outside of the store indicating that it sold sushi. Student #11 wrote that Store X "had food choices from all around the world including its own sushi bar. It was pretty impressive." Some students commented on how appealing the cheese section was at Store X. Several students made the general observation that food appeared to be "fresher" at Store X.

By contrast, students reported an inferior quality of food at Store Y. Student #13, a Caucasian woman, stated that she "felt sick at the stomach from the smell of fish" and the hamburger was "brownish in color and some was even gray." Student #4 described the produce as "pitiful," stating that it was "withered and just looked bad." She could also not find the variety of apples that she normally bought. Student #7 noticed that "the apples had black spots," and "the lettuce was browning." Student #8 observed that African American cultural foods such as cow's tongue, pigs' feet, and chitterlings were only available at Store Y, which she indicated was a strength of Store Y; however, she also reported smelling an odor that she believed probably came from the meat department. She indicated that the meat "tend[ed] to look brown and green, as if they were putting expir[ed] product out." Student #17 observed that the ratio of processed to fresh foods was much higher at Store Y than Store X.

Reflecting on differences

Most students' reflections revealed powerful responses to the differences they noted between Store X and Store Y. Many described these responses using emotional language. Student #1 grew up in the neighborhood around Store Y and found the differences between the two stores to be "disheartening." Student #4 indicated that she was "shocked and surprised" at the disparity between the two stores - namely, between the fresh meat at Store X and the "marked down ground beef, 'manager's special'" at Store Y. Student #8 recalled feeling taken aback when she asked for help finding a product at Store Y and was abruptly told by a

supplier (not a grocery store employee), "I only work with [one particular product]. I have nothing to do with whatever else goes on here. You will have to ask someone else." Student #13 reported that she felt "at ease" at Store X because it "was brightly colored, full of fruits and vegetables," but at Store Y, she felt "uneasy" because "there were many more people and it was far more chaotic." Student #14 indicated that he had stepped outside of his comfort zone, but that this was a good thing "because it brings with it knowledge, experience, and sometimes understanding and change. I truly believe that if people would do this more often the world would be a better place."

Viewing differences through a social justice lens

While students' written reflections contained some discussion of the potential causes and social implications of the differences they noted between the two stores, analysis of the instructor's notes indicated that in-class discussion allowed students more meaningfully to connect what they saw, learned, and felt with the underlying social, economic, political, and historical factors that influenced the differences they noted. In essence, processing their experiences helped them view the differences they observed through a social justice lens. For example, students engaged in lengthy discussion about the police presence at Store Y and examined how their perceptions were influenced by race, class, and gender. While one Caucasian student found the police presence to be "silly", another described how it made him feel uneasy. He attributed that feeling to having been pulled over by a police vehicle in that neighborhood in the past. He explained that he believed he had been pulled over because he was Caucasian and "police think White people are only on that end of town to buy drugs." This prompted a much longer discussion of the history and present status of racial segregation in the city, documented disparities in drug arrests by neighborhood and race, and what some students believed to be differential responses by law enforcement to similar acts committed by individuals of different racial and ethnic groups.

Similarly, during the classroom discussion a young African American student described how she worried that her appearance during an unplanned late-night trip to Store X would affect how she was perceived and, thus, treated by store personnel. Specifically, she mentioned worrying that store employees would "think [she] was a welfare mom" because she was wearing pajama pants and no make-up. A classroom discussion followed in which students explored intersections of race and class, stereotypes regarding recipients of public assistance, and experiences of micro-aggressions, the subtle ways in which individuals communicate oppressive ideologies to members of marginalized groups. While students acknowledged the long-standing and, at times, seemingly intractable nature of inequality in their communities, they expressed a heightened commitment to social work aligned with the profession's core value of social justice.

Discussion

The "two grocery stores" experience represents one approach to critical consciousness-raising as a first step toward preparing social workers to engage in socially just practice. Our analysis of the instructor's notes and student reflections completed at the conclusion of this assignment provided significant insight into students' experiences as they shopped in two very different settings. Students described experiencing differences in the stores' atmospheres, detecting differences in their styles of presentation, observing disparities in the variety and quality of food offered at the two stores, emotionally reflecting on differences in the two experiences, and viewing observed differences through a social justice lens.

Our findings suggest that this experience holds promise as an initial step in the development of social work practitioners who are prepared to engage in socially just practice. By taking part in a relatively mundane activity (i.e., grocery shopping) in two very different settings, students observed first-hand the ways in which social inequities are experienced in even the most seemingly innocuous settings. It is our hope that this experience

provided students with a new lens through which to view issues of social justice and revealed how inequality permeates the lives of individuals in the marginalized communities they are called upon to serve. We conceptualize the development of socially just practitioners as a process that begins with this transformation of thought and continues in future coursework in which students acquire skills for professional practice, such as community organizing and advocacy, which are required to bring about social change.

It is likely that the emotional aspects of the "two grocery stores" experience contributed to changing the ways students think about social justice. In addition to reporting factual information, many students expressed strong emotional reactions to this experience. The emotional component of student learning is a commonly cited benefit of experiential learning activities. Experience evokes emotional responses to course content and becomes the adult learner's "living textbook" (Vandsburger, Duncan-Daston, Akerson, & Dillon, 2010, p. 303). Further, during a facilitated classroom discussion, students were able to connect their experiences and observations to underlying social structures, resulting in a heightened consciousness of these critical linkages. Reflecting on observed differences is a requisite learning experience for those who hope to engage in critical practice (Freire, 1970; Nicotera & Kang, 2009), and we argue that students cannot develop a sense of critical consciousness via classroom lectures alone. Social work education, especially as it pertains to issues of social justice, is greatly enhanced by the use of experiential learning and opportunities for students to enter the communities they are preparing to serve.

Opportunities of this sort need not be limited to policy courses. The "two grocery stores" assignment could provide a meaningful learning experience for social work students in macro practice courses or courses focused on human behavior and the social environment. In addition, this is an experience we believe is transferable to adult learners in settings beyond the scope of BSW or MSW education, such as community- and

agency-based trainings. Learning does not end with graduation from formal education, particularly in a field like social work where lifelong learning is both a key value and a necessity for informed practice. Professional development around values and ethics is critical to the promotion of social justice, protection of clients, and as a response to ideological threats to the social work perspective evident in the contextualizing environment in which the profession operates (Kent, 2006). An experience like the "two grocery stores" assignment could be replicated in various community settings, guided by structured facilitation, and followed up with an in-person debriefing to ensure that participants have the opportunity to make meaningful connections between their experiences and underlying social structures.

Study Limitations

While ideal for a qualitative study aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, the small number of students involved in this project limits the transferability of our study's findings to other settings (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). It is possible – if not likely – that this same experience would generate different reactions in other settings. For example, students may find differences to be less pronounced in cities that are less segregated by race and social class, and the feasibility and impact of this educational experience in rural areas is unknown. In addition, students' responses to written reflections and their participation in classroom discussion may have been influenced by the fact that these were assigned, graded activities that took place in a mandatory social work course. Further, the fact that the class composition was imbalanced with regard to race, gender, and other demographic variables may have affected classroom discussion. The classroom discussion component of this assignment and its evaluation may benefit from incorporation of other educational approaches, such as intergroup dialogues, which ideally occur in more demographically balanced groups and are peer-led versus facilitated by an instructor who

assigns grades (Nagda et al., 1999). Finally, the long-term impact of this educational experience on learners is unknown. Future study is needed to determine if, as we hope, the "two grocery stores" experience has more than just a passing influence on the ways emerging professionals view the world and their role in creating social change.

Conclusion

Values manifest in the individuals who act upon them. Social work organizations can produce countless documents detailing our profession's commitment to social justice, but if we do not engage in socially just practice – if we do not actually do the work – those proclamations ring hollow and we risk perpetuating the same injustices we have been called upon to challenge. If indeed social justice is the unifying value of our profession, thoughtful attention must be paid to how we transmit that value to our students and how we prepare them to practice in partnership with clients and communities to bring about social change. This study suggests that experiential learning opportunities, particularly those that expose students to diverse settings and include critical reflection on student experiences, hold promise as tools to promote socially just practice aligned with the core values of our profession.

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