Identifying Gaps in Teaching Intersectionality in Higher Education: A Literature Review

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This literature review aims to examine the available literature and teaching methods regarding the use of intersectionality as an educational and professional tool within undergraduate social work education. Depicted within is an exploration of the historical use of Diversity in Social Work Educational Standards, the origin of intersectionality as a theory, as well as frameworks by which intersectionality acts as an educational and professional enhancement. Critical thought, safe discussion, and community engagement are investigated as methods of increasing intersectional usage. Intersectionality is approached in a qualitative manner where experiences precede statistics to explain impact, highlighting the individual experience within the larger group or system.

Keywords: social work education, intersectionality, intersectional, identity, oppression, and privilege

Introduction

Intersectionality, hailing from feminist theory and frameworks, is understood as the network of identities that formulate and determine experiences of both oppression and privilege within a given society (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Smith, 1987; Crenshaw 1989). As such, intersectionality practices are demonstrated when the interwoven nature of different identity categorizations are applied to the understanding of a person's experiences and behavior, thereby potentially enhancing informed professional practices as well as the actualization of personal actions (hooks 1981; Lorde 1984; Minha, 1998). Specifically, within the profession of social work, intersectionality could be utilized as a method of practice, by which professionals alter their behaviors to resist perpetuating oppressive occurrences within a client's life (Hulko, 2009; Jones, 2013; Mattsson, 2014). Comparatively, as an educational tool, future social workers undergo

training in which they are taught to apply an intersectional perspective as a preventative measure to avoid oppressive behavior due to the lack of understanding between the client and the worker's experiences (CSWE EPAS, 2008). However, teaching intersectionality in higher education, such as in undergraduate social work programs, is rarely discussed in empirical research and literature about such areas of study (Robinson et al., 2015). As intersectionality can be taught as a method of thought that better prepares individuals for understanding diverse and vulnerable populations, addressing and representing the theory of intersectionality is an important factor in progressing higher education practices.

The values of intersectional education are built upon the idea that individuals are unique and therefore, no single answer can exist as to what is the defining feature within oppression or privilege. Given the vast range of cultures, religions, family structures, and other identities, understanding a person's situation must be considered using the multiple systems in which they operate. These ideas are significant as they bring to light the serious effects underlying or unconscious assumptions have on experiences. An example of the significant impact underlying assumptions have, generalizing an experience of social injustice, such as race inequality, to an overarching identity group, invariably misses the potential privileges and oppressions generated within the individuals of the group. In terms of gender and sexual orientation at the intersection of race, one's racial identity may be differently perceived and experienced due to the various challenges those who are not male or heterosexual face. When missing perspectives occur, diversity amongst groups is at risk for generalization and continuous issues. Thereby promoting that intersectionality is an interesting educational piece that helps encourage critical thinking and comprehensive understandings.

CSWE Mandate

Since the late 1960s, social work education and profession have undergone dramatic transformations in regards to "environmental, demographic, and theoretical developments" (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011, p. 283). Due to the United States population increase in diversity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009; as cited in Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011, p. 283), perspectives and attitudes concerning gender, sexuality, ability status, and age (Harper-Dontron & Lantz, 2007; as cited in Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011) began to change, influencing new developments in Social Work education and research (Adams, LeCroy, & Matto, 2009; Fawcett, Featherstone, Fook, Rossiter, 2000; Fook, 2002; as cited in Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011). This led to the introduction of evidence based practice and the need for complex education. In 1971, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), approved the addition of Standard 1234 which mandated social work programs to be conducted without discrimination based on "race, color, creed, ethnic origin, age, or sex" as well as to exhibit the efforts made to enhance the program by providing diversity within students, faculty, and staff (CSWE, 1971; as cited in Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011). Upon the confirmation of Standard 1234, Standard 3201, was introduced alongside Affirmative Action policies. Standard 3201 required that students be admitted without discrimination "on the basis of race, color, creed, ethnic origin, age, or sex" (CSWE, 1971; as cited in Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011). Given increases in social work education diversity, Standard 1234A (CSWE, 1973; as cited in Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011) was introduced to modify Standard 1234 which promoted the concept of a "receptive milieu for minority group students and faculty" (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011, p. 286) which specified that schools must

both continue to enhance the presence of diverse peoples in all areas of instruction and to provide educational supports. However, Standard 3201 was loosely defined which led many programs to focus on diversity practice within areas of "academic advising, student retention programs, the nature of field placements, and the demographic composition of field instructional staff" (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011, p. 286) rather than on producing diverse educational tools and teachings.

While Standard 1234A's purpose was to "achieve the incorporation of knowledge of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, their generic components as well as differences in values and lifestyles, and the conflicts these generate in the configuration of American Society" (CSWE, 1973; as cited in Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011), it failed to identify the subjectivity of knowledge, the complexity of culture, and the developing roles individuals of color had within the United States society (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011, p. 286). In 1982, anti-social service politics and second wave feminism influenced the additions of women, age, religion, ability, sexuality, and culture to non-discrimination and educational purpose clauses (CSWE, 1982; as cited in Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011). In conjunction with expanded non-discrimination definitions for overall programs throughout the 1990s, education content, practice scope, and professional development expectations were placed upon graduate level instruction but did not include undergraduate education (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011, p. 290). In 2008, Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of CSWE, required diversity within Social Work programs—both graduate and undergraduate—to develop competencies by utilizing and recognizing the interconnecting relationships between culture, oppression, marginalization, and alienation of persons (CSWE EPAS, 2008; as

cited in Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011). These standards allowed for self-awareness, personal biases and values, and the ways in which they may affect professional practice (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011, p. 291).

Intersectionality Defined

Intersectionality addresses the issues in understanding the ways an individual's existence within "multiple socially constructed categories," "affects one's lived experiences, social roles, and relative privilege or disadvantage" (Jones, 2013, p. 101). The intricacy of "power structures and their influence on varying social identities allow the individual to be envisioned as uniquely identified rather than grouped or categorized" (Hankivsky and Cormier, 2011; Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, and Hamilton, 2009; as cited in Jones, 2013). Categorization typically refers to the socially constructed groupings, unnatural associations of feature and behaviors, of individuals within their social context which are then taught to hold permanent and significant meaning. Socially constructed categories include areas such as race, gender, or sexuality which contain specific structures and sets of "interconnected social practices" that are both embedded into society as well as enacted by individuals. For example, through a person's given agency, schemas, and resources (Haslanger 2012, pp. 20–23 and pp. 413–418; as cited in Jones, 2013, p. 100), social practices such as gendered bathrooms or sectioned stores, shape the perception of fix identities and their importance for societal function (Haslanger, 2012, p. 463, as cited in Jones, 2013). However, the intersectional approach attempts to deconstruct the various social categories professionals and students may operate within to challenge perspectives that may better serve diverse populations.

Intersectionality is the "metaphorical state of being, primarily in the consciousness of theorists..." (Crow, 1996; Essed, 1991; Mama, 1995; Marks, 1999; Millar, 1998; Morris, 1996; Shakespeare, 1996; Smith, 1987; as cited in Hulko, 2009, p. 48), as it is a paradigm in which certain frameworks and lens must be capitalized upon to understand the network of identities influencing experience properly. "Social Location" (Hulko, 2009, p. 45), is the result of interacting with intersectionality. Thus, "Social Location" is one's placement amongst interlocking oppressions that provides an individual with the perception of their surroundings in the context of its changed value within their current setting Hulko, 2009, p.45). Concerning malleable identities such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, or disability, viewing "intersectional beings holistically rather than try[ing] to tease apart different strands of identity" (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2001; Bannerji, 1995; Brah, 2001; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1994; Lorde, 1984/2007a; Mullaly, 2006; as cited in Hulko, 2009) produces the intersectional state of being in the context of one's social location.

Intersectionality as Enhancement of Student Education

Critical social workers and researchers agree that the practice of social work should be driven by "challenging inequality, marginalization, and oppression at a structural level" with application of the intersectional understanding of social issues (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002; Bailey & Brake, 1975; Dominelli, 2002; Pease & Fook, 1999; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; as cited in Mattsson, 2014). This perspective arose as a criticism of traditional social work for upholding and supporting the experiences of oppression as independently enacted and unique to the individual (Mattsson, 2014, p.8). As critical and radical social work approaches to oppression and

inequality are popularized, a need for "usable tools for critical practice" is demonstrated amongst professionals (Mattsson, 2014, p.9). Critical reflection aims to bring knowledge of social structures and their effects on social work practice (Brookfield, 2009; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; as cited in Mattson, 2014) by assisting professionals in developing an awareness as to how their practices may perpetuate experiences of oppression onto their clients through unconscious thoughts, feelings, and assumptions in everyday operation (Essed, 1996; Young, 1990; Hulko, 2009; as cited in Mattsson, 2014, p.9). By implementing the use of critical reflection within social work education and practice, one becomes "capable of working against oppression and injustice" (Brookfield, 2009; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Mattsson, 2010; Morley, 2004; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005; as cited in Mattsson, 2014). Those in social work education may be able to identify particular biases they may have in their experiences by taking an intersectional approach. The identified steps of implementation (Mattsson, 2014, p. 13) include identifying critical instances and descriptively define its details, reflecting critically on the description to pinpoint power relations, and reconstructing the strategies for the theory that helps an individual identify their agency and power as well as their impact on practice. Inviting the idea of adapting strategies used on a case-by-case basis to increase the quality of support and advocacy offered to clients by professionals, educational teachings and training are enhanced in theoretically grounded substance.

As essential to successful social work practice, cultural competency and critical reflection, prepares future professionals to identify generalizations made about a particular group while recognizing the inability to presume the experience of a member within such groupings (Hancock, 2007; Warner & Brown, 2011; as cited in Robinson et

al., 2015 p. 509). "An intersectional approach removes the tendency to aggregate social identities as if there were no dynamic interaction among them and transforms the framework through which clients are viewed into one of complexity and uniqueness" (Hancock, 2007; Warner & Brown, 2011; as cited in Robinson et al., 2015). While it is acknowledged that intersectional frameworks enhance social work education and future practice, it is rarely used within social work classes (Robinson et al., 2015, p. 510). Intersectionality education requires the full understanding of the theory by the educator to properly represent diverse experiences (Jone & Wijeyesignhe, 2011; as cited in Robinson et al., 2015). Using a learning community approach (Alejano-Steele et al., 2011; as cited in Robinson et al., 2015), faculty must engage with diverse groups of educators or disciplines while participating in training that facilitates self-reflection and discussion within a safe environment before introduction within the classroom. This practice allows educators to realize elements that aid in the creation of a safe space in which personal experiences of students may be constructively shared in conjunction with educational material. Should a classroom be void of personal experiences and reflection, intersectional education will not occur; safety and personalization allow intersectionality to be taught through the lens of multi-faceted individuals rather than using the assumptions of experiences by the educator. Additionally, challenging assumptions about identities is an important detail within intersectionality education (Davis, 2010, p. 139; as cited in Robinson et al., 2015). To accomplish such a cohesive and complex learning model, additive of multimedia content, service projects, professional experiences, and other high-impact practices allow students to fully embrace intersectional experiences through self-investigation, first-hand experience, and reflective

exploration (Banks, Pliner, & Hopkins, 2013; Case & Lewis, 2012; Ferber & Herrera, 2013; Goodman & Jackson, 2012; Lee, 2012; Kuh 2008; as cited in Robinson et al., 2015, p. 510).

Gaps in Teaching Intersectionality

Despite professional and educational standards inclusion, social work lacks intersectionality teaching. "Although using an intersectional framework in social work education enhance students' future work with clients, this approach has been rarely incorporated into social work classes" (Robinson et al., 2015, p. 510), producing a limitation in fully understanding the experiences others and one's personal participation in creating such an experience. A barrier to intersectional inclusion is the lack of research-based teaching methods specifically targeting intersectionality education within social work (Luft and Ward, 2009, as cited in Robinson et al., 2015), and since social work education now mandates intersectionality as essential for assessment and practice, "it is critical for theory and scholarship to support a greater understanding of how interconnected systems of inequality operate on multiple levels and how this affects marginalized people"(Mehrotra, 2010, p. 419). Aiding in perpetuating limiting educational experiences, is the seldom created literacy based in intersectionality for undergraduate social work education. "Much of the academic literature on teaching intersectionality has originated from disciplines outside social work" (Robinson et al., 2015, p. 511), which allows educators and programs to omit intersectional practices and exercises from curriculum easily. By not regularly producing complex networks between intersectional identities in "tandem" with one another within educational settings, "significant gaps emerge in the scholarly literatures on identity" (Nelson et al., 2015, p.

172). With gaps, students are continuously taught using methods that perpetuate confusion in experiences as well as isolation of identities. Confusion occurs due to the perception of binary identities in comparison to lived experiences and personal, identity-based knowledge (Nelson et al., 2015, p. 172). Limiting students to fixed, often generalized labels prevents critical and profound understandings of power structures, social constructs, and interlocking oppressions. Similarly, students typically privileged within their given system miss potentially enlightening opportunities to recognize their participation within inciting oppression, which may negatively impact the collective understanding of one's environment as well as one's relative oppression or privilege compared to others.

Conclusion

This review aimed to identify gaps in literature and teaching as it pertains to intersectionality as a tool in higher education. The research shows that intersectionality is a highly informative and necessary lesson, especially in the social work profession. However, there is a lack of methods for teaching intersectionality in social work higher education (Robinson et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2015). As previously identified, there is a lack of the literature on a certain subject, significant connections between issues are lost (Nelson et al., 2015). Among the sources, each targeted the idea of intersectionality as an enhancement of understanding and the common ways practice was improved upon through implementation of teaching or utilizing intersectionality. The CSWE (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, Sowbel, 2011) has identified that diversity has been a transformative substance within social work for decades and aims to continue the revision standards to reflect the current social issues within the overall population. Intersectionality as a

teaching tool is capitalized to incorporate the growing awareness of matters relating to interlocking identities that either enhance or diminish the experience of oppression within an individual. Thus, as a means of increasing diversity within the classroom and eventually the field, as well as continuing the educational standard of producing informed, culturally aware, and respectful professionals, intersectionality and the methods by which it can be taught in higher education must be represented.

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