Integrating Social Justice Advocacy into Teaching Counseling Ethics

Social justice advocacy (SJA) is an integral part of the counselor professional identity. This emphasis has been reflected in various counseling professional standards. Despite the profession's commitment to SJA research indicates a lack of advocacy engagement among master's level counseling students (Fullen et al., 2020). Hence, it is imperative to teach SJA effectively within the counseling programs (Decker et al., 2016). This teaching brief presents the use of intentionally designed activities and assignments that promote SJA awareness when teaching counseling ethics.

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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.
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Advocacy refers to the "promotion of the well-being of individuals, groups, and the counseling profession within systems and organizations" (ACA, 2014, p. 20). Social justice advocacy (SJA) in counseling is integral in providing support systems, guidance, and resources to the communities they serve (Goodman & Gorski, 2014). It also addresses the complex challenges clients face in maintaining a healthy state of well-being (Smith & Shin, 2008). Counseling provides a safe space for individuals to express their feelings and emotions, while SJA ensures that their rights are upheld (Sue et al., 2022). Recognizing the significance of advocacy in the counseling profession, the American Counseling Association (ACA) has formed a task force and established advocacy competencies in counseling, which were endorsed and adopted by the ACA Governing Council in 2003 (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Through counseling, one gains insights into their behaviors, thoughts, and trauma while learning coping mechanisms to help combat daily stressors (Beck, 2020). Through advocacy, counselors work to create a world that is inclusive of all people. The outcome of advocacy ensures individuals have access to services by increasing awareness, reducing stigma, and influencing the policies that promote holistic well-being in the communities served by counselors (Marshall-Lee et al., 2019; Paladino et al., 2011). Together, counseling and SJA foster resilience, empowerment, and policy changes that impact underserved communities (Lee & Hipolito-Delgado, 2007; Ratts et al., 2016).

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY

Fifteen years after the original ACA (2003) advocacy competencies, scholars recognized additional strategies counselors utilize and therefore, updated the *American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies (ACAAC)* in 2018 (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). The current version of competencies (ACAAC; Toporek & Daniels, 2018) outlined the necessary skills, knowledge, and actions for counselors and counselors-in-training (CITs) to address systemic barriers experienced by clients. This content explained in two dimensions (e.g., the extent of client involvement in advocacy and level of advocacy intervention) and six domains (e.g., empowerment, client advocacy, community collaboration, systems advocacy, collective action, social/political advocacy). In doing so, the ACAAC provided a practical model to guide counselors and CITs acting as advocates for clients suffering from social injustice systemic issues (Toporek & Daniels, 2018).

The professional commitment to SJA is also embodied in the *Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies* (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016), which was developed by a committee of the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) as an update for the existing *Multicultural Counseling Competencies* (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1992) and

endorsed by the ACA in 2015. Grounded in SJA and multiculturalism literature, the MSJCC have been developed, "...to reflect a more inclusive and broader understanding of culture and diversity that encompasses the intersection of identities," and, "...to better address the expanding role of counselors to include individual counseling and social justice advocacy" (Ratts et al., 2016, p. 29). The MSJCC established a comprehensive conceptual model that contains (a) *quadrants* demonstrating the intersections of identities and ways that power, privilege, and oppression influence the counseling relationship, (b) *domains* representing the different developmental levels of the *MSJCC competencies*, and (c) aspirational *competencies* counselors use in counseling and advocacy work (Ratts et al., 2016, p. 35). This model is conducive for counselors and CITs to understand the impact of diversity, power, privilege, and oppression on their work, and incorporate SJA into counseling.

Furthermore, SJA has been highlighted in the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) *2024 Standards*, which state that counseling programs should cultivate advocacy skills and foster SJA practice among students and faculty (CACREP, 2023). Moreover, specific standards (e.g., 3.B. Social and Cultural Identities and Experiences) emphasize the foundational curriculum knowledge and outcome expectations of students across counseling specializations (i.e., addiction counseling, career counseling, clinical mental health counseling, marriage and family counseling, school counseling, student affairs/college counseling) and require counselor education programs to document how SJA in training is programmatically evaluated. Parallel to this focus on SJA, scholars have proposed teaching strategies to infuse SJA into the counseling curriculum (Decker et al., 2016), a social justice pre-practicum course (Sanabria & DeLorenzi, 2019), and a counselor-advocate-scholar model to address systems of oppression (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). These professional standards and scholarly contributions emphasized the necessity of integrating SJA into counselor education, promoting rigor in counseling curriculum and practical training.

THE RATIONALE OF INTEGRATING SJA INTO TEACHING COUNSELING ETHICS

The topic of counseling ethics is a relevant and important area in which to incorporate SJA. To do so effectively, we recommend infusing SJA throughout existing counseling courses with curricula about counseling ethics. Counseling ethics is uniquely suited to include advocacy education for two reasons. First, counseling ethics is strongly connected to SJA. For instance, the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2014) accentuated the importance of advocacy to counselors, and encouraged counselors to advocate at different levels to address systemic barriers and obstacles that hinder clients' growth and development. Second, developing SJA competencies early on enables CITs to participate fully in more in-depth dialogues and actively engage in advocacy activities later in the program (Fullen et al., 2020).

For master's-level students, counseling ethics is taught throughout the program, thus, we recommend infusing SJA throughout existing counseling courses with curricula about counseling ethics. SJA can be infused in teaching counseling ethics through readings, course lectures, assignments, and interactive in-class activities. In this brief, we present four instructional

strategies aimed at promoting SJA among master's students that have been implemented by the first author in her teaching. The proposed strategies in this teaching brief aim to increase awareness of social justice/injustice among entry-level CITs, improve their SJA competencies, and encourage them to take an active role in counseling advocacy activities.

Description of Instructional Strategy

SJA SELF-AWARENESS ACTIVITY

First, before engaging in advocacy activities, students should develop an SJA lens and understand its connections to counseling. One way to achieve this goal is to take the *Implicit Association Tests* (*IAT*) provided by Project Implicit (n.d.). *IAT* uncovers biases by measuring the attitudes and stereotypes for seven topics (e.g., race and sexual orientation; Charlesworth et al., 2022; Project Implicit, n.d.). By using *IAT* data responses, students can introspect their biases that may be unrealized at the foundation of the program. Students can then engage in self-reflection about their test results and the impact of newly realized biases in their counseling training.

For this activity, the instructor should be intentional about student reactions after uncovering biases, including defensiveness, minimization, and cognitive dissonance. Prior to the activity, a prompt can be presented to prepare students for the common emotional and cognitive reactions. After the activity, the instructor could lead a debrief session validating students' experiences and discussing meaningful growth. Despite its wide use, *IAT* received criticism due to a lack of validity studies on detecting one's inherent bias (Schimmack, 2021). Instructors should note this limitation when conducting this activity.

TWO-PART SJA PROJECT

Next, to better understand how advocacy can take place in varying systems, we propose a two-part SJA project: the Macro-Level Advocacy in Action and Mini Advocacy Conference. This project aims to improve students' political efficacy and learn to align personal advocacy efforts with the goals of professional organizations in counseling. This project focuses on advocating on behalf of the clients on a macro level (Toporek & Daniels, 2018).

Part I: Macro-Level Advocacy in Action

For the first part of the project, students will engage in advocacy actions on behalf of the counseling profession. Students could start by participating in advocacy training, such as the Grassroots Advocacy Training provided by the National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI)

Tennessee chapter (https://www.namitn.org/advocacy/), which teaches students effective ways to communicate with lawmakers about issues of concern within the communities they serve. To better prepare themselves, students should familiarize themselves with legislative agendas, identify professional issues for advocacy, and further research the public policies that impact their state. With the newly learned skills, students can construct a letter to their identified political representatives (e.g., senators, state representatives, or mayors) advocating for an issue on behalf of the counseling profession. Instructors can encourage students to send letters and follow up with the legislative office. Instructors can also research advocacy days at their State Capitol, and lead students to join local ACA branches in meeting state policymakers in person to advocate.

After attending advocacy actions, students will engage in a class discussion. Each student will describe their experience and answer reflective questions, such as: (a) How has your understanding of the issue changed as a result of participating in the event? (b) In what ways did the event impact you personally? (c) How can you apply this to the communities you plan to serve?

Part II: Mini Advocacy Conference

After participating in action-oriented advocacy, students will have learned about the advocacy passions and interests of their peers. This knowledge can help them to form their groups for the second part of the project, the Mini Advocacy Conference. For this group project, students will create a presentation on an advocacy issue of their choice. The presentation needs to include (a) the introduction and current state of the advocacy issue, (b) public policies surrounding the issue, (c) how the issue is connected to ethical codes, and (d) suggestions on what other counselors can do to advocate.

Instructors can offer different structures for the presentation according to the class format. In a traditional classroom setting, one can establish a poster presentation similar to a poster session at a professional conference. Instructors can invite an audience (e.g., other students and faculty) to attend the session, ask questions, and leave comments. In a synchronous online class setting, faculty can switch to a slide show presentation where students are responsible for presenting the content and responding to questions and comments from the audience. In an asynchronous online class format, the instructor can share students' posters to an online forum where the audience (e.g., other students and faculty) can browse and comment. To enhance engagement, instructors can ask students to provide meaningful comments on posters made by other groups. Student presenters are responsible for responding to those comments and questions during a limited timeframe, such as a 30-day window). Instructors should present clear guidelines for those students who choose to use the poster presentation format, such as the size and necessary elements to include on an academic poster. For digital posters, instructors are recommended to provide tutorials on making a poster using computer software.

SOCIAL JUSTICE NEWS FORUM

Lastly, to increase students' awareness of social injustice, we propose the social justice news forum activity, in which students lead weekly forums on social injustice topics related to the

class topic of the day. For instance, students can discuss news related to the Me Too Movement when learning about ethics regarding counseling vulnerable adults. This activity addresses the critical reflection and sociopolitical efficacy components of critical pedagogy (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). It is also aligned with the *MSJCC* model (Ratts et al., 2016). Students who lead the discussion are instructed to choose from recent news regarding a social injustice issue, present the issue utilizing different formats (e.g., flyers, videos, audio, slides) in 5-10 minutes, and lead a 10-minute discussion with thought-provoking questions. Sample discussion questions are: (1) How can this issue affect clients in counseling? (2) How is this issue related to counseling ethics? (3) What can counselors and CITs do to advocate for the individuals who have been impacted? In a face-to-face or synchronous online class, this activity can be conducted at the beginning of every class as an opening activity; in an asynchronous online setting, this activity can be structured as an online forum. Typically, students find it helpful for the instructor to lead the discussions a few times before they take it over. Instructors could also provide consultation with students who will lead the discussion before they conduct the activity. As with any other discussions regarding social justice and multiculturalism, instructors should monitor the discussion and intervene when appropriate to ensure a culturally inclusive classroom.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When implementing these proposed activities and assignments, instructors should consider ethical issues related to student diversity, equity, and classroom inclusiveness. Students with different backgrounds may have distinct perspectives on advocacy. Scholars noted that members of certain racial groups may prefer a collectivistic advocacy approach (Salla et al., 2020), while major mainstream advocacy models emphasize individualism and autonomy (Salla et al., 2023). Previous advocacy experiences can also impact students' engagement in SJA activities. For instance, a student who received reprimand at work due to their past advocacy efforts may display a reserved stance when engaging in SJA activities in class.

Instructors should be mindful of student diversity and utilize an individualized approach when teaching SJA and counseling ethics. Supportive actions such as in-person check-ins and reach-out attempts can be helpful to address these reservations. Open discussions about the challenges of advocacy in life can help build a safe learning environment. During such interactions, instructors can acknowledge and validate student resistance to SJA activities, connect students with former students who have completed SJA activities, and encourage students to reach out to SJA leaders in the counseling field. Educators should pay special attention to the neurodiversity of learners. Practices involving presenting SJA materials in various styles (i.e., in-person, online synchronous, online asynchronous) using multimedia (e.g., pictures, videos, texts), allowing assignments to be submitted in different formats (e.g., videos, texts, graphics), posting class materials beforehand, clarifying class agendas and following through can help to build a psychologically safe environment and enhance the inclusiveness of the classroom (Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2020).

INSTRUCTOR REFLEXIVITY

Instructor reflexivity should be integrated throughout the implementation of the teaching strategies we have presented and is further reflected through one's instructional guiding theory. Prior to teaching the content, instructors can engage in self-reflection to examine their biases related to SJA. Example reflective questions are as follows: (1) How has my view of SJA evolved over time? (2) What challenges have I encountered in my SJA activities, and how have I coped with them? (3) How do I define and measure success in SJA activities? By incorporating these reflections in class discussions, instructors can model reflexivity for students. Moreover, we recommend instructors keep a reflective teaching journal when implementing the proposed teaching strategies for the first time. In the journal, instructors can reflect on students' engagement, time management, classroom inclusivity, etc. Intentional educators should also adjust SJA assignments and activities to the changes in the sociopolitical environment.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Many resources are available to help instructors and faculty incorporate advocacy content and knowledge into their curriculum. The list in Table 1 provides some resources, but it is not meant to be all-inclusive (see Table 1 below).

Evaluating the Social Justice Advocacy Instructional Strategy

To evaluate student learning outcomes, instructors can use the following methods for each SJA activity/assignment. For the SJA Self-Awareness Activity, useful assessment tools include reflection papers and in-class observations. We recommend assessors focus on the depth of content shared and students' commitment to growth. For the Macro-Level Advocacy in Action assignment, students can be evaluated on (a) their ability to support clients through professional advocacy, (b) their understanding of public policy, (c) their ability to advocate as a counselor, and (d) their knowledge of how public policy impacts the quality and accessibility of mental health services. Instructors can evaluate these criteria through writing products (i.e., advocacy letters and reflection papers) and observations through in-class discussions. For the Mini Advocacy Conference assignment, instructors can develop a rubric to evaluate the completeness of the presentation content, their oral presentation skills (except for the asynchronous class), responses to comments and questions, textual and visual organization of the content, and their writing clarity. To promote inclusive learning and accommodate learner neurodiversity, self-evaluation and peer evaluation can be adopted. In addition, instructors can allow students to submit their feedback in multiple formats, such as video recordings, audio recordings, unstructured narratives, and structured forms.

Instructors interested in evaluating students' SJA competencies can use the 30-item self-report *Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment Survey* (*ACSA*; Ratts & Ford, 2010) as a formative assessment. They can also capture students' perceptions of the instructional strategies through essay-style surveys. Example survey questions are: (1) What is your current understanding of social justice and advocacy within the counseling profession? (2) What assignment, reading, or other sources of information have helped develop your understanding of social justice and advocacy in counseling? and (3) What were your experiences in the Ethics course about learning about social justice and advocacy within the counseling profession? Both surveys can be implemented repeatedly throughout the semester to track student growth and make instructional adjustments accordingly.

Discussion

A recent mass survey (*n* = 5,528) of ACA members showed that master's students (32.5%) had the lowest level of involvement in advocating for Medicare reimbursement, in contrast to counselor educators (63.3%), practicing counselors (54.0%), and doctoral students (57.0%; Fullen et al., 2020). This finding underscores the importance of enhancing SJA training among entry-level CITs. We believe the proposed SJA instructional strategies are meaningful in addressing this focus. In class discussions and debriefing, students of the first author who participated in the SJA activities and assignments anecdotally shared significant growth in counseling advocacy competencies. Some students' in-class feedback included reduced anxiety related to SJA, increased knowledge about legislative structures, a heightened sense of pride and empowerment, and a desire to engage in future SJA activities outside of class. In fact, among students who participated in SJA assignments and activities, approximately one-third successfully sent advocacy letters to their identified legislative representatives and followed up with the legislative offices. Many CITs embraced SJA as a new part of their professional ethical responsibility.

Limitations and Future Directions

We recognize a few limitations of the proposed instructional strategies. First, the proposed SJA assignments and activities emphasize independence and autonomy, which may not be compatible with students from collectivistic cultures (Sue et al., 2022). Instructors could acknowledge this limitation and encourage students of different backgrounds to share the common SJA perspectives and practices within their society. Additional assistance and support should be available for students who have difficulty completing SJA assignments and activities.

Second, the SJA instructional strategies are centralized within the social structure of the United States. International counseling students may find it challenging to adapt to the advocacy practice in their country of origin (Salla et al., 2020). Discussions of global perspectives on SJA can be valuable learning experiences for all students. Inviting guest speakers with international SJA expertise could greatly enrich learning experiences.

Third, the current SJA instructional strategies are designed to be integrated into teaching ethics with Master's level students. While some of the proposed activities can be applied to teaching other content areas, educators may feel restricted due to limited class time and activities' limited relevance to other course content. Doctoral students can benefit from the proposed activities but should seek to acquire more advanced SJA work in the field, which cannot be accomplished through these activities alone.

Finally, the proposed instructional strategies currently lack empirical evidence. The student feedback shared in this teaching brief was generated anecdotally in class discussions rather than collected for research purposes. Future investigators could conduct quantitative studies to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching strategies in meaning student learning outcomes. Qualitative studies exploring the learning experiences of students engaging in the proposed SJA activities will also help improve SJA instructions.

Table 1. *Suggested Resources for Social Justice Advocacy Instructional Strategies*

Type	Title
Movie	*Hidden Pictures*
Movie	*Tough Love*
Movie	*Families Are Forever*
Movie	*Alive Inside*
Movie	*American Denial*
Movie	*Who Cares About Kelsey?*
Movie	*American Winter*
Playlist of Videos	*The Voice of Counseling by American Counseling Association* (https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpZf4HErn-qmeYzyodU22CPjuryhRVwAWl&si=XO8zGDvHJ9BG4zL8)
Website	National Alliance on Mental Illness (https://www.nami.org/Advocacy)
Website	Counselors for Social Justice (https://www.counseling-csj.org/)

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