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# Social Justice in Social Work: A Critical Discourse Analysis

by

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requirements for the degree of

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## Abstract

Social justice is central to social work and guides the profession's ethics, educational standards, and practices. It is aspirational and actionable, ideological and practical, and is simultaneously shaped by, and shapes in turn, social work. Consequently, this study understands social justice to be a discourse. Despite its ubiquity throughout the profession, what constitutes social justice, how it should (or could) be practiced, and what epistemologies orient social work to the concept continue to be debated. Given social work's express promotion of social justice and the myriad ideas and practices that follow from this critical value, the concept and the foundational epistemologies it rests upon must not be taken for granted. In this research, I assert that academic journals significantly influence the formulation of professional social work knowledge and, consequently, social justice. Therefore, critically examining social justice discourse within a dominant context like high-impact social work journals offers a chance to explore the epistemological assumptions of social justice and scrutinize their authoritative effects.

This study implements a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of high-impact social work scholarship to explore how social justice is conceptualized within contemporary high-impact social work journal articles (N=25). CDA is a critical analytic approach from sociolinguistics that attempts to pinpoint the intersections between knowledge and power to contest and reshape power dynamics. CDA is aptly suited to address my research inquiry, as the methodology aims to uncover underlying assumptions within discourses and the effects of these assumptions on knowledge creation and social practices.

My findings within the scope of this sample suggest that social justice discourse within high-impact social work journals privileges epistemologies that reflect certain Enlightenment values, neoliberalism and instrumentalization, professional hegemony, and moralizing inclinations. These findings hint at some epistemological limitations currently shaping social justice discourse. My goal is that these findings contribute to the broader social work scholarship about social justice that seeks epistemological scrutiny and critical deconstruction of social justice discourse. It is hoped that the findings aid social work students, scholars, and practitioners in critical explorations of social justice discourse so that novel social justice conceptualizations and practices may emerge.

# Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my sister. You are, and have always been, my most trusted source of support and best friend. I could not do this life without you. Thank you, Ray.

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to keep me grounded in reality. You are my handler, and I need you. Without your encouragement, humor, and love, I could not have finished this dissertation.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Social justice is a term, a practice, *a discourse* that is at once adored by the political left and maligned by the political right. On the left end of the political spectrum, social justice is a term made almost compulsory in left-leaning professions, such as social work. On the right, social justice is wholly misunderstood and vilified, frequently conflated with wildly mendacious interpretations of Marxism and Socialism. Though these orientations to the concept are opposed, something is fascinating about the fact that social justice is a slippery term in each instance. In the context of professional social work, the definitional ambiguity of the term and its disparate ideological adoptions mirror, to some extent, social justice's fluidity within broader American culture. Despite (or in part because of) the concept's ability to engender such strong feelings and countless actions taken *in the name of social justice*, it is crucial to note that social justice is a concept that is inspired by and inspires action; it is a discourse. In other words, discourses shape how we understand and talk about the world around us, and such conceptualizations shape social attitudes, behaviors, and practices, simultaneously reinforcing and reinforced by social norms.

My study will examine social justice discourse in high-impact social work journal articles published in the United States using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a methodology that assumes language is imbued with the ideological norms of a given social and cultural period, and ideologies perpetuate and reflect power arrangements (Leotti et al., 2021). As such, language encompasses words and so much more. It is this "so much more" that drives this CDA. Consequently, this study aims to explore and make visible the taken-for-granted assumptions, implications, prescriptions, and proscriptions

within social justice discourse to gain a tentative understanding of how said assumptions shape social work's orientation to social justice.

Because social justice is a core value and organizing principle of the profession, it is crucial to critically examine *how* social work conceptualizes social justice since different orientations carry differing potentials for broadscale social transformation and perhaps even liberation. Discourse analyses allow for critical interpretations of socially situated texts (e.g., discourse) and thus lend nuanced insights into how power operates, not only through a specific discourse but also through society. This chapter provides a general introduction to my dissertation study. First, I will discuss the significance of my research for social work. Next, I will present my background and interest in social justice. Finally, I will provide an overview of my study's aims, research question, key terms, and research approach.

**Significance for Social Work**

Social work directly mirrors and reifies many of the dominant discourses of a given period (Park & Kemp, 2006) and reflects the context in which it is conceptualized and practiced. As such, social work's theorizing and practice of social justice reflect not just professional norms and values but norms and values within the social, cultural, and historical context of the 21st-century United States, which means that social work is complicit in the living legacies of genocide, enslavement, settler colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and cis/heterosexism. Though social work scholars have acknowledged this (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Reisch & Park, 2022), the primacy accorded to social justice within professional and academic social work may unintentionally obfuscate this obvious fact.

Professional rhetoric about social justice may support a version of social work that promotes its benevolence rather than complicity in broader legacies and structures of oppression (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Olson, 2007; Reisch & Park, 2022). When people take a hegemonic discourse like social justice for granted and mistakenly perceive normativity as neutrality, they can obscure social work's complicity in perpetuating oppressive social conditions. Suppose social work reflects the context from which it arises. In that case, social work must acknowledge that even its most "liberatory" concepts (e.g., social justice) risk reinscribing problematic social relations.

***Social justice is central to the profession of social work.*** Given the authoritative role that leading professional organizations play within social work, this section briefly focuses on the treatment of social justice within the following professional bodies: 1) The International Federation of Social Workers, 2) The National Association of Social Workers, and 3) The Council on Social Work Education. Each organization generates dominant social work norms about social justice via the creation of competencies that include social justice (e.g., CSWE) and the creation and dissemination of professional codes of ethics that promote social justice at the national and international levels (e.g., NASW & IFSW).

Social justice is crucially essential to social work, and as a result, it is ubiquitous across mainstream professional bodies. However, its centrality within the professional lexicon is relatively new. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) first incorporated social justice into its definition of social work in 2000 (Kam, 2014). Likewise, it was only in the fifth revision of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics in 1996 (36 years after its creation) that social justice appeared in the

preamble to the code of ethics (NASW, 2022b). These leading professional bodies now mandate social justice throughout their ethics and values as both a aspirational and confrontational concept for social work. At some points, social justice is conceptualized as an aspirational goal, such as the NASW directive that states, “Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (NASW, 2021). While at other times, social justice is represented by confrontational actions that “prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class based on race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical ability” (NASW, 2021). Like the NASW, the IFSW prioritizes social justice and mandates social workers engage in “social change initiatives [that] recognize the place of human agency in advancing human rights and economic, environmental, and social justice” (IFSW, 2022).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) similarly presents competencies intended to actualize the profession’s values (social justice paramount among them) yet the foundations of the competencies still need to be recognized. In their words, “Social work competence is the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills” (CSWE, 2022). Throughout the social work literature, social justice operates simultaneously as a guiding value and achievable goal to be attained by social workers in their quests for social justice. For example, the 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) states that “these values [social work core values]… underpin the explicit and implicit curriculum and frame the profession’s commitment to respect all people and the quest for social, racial, economic, and environmental justice”

(CSWE, 2022). What constitutes knowledge, values, and skills is taken for granted, presumably left up to the reader's interpretation.

Other prominent and culturally specific social work organizations, such as the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), have been outspoken regarding their commitments to creating a more just society; however, the term "social justice" is conspicuously absent within the NABSW Code of Ethics. Instead, the NABSW favors the language of "liberation," "self-determination," and "social change" (NABSW, 2022). Their omission of social justice is unsurprising given mainstream (and white) social work's uncritical and problematic adoption of social justice rhetoric via practices like "diversity" and "inclusion" that ultimately leave structural factors like anti-Blackness unaddressed (Walcott, 2021).

To the profession's detriment, mainstream conceptualizations of social justice have historically prioritized an assimilationist agenda that offers multiply marginalized people access to white supremacist institutions by way of rights, cultural inclusion, and fraught notions of equality but does little to fundamentally alter oppressive social arrangements (Ahmed, 2007; Park, 2005). Because rights-based agendas put forth in some conceptualizations of social justice overshadow nuanced acknowledgments of white supremacy, they perpetuate a continued marginalization of a social justice agenda that honestly confronts embedded anti-Blackness in daily life (Stanley, 2020; Stevenson & Blakey, 2021). While this is deserving of further consideration, given this study's explicit interest in the term *social justice*, I chose, in this section, to focus on three professional organizations that have explicitly incorporated social justice into their ethics, goals, and competencies.

***Social justice epistemologies are underexplored.*** Many social work scholars have long acknowledged that social justice is fraught with discontinuities and various philosophical assumptions and employed across disparate ideological orientations (Gasker & Fischer, 2014; Hudson, 2017; Olson, 2007; Reisch, 2002). While social justice is a frequently discussed topic within social work, there remains a gap within social work scholarship that looks explicitly at the epistemological foundations of the concept (Hudson, 2017). The few studies that do so limitedly discuss the profession's tendency towards traditional frames and conventional theories of social justice (Bell, 2012; Hudson, 2017; Leonard, 2018).

Some scholars contend that contemporary definitions rely on liberal epistemologies of justice (Hudson, 2017; Reisch, 2002). Specifically, Hudson (2017) notes, "The dominant paradigm of social justice in social work in the USA draws upon John Rawls's (1971) theory of distributive justice (Reisch, 2002; McLaughlin, 2011; Olson et al., 2013)" (p. 1962). The Enlightenment promises of justice, equality, and freedom have left social work with unfulfilled promises of progress and foreclosed possibilities for individual agency and resistance (O'Byrne & Parton, 2018). Though this is cited, what remains less acknowledged, though named, is how social justice (as taken up within academic social work) employs assumptions that appear bound to Enlightenment-era ideas, such as truth, freedom, and equality (Hudson, 2017). There may be something dangerous about drawing from a thought tradition inherently bound to The State and the white, male-dominated thinkers from whom such concepts are generally attributed (Chapman & Withers, 2019).

***Social justice is powerful***. In 1996, social justice became prominent within social work's code of ethics (Atteberry-Ash, 2022). A recent conceptual review of social justice within the social work literature from 1996 to 2019 revealed that over 2,100 abstracts during 23 years include *social justice* and *social work* (Atteberry-Ash, 2022). That is an average of about 90 articles per year published on or closely related to social justice within social work. The transformative aspirations assumed within the concept inspire countless people to seek out social work degrees, practice in social work settings, teach social work (as is the case with me), and write about social work. To be sure, social justice is a powerful motivator, a call to action. As such, the epistemological assumptions and legacies of thought foundational to social work's version of social justice must not become so sacrosanct that they remain unquestioned.

**Background and Interest in the Topic**

Social justice is an evolving concept that requires ongoing critical reflection. Since entering social work in 2011, I have believed that studying (and practicing) social justice enables social workers to develop critical analyses of structural inequities and understand the root causes of social injustices to better *transform* them. When social workers foreground ideas of social justice, they are better equipped to identify and redress power imbalances and injustices across micro and macro settings.

A critical examination of social justice discourse will assist social workers in grappling with the strengths and limitations of social justice as we know it. Social justice discourse impacts social work curriculum, practices, and advocacy, and thus the broader society. A critical review of social justice discourse could open up space for social work to reflect critically upon the limitations of its current conceptualizations and embrace

novel orientations and practices of social justice. As Foucault points out, “Discourse[s] can be…a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). If language is the primary symbolic system used to construct our reality, drawing from non-hegemonic epistemologies, choosing different words, reinventing, and reapportioning them carries liberatory potential. Theoretical insight alone does not address social injustice, nor does it catalyze social change, but it does offer a framework for understanding that can inspire novel and transformative actions.

I orient to social justice from an anarchist perspective. My definition of social justice is based on a legacy of action and thought that envisions a world without the state, borders, police/prisons, hierarchy, and domination. Consequently, my version of social justice (if it could even be called that) seeks to cultivate relationships that are intentionally anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-trans/homophobic, and where relationships (both individual and social) are premised upon an ethic of reciprocity, care, trust, and free association. Given the previously mentioned values assumed within my definition of social justice, it is likely no surprise to readers (particularly other critical and radical social workers) that I was deeply discouraged by how social justice was discussed and how practices of social justice were detailed during my time as an MSW student. As an anecdotal example, social justice was frequently exemplified through reformist efforts to better the system or assimilate marginalized people into fundamentally fraught institutions. Furthermore, social justice was assumed to be universally understood, frequently omitting the problematic presuppositions within the concept of justice.

Since then, my role has shifted to that of a social work professor, where I have had the privilege to connect with other critical social workers who think and practice social justice beyond mainstream social work approaches. Reading and meeting other disillusioned (*never disengaged*) social workers has been invaluable to the survivability of this career choice. Critical social work scholars have long critiqued social work's control mechanisms (Rossiter, 1997; Mattsson, 2014; Weinberg, 2008), including how the profession pacified once-radical orientations to the work. Through connecting with critical and abolitionist social workers over the last decade, I have come to understand I am not alone in wanting something more, something different about the way social work orients to social justice.

Social justice requires reimagining to understand the limitations of the profession's current conceptualizations. As such, there is a need for research that critically explores the epistemological assumptions of social justice discourse, and I sincerely hope that novel and exciting forms of socially just social work emerge from this endeavor. I hope this study aids the profession in thinking beyond the confines of the now and the possible limitations resulting from thought traditions long past.

**Overview of the Project**

The need to further interrogate social justice has been named and engaged in critical analyses of course syllabi (Mehrotra, Hudson, & Self, 2019) and historical reviews of social justice epistemologies and practices (Reisch & Park, 2022; Reisch, 2002; Reisch, 2007). Despite this, there needs to be more discussion within the social work literature on the epistemological foundations of the term.

This study aims to explore the discourse of social justice within contemporary, high-impact social work journals based in the USA. Social work peer-reviewed journals exist within diffuse networks of overlapping power interests, discursive boundaries, and taken-for-granted truths about what constitutes publishable knowledge on a particular subject, in this case, social justice. In this study, I assume that academic journals are influential sites where knowledge of the profession of social work (and thus practice) is generated (Jäger & Maier, 2009). Discourse is an "institutionalized way of talking that regulates and reinforces action and thereby exerts power" (Jäger & Maier, 2009, p. 35). Thus, critically analyzing social justice discourse within hegemonic landscapes such as high-impact social work journals provides an opportunity to disrupt its normativity and question its regulatory implications.

**Research Question**

My dissertation research critically examined social justice discourse within contemporary high-impact social work journal articles based in the United States. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology, my research investigated the following question:

1. How is social justice conceptualized within contemporary high-impact social work journals?

**Key Terms**

This section articulates the definitions of key terms used throughout this study. ***Discourse.*** A discourse is a framework of intelligibility (implied and explicit) within which concepts are presented and theorized, and linguistic norms and practices operate. I draw from Gee's (2011) use of Hacking (1986) that discourses are distinctive ways

people talk, read, write, think, believe, value, act, and interact with things and with other people to get recognized and recognize themselves as a distinctive group or distinctive kinds of people. This definition assumes that discourses shape and reflect both thought and action.

Additionally, this CDA draws from Foucauldian assumptions about discourse, which could be considered *language plus*. A Foucauldian orientation to discourse assumes that discourse has linguistic and practical attributes and, consequently, regulatory functions. Though tacit, these regulatory functions operate in ways that delimit what is sayable and thus doable at a given period.

***Contemporary.*** I have defined contemporary as the last ten years. I draw from colloquial and historical contentions that assume a ten-year increment is a distinct historical period (Chappell, 2019). This study generated data from the last ten years (2012-2022) to examine contemporary thought on social justice within social work.

***High-impact Social Work Journal.*** I identified high-impact social work journals according to their Eigenfactor scores. The Eigenfactor Project is a free database that allows users to populate a list of high-impact journals by subject matter. Since the articles in my sample were published in high-impact social work journals, generating knowledge within social work, I consider them salient to the profession.

## Research Approach

CDA is a rich methodology that fits various theoretical orientations (Fairclough, 1995); however, poststructuralism serves as the theoretical anchor for this project. CDA frequently leans on poststructuralism because it recognizes the socially constructed nature of knowledge as mediated through language and discourse. Poststructuralism attends to

social/political/historical contexts and the dynamic nature of meaning, making space for nuance and discontinuities. This project originates from and is firmly anchored in this tradition with corresponding epistemological assumptions in critical theories that seek social transformation by generating disruptive knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 2016). For example, like in poststructuralism, the study of power is a crucial aspect of CDA, and both assume power operates through texts (Fairclough et al., 2013). Poststructural, specifically Foucauldian, concepts such as power/knowledge and discourse assume that what is known about a subject (e.g., social justice) does not preexist social-political contexts or power relations.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is well suited to address my research question, given the methodology's goal of identifying assumptions embedded within discourses and the implications of this knowledge on social practices (Jager & Maier, 2009). In other words, CDA seeks to examine taken-for-granted assumptions couched within a discourse and how this knowledge regulates social behavior. Further, CDA is a politicized methodology emerging from sociolinguistics that seeks points of connection between knowledge (discourse) and power to challenge and transform relations of domination. Finally, I used CDA to critically examine conceptualizations of social justice within social work so that the profession may glean a deeper understanding of the epistemologies influencing social justice conceptualization. Given social work's interest in resisting and redressing social injustices, a study exploring social justice discourse's epistemological limitations and problematics is vital.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the significant components of my research project. I have introduced the project's significance for social work, my background and interest in the topic, explicated key terms, and summarized key elements of CDA. In the following chapters, I examine social justice within the social work literature and detail my study design.

Chapter 2 critically synthesizes the relevant literature on social justice within high-impact social work scholarship. The literature review spans from social work's inception in the late 19th century into the 21st century and draws primarily from social work journal articles. Though the term is diversely conceptualized, I discuss the concept's ongoing opacity and situatedness within Christian and Enlightenment legacies. Following this, I present various interpretations of social justice while demonstrating how social work scholarship engages with the idea.

Chapter 3 includes an overview of this study's methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA bridges my study's philosophical assumptions and methods. Given CDA's anchoring to rich theoretical and philosophical orientations, I devote much of this chapter to articulating my study's ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Following the discussion of the foundational elements of my research, I discuss methods and analysis. At the close of Chapter 3, I discuss potential limitations and my research's ethical considerations and evaluative criteria.

In Chapter 4 I present the research findings and an analytical discussion addressing the research question. Through an iterative analytic process, I interpret social justice discourse through fours disparate yet related dominant discursive strands, such as

1) Vestiges of the Enlightenment, 2) Neoliberalism and Instrumentalization, 3) Professional Hegemony, and 4) Moralizing Inclinations. Though I have chosen to present the findings and discussion as separate chapters, the boundary separating the findings and discussion of critical discourse analysis is imprecise, as will be noted within the chapter.

In the concluding chapter, I provide a comprehensive analysis summary, delving into the dominant and counter-discourses identified in this study. Furthermore, I discuss the implications of these findings while also addressing limitations and suggesting avenues for future research. A pivotal element of this discussion is encouragement for continued critical examination of social justice discourse within the realm of social work and its broader societal implications.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Social justice is a requisite value and a goal of social work. Although social justice lacks a universal definition and a static name, it is a salient idea within social work, advancing social work ethics, values, curriculum standards, and practices (NASW, 2021). From the profession's inception in the United States in the late 19th century to now, social justice has been extolled under diverse nomenclatures (e.g., social reform, social welfare, righting-wrongs) and exemplified via diverse practices (e.g., Settlement Houses, Rank-and-File social workers).

Social justice has shifted across time and place, and its practices vary depending on theoretical orientation and social work setting. Although social justice, in its contemporary form, was not officially incorporated into social work's professional lexicon until near the turn of the 21st century, ideas such as advocacy, social transformation, activism, structural social work, and diversity functioned as proxies for what social work terms social justice today. Across settings, social workers are expected to practice (O'Brien, 2011a; Reisch, 2012), teach (Hodge, 2010; Krings et al., 2015), and advocate (Kam, 2014) for social justice. So central is social justice to social work that social work scholar John Ehrenreich asserts that social justice "…is at the core of social work's reason for existence" (Ehrenreich, 2014, p. 230).

Though social justice accommodates disparate and, at times, divergent philosophical and political beliefs (Reisch, 2002), social justice has been flattened by the weight of a homogenizing vocabulary of justice, such as freedom, equality, and rights. Consequently, this shared social justice vocabulary might obscure exciting and complex systems of meaning, culture, power, and history that contextualize social work's

terminologies and practices of social justice. Such routinization suggests that social justice is an arena of social work with distinct language norms, values, and accompanying practices. Accordingly, I have conceptualized social justice as a discourse.

My understanding of discourse derives primarily from Michel Foucault and the work of social work scholars who conceptualize discourse as a phenomenon of and *more than* language (Garrity, 2010; Gee, 2011; Healy & Mulholland, 1998). From this vantage point, discourse is a distinct framework within which language and social and cultural practices operate. This often unknowable boundary of acceptability simultaneously prescribes and proscribes normative behaviors within, among many other locations, a particular cultural practice or value (social justice) or profession (social work). As such, the notion of social justice within professional social work functions discursively.

Accrediting bodies and professional organizations like the CSWE and NASW outline what is knowable, sayable, and *doable* about social justice within the context of social work. It is through linguistic and practical repetition of social justice vocabularies within professional social work that social justice is recognizable and thus replicable. As a result, what is spoken and written about social justice constitutes the performances of social justice, shaped by and shaping the social justice discourse simultaneously.

When scholars theorize and critique social justice, they attempt to clarify it (Aston et al., 2014; Reisch, 2002; Solas, 2008), reinvigorate it (Kam, 2014), salvage it (Nicotera, 2019), or seek out its "true" meaning. In a departure from this, this literature review does not intend to present the "true" meaning of social justice, nor does it attempt to perfect it. Instead, I present social justice as a dynamic and culturally contingent concept as

reflected in scholarship. The review of the scholarly literature aims to critically explore these themes and tensions in the following sections:

1. The Opacity of Social Justice: A Concept in a State of Flux
2. Notable Legacies: The Enlightenment and Christian Benevolence
3. Conceptualizations of Social Justice
4. Social Justice in Context

**The Opacity of Social Justice: A Concept in a State of Flux**

For decades, other disciplines, particularly the humanities and social sciences, have taken up social justice in much more precise and theoretically nuanced ways (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Young, 2010). However, social work has yet to engage in similarly deep analyses of social justice. Generally, social work's theorizations of social justice remain superficial, lacking meaningful interdisciplinary influence and theoretical depth. As it is deployed in social work, social justice is an amalgamated term – drawing from various white, Western, male philosophers, Christian benevolence, and to a lesser extent, grassroots movements and in-the-field social workers (Gasker & Fischer, 2014; Finn & Jacobsen, 2008; Reisch, 2002). Social justice discourse is dynamic and comprises overlapping, even competing, understandings of what constitutes justice and how to achieve it (Gasker & Fischer, 2014; Hudson, 2017; Olson, 2007; Reisch, 2002 ).

Over the last 100 years, social work professionals have sought "justice" through practices that range from collective organizing (Mickenberg, 2018; Selmi, 2001) and direct action (Reisch & Andrews, 2001) to the surveillance and evangelizing of immigrants (Katz, 1996a), gendered practices of social control (Costin, 1983; Wahab, 2002), and the perpetuation of capitalism and exclusionary racist and sexist federal

policies via the New Deal (Abramovitz, 1988; Ehrenreich, 2014; Katz, 1996b). Looking across history, it is clear that what is considered "just" remains bound to power; meaning, conceptualizations and social justice practices remain inseparable from institutional and cultural norms and political ideologies. To give shape to the dynamic idea of social justice, I have teased out three initial characteristics that are distinct yet fundamentally related: social justice as value, goal, and practice within the profession. Throughout the literature review, I will theorize the concept of social justice, drawing from one of these three characteristics.

Though I have listed the characteristics as discrete categories, each instance is bound to the others. Social justice oscillates between the aspirational and actionable, and the three attributes of social justice exist reciprocally, with no single origin. For example, the NASW cites social justice as a core value, highlighting its professional importance (NASW, 2021). The profession's values necessarily guide professional practices and standards that, in turn, strive to attain the profession's goals; in the case of social work, a "just society" or social justice is frequently the object of the profession's ambitions (NASW, 2021; CSWE, 2022). It could be said that because social justice is a leading professional goal, professionals and academics must engage in practices that serve it.

Some scholars contend that social justice is a value that has an "instrumental function" (Olson, 2007, p.60), tacitly serving the goal of social work professionalization. Others regard social justice as a laudable, albeit elusive, goal to which we should strive to return (Kam, 2014; Solas, 2008). While each perspective engages social justice differently and maintains specific intervention sites, with differing views on how best to assist individuals and transform society, their terms (equality, freedom) (O'Brien, 2011a;

Reisch, 2002) and frameworks (liberalism, democracy) (Hudson, 2017) remain under-examined. Though social justice is conceptually opaque and distinctively practiced, there are legacies that contextualize social justice in social work, such as Rawlsian Justice, Christian benevolence, and the Enlightenment.

### *Rawls's Influence On Social Justice Conceptualizations*

Rawls's treatise on social justice, *A Theory of Justice,* was first published in 1971 and revised and updated in 1999 and 2001 (Rawls, 2005). In his tome, Rawls densely outlines the properties of justice that derive in large part from the social contract tradition that originated during the Enlightenment era. The egalitarian notion of "justice as fairness" is central to Rawls's thesis (Rawls, 2005). According to Rawls (2005), social justice is primarily achieved through a fair distribution of "primary goods" throughout society via cooperation between its institutions and citizens. Accordingly, cooperation is essential to distributive justice. In Rawls's framework, the state's cooperation is best understood as benign neglect of the markets, allowing a free-market economy to efficiently self-regulate based on supply and demand (Rawls, 2005). Citizen cooperation is primarily centered on work. Reflecting a tacit endorsement of meritocracy and capitalist productivity, citizens unable to invest in the market are expected to contribute via gainful employment and advance economically and professionally based on their educational achievements.

Two principles bolster Rawls's justice framework: 1) *the principle of equal liberty* and a second principle outlined in two parts, and 2) *the equality of opportunity principle* and *the difference principle* (Rawls, 2005, p. 124). The *principle of equal liberty* conceptualizes liberty as "political liberty" (Rawls, 2005, p. 61), e.g., the right to

vote, run for public office, assemble, speak freely, hold property, and avoid arbitrary arrest. In other words, Rawls's *principle of equal liberty* mirrors the rights established by the United States Constitution (Banerjee, 2011). His second two-part principle, the *equality of opportunity,* maintains that those with equal abilities and talents should have fair access to meaningful education and employment, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Part two of the equality of opportunity principle is the *difference principle*. The *difference principle* recognizes that some inequality within social institutions does not necessarily preclude fairness and assumes the noblesse oblige of those with power and privilege. For example, Rawls mentions the importance of fostering policies that support those with more extraordinary abilities and educational achievements as advantageous to the "less fortunate" since their abilities can be harnessed for the "common advantage" (Rawls, 2005, p. 107). In other words, some inequality is inevitable, even functional to society, if it can be maximized for the greater good. Thus, Rawlsian justice is about *fair* access to opportunity within a context based on the equal distribution of rights. He says, "When the two principles are satisfied, all are equal citizens…" (Rawls, 2005, p. 97).

Despite the questionable ideological affinity and utility of Rawlsian conceptions of justice for social work and his glaring omissions about racial justice, he has been long regarded as one of social work's most cited social justice theorists (Banerjee, 2011; Gasker & Fischer, 2014). Though he is notable in the literature, some social work scholars maintain that the profession has misread Rawls. One study presents a well-articulated comparison between social work and Rawlsian social justice. It concludes that social work has misrepresented Rawls by adapting his work to fit more neatly with the

social justice goals of the profession (Banerjee, 2011). Still, scholars writing about social justice often open their works with an articulation of Rawlsian justice before going on to cite the ways that social work is not living up to its social justice principles and misunderstanding, *even misusing*, social justice (Kam, 2014; Olson, 2007; Reisch, 2002; Solas, 2008).

Given that Rawls is regarded as one of the preeminent justice theorists of the 20th century, it is unsurprising that a profession that has made social justice compulsory to its mission widely adopted his treatise. However, this brief exploration of Rawls's contribution to professional conceptualizations of social justice lends only partial insight into what social work means when it speaks of social justice. To further explore some of the contours of social justice, I turn now to two legacies that meaningfully contextualize social work's relationship to social justice.

**Notable Legacies: The Enlightenment and Christian Benevolence**

Social justice discourse does not exist in a vacuum. Accordingly, contemporary social work has inherited imaginations of social justice that come from *somewhere* and reflect shifting social, political, and historical contexts. Indeed, when social work speaks of social justice, it speaks to and from innumerable historical legacies and dynamic social contexts. Though social justice consists of many disparate narratives, the Enlightenment and Christian benevolence are enduring and salient legacies within social work's ever-unfolding story of social justice. Social work scholars have pointed to the influence of both legacies in their critiques of "progress narratives" (Hudson, 2017; Wilson, 2020) and "altruistic" practices (Ehrenreich, 2014; Lubove, 1965). My desire to name both legacies follows in the footsteps of these scholars. It operates from the assumption that, to some

extent, the Enlightenment and Christian benevolence may remain woven into social justice discourse.

### *The Enlightenment*

The Enlightenment spanned from the late 17th century through the early 19th century and ushered in the Modern Era in Western terms. During this period, thinkers in England and France began questioning the traditional authority bestowed upon monarchs or the divine right of kings (Locke, 2003). It was a historical period also characterized as The Age of Reason due to the novel optimism in science and the ability of human rationality to expose tyrants, maximize liberties, and alleviate human suffering (Baxter, 2020). It was an age defined by the values and pursuit of "progress," "freedom," and "justice."

Enlightenment-humanist thinkers held the essentialist idea that humans (for those even considered human at the time) are fundamentally moral and rational subjects and are compelled to liberate their inherent reason by overthrowing political despots (Newman, 2003). However, their persistent advocacy for rationality and their embrace of science and logic engendered a rational/emotional binary that ultimately positioned reason over emotion (Rich, 1986). Rationality arose as a fixed idea, a normative standard against which all other modes of subjectivity could be measured and subsequently classified and controlled. While Enlightenment thinkers had moved beyond the sovereign's power, they uncritically wielded the power of science. Commenting about this historical era, the philosopher Michel Foucault notes that during the Age of Reason, "one form of power ... [was] replaced by another, even more totalizing—the power to judge, to police and to

diagnose and treat" (O'Brien & Penna, 1998, pp. 115-116 as cited in Morley & Macfarlane, 2012).

Broadly speaking, the Enlightenment conceptions articulated throughout the U.S. Constitution (e.g., natural rights, freedom of speech, religious tolerance) have considerably shaped America's political arrangements (e.g., liberal democracy), grand narratives about human life/freedom (e.g., human rights), and cultural mores (e.g., individual responsibility) (Baxter, 2020). It is within this context that American social work operates. For example, the Enlightenment promises of universal human rights, civic engagement, and human progress remain powerful rhetorical devices in social work and are evidenced most clearly in social work's calls for social justice through human rights.

Further, the Enlightenment-era drive to flatten the complexities of human experiences to better classify, understand, and coordinate people laid the foundation for scientific charity, evidence-based practices, and the positivist direction that 20th-century social work would take (Chapman & Withers, 2019). A span of over one hundred years separates the Enlightenment and Progressive Eras; however, the notions of scientific efficiency and rational human actors (e.g., the white ruling classes) and Enlightenment values like liberty, justice, and equality remained contextualizing discourses shaping Progressive Era social work and social work still today (Caputo, 2002; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Lubove, 1969).

The Social Work Dictionary defines *social justice* as "an ideal condition in which all members of society have the same fundamental rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits" (Barker, 2003, pp. 404-405). Like the construction of human rights in the Enlightenment, this definition presents rights as something universal

(Witkin, 1998). Within the social work literature, scholars seek social justice via the perfectibility of society, often taking shape in the form of social activism and policy recommendations (Lundy, 2004; Thompson, 2002). Other scholars promote social justice via critical inquiry into social work practices (Finn, 2021) and critiques of neoliberalism (Ferguson, 2007). Still, others link social justice to institutional access and state-based rights, which harkens back to the Enlightenment idea that freedoms are bound to rights (Gatenio et al., 2020; Lundy, 2011). In many instances, there are latent assumptions about the linear nature of progress. Since knowing better can lead social workers to do better, the profession's approach to social justice can be perfected with more and better research.

Critiques of Enlightenment logic are prevalent within social science literature; however, social work has remained slow to enter this conversation (Hudson, 2017; Leonard, 2018; Parton & O'Byrne, 2018). The profession's overreliance on Enlightenment framings of social justice has left an area of social work's epistemological base under-examined (Bell, 2012). Social work scholars have limitedly discussed the profession's subtle reliance on liberal conceptions of social justice (Bell, 2012; Hudson, 2017; Leonard, 2018). However, more frequently, social work scholars pair their critiques of Enlightenment Liberalism with attempts to infuse social justice with newer and more critical theories and, in doing so, salvage it (Bryson, 2019; Goroff, 1982; Reisch, 2013; Spatscheck, 2013).

### *Christian Benevolence*

The intersection of religion and social justice spans centuries (Reisch, 2002). In the USA context, social justice and Christianity have frequently overlapped. Christian devotees and activists have maintained the importance of human well-being, dignity, and

worth by using the rhetoric of social justice (Slessarev-Jamir, 2011). There is a long, admirable, and complex history of religious-based social justice activism in the United States. The role of Black churches and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s pacifist movement in the 1950s and 60s may be one of the best-known couplings of social justice and religious beliefs (Kusener-Nelsen & Nelsen, 1975); however, Christian benevolence has underscored what can be deemed social justice causes as disparate in historical time and ultimate aims as the Christian Abolitionists of the 19th century to the progressive social workers of the early 20th century (Slessarev-Jamir, 2011). It is within the context of the Progressive Era where Christian benevolence or notions of saviorism, the nobility of suffering, and moralizing the poor gained traction within specific segments of a burgeoning professional social work (Chapman & withers, 2019; Lubove, 1965).

As a result, it is impossible to separate some of social work's most notable predecessors from their broader historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. For example, Mary Richmond and Jane Addams were introduced "to a morality of Christian service" that inspired their social work practices and activism (Ehrenreich, 2014, p. 34). In a notable example of the intersection of religion and social work, Mary Richmond stated that "social service is…the essence of religion" (Chapman & Withers, 2019, p. 171). Further, in the influential text *The Professional Altruist,* Roy Lubove (1965) states that the original practices of social work were "a blend of…Social Darwinism, Romanticism, and… Christian love [that] inspired all benevolent efforts" ( p.7). The moralizing tendencies of some of the Christian adherents driving Progressive-Era proto-social work were most clearly evidenced in the Charity Organizations Society's management (or judgment) of people experiencing poverty through categorizations of

deserving and undeserving poor rooted in perceptions of moral vs. immoral behaviors and the implicit confessional aspects of the client/friendly visitor interaction (Lubove, 1965).

Due mainly to the revolutionary backdrop and professionalization efforts of the early 20th century, social work distanced itself – at least rhetorically- from Christian charity in favor of science and professional status (Lubove, 1965). By the early 20th century, Jane Addams differentiated charitable and radical approaches to pursue social justice and guide social work. She differentiated the radical approach, driven by its "hatred of injustice," from the charitable approach that was inspired by its "pity for the poor" (Addams, 1910, p.68). Though not incorrect, this dichotomization invisibilized the continued, albeit subtle, presence of Christian benevolence that underscored some of social work's so-called radical practices at the turn of the 20th century (Ehrenreich, 2014). Through the efforts of socially progressive social workers and the underrecognized influence of a revolutionary social context, the profession's rhetoric shifted away from god not to reject the presence of Christian benevolence but to allow for the continuation of saviorism via professional treatment, management, and even care (Chapman & Withers, 2019).

I focused this section on the intersection of Christian benevolence and social work via Mary Richmond and Jane Addams because of the excess of information on them within social work scholarship and their central position within social work's dominant historical curriculum (McCleary & Simard, 2021). Typically, white women leaders like Richmond and Addams are highlighted in schools of social work as the "mothers" of the profession, and their contributions remain problematically hegemonic within social

work's origin story. However, recent scholarship has noted the implicit coloniality and Eurocentrism that result from this partial origin story for social work (Clarke, 2022; McCleary & Simard, 2021).

Though engagement with the myriad narratives of Black, Indigenous, and women of color who practiced social work and advanced the profession (e.g., Ida B. Wells and Hortense King McClinton) exceeds the scope of this literature review, it is paramount to note that *who* social work represents as its ancestors undeniably shapes *how* social work is thought of and practiced today and who and what is valued by the profession (Clarke, 2022). As well as the tragic loss of history, voice, and legacy that has resulted from the erasure of women of color within social work's origin story, this single story supports an inaccurate historical legacy that minimizes diverse social work approaches. By overlooking the diversity of tactics and people present during the inception of the profession, it becomes possible to gaze upon the past in myopic judgment, amplifying the exceptionalism of the present (e.g., "Look how far we have come as a profession"), thus, leaving it under-examined (Wilson, 2020). This simplification may imply that social work has progressed beyond its problematic past. In this way, "[the story of social work is] a kind of progress narrative where 'we,' whomever we might be, are on the right side of history" (Wilson, 2020, p. 576). Like its origins, contemporary social work remains complex, dangerous, paradoxical, and socially situated.

Contemporary social work is sometimes contrasted with practices often overtly bound to Christian benevolence and moral righteousness, which allows these legacies to remain underrecognized in the profession today (Chapman & Withers, 2019). Social work, and correspondingly its social justice project, has distanced itself from the

Christian benevolence and complex practices of its past via the narrative that social work has advanced from "moral reform" via the Charity Organization Societies to the "social reform" of the Settlement Houses, resulting in its final and entirely secular iteration, "applied social science" or what we might today call "evidence-based practices" (Hick, 2010 cited in Chapman & Withers, 2019, pg. 170). The perceived shift from an explicit Christian-inspired saviorism towards the scientific improvement of material human conditions, coupled with tolerance rather than the judgment of those economically and socially suffering, may further hint at the influence of the Enlightenment on social work's conceptualizations of social justice

**Conceptualizations of Social Justice**

Though social justice discourses have inevitably transformed since the profession's origins, throughlines underscore the profession's most common conceptualizations. In a transcription of a speech titled "Charity and Social Justice" given to the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1910, in which Jane Addams considers social work's shift from "cure to prevention…to Vital Welfare" (Addams, 1910, p.69), she notes that "social justice" is a word "that belong[s] distinctively to our own times" (Addams, 1910, pgs. 69-70). Contextualized by Progressive Era political engagement and activism, Addams sought to expand social justice efforts beyond charitable relief and prevention to the "positive idea of raising life to its highest value" (Addams, 1910, p. 69). Addams conceptualized social justice as a goal achievable through a combination of agitation and statistics or research and science.

Like Addams, contemporary social work conceptualizations of social justice advocate (at least rhetorically) for a social justice that differentiates itself from the

individualization of problems and management practices associated with charity (Galambos, 2008; *Gibelman, 1999*; Reisch, 2002). Standard interpretations of social justice include terms such as equality, access, rights, opportunities, fairness, dignity, and equitable distribution of goods and services (Hudson, 2017). Despite a sameness in the vernacular, most literature recognizes social justice as an open-ended project.

Social justice definitions and practices reflect epistemological and political orientations to the concept. Depending on the author's orientation to social work and their analyses of the causes and methods indicated to redress injustice, the distinct contours of social justice differ substantially (Nash et al., 2016). With this in mind, the following section presents an overview of social justice from various orientations.

***Critical***

Drawing from the influences of anti-racist, queer, feminist, Indigenous, and Marxist scholars, proponents of critical social work have re/conceptualized social justice in myriad ways (Brown, 2012; Moreau & Leonard, 1989; Weinberg, 2008). Since the 1960s, strands of critical social work (e.g., structural, radical, anti-oppressive) began to study and center oppression vis-a-vis the profession's broader calls for social/economic/racial justice (Mattsson, 2014). Theoretically, these approaches assume the conflict-laden nature of society or that society is composed of competing interests (e.g., class, race, gender) and ultimately representative of institutionally powerful and hegemonic power structures (Mullally, 1997). As a result, conceptualizations of social (human) problems and their attendant solutions reflect dominant cultural values and norms. For example, this may look like the tendency to individualize human misery and subsequent interventions due to America's unwavering belief in rugged individualism

and meritocracy. Critical social workers are skeptical of this and assume that human experience is better understood in the context of competing power relations.

From this perspective, human suffering that superficially appears to be an individual problem or pathology is better understood as a product of structural inequalities. Thus, collective intervention, institutional change, and broad-scale social transformation are favored, representing a paradigmatic shift away from mainstream, highly individualistic, and pathologizing interpretations of human problems. This shift resulted in social work's ambitious re-commitment to intervening at the macro level to create a socially just world by interrupting social inequalities. This newfound conflict orientation to individual and social analysis directed critical social workers' attention to structures and institutions of power and, in doing so, dedicated much of their analysis to exploring how oppression flows from these structures, contextualizing social work practices, practitioners, and clients at the local level (Rossiter, 1997; Mattsson, 2014; Weinberg, 2008).

Given critical social work's theoretical and axiological proximity to many of the critical theories formulated in the humanities, it makes sense that much of the literature on social justice expands upon the social criticisms and epistemologies of the Frankfurt School (Barak, 2016). Critical theory rests upon traditional conceptualizations of power that assume power's coercive and oppressive functions. A traditional orientation to power assumes that power resides within hierarchical institutions and asserts its authority primarily through repression. Particularly in the current context, when the effects of neoliberalism appear totalizing and cultural hegemony inescapable, analyses of power that center on the supremacy of institutional power offer a straightforward way to make

sense of one's material conditions. Deriving from this tradition, critical strains within social work have presented anti-oppressive practice (AOP) and structural social work as reliable, socially just alternatives to the profession's neoliberal, individualistic, and coercive tendencies (Rossiter, 1997; Dominelli, 1996).

Critical approaches have enriched the profession but are limited due to traditional conceptualizations of power that may underestimate power's productive and localized characteristics. In response to these limitations, some scholars have sought to integrate poststructural assumptions into critical strains of social work (Fook, 2016; Leonard, 1997; Rossiter, 1997; Wendt & Seymore, 2010). Poststructuralism can somewhat temper the revolutionary rhetoric of critical perspectives since it is an epistemology that remains reticent to offer coherent alternatives.

***Poststructural***

Poststructuralism is an umbrella term under which diverse theorists are grouped. As a result, it can be challenging to define. However, poststructuralism is generally recognized as an epistemology concerned with the effects of power via language and discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Poststructuralism assumes that language, knowledge, discourse, and truth are constructed in power networks across institutional and local levels. As a result, there is no space "outside" of power, only the subject's ability to navigate their reciprocal relationship to, within, and against power (Foucault, 1978). Thus, poststructural social workers explore how discourses produce subjects and shape meanings, not just at the institutional level but through daily, repetitive linguistic choices and behavioral norms. At the same time, poststructuralism emphasizes human agency by

recognizing that subjects, while the product of discourse, are simultaneously producing discourse.

Poststructuralist scholars conceptualize social justice beyond institutional access and transformation. Instead, they favor analyses that center on the productive and dynamic nature of power, the role of discourse in re/producing oppressions, and the localized and contingent nature of socially just practices (Heron, 2005; Pease & Fook, 1999; Wendt & Seymore, Zhang, 2018). Poststructuralist scholars have demonstrated the epistemologically fluid nature of social justice through engagements and critiques of the term and its associated practices (Aldridge, 1996; Dominelli, 2010; Featherstone & Fawcett, 1995; Gorman, 1993). From this perspective, scholars have critiqued the metanarratives associated with mainstream social justice (e.g., privilege and oppression) that tend to flatten the diversity and discontinuities present in human experiences in favor of homogenous group identities, upon which individual rights are conferred and the basis upon which institutional access can be granted (Leonard, 1995).

### *Abolition and Transformative Justice*

Though social work has been slow to reimagine social justice through an abolitionist lens, social work has *marginally* begun to incorporate abolitionist theorizing into conceptualizations of social justice (Jacobs et al., 2020; Kim, 2018) through calls to reimagine social work histories, practices, policies (Kim, 2018), and self-care practices (Pyles, 2020). Further, some scholars have voiced the vital link between racial and social justice to interrupt further harm, both incidental and intentional, perpetuated by conceptualizations of social justice that do not specifically name and redress racial injustices (Gregory, 2021; Reisch, 2007).

Unlike mainstream engagements with social justice in social work, abolitionist-associated scholars have linked social work's social control tendencies directly to white supremacy, citing examples from Progressive Era assimilation and eugenics practices to modern-day practices of surveillance and control through social welfare institutions, most notably child welfare (Jacobs et al., 2020). Abolitionist scholars have clarified the link between social work and white supremacy and highlighted social justice's communal and radical elements (Pyles, 2020). Perhaps most importantly, they have also noted that abolition and transformative justice are, in fact, forms of social justice vital to the strength of social work's theorizing and organizing efforts (Gregory, 2021; Kim, 2018; Richie et al., 2019).

Social work's abolitionist strains are rightly credited to the decades-long activism and community work of queer, trans, and femmes of color (INCITE!, 2016). Transformative justice theorizing and practices originated primarily in oppressed and marginalized communities outside of formal institutions and nonprofit contexts. From these spaces, intersectional analyses and practices of justice that attend to unique experiences of harm within the context of gender, ethnicity, class, ability, documentation status, and mental health have arisen (INCITE!, 2016; Jacobs et al., 2020; Kim, 2018). Nearly 30 years since the start of women of color-led prison abolition organizations like Critical Resistance in the late 1990s and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence in the early 2000s, concepts such as *prison abolition* and *transformative justice* have moved, to some extent, from their marginal position within social work academic literature.

Scholars associated with transformative justice seek social justice by developing alternative institutions and liberatory approaches to violence and harm, safety, care, and

community self-determination (generationFIVE, 2017). Proponents of transformative justice assume that social justice is achieved through a co-occurring process of actively confronting powerful institutions *while* building sustainable and community-led alternatives (Critical Resistance, 2022). Community-based approaches like this differ from social work interpretations of social justice that emphasize fairness within and access to statist institutions, with little attention paid to creating viable alternative institutions.

The following section shifts from theoretical conceptualizations of social justice and explores social justice in context.

**Social Justice in Action**

For decades, social work has been influenced by the Freirean concept of praxis, or the necessary and reciprocal relationship between theory and action (Freire, 2009; Gringeri et al., 2010). Though not consistently named, praxis is evidenced throughout the social justice literature. For example, scholars have cited the influence of radical theorizing on social work practice (Kim, 2017), made calls to extend academic theorizing about social justice to the ground level (Morgaine, 2014), and discussed the link between academic socialization about social justice and the resulting professional practices (Hong & Hodge, 2009). Moreover, scholars have noted that academic conceptualizations of social justice are mirrored in practice settings and social workers' understanding of social justice (Olson et al., 2013). Consequently, knowledge of social justice produces actions; it is doing something (Garrity, 2010). Social work's knowledge of social justice is not simply theoretical but actionable and practiced locally.

Even though academic social justice discourse influences social workers' interpretations of justice and behaviors across social work settings, it remains a versatile and enigmatic discourse, and its contours shift as it is taken up across social work settings (Reisch, 2002). Given the enduring centrality of social justice within the profession, exploring the versatility of this discourse within social work settings is useful.

### *Social Justice And Social Work Practice*

Social justice is an approach and goal of contemporary social work practice (McLaughlin et al., 2015). Though organizational contexts, political pressures, social worker interest, and contextualizing cultural norms influence how social justice values can be practiced, social workers describe social justice as central to their work (O'Brien, 2011b; Hendrix et al., 2020). Across practice settings, the value of social justice promotes social work that aims to address institutional oppression, redress individual and structural power imbalances, and situate client experiences within their broader socio-political contexts (Lundy, 2004).

Structural, Strengths-based, and Empowerment approaches have contextualized professional practices for decades. These approaches purport to advance social justice by fundamentally transforming dominant social structures (structural), discovering and growing client voices and unique skills (strengths-based) and cultivating human agency across individual and institutional settings (empowerment approach) (Finn & Jacobson, 2008). However, these approaches have since been enriched with feminist, critical, and constructionist epistemologies that emphasize the central importance of language, social constructions, and localized narratives when analyzing social (in)justices and the processes by which to realize resistance and transformation (Carr, 2003; Fook, 2016;

Saleebey, 1996). Regardless of the epistemological tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities concerning social justice, it remains central to scholars and those directly engaged in social work practice (O'Brien, 2011b). Even in oppressive practice contexts like child welfare systems, prisons, and psychiatric facilities that seemingly belie social justice values, attempts have been made to remedy a paradox fundamental to social work practice: How does social work seek justice within and through fundamentally unjust institutions (McLaughlin et al., 2015)?

Clinical social work exemplifies this tension since it has been frequently criticized for favoring micro-level interventions and over-relying on individualization and pathology instead of explicitly advancing social justice values and goals (Brown, 2021; Hendrix et al., 2020). However, some scholars contend that the vilification of clinical social work is partly due to using a structural social justice lens that does not fully appreciate micro-level social justice interventions (McLaughlin, 2011). According to them, social work has erroneously constructed a "justice versus therapy" dichotomy that invisibilizes clinical social work's "essential role in social work's mission of social justice" (Wakefield, 1988a and 1988b cited in McLaughlin, 2011 p. 236). Instead, clinical social work practice might be understood as intervening for and with social justice values at a micro-level in ways that explicitly relate to the macro, for example, "accessing resources, advocating for individual rights, navigating an unjust system, and treating those who are devalued in society with respect" (McLaughlin, 2011, p.248). In this way, social work clinicians can disrupt the private/public binary, as is undoubtedly evidenced in feminist, structural social work, and narrative clinical practices (Hendrix et al., 2020; Moreau & Leonard, 1989; White & Epston, 1990).

### *The Pervasive Encroachment of Neoliberalism*

As clinicians and scholars promote possibilities for social justice in clinical social work and beyond, other scholars contend that a more significant ideological creep is occurring and obstructing social justice within social work practice. That is the pervasive influence of neoliberalism. Although disparate definitions are abundant in the literature, neoliberalism is commonly understood as ideological and discursive (Garrett, 2010). Like the ethos of the Enlightenment, neoliberalism manifests through practices (at both the micro and macro level) that encourage, among other things, hyper-individualism, social/economic inequality, a free-market economic system, deregulation, competition, efficiency, quantifiability, and productivity.

Critical social work scholars have been outspoken commentators about neoliberalism's detrimental influence on social work practice (Garrett, 2010). Regardless of epistemological stance, critiques of neoliberalism's ubiquitous influence on social work practice abound. Across the literature, social work scholars are discussing, with concern, the rising trend toward neoliberal practices and ideologies exemplified through social work practice (Evans et al., 2005; Hendrix et al., 2020; Rossiter & Heron, 2011). At the expense of creativity, intuition, and critical contextualization, neoliberal ideologies (as manifested through competencies and evidence-based practices) privilege expert knowledge, expediency, and outcomes (Rossiter & Heron, 2008); neoliberal ideologies encourage the privatization of human struggles that decontextualize an individual's experience from the broader social context.

Some of social work's macro-level social justice practices (e.g., community organizing) are mitigated by processes of professionalization (Reisch, 2013). As

professionalization increases, practices associated with social justice decrease. However, it is not simply participation in professional social work but *identification with professionalism* that encourages practitioners to move away from social justice strategies (Epstein, 1970). This is particularly concerning when considered within today's pervasively neoliberal culture. Professional identification is nearly compulsory in social work today (Olson, 2007). For example, professional and monetary incentives exist for being a paying member of the NASW (NASW, 2022), and there are calls for title protection within the profession (Fink-Samnick, 2016). To be sure, social justice practices in the 21st century are profoundly shaped by processes of neoliberal professionalization that encourage social workers to prioritize risk management, efficiency, and an instrumentalization of knowledge at the expense of critical social work practices and social justice efforts.

Professionalization maintains an inverse relationship with social work practices that tend towards social justice efforts (Abramovitz, 1998; Reisch, 2013). Indeed, practitioners embroiled in record-keeping and risk assessments are less apt to have the time or willingness to engage in politically meaningful social work practices. Theorizing within the context of domestic violence work, scholars Mehrotra, Kimball, and Wahab (2016) note the ways that the convergence of professionalism, neoliberalism, and criminalization discourage politicized forms of social work practice. Similarly, Epstein's 1970s survey of approximately 1,500 professional social workers found that social workers who identified more with notions of professionalism were significantly less inclined to approve of radical social change efforts (Epstein, 1970). Though this study is dated, it remains relevant given the exponential rise of neoliberal professionalization in

the last two decades of the 20th century and its continual impact on and influence of the profession (Mehrotra et al., 2016). Similarly, there is an impetus towards neoliberal professionalization within social work education.

### *Social Justice And Social Work Education*

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires that American schools of social work include social justice-specific curricula to meet Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (CSWE, 2022; Jani, 2011 et al.). Specifically, "accredited social work programs are required to teach about racism and social justice based on… social work competencies (CSWE, 2022). Accreditation standards are met by creating social justice-specific courses or integrating social justice content across coursework.

Scholars are concerned with how to integrate social justice into social work curricula (Austin et al., 2014; Hodge, 2010; Nicotera, 2019), and some have emphasized the efficacy of social work classes explicitly dedicated to raising students' awareness about social justice (Pitner et al., 2018). Others have noted how white supremacist and neoliberal discourses move through social justice courses (Mehrotra, Hudson, & Self, 2019; Morley et al., 2017). In response, some scholars contend that an active confrontation of whiteness must be central to social work education to advance social justice (Gregory, 2021; Nylund, 2006).

Within academic settings, race, ethnicity, relationships of oppression and power, professionalism and neoliberalism still contextualize the teaching and learning of social justice (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Mehrotra et al., 2019). Because of this, the way that social justice is conceptualized matters. Social justice classes affect how students understand,

enact, and struggle for social justice (Krings et al., 2015). Social justice courses have the potential to foster critical thinking and inspire social action, yet the "social justice discourses available to and employed by emerging social work scholars in the USA are limited" (Hudson, 2017, p. 1972). Various scholars contend that social justice discourse is limited by its anchoring in modernist traditions (Hudson, 2017; Reisch, 2002) and how subtle forms of white supremacy and neoliberalism move through it (Mehrotra, Hudson, & Self, 2019). Specifically, social justice tends to be taken up through the Enlightenment-era concepts of liberty, equality, and justice. These vestiges of the Enlightenment are compatible with neoliberalism in promoting individual freedom, choice, and rationality, yet these terms remain taken for granted within social work education (Hudson, 2017).

To resist neoliberal encroachment within social work and re-center social justice approaches that explore dominant discourses, power, and social transformation, there is a need to critically engage the insidious ideologies that underwrite social justice courses (Morley et al., 2017; Wendt & Seymore, 2010).

### *Social Justice and Social Work Research*

All research is informed by the political and cultural contexts in which it is conducted, and social justice is the goal of distinct and overlapping epistemologies. An abundance of literature presents the merits of social justice research practices, outlines social justice research approaches, and generates knowledge of social work's broader social justice goals. For example, anti-oppressive, feminist, and critical research methodologies frequently name social justice as both an anchor and goal of research (Danso, 2015; Gringeri et al., 2010; Lyons et al., 2013). Given that social work strives to promote social justice, social work research might mirror this conviction by centering

research questions, epistemologies, methodologies, and methods that advance social justice (Rogers, 2012). (p.40)

Professional social work relies on knowledge generated by researchers for insights into social problems, human behaviors, and structural inequities (Danso, 2015). As such, a reciprocal relationship exists between academic research and social work paradigms and practices, necessitating calls within the literature for socially just research practices or transformative paradigms (Danso, 2015; Lyons et al., 2013; Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008). Transformative paradigms exemplify the "axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological beliefs that support the goals of social work researchers who strive for increased social justice" (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008, p. 486).

Themes of social justice research are evidenced in practices such as critically considering researcher positionality (Creswell, 2007), reflexivity (Gringeri et al., 2010), participant inclusion throughout the research process (Danso, 2015), centering marginalized voices/communities (Harding, 2004), and generating new knowledge for social justice and liberation (Anzaldúa, 1987; Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, since there is an express rejection of objectivity that undergirds methodologies concerned with social justice, they exist in opposition to hegemonic and positivist approaches to research that often remain "epistemologically unconscious" (Steinmetz, 2005a, as cited in Staller, 2013, p. 396; Strier, 2007) within dominant research paradigms.

Social justice can have a prominent role within social work research, influencing how and what the profession examines and what knowledge is generated. This means that social activities reinforce knowledge, and knowledge creates a context in which social practices are delineated (Young & Collin, 2004). Given this, research can be an effective

tool for social change or exercised in ways that reinforce dominant social arrangements (Bocarro & Stodolska, 2013; Brown & Strega, 2005).

### *Social Justice at the Institutional Level*

Social justice is one of social work's original and principal ideas guiding social welfare policy (Reisch, 2007). Given the primarily institutional setting of social welfare policy, it is an arena of social work where conceptualizations of social justice can be particularly consequential at the macro or societal level (Reisch & Andrews, 2002; Reisch, 2016; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Across the history of social work, small numbers of macro social workers have been instrumental in social welfare praxis or translating the profession's values and ethics into tangible change strategies. Their leadership often catalyzes the development and implementation of policies and strategies that alter institutions to positively impact human well-being (Reisch & Andrews, 2002; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). Some progressive legislation supported by macro social workers throughout the 20th century (e.g., The New Deal and the Great Society) formally and meaningfully altered social welfare institutions (Ehrenreich, 2014).

Governmental agencies are tasked with identifying and alleviating social problems. However, public opinion shapes and is shaped by them (Eversman & Bird, 2016). As a result, they are fraught with cultural biases and influenced by moral panics. For example, during the 20th century, multiple waves of moral panic were instrumental in shaping detrimental social policies that remain consequential today (Eversman & Bird, 2016). From the xenophobic and moralistic drives to purify women and control their sexuality during the early 20th century (Wahab, 2002) to the McCarthyism that mitigated social work's radical impulses in the 1950s (Andrews & Reisch, 1997), socially

constructed crises have driven social work's complicity with oppressive practices. Looking upon this legacy, macro social work practices are uniquely positioned to identify the social and cultural contexts shaping social welfare policies and question their role within institutions.

Some contemporary scholars have begun to do so by presenting mutual aid as a radical and alternative practice to social welfare (Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Izlar, 2019). Izlar (2019) locates social welfare systems within the broader context of neoliberal austerity and envisions counter-hegemonic alternatives to current social welfare institutions, or "radical social welfare" that draws from social anarchist thought traditions. Specifically, he emphasizes non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian, and prefigurative forms of organization. In a way that somewhat echoes the perspectives of abolitionists, rather than enter the debate about what type of social justice frames can most effectively guide social welfare policies, his anarchist frame eschews the state entirely. It promotes social justice via the co-creation of alternative welfare institutions.

**Conclusion**

Social justice discourse undoubtedly influences the *doing* of social work and manifests distinctive characteristics across social work settings and theoretical orientations. Knowledge and language are political; learning is political. As a result, academic literature shapes social work learning and doing (social practices and education), facilitating danger and possibility within academic conceptualizations of social justice (Gee, 2011). Because of this, academic texts that theorize social justice can act as sites for analyses and action (Healy & Mulholland, 1998). Hudson (2017) states:

The social work profession would benefit from continuing to examine its orientation towards social justice accordingly (and perhaps theory more broadly) and requiring all social work scholars to have a robust, complex, and current theoretical understanding of social justice (pp. 1972-1973)

Since knowledge sets boundaries and establishes discursive norms (Garrity, 2010), it is crucial to critically analyze the taken-for-granted presuppositions underlying social work's diverse conceptualizations of social justice. Critical and poststructural scholars recognize the importance of deconstruction and critique and question the profession's foundational assumptions while highlighting the value-laden nature of knowledge (Healy, 2007; Park, Crath, Jeffrey, 2020; Parton & O'Byrne, 2018), the impact of dominant knowledge systems on one's practice (Fook et al., 2000), and sites of resistance that can emerge when critically re-examining social justice (Fook, 2002; Heron, 2005; Leonard, 2018; Macías, 2013). However, while scholars have discussed the meaning and use of social justice, only a few have looked at the theoretical and epistemological frames through which the social work scholarship conceptualizes justice (Carey & Foster, 2013; O'Brien, 2011a; Rosenwald et al., 2012). As a result, there remains a dearth in social work studies that critically explore the epistemological foundations of social justice discourse. Such an investigation may be particularly impactful since it is from these foundations that the profession derives its curricula, practice approaches, and grand narratives about social justice.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter three introduces the study's research design and critical discourse analysis methodology (subsequently referred to as CDA). CDA is the rope that binds my study's guiding philosophical framework to my choice of methods. Following this, I categorized this chapter into four distinct yet interrelated sections: 1) ontology, epistemology, and axiology; 2) critical discourse analysis; 3) methods and analysis; and 4) ethical considerations.

## Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology

Ontology, epistemology, and axiology play influential roles within the study design. Taken as a whole, they function as this study's philosophical and theoretical base. Somewhat paradoxically, CDA is a deeply theoretical methodology lacking a unifying theoretical framework because it draws from various theoretical traditions spanning time and geography (Fairclough, 1995; Given, 2008). Given the disparate theoretical and philosophical traditions underscoring CDA, it is necessary to explicate the specific assumptions driving this study's interpretation and use of the methodology.

Ontology is a branch of philosophy that examines the nature of being, which includes the study of reality (Crotty, 2015). It is a philosophical area of study concerned with questions such as: What is the nature of reality? Does reality exist external to the mind? Is reality objective or subjective? The answers to these questions differ significantly based on one's ontological standpoint. This study is grounded in a relativist ontology that assumes reality is socially situated and subjective, in other words, the idea of relativism. Relativism assumes that reality is what we make of it (Crotty, 2015). As such, this study does not presume anything as natural or *a priori*. Instead, I assume reality

is historically and socially situated; thus, I skeptically engage within it. Meaning is fluid and culturally contingent, suggesting a movement away from truth claims and universalized interpretations of phenomena. For example, how one interprets reality undoubtedly impacts how one perceives it. In other words, one's assumptions about knowledge follow assumptions about reality.

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that examines the nature and limits of knowledge (Crotty, 2015). Epistemological questions might ask: What can be known? What constitutes valid knowledge? How do we know what we know? What kind of knowledge does the research seek? Every study is embedded with theoretical assumptions about the nature of knowledge, which justify and initiate methodological decisions. Poststructuralist theories anchor this study. Poststructuralism is a transdisciplinary response to structuralism's limitations, such as the structuralist insistence on the totalizing impact of social structures on the individual (Crotty, 2015; Leotti et al., 2021). Undoubtedly, structuralism has aided social work scholars in moving beyond individualist perspectives on human experience by identifying and critiquing underlying structures that constrain and shape individual choice (Coates, 2017; Mishna & Bogo, 2003; Mullaly, 1997). However, structuralism tends to essentialize identities, limit their scope, simplify discontinuities into binary oppositions, minimize human agency, and under-discuss the role of power in shaping social phenomena (Fook, 1996; Healy, 2007).

Unlike its antecedent, poststructuralism assumes that power functions discursively and proves to be an exciting concept and practice for analysis (Healy & Mulholland, 1998; Leotti et al., 2021). Poststructuralism focuses on the inseparability of power and

knowledge by considering how/where knowledge originates, how knowledge becomes valid and viewed as truth, and what knowledge does. Key poststructuralist theorizations about the nature of knowledge that drives this study include (but are not limited to) 1) knowledge as co-created with power, 2) knowledge as socially situated, 3) knowledge as limited, and 4) knowledge as discursive.

Axiology is a sub-branch of the philosophy of science focused on the effects of a researcher's values within their study design (Creswell, 2007). Simply put, axiological questions compel the researcher to consider what they value in the research process, the researcher's intended outcome and why, and how one's values influence methodological choices (Creswell, 2007). Epistemological commitments in poststructuralism encourage politicized engagement with knowledge. To borrow from the words of famed philosopher Michel Foucault (1971), "knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting" (p. 360). In other words, this research project considered how knowledge might be used.

Studying power and oppression (so they might be transformed) are critical aspects of CDA (Fairclough et al., 2013). My axiological stance values the interplay between knowledge and social change. As a researcher, I value the potential of critical theorizing and knowledge generation to inspire action and interrupt oppression. As such, this study aimed to generate knowledge that is ultimately useful and transformative (Guba & Lincoln, 2016). The aforementioned ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions are the foundation upon which I critically engaged my subjectivities throughout the research process. CDA rejects any claims of objectivity and assumes that

a research project cannot be divorced from one's personhood, including insights and oversights.

The preceding methodological assumptions about the subjective nature of reality, the crucial linkages between power and knowledge, and a commitment to using this knowledge form the philosophical basis for CDA in three crucial ways. First, CDA is a mode of inquiry that analyzes our linguistic choices while problematizing them (Leotti et al., 2021). Like poststructuralist theorizations that assume the *political dimensions of language*, CDA goes beyond simple analysis by connecting local, discipline-specific word choices to broader histories and social phenomena (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Therefore, CDA assumes that power operates through text, and as a result, how a discipline, like social work, speaks about a topic can point to what a discipline values and what it simultaneously obstructs (van Dijk, 2001). Second, CDA methodology is anchored by poststructuralist theorizations that assert the reciprocal relationship between language and reality or the *discursive aspects of language***.** This means CDA assumes that language does something - that it is consequential at the material level (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). As a result, CDA looks at "language in use," or the function of discourse (Given, 2008, p. 145) through an exploration of taken-for-granted linguistic choices (Garrity, 2010). Finally, CDA *rejects claims to objectivity in the research process***.** Because CDA asserts the discursive characteristics of language, it assumes that the researcher herself is also situated within power-laden contexts, operating within and drawing from various discourses (Leotti et al., 2021). As a result, the researcher is tasked with elucidating the influence of their subjectivities and political commitments on their choice of

methodology, not to create the illusion of objectivity but to name the impossibility of it (Fairclough et al., 2013).

**Methodology**

Though ample literature describes the merits of discourse analysis, as it was established in linguistics in the mid-20th century, for this study, I focused my attention on *critical* discourse analysis (Given, 2008). CDA is a discourse analysis subfield that originates in linguistics and sociology. CDA methodology is transdisciplinary and, as a result, incompatible with rigid methods and unitary theoretical frameworks of social phenomena (Leotti et al., 2021). Because analyses of discourses differ significantly based on the disciplines within which they are deployed (Given, 2008), CDA is necessarily challenging to define. Despite diverse implementations of CDA, the designation of "critical" indicates an examination of how language re/produces asymmetrical power arrangements through discursive arrangements (Given, 2008).

CDA originated within critical linguistics and philosophy (e.g., the Frankfurt School). Notable scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, and James Paul Gee in the United States began theorizing linguistics's critical and political dimensions in the 1990s (Given, 2008). These scholars broadened the focus of linguistics from descriptions of language structures and choice (e.g., grammar) to include the *effects* of language within social-political contexts. Though theoretically diverse, CDA tends to emphasize the centrality of identifying dominant discourses (that reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies) in order to mitigate the effects of institutional oppression and promote social justice (Given, 2008). Given CDA's disciplinary and theoretical diversity,

it is necessary to outline the central assumptions of CDA as they will be employed in this study.

### *Critical*

Typically, "critical" within research design indicates that the study's methodology theorizes power while trying somehow to redress its harmful consequences (Crotty, 2015). In the context of CDA, the word critical suggests a preoccupation with social analyses that engender social change (Leotti et al., 2021). For this study, my understanding of the term follows in the footsteps of critical social workers like Stephen Webb, Jan Fook, and Tina Wilson, who engage in critical scholarship not to "cultivate faith in change to come" but to instigate change in everyday life (Webb, 2019, p. xxx). Critical scholars emphasize the importance of generating knowledge that can be useful and disruptive of oppressive power relations. To do this, critical social work scholars Pease and Fook (1999) contend that critical approaches are enriched by poststructuralism. For example, critical approaches that are infused with poststructuralist assumptions about discourse and power open up multiple sites of resistance (Healy, 2001; Heron, 2005; Fook, 2002). This study follows this tradition and is influenced by poststructuralist (specifically, Foucauldian) conceptualizations of discourse and power.

### *Discourse*

Scholars and proponents of CDA generally draw from Foucauldian conceptualizations of discourse that suggest discourse is *more than* language (Fairclough et al., 2013; van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Foucault conceptualized discourse as a framework within which speaking becomes intelligible. I lean on Foucault's understanding of discourse and assume that discourses delineate boundaries for speech,

making some statements and utterances allowable, perceived as usual, and others marginal. In this way, discourses create a context where some statements/knowledge become "commonplace." Repetition solidifies the primacy of certain knowledge forms (Jäger & Maier, 2009).

Consequently, the perceived naturalness of dominant discourse leaves them taken for granted. For example, academic journal articles function discursively since social work scholars must engage in intelligible (e.g., normative) statements to be included in the discourse (e.g., published). Following the poststructuralist assumption that language is central to the re/production of power, the meanings derived from discourse are neither neutral nor safe (Foucault, 1978; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Since discourse shapes and is shaped by language norms and social practices, it is understood as a social practice. Given this, discourses must be examined to reveal their effects on meaning, social arraignments, and intersections with power.

***Power/Knowledge***

CDA assumes that power functions through texts. In other words, what becomes sayable, knowable, and taken for granted as truth can reveal what types of statements and knowledge claims are privileged within an academic discipline and with what effects. To fully demonstrate the relationship between discourse and power, it is necessary to briefly articulate Foucault's assumptions about power. Foucault encouraged a problematization of knowledge, language, and reality itself. Throughout his writing, a common thread that wove his ideas was the disruption of certainty vis-à-vis a sharp move away from apriorism and the Enlightenment traditions of logic, rationality, and truth; like in CDA, this epistemological and ontological disruption created space to explore social discourses

without assuming their inevitability or tacit neutrality. From this novel starting position, Foucault explored the concept of power. Within *The History of Sexuality* (1978), he explores power's relationship to knowledge as manifested through diverse and overlapping discourses.

According to Foucault, it is no longer sufficient to think about power *only* in the traditional sense, solely as repressive, located in tyrannical institutions with near-absolute control. This top-down formation and imposition reduces power to its repressive and limiting functions. Further, traditional power maintains fraught dichotomies like ruler/ruled, institution/citizen, and repressor/repressed that ignore power's insidious enticements by focusing exclusively on its proscriptions. When power is assumed centrally located within institutions and exercised only by the rulers, it renders those outside formal institutions mere subjects with little ability to enact (*and transform*) oppressive power relations. This underestimates power's use of self and social surveillance via ongoing social practices, norms, and mores at the local and discursive level.

CDA relies to a large extent on Foucault's articulation of "modern" power, or in his own words, "polymorphous techniques of power" (Foucault, 1978, p.11). Central to modern power is its diffuse and shifting nature. Power is an invitation to think, speak, and perform in specific ways (e.g., discourses) bound to regimes of control through invisibilized (structural) processes of violence. From this vantage point, power is everywhere, within dynamic (often competing) discourses. Power is reified at the individual/local level through daily practices, linguistic choices, and the observing/monitoring of others. Power recruits people into their own surveillance based

on the aims, needs, and norms of a particular cultural/political/social period. "[The body] was taken charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed to allow it no obscurity, no respite" (Foucault, 1978, p.20). It is advantageous to state control not simply to repress its citizens but to expose them, categorize them, and, from this, create new knowledge, categories of inclusion/exclusion, and a new language of normalcy.

Through active participation in various discourses (social work and social justice as two examples), the control functions of "normalcy" remain masked. Human involvement in their subjection appears normal, even desirable. Power masquerades within and is validated by "truth," yet nothing is neutral about how social work conceptualizes and applies social justice. Instead, "regimes of truth" delineate what is doable, sayable, and knowable, invisibilizing the domination and control functions of power/knowledge and its foreclosures of expansive human expression and creative potential. CDA's focus on discourse (e.g., Social justice within social work) allows the analytical space to explore the varied meanings, origins, and consequences of assumptions about social justice. CDA's explicit concern with the role of language in the reproduction of power can assist my analysis in uprooting the underlying values and power relations embedded within "everyday" language use.

**Methods**

There are differences between institutions designed with the express purpose of controlling and repressing populations and institutions like academia that exist to generate and impart knowledge. However, a Foucauldian orientation to power makes it dangerous to assume that the two are unrelated. For example, if academia is conceptualized as separate from repressive institutions and subsequently normalized, its

control functions are easily overlooked and subsequently taken for granted. Culturally, it is assumed that academia exists for the benefit of humanity via the institution's drive to seek out new "truths" about the world or the development of new frameworks and theories. On the surface, such pursuits can appear logical, even desirable, and certainly different from the logic of overtly repressive institutions such as prisons and police.

It is precisely because academia appears benevolent that it is dangerous. The facade of benevolence invisibilizes the political violence and control that operates through academic knowledge production; in other words, academic discourse. With this in mind, I chose academic social work journals as an entry point into social work's social justice discourse and used Jäger's (2001) CDA framework to investigate the following question:

1. How is social justice conceptualized within contemporary high-impact social work journals?

Jäger's (2001) approach is an appropriate framework for exploring my research question as it draws from Foucauldian assumptions about power, discourse, and knowledge. This framework assumes 1) power's productive capacities, 2) discourses exercise power while simultaneously resulting from it, and 3) the role of discourse in shaping reality. Below, I have operationalized critical terms concerning my study to give an overview of *the structure of discourse* according to Jäger (2001).

***Discourse Strands and Discourse Fragments***

Discourse strands and discourse fragments are separate and deeply connected dimensions of a discourse structure. Discourse strands, or "thematically uniform discourse processes" (Jäger & Maier, 2009, p. 47), are the thematic frameworks within which language operates. In other words, discourse strands or frameworks differ based on

the locations from which they arise. Discourse strands comprise various discourse fragments or one aspect of the broader discourse strand (Jäger, 2001). A discourse strand should be considered the theme explored throughout the research process (e.g., social justice). At the same time, discourse fragments are texts or portions of texts (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles) that combine to form a discourse strand.

Discourse strands evidence both the synchronic and diachronic features of language. Synchronic dimensions of language are a point-in-time snapshot of what is sayable within a particular discourse. I analyzed articles representing the contemporary social, cultural, and political context within social work scholarship for my study. Specifically, I focused on articles published within the last decade. Though I did not attend to diachronic dimensions of language within my study, diachronic language features consider how meaning shifts and develops over temporal, social, and historical contexts.

### *Entanglement of Discourse Strands*

The structure of discourse consists of overlapping and intersecting discourse strands. In other words, various discursive strands can be contained within a manifest discourse (Jäger, 2001). This means a manifest discourse strand frequently contains themes that can appear distinct, though remain entangled. For example, the discourse strands of freedom, justice, and fairness emerged in an entangled form or when the social justice discourse manifested as various themes simultaneously.

### *Discursive Planes*

*Discursive planes* are the locations in which discourses operate. Discursive planes cut across all aspects of life and are fundamentally connected to social processes and

phenomena. In other words, they exist everywhere, ranging from the macro (e.g., politics and media) to the micro (e.g., daily life practices) (Jäger, 2001). Discourse strands manipulate and drive discursive planes, social phenomena, and societal practices. As such, discursive planes do not operate in isolation but instead rely on one another. For example, much of what happens in daily life, or within localized discursive planes, deeply reflects and constitutes larger-scale political processes or macro discursive planes. The discursive plane of central importance within this project is academia, specifically, how social justice discourse operates within and on the discursive plane of social work academia.

Finally, discourses do not exist in a vacuum; they have a history, which means they have a present and, almost assuredly, a future (Jäger, 2001). However, a discourse's primacy is not a foregone conclusion. Conceptualizing the structure of discourse in this way can lend insight into its strength, shifting forms, and preferred alternatives.

**Data Collection**

The data used in this project came from contemporary, high-impact academic social work journals published within the USA. Academic journals establish professional discourses and may crystallize taken-for-granted discourses already in existence. Academic journals offer a site where social work norms are established, truth claims are posited, and discipline-specific content is delineated. In other words, tacit power relations undergird the assumption of legitimacy within high-impact academic journals (Weiler, 2006). Because I draw from poststructuralist epistemologies, the normalization of academic journals as the primary sources of social work scholarship is situated within

power relations. As a result, social justice may hold a discursive function within social work, delineating acceptable social practices and performances.

For this study, contemporary means any article published within the last ten years. Historical periods are commonly conceptualized and analyzed in ten-year increments, and a decade is generally understood as a culturally and socially distinct yet dynamic period in history (Chappell, 2019). To capture potential shifts in social justice discourse during a ten-year period, this research analyzed social work journal articles published from 2012 through 2022. While detailed considerations of this decade's social, economic, cultural, and political specifics exceed the scope of the research, the research assumes the reciprocal and inseparable interplay between the broader sociohistorical context and conceptualizations of social justice.

I identified high-impact social work journals using Eigenfactor Scores. The Eigenfactor Project was founded in 2007 as an academic research project at the University of Washington and provides a searchable database, by subject matter, of the most influential academic journals. The Eigenfactor Project assumes the primacy of scholarly publishing in generating academic knowledge and seeks to trace legacies in scientific thinking, or the "latticework of citations" that scaffolds scientific thought (Eigenfactor, 2022). In doing so, the project evaluates the impact of scholarly periodicals or a journal's importance to the academic community. Eigenfactor data is derived from the Thomson-Reuters Journal Citation Reports (JCR), capturing 8,000 science and social science journals indexed within the Web of Science. Eigenfactor scores are freely available, appear annually, and are based on five-year citation data to ensure an article's

influence is fairly captured (since many articles are not cited in the first few years post-publication).

***Sample***

I used Eigenfactor data to generate a list of high-impact social work journals under the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) subject category. The ISI categorizes knowledge based on discipline. Because social work's status as a discipline remains contested (Flexner, 1915; Hobbes & Evans, 2017), I used the ISI subject category to generate a list of high-impact social work journals. I eliminated all listings that were not explicitly published in social work journals or English. Since the project is contextualized by and attempts to critically analyze social justice discourse within social work within the United States, I omitted journals that operate beyond this parameter (e.g., *European Journal of Social Work*). However, I included *the International Social Work Journal*, which can include articles from the United States. Given my specific interest in social work, I also eliminated multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary journals. Once I generated a list of high-impact social work journals to narrow my sample further, I searched the Web of Science using the remaining identified journals and a series of keywords.

The Web of Science search engine allows space to search by keyword, publication title [journal name], and date range [2012-2022]. I established the following keywords upon review of the social justice literature. Each word regarding social justice was frequently found in the social work literature. The keywords I included were distributive justice/equality/equity/justice/human rights/social justice/racial justice. Though racial justice is a distinct discourse with specific legacies and practices, the two discourses overlap.

Using a keyword search allows for the inclusion of articles in which the keyword appears in the article title, abstract, keywords, text, or references or is explicitly mentioned or claimed by the authors. I reviewed each article's abstract to determine inclusion eligibility. However, only articles that explicitly engaged with social justice were selected. Explicit engagement means the article's *primary focus* is social justice. I operationalized primary focus in the following ways: 1) the article engages social justice theoretically, meaning social justice is conceptually (e.g., idea of social justice) explored and theorized (e.g., social justice as framework); 2) the article engages social justice pragmatically, meaning that social justice concepts are applied to real life and hypothetical situations; and 3) the article engages social justice as a goal, meaning the author it putting forth research, theory, advocacy, or practice approaches that claim to further the goal of social justice.

Given the in-depth and time-consuming nature of CDA, I utilized the aforementioned data collection procedure until I collected a maximum of 25 articles to analyze. Qualitative research, such as CDA, neither desires nor requires a large analytic sample. Instead, qualitative research demonstrates credibility by providing rich context and in-depth descriptions (both aspects of CDA) (Lincoln & Guba, 2005).

### *Analysis*

In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), Siegfried Jäger suggests a CDA method to analyze discourses and what they do (e.g., power effects), destabilize truth claims, and explore how discourses perpetuate dominance. My study used a synchronic analysis to interrogate what is sayable or what utterances are realizable within social justice discourse within a specific context (e.g., high-impact

social work journals) and specific time and place (e.g., ten-year increment within the United States). In other words, a synchronic analysis examines knowledge claims embedded within a discourse at a particular time and place. This approach to CDA allowed me to look at the discourse position of social justice within American social work.

CDA is an iterative and adaptable methodology. Following this, I adapted various elements of Jäger's (2001) simple CDA method to generate a helpful framework for my research project. Jäger (2001) notes that repeated text readings allow researchers to draw connections and strengthen their interpretation. As such, all articles were subjected to the following analytic procedure multiple times. I repeated the following multi-step process until saturation, defined as the emergence of repetition in analysis. I kept detailed notes and memos throughout the analytic procedure to generate an audit trail and cross-reference for saturation. The following framework is a detailed review of how I approached the analytic sample.

Drawing from Jäger (2001), I conducted a critical discourse analysis using the following three-part framework: 1) structural analysis, 2) fine analysis, and 3) synoptic analysis. *Structural analysis* is an overarching yet detailed review. For my study, the structural analysis included basic information about an article in conjunction with the article's topic/subtopic, theoretical orientation, main objective/s, vocabulary, tone, omissions, discursive entanglements, discourse position, and summary. After summarizing my findings, I grouped them based on topic/subtopic. I kept an audit trail by memoing the names of groups, the significance of each group, and critical commonalities within groups, supported by direct quotes. In this stage, I compiled relevant articles and

detailed general characteristics and major themes and strands (themes typical in the sample) to identify discourse fragments (articles or parts of articles that typify the discourse strand and so will be subjected to fine analysis). I then selected articles, or portions of articles, for fine analysis if I determined during structural analysis that the article, or portion of it, typifies a specific discourse strand (as identified through structural analysis).

**Table 1. Adapted Framework for Structural Analysis**

Adapted from Jäger's *Little Toolbox for Conducting Discourse Analysis*

| **Structural Analysis (overarching and detailed review of discourse strand; allows the researcher to identify and refine the discourse fragments to examine in more depth )** |
|---|
| **Article Title:**<br>**Author(s):**<br>**Publication Year:**<br>**Journal:**<br>**Topic:** |
| **Main Objective(s):**<br>1. What is the article's main topic and subtopic(s)?<br>2. What is the article's goal(s)?<br>3. Who is the article's intended audience? |
| **Theoretical/Epistemological Orientation:**<br>1. Does the article name its theoretical orientation? If so, what?<br>2. Is one implied, if not? |
| **Vocabulary:**<br>1. What are the key terms used in reference to social justice?<br>2. What are the recurring themes throughout the article? |
| **Tone:**<br>1. What is the overall attitude of the article? Examples: |
| **Omissions:**<br>1. What is conspicuously absent from the discourse strand?<br>2. What viewpoints/epistemologies are marginalized due to the omission(s)?<br>Terms relevant to the discourse strand (generated from the literature and my current critiques of what could be relevant to the discourse strand, though under-discussed): access, anarchism, anti-oppression, anti-oppressive practice, collective transformation, critical race theory, decolonial theory, decolonization, equality, equity, feminist theory, freedom, human rights, inclusion, liberation, queer liberation, queer theory, radical, self-determination, social transformation, structural change, structural social work, transformative practice, transformative justice |
| **Discursive entanglements:**<br>1. What is the relationship between the various discourse strands referenced in the article?<br>2. How do the discourse strands overlap?<br>3. Examples: |
| **Discourse position:**<br>1. What is its overarching perspective based on the discourse strands and discursive entanglements within the article?<br>a. Discourse position: |

Fine analysis examines the discursive fragments (e.g., articles) in greater detail by interrogating argumentation strategies, implications and insinuations, idioms, sayings, cliches, and vocabulary, among other things. As such, I conducted a fine or detailed analysis of texts representing specific discourse positions, as evidenced by the structural analysis. I organized the fine analysis using the following headings:

1. *Article Context*: Analysis of a text's context, particularly the journal's status (as determined by its Eigenfactor score) in addition to publication year, allowed me to consider the text's broader context. Taking into account the context in which the text is situated allowed me to consider broader social-political contexts and how this context is reflected or omitted within the texts.
2. *Text Surface:* The surface of the texts looks at what is manifest, e.g., the text's topic/subtopic, abstract, keywords, and themes addressed.
3. *Rhetorical Devices*: An analysis of the language choices (idioms, metaphors, and cliches), lexical choices, implications and insinuations, and argumentation.
4. *Ideological statements**:*** Analyzing ideological statements within a text allowed me to examine discourse fragments more closely. At this point, I examined assumptions about social justice, the means of enacting social justice, and who/what is missing.
5. *Other Striking Issues/Summary*: I included any noteworthy characteristics or anomalies within the texts. Each text summary located the article within the discourse strand. That is, I summarized the article's message about social justice and offered a concluding interpretation of the discourse strand.

**Table 2. Adapted Framework for Fine Analysis**

Adapted from Jäger's *Little Toolbox for Conducting Discourse Analysis*

| **Fine Analysis (discourse fragments that typify a discursive strand with corresponding examples)** |
|---|
| **Characterization of the Discourse Plane:**<br>1. Why was the article selected? How does it typify the discourse strand?<br>2. Who is the author? What is their status within social work?<br>3. What type of article is it?<br>4. What year was it written? |
| **Text Surface:**<br>1. What is emphasized in the abstract (including keywords)?<br>2. What topics are addressed within the article? What themes/subthemes are touched upon?<br>3. How do the themes overlap? |
| **Rhetorical Devices:**<br>1. What argumentation strategies are employed (e.g., logical, emotional)?<br>2. What idioms, sayings, metaphors, and cliches are present?<br>3. What vocabulary does the article use?<br>4. What sources of knowledge are referenced (e.g., science, statistics, other social work scholars, other disciplines)? (intertextuality) |
| **Ideological Statements:**<br>1. What notion of social justice does the article convey?<br>2. What assumptions about social justice underlie the article?<br>3. What thought traditions is social justice embedded within?<br>4. What assumptions about social transformation underlie the article?<br>5. What is presented as an arena for social justice? What is presented as the means of enacting social justice? What is deemed an effective social justice practice?<br>6. Who/what needs to change in order to realize a more socially just world?<br>7. How are patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and heterosexism taken up, if at all?<br>8. Who/what is missing? |
| **Other Striking Issues:**<br>1. What binaries are present?<br>2. What contradictions exist?<br>3. What/who is omitted? (textual silence) |

CDA is an iterative methodology, and there is likely to be slippage between the two-step process listed above and the final synoptic analysis. Wodak and Meyer (2009) note that flexibility, re-interpretation, and revisions are central aspects of CDA. With this in mind, I concluded with a final synoptic analysis. *Synoptic analysis*, or "comparative concluding analysis" (Jager, 2011, p. 21 in Wodak & Meyer, 2011), situates structural (e.g., general characterizations) and fine analysis (e.g., rhetorical devices) of text alongside each other, allowed me to compare and contrast findings across analytic locations. Synoptic analysis allows for a horizontal analysis across structural and fine analysis, or comparing and contrasting the findings, to comprehensively understand the discourse position(s) within social work scholarship about social justice.

**Table 3. Adapted Framework for Synoptic Analysis**

Adapted from Jäger's *Little Toolbox for Conducting Discourse Analysis* in Wodak & Meyer (2001) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (pp.52-56)*

| **Synoptic Analysis (Overview of fine and structural analysis findings with corresponding quotes)** |
| --- |
| **Comparisons:** |
| **Dissimilarities:** |
| **Overall assessment of discourse position(s):** |
| **Notes:** |

**Locating Myself**

My study's epistemological anchor to poststructuralism aligns with the feminist practice of reflexivity. Mann and Kelley (1997) characterize reflexivity as a stance that acknowledges "all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced and that it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed" (p. 392). In other words, reflexivity is the ongoing practice of reflecting upon how one's subjectivities are implicated throughout the research process and impact the model and outcome of research. As Lietz, Langer, and Furman (2006) argue, a researcher's race, class, and gender subjectivities impact the research design and will be reflected within their analysis. Since CDA aims to uproot and reconfigure power relationships, it is central to see how researchers' subjectivities are implicated in these power systems and how their analysis holds the potential to uphold and challenge them. Put simply, any analysis is dangerous, and reflexivity attempts to mitigate this.

CDA research assumes that research is a technology that must also be examined "as potentially embedding the beliefs and ideologies of the analysts" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p.30). Reflexivity assumes that research is shaped by the values and beliefs of the researcher and creates a context in which a researcher can critically examine how their beliefs, values, and lived experiences impact the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In other words, the self is fundamentally social, reflecting and resisting the imposition of one's social contexts in an ongoing capacity. Reflexivity speaks the unspoken with intentionality and integrity and, in doing so, engenders confidence in the research process (Steinmetz, 2005, as cited in Staller, 2013).

I chose to critically enter the discourse of social justice because I am a queer, white, genderqueer woman who has found an affinity with anarchism for the last twenty years. Anarcha-feminist punk culture politicized me, and from this, I carry with me a skepticism of institutions, including academia, coupled with a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic that inspires me to challenge and change the contexts within which I exist. It is because I am passionate about social justice that I wanted to explore it.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, "You do not accuse what you are deconstructing. You enter it" (Paulson, 2016). In other words, this study entered the discourse of social justice not solely to point out and condemn underlying biases or constraints within current conceptualizations but to understand better the nuanced ways that social, cultural, and historical forces shape social work's conceptualizations of social justice. By "entering" social justice discourse and exploring how it reflects and challenges hegemonic ideologies, I hoped to promote more critical and reflexive engagement with the discourse and the broader social phenomena that shape it to better support broadscale social transformation.

**Ethical Considerations and Evaluative Criteria**

According to feminist scholars, power and ethics are deeply connected (Gringeri et al., 2010). In other words, an ethical research project must consider what epistemologies shape the research and how this effects the research, research participants, and knowledge itself (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In response to Western, or dominant, ethical frameworks that prioritize institutional review boards, confidentiality, and consent, feminist ethics choose to cultivate relationality within research (Gringeri et al., 2010). For example, feminist ethics are concerned with the relationship between the researcher and

research subject(s), such that the relationship is fraught with power imbalances, positions of centrality and marginality, and risks of exploitation and possibility. To mitigate potential harm and de-center the primacy of the researcher, feminist scholars lean on an "ethic of care," or explicit considerations of both the context of the research and the implications of the research on its participants (Preissle, 2007, as cited in Gringeri et al., 2010, p. 393).

Though my study did not engage human subjects, an "ethic of care" can be exemplified in myriad ways. Expressly, I assumed that this project is subjective and shaped by the context in which it took place (e.g., a white supremacist, patriarchal, heterosexist settler state). Feminist researchers are deeply committed to generating knowledge that critiques hegemonic ways of knowing and being and, in doing so, opens up space for new and more liberatory forms of human existence (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Following this, my project leaned on feminist research ethics in the following two ways: 1) Research as a challenge to the status quo and 2) Research in service to social transformation.

First, my research is guided by the ethical assumption that research, both in form and effect, can challenge the status quo. For example, I chose a methodology that remains somewhat marginal within academic social work. As such, the methodology stands up to dominant epistemologies and modes of research inquiry. Further, the consequences of this research (effect) seek to interrupt dominant conceptualizations of social justice within social work in order to make space for novel critiques and practices. Second, and deeply connected to the point above, is an ethical commitment to conducting research in service of social transformation. In other words, the desire to catalyze social change is a

guiding principle of this project. This is closely tied to the idea of praxis, or the necessary linkage of theory and practice, with the express and openly political desire for one's research to inspire liberatory actions (Gringeri et al., 2010).

For this research to be consequential (i.e., land in the hands of accomplices in the struggle for broader liberation both in and outside of academia), I considered the readability and accessibility of this content and will attempt to publish parts of this project in both academic and non-academic locales. Van Dijk (2009) states that accessibility is a crucial measure of quality in CDA, meaning the findings of CDA should be readable and accessible both in and outside academia. To what extent this is possible - given the deeply theoretical and jargon-laden aspects of CDA - remains to be seen. However, I considered the accessibility of the findings in an ongoing capacity through reflexive memoing.

Many benefits result from conducting a CDA, including nuanced descriptions and rich understandings. CDA looks at context and complexity, allowing the researcher space to unsettle dominant discourses. However, CDA is not without limitations, and one of the primary critiques of CDA is that it needs more rigor (Sriwimon & Zilli, 2017). For example, some scholars contend that CDA needs a clear and consistent methodology, making it difficult to replicate and compare across studies. Others have noted that CDA embraces a deeply interpretive approach to data analysis, which increases the occurrence of bias (Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak, 2015). However, the concept of rigor is incongruent with the epistemological orientation of my research design since it relies on standardized techniques and assessment and claims of objectivity. Despite this tension, Leotti et al.

(2021) maintain that CDA can still use criteria to ensure rigor while maintaining epistemological integrity.

Following this, quality within this CDA was demonstrated by clearly articulating the project's purpose and utility, describing the study's research paradigm (axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology), and, by doing so, demonstrating the coherence in decision-making throughout the research process. Epistemologically consistent criteria for trustworthiness supports methodological coherence. Generally, trustworthiness is established in qualitative research designs through the researcher's thoughtful and descriptive outlining of their research paradigm and consistent methodological practice (Lietz et al., 2006). I aspired to establish trustworthiness by clearly articulating my ontological, epistemological, and axiological frames and explicating my subjectivities and my personal investments in the project.

# Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is to engage deeply with a text or texts from the assumption that the reader might be able to come to some tentative formulations about the ideologies and power relations that underwrite the text(s) they are studying (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). CDA assumes that power shapes what is sayable, knowable, and thus doable at a particular time, meaning that any discourse, even one as seemingly altruistic as social justice, is influenced by social, political, and historical power dynamics. The following critical discourse analysis examines how social justice discourse is conceptualized within contemporary high-impact social work journals. I have scrutinized how power subtly operates within social justice discourse, mainly through unexamined ideologies and epistemologies.

This chapter presents findings that address the research question: How is social justice conceptualized within contemporary high-impact social work journals? Through an iterative analytic process, I interpreted social justice discourse through disparate yet related dominant discursive strands, such as 1) vestiges of the Enlightenment, 2) neoliberalism and instrumentalization, 3) professional hegemony, and 4) moralizing inclinations.

Though I have chosen to present the findings and discussion as separate chapters, the boundary separating the findings and discussion of critical discourse analysis is imprecise. Given this, the slippage between my findings and discussion will be evident within the following sections, as CDA is an interpretive methodology that requires subjective, though tentative, engagement with the data (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2007). Accordingly, the following sections present the dominant discursive

strands within the data (which overlap significantly), followed by the counter-discourse I identified. Detailed speculation about the effects of the discursive strands on the profession, conceptualizations of social justice, and the worldviews that are legitimized via the dominant discourse are provided in the discussion chapter.

**Vestiges of the Enlightenment**

The epistemological constraints associated with the Enlightenment and its derivative, the political ideology of liberalism, within social justice discourse have been noted within social work scholarship (Bell, 2012; Hudson, 2017; Leonard, 2018). The liberalism that runs throughout social work scholarship embraces many Enlightenment ideals and principals, such as individual rights and representative democracy. Consistent with this, nearly every article within my sample had at least one instance of ideological claims or lexical choices that align with Enlightenment values. For example, one of the main ways in which vestiges of the Enlightenment were identified in the data was through discursive moves such as: "dignity," "equality," "human rights," "freedom," "progress/progressive," and "universal." Superficially to social workers, these words may suggest altruistic, even utopian, alternative social arrangements; however, upon closer examination, they reveal underlying assumptions and power dynamics. For example, although equality was a pivotal principle of the Enlightenment, the individuals deemed equal during the 17th and 18th centuries were defined problematically. At the start of the Enlightenment period, non-whites and women were omitted from the perceived advantages of equality (Davis, 2006; Okin, 1979; Smith, 1999).

While a few of the articles in my sample departed from this, the majority echoed Enlightenment values so that its terms (e.g., freedom, justice, progress) and assumptions

(e.g., universality, reason, and natural rights) presented as common sense. When terms are presented without definition there is potential to reinscribe their “universal” appeal, or the fraught assumption that the terms transcend specific cultures and contexts. Lexical choices without context or epistemological explication can obfuscate power and the ideological alliances that underwrite knowledge-making. Consequently, the Enlightenment ideals that implicitly and explicitly structured the discourse in many articles remained unacknowledged.

In one example, a descriptive study about social workers' professional motivation and values, liberalism is taken for granted to such an extent that its accompanying rhetoric (e.g., "liberty" and "equality") is deployed without explanation (Bradley et al., 2012, p. 466). The absence of a clear articulation of terms and their epistemological anchors is particularly striking in an article that explores social workers' values, which are never neutral and always socially and culturally situated. Within this article, I identified that social workers often conceptualize social justice within liberal frames that affirm "a dedication to social justice through a commitment to working for the liberty, equality, and dignity of all people" (Bradley et al., 2012, p. 470). Whether explicitly stated or not, epistemological assumptions and ideological allegiances shape the conceptualizations and *use* of social justice within academic journal articles.

Another vestige of the Enlightenment in the data is the embrace of rights-based discourse. A survey of social work programs across the United States that sought to explore the methods, knowledge, and skills employed within schools of social work to teach social justice found that social work instructors are better equipped to teach about social justice than human rights (Gabel & Mapp, 2020). The article recommends that

"additional resources should be developed for social work educators to learn about human rights and its relation to social justice to develop rights-based skills" (Gabel & Mapp, 2020, p. 428). What constitutes rights, what entity or person distributes them, and who are the bodies upon which these rights are conferred are wholly taken for granted. This means that when rights are taken for granted as universally beneficial, their socially constructed nature, and thus the relationship of rights and power, is rendered invisible.

The idea of individual rights is a *central* characteristic of the Enlightenment. Prominent Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Kant, and Rousseau all wrote about the "inalienable" or individual rights of people to be protected and upheld by the state (Kant, 1981; Locke, 1982; Rousseau, 1947). Allowing this Enlightenment legacy inherent within rights-based discourse to go unnamed allows for its common sense nature and hegemony to flourish. When the discourse of social justice leans on this legacy it can easily overlook the Eurocentrism inherent in western philosophical traditions. Considering the racist, orientalist, and misogynist legacy of the Enlightenment (Dhawan, 2014; Popkin, 1974), social work should be skeptical of rights-based discourses that rely on stable identity construction, notions of citizenship, and how those in power can weaponize rights to serve nefarious ends (Brown, 2015). Indeed, individualizing social justice by way of rights-based discourses can ignore the systemic context that gives rise to social inequities and runs the risk of decentering collective interests (Brown, 2015).

In another example of taking for granted the universal assumptions of rights-based discourse, one article states that "our concern should not stop at the level of advancing social justice at home but needs to be extended to the promotion of global justice [e.g., human rights] across humanity as a whole" (Kam, 2014, p.725). The lexical

choice of "home" here assumes a shared geopolitical location and, thus, a shared cultural understanding of social justice. There is a tacit imperialism here that seems to imply the values of home are just and have been perfected, and cultural influence should extend from the home[land] out to other (presumably less socially just) countries. Further, a homogeneous or shared identity is assumed through the first-person plural pronoun "our." Following this are assumptions about the rightness and trueness of social justice in this text portion. The language "extend[ing] global justice across humanity" hints at ideological imperialism, assuming that human rights and global justice are universally understood, accepted, and valued across cultures and societies. Drawing from universal conceptions of human rights, such discursive moves obfuscate that rights are culturally contingent, thereby taking for granted the power relations underwriting any lexical choice. Further, conceptualizations of social justice via rights-based discourse presuppose the inevitability of a "just" state that acts as the arbiter of said rights while buffering the state from structural critiques. This may further normalize the structural violence that underwrites the state's ability to both accord and deprive human beings of rights.

Similarly evidencing Enlightenment assumptions about rights, another article posits that a just society hinges on the prominence of rights established by the state and that social workers can play a pivotal role as advocates for the "protection and realization of human rights" (Gabel & Mapp, 2020, p. 428). In a clear illustration of an ideological embrace of rights-based discourse, the article states that:

> Social workers can be the catalysts who…show by example of their practice how a rights-based approach embedded in justice can deliver a better world. To accomplish this, more faculty, students, and field instructors are needed who are

> well trained on the human rights approach, instruments, and application of human rights principles in social work practice (Gabel & Mapp, 2020, p.438).

This passage implicitly relies on the Enlightenment value of reason given the assumption that social workers, through their expertise, can advance social progress or deliver a better world. Further, a subtle push exists to systematize this value through training "instruments" and application in social work settings. Central to the Enlightenment is the belief that education is a crucial way to empower individuals and advance societies. Here, the discursive interplay between Enlightenment values and the professionalization of social work is evident. The discourse of professionalism suggests that social work is a profession that requires and benefits from specialized knowledge and skills converges with Enlightenment discourses of reason and progress.

The notion that professional expertise, or reason, is essential for social justice or social progress is commonly perceived as impartial and accepted as the norm. In an example indicating the interdiscursivity between professionalism and rights-based discourses:

> Social workers should have zero tolerance when confronted with social inequality, social exclusion, and violation of human rights. Social work requires its practitioners to develop a strong dedication to eradicate unequal treatments, remove exploitation, and break the cycle of oppression. What social workers need to strive for is a society providing fair and equal rights, opportunities and resources (Kam, 2014, p. 732).

The use of "zero tolerance" is noteworthy. Since the inception of the War on Drugs in the 1980s, the term zero tolerance has been used as a shorthand or proxy for policies

extending beyond the drug war that punish, minimize individual experiences, and frequently ignore contextual specificity (e.g., exclusionary school discipline practices such as expulsion) (Kyere et al., 2020). In the above excerpt, the use of "zero tolerance" compels social workers to respond quickly, unequivocally, and perhaps even righteously when confronted with inequality, while the use of persuasive language such as "requires," "dedication," "eradicate," and "break" suggests a rhetorical strategy that justifies a zero-tolerance approach.

As importantly, the language of equality is not neutral, and when taken for granted, the power imbalances that shape the idea of equality are easily rendered invisible. For example, is equality based on the conceptualization of an identity that is presumed stable (e.g., man, white, citizen)? Then, presuming the unquestionable goodness of equality and its corollary, human rights, to the extent that social workers are encouraged to maintain a stance of "zero tolerance" in their absence, may suppress much-needed critical debate concerning the epistemological assumptions of these terms while overlooking the dangers of presupposing them to be transcendental.

In another example of tacit Enlightenment values the following passage showcases how social work upholds Enlightenment values such as progress and equitable resource distribution. An uncritical acceptance of Enlightenment values may overlook the complexities and nuances inherent in societal power dynamics, potentially perpetuating a narrow understanding of justice and resource distribution:

> Social work…respects human cultural diversity and works to advance social and economic justice throughout the nation" while "reaffirm[ing] beliefs presented by Bell (1997) and Young (1990) that social justice requires a society where

> resources are equitably distributed and the full potential of all of its members is supported" (Windsor et al., 2015, pgs. 58-60).

Presumably, "advance" implies social progress, suggesting the ideological presence of the Enlightenment value of progress. One potential effect of this discursive move is a tacit perpetuation of the Enlightenment notion that social progress is the effect of social reforms and human reason. The employment of terms like "advance" implies that societal amelioration is achieved through deliberate and rational actions, suggesting a progressive trajectory where each action builds upon preceding improvements. While this pattern is frequently observable in legislative endeavors, it tends to overlook the spontaneous nature of social change. This spontaneity was notably evident during events such as the George Floyd rebellion or the formation of mutual aid networks in response to environmental disasters like Hurricane Katrina (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, n.d).

Framing progress in terms of advancement conveys the idea that societies are moving forward towards a desired state or goal and that this movement is driven by rational decision-making and reformist endeavors, tacitly reinforcing the belief that positive social transformation is achieved through systematic analysis, policy implementation, and the application of rational thought. Further, the centering of resource distribution harkens back to Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, who emphasized equal distribution of resources as a means to achieve a "just" society. This suggests that the principles guiding resource distribution are influenced by faith in human beings' rational capacity to discern what is just and equitable. This leaves unexamined many assumptions about the "goodness" of human reason within institutional and bureaucratic conceptualizations of fairness that guide resource distribution.

In another illustration of unmarked Enlightenment assumptions, one article conceptualizes social justice using a seven-part definition, or seven "Es" - words that begin with E to conceptualize social justice (Nicotera, 2019). The first three Es used to conceptualize social justice evidenced Enlightenment values: 1) "Equitable distribution of resources; 2) Equal access to basic liberties and opportunities; 3) Empowerment of all persons, especially the disadvantaged, vulnerable, and oppressed" (Nicotera, 2019, p. 472). “Equitable distribution of resources” follows from the Enlightenment assumption that all citizens of a nation are entitled to access at least some of that nation's resources. Simply put, there is an implication of "fairness" or the notion that one should not be denied access to resources (within an assumed delineated boundary such as the nation). This omits that people were *and are* denied access to a nation's resources if and when a given period constructs them as non-human or non-citizen; at which point, it would be okay, even "fair," to deny access. Likewise, the notion of "equal access to basic liberties and opportunities" stems from the Enlightenment premise that all individuals within a presumed nation-state should be afforded opportunities to exercise their freedoms, facilitated by the state. Furthermore, the article does not explicitly address actively creating socio-political contexts and robust communities wherein individuals feel supported and can access opportunities and freedoms.

Finally, the “empowerment of all persons, especially the disadvantaged, vulnerable, and oppressed”, follows from the universalism of the Enlightenment. For example, this value purports that "all persons" (e.g., a citizen or however a person is constructed at a particular period) possess inherent worth by virtue of their" person[hood]," a dubious assumption that sets the stage to exclude all those who were, or

will be, constructed as "non-human." Though some version of "equal" appears in two of the first three approaches named, the term is neither explicated nor contextualized. Equality was a central value of the Enlightenment, yet who was considered equal in the 17th and 18th centuries was not given. At the inception of the Enlightenment, enslaved people, colonized people, and women were excluded from the so-called benefits of equality (Davis, 2006; Okin, 1979; Smith, 1999). As I read and reread the "seven E" framework, paying close attention to the first three "Es" on the list, I wondered how equality might be similarly problematic in our contemporary context when left unexplored.

**Neoliberalism and Instrumentalization**

For years, scholars have noted the professionalization's effects within social work, including its intersections with neoliberalism (Mehrotra et al., 2016; Reisch, 2013; Younghusband, 2021). Throughout the social work literature, social justice is often portrayed as a solution, or at the very least, a mitigating influence, for the negative impacts of professionalism (Ferguson, 2017; Reisch, 2013; Webb, 2006). Because of this, the subtleties of neoliberal ideology within social justice discourse are easy to overlook. Within this study, it was striking to consider how professionalism and neoliberal ideology are present within social justice discourse. Mainly because social justice is supposed to stand up to neoliberalism (Ferguson, 2007; Morley, 2016) and to mitigate its pernicious consequences by reorienting to the profession through social justice values, it is alarming that the discourse of social justice is also shaped by neoliberalism within social work. In light of this, presenting social justice and neoliberalism as oppositional may be misleading. The false dichotomy of neoliberalism and social justice obfuscates the

neoliberal rhetoric abundant (sometimes implicit, but often explicit) throughout social justice discourse.

Neoliberal ideology within social justice discourse often relies on professional standards and competencies. For example, in an instance of reducing social justice to individual competency and presenting social justice as an accreditation criterion, one article states:

> To promote implementation of these critical competencies [e.g., commitment to foster social justice] in practice, schools of social work must develop practical courses in *training* [emphasis added] social work students…*Schools must demonstrate the effectiveness of their courses in teaching the new core competencies and practice behaviors to maintain accreditation* [emphasis added] (Windsor et al., 2015, p. 58).

Here, the importance of competence, training, and accreditation are centered rather than emphasizing education about social justice to pursue a more socially just world. When social justice is instrumentalized, it can quickly become another competency to check off, a line on one's vita, and an area of expertise that differentiates one from others.When social justice is perceived as a commodity that can be acquired (by prospective employers) and exchanged (by aspiring social workers), it becomes commodified, diminishing its essence to a personalized skill set or competency necessary for maintaining expertise and marketability. This was evident throughout the social justice discourse within the sample.

In another example, I analyzed further the implications of neoliberal assumptions and the instrumentalization of social justice through a discussion of social justice as a

practice modality (e.g., an individualized and systematized approach to social justice practice). One article states explicitly that "social justice should be treated as an overarching practice modality" (Kam, 2014, p.733). Consistent with the poststructuralist epistemological assumptions of this study, modalities are not simply theoretical frameworks - they *do* something. In the case of my sample, they reinforce social work professionalism and the conceptualization of social justice as an instrumental marker of expertise (a fundamental assumption of neoliberal ideology).

Framing social justice as a practice modality deploys a frequently taken-for-granted social work discourse and legitimizes neoliberal professionalism by leaving the concept of modality unquestioned. When social justice is conceptualized as a practice modality, it may move from the conceptual domain of values, ethics, and ideas to the instrumental domain, the land of utility and pragmatism. While this shift does not necessarily imply a complete detachment from social justice's conceptual foundations in values and ethics, social justice initiatives, when translated into practical applications such as best practices, can risk losing sight of their epistemological anchors. These anchors represent the foundational values and ethical principles that initially inspired and informed them. When this happens, the complexities of social justice and the much-needed nuance and situatedness of the term are at risk of being flattened. The focus on measurable outcomes, logistical considerations, and political realities may sometimes overshadow more profound reflections on the ethical imperatives driving social justice efforts. This distancing from conceptual foundations can lead to a dilution of the ethical dimensions of social justice work, potentially undermining its integrity and effectiveness in the long run.

Several social work scholars are critical of and caution against the profession's overreliance on modalities within practice and academic theorizing regardless of the applicability and charitability of their various assumptions. For example, Karen Healy (2008) has criticized social work's overemphasis on modalities which prioritize individualized interventions instead of structural and systemic change. From a different vantage point, Eileen Gambrill (2006) questions the limitations of prescriptive social work practices within evidence-based modalities that flatten human complexity and context. Some of the many negative implications of this include loss of depth in analysis and commodification of social justice to increase the profession's reputation. When social justice is instrumentalized, moving it from the breadth of social justice values or goals into practices, the expansive features of the concept may be marginalized. This is problematic because social justice, in this way, becomes a best practice approach that is utilized to strengthen the social work profession. In the literature on social work, there is an expectation that scholars will champion these modalities as methods of working with individuals, which distinguish social work from other professions (Gambrill, 2012; Gitterman, 2014). When social work justifies itself with practice modalities, it can substantiate its insistence that the profession is specialized to meet human needs and more equipped than the people it purports to serve to foster social change (Gitterman, 2014).

The term "modality" implies the possibility and desirability of systematizing social justice, suggesting that doing so could maximize benefits, such as having more social workers incorporate social justice as a practice method, while minimizing inefficiencies, such as the time-consuming nature of social work's relational practices.

When social justice is conceptualized as a practice modality, there is an implicit valuing of expertise that tacitly marginalizes collective approaches to social justice in favor of social justice as a practice approach, e.g., the individual social worker, and thus the individualization of social justice. Consistent with neoliberal ideology that values expertise and data-driven decision-making, there is the subtle suggestion that social justice can be achieved through technocratic means. This begs the question: who are the experts in the room conceptualizing social work's "solutions" to societal inequities? Grappling with the answer to this may begin to tease out the subtle power relations that underwrite social justice as a practice modality.

Social work scholars have critiqued how neoliberalism converges with professionalism (Mehrotra et al., 2016). This tendency was evident throughout some of the articles within my sample. For example, one article emphasized the importance of:

> ...map[ping] empirical studies on teaching methods that translate social justice values into teachable curricula using traditional and innovative teaching methods…would [lead to] invaluable information for current social work programs that deeply care about social justice education and training (Lee et al., 2022, p.763).

Here, the benefit of systematizing social justice values is explicit, in conjunction with the contention that social work curriculum stands to benefit from quantifiable data.

Another article exemplifies the use of market-oriented and individual-centric language. The following quote underscores the notion that schools of social work, by emphasizing content steeped in social justice, hold the capacity to cultivate individuals

who actively advocate for social justice. These individuals are portrayed as proactive change agents, or experts in social change:

> By providing educational opportunities that are steeped in social justice content, schools of social work have the opportunity to *produce* [emphasis added] social justice *advocates* [emphasis added] who continue to challenge social injustice and serve as *agents of change* [emphasis added] toward social and economic equity (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2021, p.8).

What stands out are the discursive maneuvers that subtly validate market-oriented and individual-focused language, such as “produce” and “agents.” Specialization is invoked through the use of "advocates" and "agents." Following poststructuralist insights, I assume words to be differential rather than referential (Derrida, 1973; Foucault, 1972). As such, a subtle other accompanies the use of both terms, given that if someone is an advocate, a differential other (non-advocate) is necessarily implied. From this, social justice can emerge as a specialized body of knowledge where those who are advocates get positioned as the change makers. Education, then, can be assumed as central in the fight against injustice, resulting in the technocratic idea that skill-building in service of expertise equates to social progress. From this, the agency of everyday people is left unacknowledged and underutilized, further positioning educated professionals as one of the critical arbiters of social change.

It is imperative to critically examine how prevailing ideologies shape pedagogical approaches and educational priorities. In another example of neoliberalism analyzed within social justice discourse, the following quote provides insight into the neoliberal assumptions that underlie certain perspectives on teaching social and economic justice

competencies within the field. By emphasizing the importance of employing "best practice strategies," the passage reflects a neoliberal worldview that prioritizes individual responsibility, market-oriented language, and a depoliticized understanding of education:

> ...it is crucial to use best practice strategies for teaching social and economic justice competencies, practice behaviors, and course content…effectively teaching the next generation of justice-focused social workers is important work, to be done with zeal and a renewed passion for social and economic justice as a key and unique component of social work practice (Harrison et al., 2016, p.269).

Social justice is left conceptually opaque in a typical discursive move made throughout the dataset. However, it is circumscribed and situated within technical language, such as "competencies" and "best practice strategies." Like others, Harrison et al. (2016) acknowledge that social justice is a central component of social work practice and a subject area that requires technical expertise. Academic social justice discourse suggests that it is a concept best learned within academic settings, which (perhaps unintentionally) deemphasizes social justice practices and experimentations in nonacademic settings and localized knowledge like lived experience. When some articles take a discursive turn away from collective, emergent, and dynamic conceptualizations of social justice, the discourse remains firmly within the framework of professional social work. Thus, within this sample, neoliberal and professional suppositions are tacitly legitimized.

**Professional Hegemony**

Within the sample, social justice was simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Everywhere, since nearly every article in my sample took up some version of professionally defined social justice, and nowhere since the definitions of social justice

did not necessarily grant conceptual clarity to the term. This is of importance, given the study's epistemological anchor in poststructuralism. What exactly constitutes social justice and what bodies of thought are drawn from to define it are fundamentally bound to power since professional definitions from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) are being used throughout the sample to legitimate research, drive critiques, conceptualize curricula, and advance social work pedagogy.

Further, all but four articles took for granted the legitimacy of professional definitions, leading to a glaring textual silence around so-called non-traditional orientations to social justice (e.g., liberation, as conceptualized by the National Association of Black Social Workers). It stands to reason that ample knowledge, practice, and history of social justice movements are lost to social work when hegemonic epistemologies of social justice are consistently reiterated and centered. Undoubtedly, how a definition is used, where it is located within an article (e.g., its position of primacy within the body of a text), and even casual references to a definition without clearly articulating it suggests something about the hegemony of professionalized social justice within this collection of social work literature. So, social work emerged as nebulous and also relatively static all at once.

Social justice, though central to the profession, is a fuzzy term (Atteberry-Ash, 2022; Goode et al., 2021; Kam, 2014; Nicotera, 2019; Varghese & Kang, 2019; Slater, 2020). Paradoxically, at the same time, social justice is articulated in all but four of the articles (e.g., 21) using the following professional social work bodies: Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), American

Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW), and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Interestingly, a myriad of articles claim that social justice lacks a coherent definition (Asakura & Mauer, 2018; Atteberry-Ash, 2022; Carlson et al., 2016) while simultaneously deploying the same definitions from a handful of professional bodies and language to define it and anchor their analyses, practices, and critiques (which implies hegemony, or coherence, in thought).

Because of this tendency within the sample, I needed to look beyond the manifest presentation of professional social justice conceptualizations to explore what the professional definitions were *doing* and what sources of knowledge they legitimized. With this in mind, this section demonstrates the prominence of professional definitions in framing the concept of social justice. This entails identifying the specific locations within the articles where the definitions are situated and discerning the role of power in shaping conceptualizations of social justice.

One article captures the primacy of professional social justice definitions both in terms of location (opening line of the article) and directness (social work requires engagement within social justice vis-a-vis professional ethical codes and competencies) (Nicotera, 2019). In the opening line, the text reads, "Social work ethical codes and mandates are clear. A commitment to promoting social justice lies at the heart of the social work profession" (Nicotera, 2019, p. 460), before drawing on the CSWE EPAS and NASW Code of Ethics to conceptualize social justice. Beginning an article in this way prioritizes professional perspectives at the expense of other forms of social justice knowledge production (e.g., indigenous, Black, queer, and anarchist). Additionally, like many other articles within the sample, this article was concerned about the lack of

conceptual clarity about social justice. For example, it states, “The fact that the concept of social justice in social work has multiple meanings leads to misunderstandings and to a lack of clarity and cohesiveness with respect to its application (Nicotera, 2019, p. 460).

It was common throughout the sample for articles to name the definitional opacity of social justice. Many sought to redress this by offering multiple professional definitions that drew from competencies, standards, and core values. If social justice is conceptually opaque and definitionally diverse, why not use this to explore novel conceptualizations and epistemologies? Besides the NASW, CSWE, and IFSW, the article's knowledge sources used to conceptualize social justice consisted of academic texts, for example, *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice, Third Edition,* and *Social Work and Diversity Education for Social Justice: Mastering Teaching Skills.*

An interesting potential consequence of professional knowledge is that these conceptualizations of social justice become normative and are subsequently used throughout articles to justify disparate theses (further normalizing them). If social justice is a "core value of the profession, " then projects that aim to clarify and apply social justice within pedagogical settings might be justified as interesting, professionally necessary, and responsible. In other words, professional conceptualizations of social justice can bolster an author's thesis, practice approaches, and critiques, which is not neutral (a point I will expand upon further in my discussion section).

Similarly exemplifying the primacy of professional influence to define social justice, another article notes that social justice is the "primary mission of SW" (Kam, 2014, p. 725) before going on to justify this claim with a large amount of text taken from

the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). The text states that:

> Both IFSW and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) agreed to adopt it [new definition of social work to include human rights and social justice] as the joint international definition during the IASSW-IFSW meeting in Copenhagen, which illustrates that social justice is internationally recognized as the primary mission of social work (Kam, 2014, p. 725).

The use of the IFSW and IASSW suggests that social justice is inextricably bound to professional conceptualizations and professional bodies are taken for granted as trustworthy and laudable.

Professional language and definitions of social justice are also deployed as context for critiques and contributions to the literature (Carlson et al., 2016). The *opening line* of one article reads: "In the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards EPAS, the concept of social justice shapes several of the competencies and practice behaviors that constitute the document's standards" (Carlson et al., 2016, p. 269). The implication is that social justice is a non-negotiable value of the profession, yet *how* social justice is conceptualized is still undefined. In effect, the reader is reminded of social justice's centrality within the profession yet left to assume what exactly is meant by social justice. Though it is apparent in the text that social justice is a professional priority, drawing from authoritative bodies such as the NASW and IFSW to bolster this claim, no actual definition is articulated. What professionalized social justice conceptualizations *do* in an instance such as this is justify an author's contributions to the literature (in this case, the

advent of a "blueprint" to reconceptualize the EPAS social justice pedagogy within a global framework). When social justice discourse is intricately woven with the profession's authoritative bodies, the potential of a multifaceted, expansive, and epistemologically diverse orientation to the term is marginalized.

Professional social justice mandates are not inherently problematic, so much as they are limited and limiting. Social justice issues are complex, dynamic, and rapidly changing, and an overreliance on slow-moving bureaucracies to define and respond to social justice issues may lead to insufficient and dated definitions, standardized knowledge, and professional hegemony. For example:

> Social work has a commitment to promote and achieve social justice" (Council of Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015) and there is consensus that social justice is a core value and mission underpinning all levels of micro, mezzo, and macro services. However, defining social justice and determining what constitutes key domains of social justice-oriented practice and education have been topics of debate among social work scholars (O'Brien, 2011; Reisch, 2002) and professional organizations (e.g., the National Association of Social Workers [NASW])...Due to "the wide range of social conditions that fall under the social justice or human rights umbrella, NASW has identified a set number of issues on which to focus" (NASW, 2022, para. 1). These include five social justice priorities such as voting rights, criminal justice/juvenile justice, environmental justice, immigration, and economic justice (Lee et al., 2022, p. 763).

Even though it is noted that social justice is debated among professional organizations and scholars alike, the NASW's social justice priorities and the AASWSW's grand

challenges are presented. Including both definitions in the introduction of the paper reinforces the dominance of professional definitions of social justice while preemptively closing off the terrain of the debate. In other words, a debate is named, but the terrain upon which that debate is taking place, e.g., with what definitions and whose terms, is taken for granted, and the authors' professional bias is unnamed. By not acknowledging the countless other epistemological orientations to social justice, the authority of professional bodies is subtly crystallized.

**Moralizing Inclinations**

The moralizing tendencies of professional social work, or the imposition of the profession's beliefs on others, have been discussed by some social work scholars (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Lubove, 1965), and this literature evidence critiques of social work's propensity to espouse and operate from moral judgments and unexamined normative values about what is right (Gray et al., 2013). Unsurprisingly, given social justice's hegemony with social work, the moralizing tendencies of social justice have not been critiqued (to my knowledge), nor has social work's morally superior posturing (e.g., social work has a heart, and that heart is social justice). Suppose historical contingencies deem what is moral at a given time (Foucault, 1972). In that case, the discursive construction of "heart" or the "good" is located within power relations that, when rendered invisible, become normalized and reified throughout my sample's professional discourse.

It is telling *where* in the article moralizing assertions emerged as I found that moralizing strands were employed to emphasize an author's thesis. As such, moralizing claims almost always manifested at the start or end of articles, except for Kam (2014),

whose assertion of social work's "two hearts" is situated within the center of the article. The similarities in the placement of moralizing discursive strands suggest that their function is a form of rhetorical "mic dropping" within the sample. In other words, since social justice *is* the heart of the profession, why would anyone question the assertions being made? With this in mind, this section examines the moralizing tendencies within social justice conceptualizations while considering how social justice is presented as *the* moral direction of the profession instead of *a* moral direction.

To illustrate subtle technologies of power and the textual silences (e.g., epistemological omissions) that emerge in their wake, I begin with an article that opens *and* closes with the contention that social justice lies at the heart of social work. For example, the article asserts that "a commitment to promoting social justice lies at the heart of the social work profession" (Nicotera, 2019, p. 460). In other words, social justice is the central, but not exclusive, heart of the social work profession. Superficially speaking, this is not a particularly egregious claim, nor does it appear problematic. However, there is something dangerous in the assumption that social justice lies at the heart, or acts as the essence, of what *could be* an epistemologically diverse profession. The implication that social justice needs a core or a heart - a *singular* muscle (e.g., a homogenized set of values)- to drive the profession precludes the possibility of incorporating diverse epistemologies and practices.

Further, this heart is something that moral (implied) social workers should "commit" to. The word commit or commitment suggests a cause or value to which one commits themselves; in this instance, it means adherence to the cause of social justice. From this, power relations about who has and continues to identify social justice as the

heart of the profession remain unnamed, and the possibility of alternative or multiple hearts for the profession is wholly erased. This leads to a textual silence around the various values that drive (or hold the potential to drive) the profession. Interestingly, hedging, or cautious language is characteristic of articles within high-impact academic journals, yet conspicuously absent from this declaration is the absence of speculation, an openness to the possibility of other hearts for the profession, or other attributes that lie at the profession's heart. This may suggest something about the commonsenseness of social justice. When a term maintains hegemony, there is no need to speak cautiously about what one assumes (and assumes other professionals do too) is capital "T" truth.

As I engaged this meaning unit and grappled with the problematics of a singular heart for the profession - phrasing that sounds poetic, even philanthropic, I kept wondering about the unnamed possibility of social work having multiple hearts, resulting in the image of an octopus consistently emerging for me. To navigate great depths, an octopus requires three hearts (Nuwer, 2013). Though social work has only begun to navigate the depths of social justice discourse, perhaps the profession will find that it is not a single heart that is needed when swimming in the deep waters of social (in)justice, but multiple hearts or a multifaceted approach, to engage with the complexities of social justice, to move beyond the confinement of a singular viewpoint. Social justice is nearly unanimously perceived as the proper moral center for the profession, precluding differing perspectives while taking social justice for granted as one (if not the only) legitimate moral imperative for the profession.

To further justify the claim that social work's heart is characterized by social justice, Nicotera (2019) concludes the article with a quote from Ira Colby, a former dean

and president of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) from 1985-1987. The article states:

> When I asked Ira Colby, *social work leader, author, educator, policy and clinical social worker, former dean, and former president of CSWE* [emphasis added], about the heart of our social work understanding of social justice, he said that for him we must ask one critical question when contemplating social justice action: Is it (our action or policy) fair and just (473)?

The words of a man (whose credentials are listed explicitly) who operated within the upper echelons of professional bodies that are profoundly influential and powerful within the profession are particularly striking.

The use of Colby's words at the end of an article to reinforce for a final time that fairness and justice lie at the heart of social work's understanding of social justice overtly legitimizes institutional authority and expertise by drawing from these discourses to justify one perspective on social justice. In this way, professional power is left unquestioned, and ultimately, its legitimacy is reinscribed. Further, using a professional voice to prove a point presumes that privileged voices effectively promote social justice within high-impact academic scholarship. The discursive move to platform Colby's authoritative voice legitimizes deeply subjective and loaded terms like "fair" and "just," leaving them undefined and flattened under the weight of professionally justified and "universal" rhetoric.

Similarly, though somewhat less explicitly, another article assumes the universal righteousness of social justice globally. The article states, "Throughout the world, social workers are called on to practice, social work educators to teach, and social work students

to learn justice-focused practice" (Harrison et al., 2012, p. 259). Here, social justice is again conceptualized as universal, with the subtext that it is invariably good. In other words, social justice is righteous enough to be applied globally. Interestingly, the linguistic choices hint at the relationship between knowledge and power, or power/knowledge, through the verb "called [on]." Who or what is the entity calling on social workers to take up the cause of social justice globally? Who or what is imposing this moral imperative of social justice? Additionally, this article has a subtle religiosity in that "called on" is often used colloquially to suggest a metaphysical inspiration to engage in righteous or divine causes. Mirroring other articles, in this instance, the discursive strands of professional hegemony and expertise covertly braid together to support a righteous stance.

Likewise, another article conceptualizes social justice as a moral anchor for social work. The article suggests that in an unjust world (wrong), social workers must continually examine and remain tethered to social justice (right) since it is the root that connects the disparate branches of the profession. The article states:

> Perhaps now more than ever, as our political pendulum swings far outside the realms of a just world, it is time to come together as a profession and examine the value [social justice] that roots us in our journeys as social workers (Atteberry-Ash, 2022, p. 45).

Though it is acknowledged that the value (e.g., social justice) must be examined, its unquestioned position as the moral anchor of social work needs to be explained.

In a different yet related element of moralizing susceptibility within social justice discourse, there were a couple of examples where moralizing converged with

professional self-aggrandizement. For example, Slater (2020) states that "the humanitarian commitment needed to undertake all of the responsibility of the profession is not for the faint of heart…" (p. 366). Again, the word heart is brought in. The subtlety is that only those with strong hearts are best suited to practice social work. Kam (2014), similarity uses the term heart to differentiate from and elevate social work above other professions and states, "What sets a social worker apart from other professionals (clinical psychologists, counselors. etc.), is that they have to develop 'two' caring hearts: one for people in need and another showing genuine concern for the larger society" (p. 731). Though the quote manifestly conveys the importance of holding individual and structural concerns at the same time, the idea that social workers must have not one but two hearts perpetuates the idea that social work's heart-driven approach (read: its social justice imperative) somehow differentiates it from other professions with the possible effect of rendering it morally superior (a notion contested by some critical social work historians) (Reisch, 2007).

Deploying the term "heart" also contributes to conceptualizations of social justice that assume a "truth" about the profession. "Hav[ing] to develop two caring hearts" (Kam, 2014, p. 731) seems to suggest that "real" social workers must be emotional and operate from the heart if they are to truly evidence the uniqueness that is social work (i.e., if they are *real* social workers). Additionally, the lexical use of the word heart suggests something about emotions. Positioning the social worker as fundamentally heart-driven (which elements of one's heart are allowed within this conceptualization are left unstated) tacitly privileges heart-based (or *acceptable* emotions-oriented) social work over other possible emotional orientations to the work (e.g., anger, sadness, etc.) and by doing so

tacitly prescribes normative characteristics for social workers. Potentially, this has a regulatory effect on social workers, who come to understand how to orient to the work through social work scholarship, among other areas.

Further, there is a glaring textual silence here about race and gender (especially because social work is a feminized profession). Caring and heart-work take on different meanings in the context of race and gender. The idea of caring can *and frequently does* become burdensome to women/femmes of color and women/femmes generally when there are unstated expectations about who does emotional labor, when, and in what manner that is deeply tied to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (the unnamed context from which social work is inseparable). In all, from an altruistic statement, I identified a discursive strand within social justice discourse that prescribes normative behaviors via subtlety coded moralistic language and begs the question: What happens when social workers express unwelcomed (read: counter-hegemonic) emotions from their "caring hearts?"

**Counter-discourse**

Despite the predominance of the four main discursive strands imminent within conceptualizations of social justice discourse, counter-discursive strands emerged alongside and in opposition to them (N=4). Discourses are only partially coherent and include both contradictions and discontinuities. Often, these discontinuities prove to be political since they stand up (often in isolation or with few other articles, as is the case in my sample) to dominant ways of knowing and speaking. In other words, writing beyond the boundaries of a dominant discourse opens up different ways of knowing and thus doing. Social work scholars Wahab, Bhyuan, and Park (2018) name this phenomenon

(however, they use the term "narrative") in their article *Feeding the Scyborg in Social Work*. They state: "The work of the counter-narrative is political in that it disrupts the "taken-for-granted" stories of the dominant culture by insisting consideration of alternative voices and accounts. Counter-narratives offer a different story" (Wahab et al., 2018, p. 282). Indeed, a small handful of articles within the sample offered different stories (knowledge) about social justice, ones that conceptualized it from the bottom up by emphasizing activism, critiqued the contexts in which social justice is theorized, made race a central precept of social justice and emphasized the necessary dynamism of the term.

According to Foucault (1972), a discourse is only partially coherent, homogenous, and absolute. No matter how ubiquitous, a discourse always encompasses contested, contradictory, and complex strands. As such, even though professional definitions emerged as a primary discursive strand within conceptualizations of social justice, there was simultaneously a subset of articles within my data that theorized social justice beyond professional definitions, critiqued them, or omitted them altogether. For example, Jeyapal (2017) is one of the few articles that does not open with a professionally-based definition of social justice and ultimately never offers one. However, it does allude to the fact that "the concept [social justice] is engrained in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)." (Jeyapal, 2017, p.46).

Only a small subset within the larger sample conceptualized social justice within a larger context of social activism rather than a professional definition from which social work practices emerge. Given this, the article shied away from rote professional definitions to stress the importance of social work when theorizing new ways to engage

in activism and social justice. Instead, social justice is couched within examples of past and present social movements, drawing from a legacy of resistance to imbue into professional social working thinking and doing. Jeyapal (2017) contends that "social movements have challenged the complacency of traditional models of professionalism and influenced a model for more progressive social work that challenges oppression and promotes social justice" (p. 45). Further differentiating this article from the dominant discursive strand, the article explicitly names the *construction* of professional obligation [vis-a-vis social justice discourse] or that what we come to understand as "ethical" is in no way neutral. Jeyapal (2017) states, "We must challenge how our practice within neoliberal institutions constructs and limits our professional obligations for radical social justice" (p. 49). Drawing from different contextualizing frames avoids the discursive reliance on professional organizations to conceptualize social justice and legitimate knowledge. The *non-use* of professional bodies opens space to explore other ways of knowing. Arguably, the effect is the emergence of a counter-discourse of social justice, one, in this instance, rooted in decolonial and BIPOC struggles.

Like Jeyapal (2017), Bryson et al. (2019) and Beltran et al. (2016) demonstrated an unwillingness to take up normalized, professional conceptualizations of social justice. Both articles demonstrated gaps (e.g., antiracism and environmental justice) in current conceptualization through their intrusion into canonical interpretations of social justice. In one five-year retrospective of Portland State University's BSW Program, social justice emerged as a goal of equity work rather than a competency to uphold or professional definition of evidence (Bryson et al., 2019). Rather than drawing from professional definitions of social justice, the article remains skeptical of the term, as evidenced by the

acknowledgment of the discrepancies that continue to surface between social justice rhetoric and action:

> Given social work's long-stated commitment to social justice (Healy, 2008; Pearson et al., 1993; Reisch, 2011) but ambivalent embrace of antiracism, per se (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Dominelli, 2018; Schiele, 2007; Tecle et al., 2019), we were not entirely surprised to find few pragmatic models of racial equity–focused curricular change in the social work literature" (Bryson et al., 2019, p. 12).

Wary of professional conceptualizations of social justice, this article does not take social justice for granted nor the professional EPAS and instead engages them skeptically. It was refraining from presuming the merits of professionally conceptualized versions of social justice or relying on professional terminology. Instead, antiracism was discussed as central to social work's more prominent social justice project.

Corresponding to other counter-hegemonic strands within this portion of the sample, Beltran et al. (2016) begin not with a definition of social justice but choose instead to name what social justice *does*. They note, "[social justice] is primarily concerned with addressing issues of power and oppression, as they affect complex intersections of identity, experience, and the social environment" (p. 494). The absence of an initial professional definition in the article can open conceptual space conducive to incorporating diverse epistemic foundations within formulations of social justice. In other words, by not having a strict starting point, there is potential for varied exploration of perspectives related to social justice. The authors can justify their intrusion into the social justice canon by leaving conceptual space. Rather than follow professional definitions and expectations, they "provide suggestions for how environmental justice might be most

effectively integrated into recent modifications to the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) core competencies" (p. 493). This evidence shows a willingness to expand and complexify social work's conceptualizations of social justice.

For example, one article contends that "the nature of social justice within the profession is an evolving construct that cannot be defined as a prescribed set of principles applicable in all situations" (Jeyapal, 2017, p. 47). Counter-discursive strands like this consider the socially constructed nature of social justice. By refusing to reify presuppositions of social justice's transcendental meaning and value, alternative understandings and practices of the discourses can emerge. From these tiny ruptures, these political acts of discursive resistance, new epistemologies of social justice emerge, and possibilities for novel social justice knowledge and practices take shape. It is with this sense of possibility and hope that I conclude my findings section with an overview of *the resistance*, or the small subset of the sample, that both stretched and challenged dominant conceptualizations of social justice. These articles tether their examinations of social justice to social movements (Jeyapal, 2017), activism (Kim, 2017), and a concerted scrutiny of the subtleties of white supremacy to highlight the urgency of BIPOC freedom (Bryson, 2019; Gregory, 2021).

### *Out Of The Office And Into The Streets: From The Professionals To The People*

Within the counter-discourse, some illustrations orient to social justice through street-based activism (Jeyapal, 2017; Kim, 2017). In this way, conceptualizations of social justice are ascending in that localized and specific activist practices guide professional conceptualizations of social justice. This stands in contrast to a hegemonic

or descending analytical approach that commences with a professional framing of social justice, with purported implications at the local level. Jeyapal (2017) acknowledges that social movements are central to radical conceptualizations of social justice that can push social work(ers) beyond the limitations of its complacency. The article states, "Social movements have challenged the complacency of traditional models of professionalism and influenced a model for more progressive social work that challenges oppression and promotes social justice" (Jeyapal, 2017, p. 45). In a somewhat critical tone, social movements rather than professionals are credited with influencing progressive social work. In this context, social work knowledge is mutable and dynamic when it is noted that "the nature of social justice within the profession is an evolving construct that cannot be defined as a prescribed set of principles applicable in all situations" (Jeyapal, 2017, p. 47). Unlike many of the dominant discursive articles within the sample, this meaning unit assumes the intricate interplay between the profession and the political contexts within which it functions.

In an act of overt resistance to professional conceptualizations of social justice, the article states that "[social workers] have consistently allied with what revolutionaries have called social justice, mobilizing for social reform, and policy change through labor movements, health care, child labor, child welfare, civil rights, and women's rights movement" (Jeyapal, 2017, p. 45). This meaning unit is counter-discursive in that it explicitly *names* broadscale social justice movements and offers a different context (social justice *movements*) from which social work can glean crucial insights and offer much-needed support. By calling attention to various movements by name and the

possibilities of aligning with them, the articopens up conceptual space to reconsider social justice discourse beyond professional and state apparatuses.

That social justice discourse would benefit from collective approaches and community-based activism beyond the boundaries of professional bodies is further expressed:

> Collective approaches have a qualitatively greater potential for change at the community and structural level, a potential that has been almost completely lost over the past three decades. We need to restore radical, campaigning community work to its rightful place within social work. The implication for radical social work is that it is a good chance to revisit our inherent activist roots and a wake-up call for the social work profession for reestablishing community-based practice, the root of actualizing social justice (Kim, 2017, p. 310).

This passage is markedly different from the prevailing hegemonic discourse, presenting a different "root," or foundational basis, for social work. Rather than advocating for transcendental values and professional mandates as a rationale for the core relevance of social justice within social work, activism, and community-oriented approaches are proposed. As a result, the article tends to eschew moralizing language (e.g., the heart of the profession) and instrumentalist logic (e.g., social justice as modality) by allowing space for social work to be guided by activist practices rather than professional standards. In this way, a conceptual place opens for social justice to be both historical and emergent.

Similarly, another article considers a practice of social justice that is explicitly political and collective. The article contends that "we need to make the political nature of social work explicit, develop a critically reflexive approach, make alliances with service

users, develop a practice based on social justice, and act collectively" (Johnstone, 2021, p. 641). The contention that social work must "mak[e] [social justice] political" suggests collective and structural intervention that resists the mainstream conceptualizations that uncritically adopt technocratic, and professionalized approaches to social justice. Unlike hegemonic articles within the sample, this passage has a tone that conveys urgency, and the use of the first personal plural, in this instance, suggests the collective responsibility of all social workers to engage in politics and, thus, socially just forms of social work practice. There is the feeling that this excerpt stands up to professionalization through lexical choices such as "act collectively" and "make alliance with service users." From this, the text moves away from professionally-driven conceptualizations of social justice by reorienting the term through collaborative and participatory actions.

***Race Matters***

Critical social work scholars have discussed the harmful effects of whiteness within social work (Gray et al., 2013; Tascón & Ife, 2019), the limitations of Liberal frames (read: white) for social justice (Hudson, 2017), and called on the profession to explicitly integrate analyses of race into its conceptualizations of social justice (Gregory, 2021). However, within the sample, only a limited subset extensively engaged with race when conceptualizing social justice and addressed the dismantling of white supremacy as a fundamental aspect of social justice praxis. Elaborating on the assertion that social work should link social justice to a broader spectrum of social justice activism, one article additionally underscores the significance of prioritizing the experiences of racialized communities within conceptual frameworks for social justice in social work. She states:

> In the face of racialized communities' complex experiences of social injustice, a call for social change alone is futile; social work must critique the practices that construct its professional and moral stance for social justice in relation to the discursive and material conditions of racialized communities (Jeyapal, 2017, p. 47).

Not only is the urgency of BIPOC liberation conveyed, but this text simultaneously moves beyond critiques of facile terminologies to a more profound critique of the hierarchical structures that give rise to calls for social change. Here, there are implications of the productive and limiting nature of social work discourses. By noting that professional norms and morals shape social work truths and practice, a discursive terrain upon which to analyze complex power relations wherein professional bodies determine the profession's stance on social justice is opened up. Here, the text pushes against the boundaries of the discourse (what is sayable) by explicitly considering the source of social work practices (power/knowledge) and the contexts in which truths about social justice emerge.

Bryson et al. (2019) similarly contend that race must be central to social work's conceptualizations of social justice if the profession aims to meaningfully redress oppressions. In a case study of a BSW program that aims to achieve a more substantive integration of racial justice and equity into its curriculum, they contend that "while a wide-angle social justice lens is critical for social work, Schiele (2007) warned against an "equality of oppressions" approach that can dilute racial oppression, and instead, calls for a more explicit focus on racism" (Bryson et al., 2019, p. 3). The use of the term "wide-angle" hints at the limitations of hegemonic social justice frames that may universalize

social justice goals and practices at the expense of nuanced approaches that specifically aim to dismantle white supremacy and redress racial oppression. Another articles echoes Bryson et al. (2019) in the assertion that "professional social work bears an ethical responsibility to reckon with the existence of whiteness as innately oppressive and antithetical to social justice" (Gregory, 2021, p.121). Both articles suggest something about the dangers of subsuming racial justice under "big tent" social justice, which is assumed to be inadequate to address the unique dynamics and effects of white supremacy.

**Conclusion**

I have identified four prominent yet constitutive discursive strands throughout the data. Although I have presented them as distinct, each of the four strands related to the other and knitted together to form a hegemonic social justice discourse within contemporary high-impact social work journals. Indeed, liberal conceptualizations of social justice that follow from the Enlightenment are reified through professional competencies and values while simultaneously buttressed by the taken-for-granted ideological context of neoliberal instrumentalization. Concurrently, the re-articulation of professional definitions and values to define social justice can lead to homogeneous conceptualizations, while professionally justified claims about social justice present social justice as *the* moral direction for social work.

Enlightenment ideals are the dominant framework for conceptualizing social justice within high-impact social work journal articles. This was evident through lexical choices (e.g., fair, universal, just, access, inclusion, and reason) that proliferated throughout the dataset, resulting in a glaring textual silence about alternative

epistemologies for social justice and liberation. In addition, social justice was taken up as an instrumental marker of expertise. Alarmingly, social justice was repeatedly conceptualized as a body of knowledge to be studied and perfected, a skillset that affords the profession (and professional) expertise, and an approach that can be standardized and universally applied. Through the deployment of a variety of tones, lexical, and discursive techniques, social justice was routinely framed as a "competency," "best practice," or "teaching tool."

Furthermore, the unquestioned legitimacy of social work professional bodies was evident in nearly every article in the sample. I found that the regularity and unquestioned promotion of professionally derived definitions within virtually every article rendered the presence of professional social work organizations nearly invisible. Many articles began not with calls to liberation or details regarding the social context (as did texts from the cross-section of articles that comprised the counter-discourse) but with recapitulations of professional social work definitions of social justice. Though many articles noted that social justice lacks a coherent definition, the majority did not use this as an opportunity to expand or push back against current definitions. Instead, most articles leaned on rote definitions and moralizing calls to uphold professional ethics and grand challenges.

In contrast, the articles comprising the counter-discourse proposed alternative ways to think about and *beyond* social justice, which means that these scholars theorized about social justice from different vantages and conceptualized social justice drawing from different epistemologies than the dominant discursive strands. Drawing from non-dominant sources of knowledge, such as activism and revolutionary movements, stretched the dominant discourse and opened up the discursive space to conceptualize

social justice as practices that exist both outside of and in relationship to professional social work and academia (rather than remain firmly within the grip of both discourses, as was the case in the hegemonic articles). Though small in number, the articles of the counter-discourse exemplified the tensions and contradictions inherent to any discourse. To be sure, a discourse is never completely intelligible, nor does it have an inescapable hold on the knowledge that can be gleaned from within its bounds. Though not without potential consequence (since writing beyond dominant academic norms and conceptualizations bears professional risk), counter-discourses make visible that dominant discourses are fallible and malleable.

Given the fallibility of any hegemony, it is crucial to talk back to discourses to expose their implicit boundaries of acceptability for the power-laden ideological constructs that they are. Following the lead of other social work scholars, such as the ones discussed in this chapter, who refuse prescriptive versions of social justice, I will spend the final chapter discussing both the strengths and limitations of social justice discourse as it has been conceptualized within contemporary high-impact social work journals.

# Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Though this study draws from various philosophical traditions, it is premised upon one crucial poststructural assumption: power relations structure language, and these relations (though frequently insidious) lend context to every aspect of a text (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). In other words, language can be both reflective of and deployed against power relations; a double-edged sword that structures every discourse. From the academic norms legitimized via publication to the lexical and aphoristic standards through which interpretations of social justice function as "truth," social justice discourse, like any other, is firmly situated within this broader, primarily unnamed, discursive landscape. The legitimation of academic textual discourse, and thus ideas, within academic circles reflects prevailing power structures and reproduces these structures. Since power operates through discursive practices, language is the medium through which power relations are negotiated and constructed. Knowledge, in turn, is not static but is contingent upon language and power dynamics, reflecting the complexities of social structures and subjectivities.

To meaningfully confront some of the limitations of social justice discourse as it currently exists, it is necessary to explore the intricate interplay between power dynamics and knowledge construction to adequately examine how specific epistemologies, rhetoric, and truisms are amplified or marginalized within the broader discourse. By scrutinizing some of the tacit power relations that underwrite academic articles, this study has examined how social justice discourse participates in, and sometimes challenges, the hegemonic discursive landscape of social justice scholarship. As such, this critical discourse analysis interrogated social justice discourse within high-impact contemporary

social work journal articles. Through an analysis of twenty-five social work journal articles (N=25), I interpreted four interrelated, yet distinct, discursive strands that were most prevalent throughout the sample: 1) vestiges of the Enlightenment; 2) neoliberalism and instrumentalization; 3) professional hegemony; and 4) moralizing inclinations.

Alongside the hegemonic discursive strands was a faint but extant counter-discourse. Some articles within the sample challenged dominant social justice discourses with non-dominant knowledge sources (Jeyapal, 2017; Kim, 2017) and explicit emphases on the importance of race within social justice teaching/learning/practicing (Bryson et al., 2019; Gregory, 2021; Jeyapal, 2017). As critical social work scholars Taylor and Powell (2019) note, “Particular dominant discourses will exist, but it is also our task to be attuned to the discursive silences and potential for some knowledge and understanding to be subjugated as a consequence of prevailing cultural 'scripts' that shape understandings” (p. 362). While it was evident that epistemological norms and lexical hegemony create and reinforce the discursive boundaries of social justice, the counter-discourse I interpreted made clear that hegemonic discursive boundaries are also porous and permeable, able to be stretched or transgressed altogether.

Radical transformation within social work necessitates an unflinching critique of how social work's vision of social justice is conceptualized and actualized. Academic social justice discourse subtly silences dissenting and marginalized voices within the field, arguably because of the perceived impossibility and perhaps career-ending dangers of advocating for radical actions and change. These discursive barriers, coupled with academic discourse's institutional and professional constraints, may hinder a broad realization of transformative practices within social work. The following sections explore

how predominant discourse strands function to subjugate alternative perspectives. Importantly, these strands only reflect part of the social justice discourse within social work scholarship.

Further, my discussion of the discourse includes only some of the countless possible interpretations of the articles. However, valuable insights are to be gleaned by those interested in critically engaging with and reimagining social justice within social work. Finally, given this study's epistemological anchor in poststructuralism and the critical assumption that no utterance, text, or knowledge claim ever operates outside of power, it bears repeating that I do not intend to construct a perfected version of social justice from the critiques that follow. To do so would contradict many of the analyses that ensue (e.g., the problematics of prescriptive and performative conceptualizations of social justice).

In this section, I will focus on some of the problematics of academic discourse and the dangers of unquestioned and fixed viewpoints (e.g., subtle dogmatic tendencies). I will also discuss the nascent potential of the counter-discursive strands. From there, I will discuss the study's implications for the social work profession, its strengths and limitations, and directions for future research.

**On Some Of The Dangers Of Academic And Professional Hegemony**

Academia exists as a largely separate space from the real-world practices of social workers, social justice activists, and undoubtedly radicals and anarchists. The separation between academia and real-world practitioners and activists may perpetuate a disconnect between scholarly discourse and the lived experiences, lessons learned, and needs of marginalized communities, impeding the development of social justice discourse while

reinscribing the authority and elitism of academics. Academia is born of elitism and the perpetuation of white male rule under the guise of intellectual pursuits. The establishment of universities can be directly traced to colonial and imperial projects that sought to reinforce hegemonic cultural norms and justify the interests of the ruling powers (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988).

Throughout academia's history, the exclusion of BIPOC and women from its institutions reinforced social hierarchies and reinscribed the hegemony of knowledge that was (*is*) fundamentally rooted in settler-colonial, white supremacist patriarchy. This deeply entrenched legacy remains evident today when considering who is legible within academia, what paradigms are favored, what intellectual traditions are lauded, and what are vilified or outright ignored. Accordingly, any version of social justice compatible with and well-received within academia (read: high-impact) is likely dangerous. Though a thorough critique of academia is warranted, it is beyond this project's scope. Instead, this section will focus on some potential issues with academically conceptualized versions of social justice, such as the use of grandiose language and the need for real-world insights from and practical application within grassroots movements.

Because power's reach is inescapable, the context from which social justice ideas emerge matters. Accordingly, throughout my analysis, the following question remained prominent: What changes about conceptualizations of social justice when they are conceptualized by academics for an elite institution? From the sample, the answer to this question is straightforward: Social justice is at risk of losing its salience and impact when it originates from social work academics and professional organizations rather than being rooted in social practices like activism and direct action. Moreover, the academic

machine gains strength and increased legitimacy when it relies on existing academic and professional definitions, thereby suppressing alternative sources of knowledge. The academic bounds of social justice discourse, then, encourage conformity.

For example, nearly every text in the sample drew from well-regarded academic epistemologies and wrote within the bounds of academic acceptability (e.g., structure, tone, and style). This acceptance of convention is perhaps required to publish a paper on social justice; however, it has dangerous hegemonic effects. Such conformity risks pacifying radical ideas (the few times they emerge) and reducing the possible impact of social justice values to mere words, almost entirely divorced from meaningful actions and real-world examples. In other words, an academically palatable version of social justice discourse suggests a discursive prioritization of incremental rather than radical changes. Notably, this emergent understanding has been explicitly highlighted in a recent statement titled *The NASW Is Failing Us. Either It Changes, or We Will Change It Ourselves* by Social Services Workers United - Chicago (SSWU). The statement criticizes the NASW's tepid engagement with radical practices and tendency toward minor reforms and instead advocates for collective actions to address what they perceive as a "deep and pernicious moral rot within the NASW" (Murray et al., 2023, p. 747)

Of further concern is the disconnect between grandiose language concerning social justice (e.g., "In the fierce urgency of now, transforming our social work curricula has the potential to create a lasting legacy of love and foster a deeper commitment to the collective task of constructing [Dr. Martin Luther] King's new world" (Nicotera, 2019, p. 467) and the medium itself (e.g., academic journals). Calling for the collective construction of MLK's world within the context of academic silos seems not only

contradictory (given the unlikely mass readership and real-world application of academic articles) but obtuse (given the deeply embedded white supremacy within the medium through which this claim is made). To my knowledge, mass-scale social actions and change have never been catalyzed through academic journal articles, let alone one man's singular vision. Nevertheless, some of the articles adopted the language and, on rare occasions, the practices of activists.

In another example, one of the articles employs a typical activist cliche and suggests that social work can transform its curricula by "bring[ing]…to the table…the vulnerable, oppressed, and disadvantaged" (Nicotera, 2019, p.468). However, it was persistently unclear whether the articles had the effect of actually inspiring others to collaborate and fight or were unintentionally appropriating certain words for scholarly originality, credibility, and advancement. While engaging with the sample, I wondered whether an emphasis on social justice within high-impact social work journal articles is genuinely aimed at its achievement or if, instead, it serves the purpose of establishing and sustaining academic careers.

The de-emphasis on real-world insights and application via grassroots practices and epistemologies, coupled with an over-reliance on professionally-based conceptualizations within the sample, calls into question the sincerity of social work's social justice discourse regarding its transformative potential within the profession and beyond. In a recent adjacent critique, Murray et al. (2023) state, "At this point, it is clear that our COE [Code of Ethics] is merely a performative statement intended to message a public commitment to justice while presenting the ways that social work facilitates and participates in oppression as benevolent" (p. 753). Specialized professional social justice

discourse that gets taken up with academic conceptualizations may not only perpetuate "benevolent" oppression, it may also foster social worker passivity.

When professionalized and academic conceptualizations of social justice maintain their supremacy within social work's social justice discourse, hegemonic ideas take on meaning in and of themselves, and they can easily be misperceived as "right" or "true," no longer requiring rigorous theorization and philosophizing. This was particularly evident throughout the dominant discourse strands that presented social justice as *the* direction for social work, drawing from overused terminologies (e.g., liberty, equality, rights) and well-worn professional definitions and epistemologies (e.g., liberalism). When specific terms and epistemologies are overused, the potential for a robust and nuanced discourse to develop is hindered. The risk of oversimplification and reductionism of complex social relations may stifle the diversity of perspectives and methodologies needed for diverse and contextually grounded social justice strategies.

Likewise, the use of under-defined and under-theorized terminologies raises questions about the substance behind social justice rhetoric and often needs to be clarified within the discourse. For example, the commonality of certain words (e.g., justice, community, critical, rights) and phrases (e.g., "advocating on behalf of disadvantaged populations" (Keenan, 2017, p. 19) may unintentionally diminish the impact and potential of the words, due to an overreliance on cliches instead of a deeper exploration and critique of complex issues, social relations, and knowledge production. When this happens, words (ideas) are assumed to have transcendent worth, and as a result, they become alienated from their thinkers. The amplification of a professionally derived lexicon is undoubtedly tied to a broader neoliberal context that seeks uniformity and

expertise within the profession. As Garrett reminds us, "It is neoliberalism, of course, which provides the economic and cultural context for the circulations of…words [and practices]" (p.51). The economic and cultural framework of neoliberalism shapes not only language but also societal norms and behaviors, and understanding this connection is crucial as it highlights how dominant ideologies permeate various aspects of social work. Recognizing the pervasive impact of neoliberalism prompts critical reflection on how language and practices can either reinforce or challenge prevailing systems of inequality and exploitation. Acknowledging the cultural context within which discourses circulate creates an opportunity to engage in transformative dialogue and action to create more equitable and just social arrangements.

It is not uncommon for academics to extract both theoretical and practical insights from activist communities, and it is seldom that these communities get anything from academia (Smith, 2021). To be sure, academics, journals, and universities have much to gain (read: profit and prestige) from activists' hard-won lessons and emergent theories. Conversely, activists have almost nothing to gain from academic "insights," "calls to action," and navel-gazing about "liberation." It is crucial that scholars concerned with the human-sized relevance of social justice (read: making life more livable and free) begin to grapple with these shortcomings in order to enhance the robustness of social work's conceptualizations of social justice.

To be clear, I am not suggesting a perfected version of social justice here but rather a destabilization of entrenched discursive norms to better explore new potentialities within (and beyond) the current social justice discourse within academia for the benefit of both social work academics and students. Though not a solution to the

problematics outlined above, I do feel that a shift toward the use of precise language (e.g., clear articulations of contextual ethics, tactics, and preferred social relations rather than the blanket term "social justice"), engagement with alternative and radical epistemologies (e.g., abolitionism, anarchism, decolonial, queer, and critical race theories), and ongoing scholarly debate (e.g., more critical examinations of social justice discourse), can aid social work scholarship in the production of previously unexplored and unpracticed versions of social justice.

**Subtle Dogmatism and its Effects**

Though philosophers and political scholars have engaged with the problematics of fixed doctrines and their effects for decades, exploring ideological thinking within social work remains under-discussed (Carey & Foster, 2013; Duarte, 2017). Some scholars have noted the limitations and essentialism inherent within grand narratives (Brown, 2012), however the scholarship has been less willing to apply this same critique to academically conceptualized versions of social justice, and the likely probability that the profession's definitions and values pertaining to social justice are equally as partial, equally as hegemonic. I draw from the ideas of Nietzsche and Foucault to conceptualize dogma as a constructed set of truth claims that, when institutionalized, exercise power over discourse (and thus individuals) by prescribing and proscribing certain beliefs (Foucault, 1972; Nietzsche, 1995).

One illustration of the dogmatic undertones within social justice discourse emerged through the moralizing discursive strand. In multiple articles, I interpreted the moralizing discursive strand through tacitly essentialist claims that social justice is the righteous anchor of the profession. Further, there were examples throughout the sample

where social justice was interpreted as not just one but perhaps the sole legitimate moral imperative for the profession. In other words, social justice emerged as the prevailing moral foundation for the profession, which could discourage alternative discourse.

Moral positions can lead to stasis and inflexibility in thought, not unlike the rigidity and oversimplification associated with dogma. Like dogma, the moralizing discourse strand prescribes a set of beliefs and values from a moral (e.g., heart) stance. For example, many articles evidenced liberal beliefs and values about social justice (e.g., equality, inclusion, and fairness), justified by the profession's moral and emotional (or "heart") commitments to social justice. In other words, liberal perspectives on social justice are justified because they are considered good and right. When social justice discourse is understood as "good," social justice can function almost mystically or as the transcendent realization of the good (therefore not confined by power).

Relatedly, I was struck by the ease with which the concept of social justice can be made instrumental in service of neoliberal ends (e.g., student recruitment, efficiency, funding, and expertise). Suppose social justice is subtly conceptualized in ways that mirror a doctrine that can preclude alternative perspectives. In that case, its core principles (e.g., NASW Code of Ethics and core values) can be easily converted into tools (e.g., best practices) that can be used to serve a particular agenda. Hegemonic conceptualizations of social justice may facilitate its instrumentalization, meaning it can be more readily used to achieve specific goals or agendas.

When social justice is instrumentalized, there is a risk of converting expansive values and flexible practices into simplistic tools to conceptualize and meet measurable goals quickly. Perhaps paradoxically, I am not suggesting a total move away from

tangible approaches to social justice but suggesting the importance of contextually grounded orientations to social justice that emphasize and encourage flexibility and responsiveness to diverse needs, allowing for interventions that are tailored to specific contexts rather than imposing standardized ideas, practices, and solutions. Social justice should not solely remain theoretical. As such, it would be beneficial to conceptualize social justice in collaboration with those in social work settings (e.g., drawing from practical tactics and frameworks that are responsive to real-world contexts and practices). However, the instrumentalization of social justice within some strands reduced it to competencies, an individualized set of marketable skills, and technocratic aspirations (e.g., standardizing social justice for effectiveness and efficiency).

My final concern with the sample was the observed (yet extremely subtle) recapitulation of the Great Man Theory. Popularized by Thomas Carlyle in the 19th century, the great man theory decontextualized social change processes through its contention that "exceptional" individuals (rather than social-political and even unpredictable occurrences) catalyze historical shifts (Carlyle, 2008). Though this theory has been largely discredited, there are subtle examples throughout the United States's historical narratives (the "exceptionalism" and hero-worship of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King are two disparate examples). Subtle mirroring of this perspective was evident through my sample, most notably in the assumption that a rich and dynamic concept like social justice could have or should be drawn from a solo thinker (e.g., John Rawls).

However, perhaps even more insidious, and reflective of this ludicrous theory were the myriad calls to take up actions that follow from *founding* professional norms

(e.g., the CSWE code of ethics). The sample routinely prioritized the definitions of influential professional bodies. Omitted almost entirely from the discourse was any mention of broader collective efforts to implement, adapt, and *practice* these ideals in context. As I read and re-read the articles, I kept asking myself: Should the practices follow from definitions, or should the definitions follow from experimental practices? I tentatively concluded that theory seems more open-ended when it follows from action rather than academics. Moving beyond "key thinkers" and recapitulations of the literature encourages an embrace of a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to historical and social analysis that accounts for the randomness, non-linearity, collective, and interconnected nature of the forces shaping the world and us.

**Counter-discourse**

The existence of a counter-discourse evidences the partiality and fallibility inherent to dominant discourses. A counter-discourse "question[s] or resist[s] dominant discourse and create[s] the space to encourage others to follow suit (Gallop, 2019, p. 492). Moreover, it represents resistance not only to established knowledge claims but also to unexamined power relations. As with this sample, a counter-discourse emerged in response to and opposition to dominant discourses or hegemonic ideology. The counter-discourse brought attention to race, oppressive structures, and alternative approaches to social justice, which fostered some novel insights and critiques in ways that were marginal or altogether absent from the dominant discursive strands.

For example, centering race within social justice discourse opens the conceptual space to acknowledge the historical and ongoing genocidal logics that shape daily life for BIPOC in the United States. As noted within the counter-discourse, if social work is

going to confront these deeply embedded inequities meaningfully, race must be made a central precept of social justice (Bryson, 2017; Gregory, 2021; Jeyapal, 2017). However, it is not surprising that race remains marginalized within social justice discourse, given that "social workers' commitment to social justice was not explicitly stated until 1996 (NASW, 1960–2007)...and a direct commitment to taking action against racial oppression was not added until 2021" (Murray et al., 2023, p. 745)**.** When race is taken up as an afterthought within social justice discourse, a much-needed exploration of the futility of seeking racial redress, assimilation, and reform through the very structures and institutions that give rise to racial oppression in the first place is marginalized. Conversely, focusing on race allows one to critically examine the statist implications tacit within colorblind versions of social justice.

To sufficiently confront and dismantle deeply ingrained systems of oppression, particularly racial oppression, a profound structural critique is needed, one that is not fully accessible when the state and professional organizations are taken for granted as the catalysts and arbiters of justice, rights, and institutional change. I echo Murray et al. (2023) in their contention that "there is a danger in calling on the NASW to bring about change as this perpetuates the idea that the NASW holds power" (p. 754). Undoubtedly, seeking redress and assimilation through mainstream institutions deemphasizes legacies of BIPOC resistance that prioritize transformation, *people power*, alternative world building, and confrontation as tactics of social justice. Meaningfully centering race within social work's conceptualizations of social justice can encourage social workers to cultivate a strong historical and contemporary understanding of the violence of so-called democratic institutions, the legacies of BIPOC resistance, and the limitations of

institutional reform. From this, it becomes apparent that anti-state alternatives, such as anarchist and abolitionist frameworks, are deeply vital to any version of social justice that seeks to radically transform society.

Alongside discussions of race within the counter-discourse was an acknowledgment of looking to grassroots movements and activists to conceptualize social justice from the bottom up (Jeyapal, 2017; Kim, 2017). Emphasizing bottom-up and collaborative perspectives suggests a promising paradigm shift for social justice discourse that "loosen[s] up knowledge to legitimate other ways of knowing [to] promote richer, more complex types of knowledge" (Bell, 2012, p. 417). When the insight and agency of those directly affected by social injustices is highlighted, the potential for inclusive, participatory, and contextually relevant conceptualizations of social justice becomes more possible. Further, the hegemony of neoliberal individualistic notions that position individual social workers as "change agents" is destabilized. When conceptualizations remain hierarchically derived, the risk of imposing "solutions" from external authorities is higher. In contrast, looking to those most impacted to define their social conditions and their subsequent vision of social justice to redress oppression moves social work beyond tokenistic mentions of oppressed communities within grand challenges that hold little relevance for them toward genuine interest, collaboration, and the co-creation of solutions. Though there is no "real" version of social justice to be found, it seems that centering the human agency that already exists within communities can build solidarity and trust and, from this, signify social work's commitment to a more equitable world that pushes social workers beyond professionally outlined practices and sloganeering.

**Implications**

The following section builds upon the study's findings by exploring this critical discourse analysis's practical and theoretical implications. My research critically analyzed social justice discourse to gain insights into what ideologies, epistemologies, and power dynamics operate subtly (and not so subtly) within the contextual background of social work discourse. It bears mention that a goal of this study has always been to intrude into social justice discourse, explore it, gain insights into its current conceptualizations, and ultimately revolutionize it within social work. As such, this study set out to question one of social work's sacrosanct values - social justice - so that its epistemic hegemony, ideological uniformity, and dangerous intersections with neoliberal assumptions might be better acknowledged.

Although social work scholarship is only one area in which social work knowledge is generated and consumed, it is abundantly clear that social justice discourse plays a central role within the profession beyond scholarship. Undoubtedly, social justice discourse plays a pivotal role in guiding the profession's theoretical allegiances (e.g., liberalism), practice approaches (e.g., anti-oppressive), and educational content (e.g., mandatory social justice courses). As one text from the sample states, "[social justice] is the value that roots us in our journeys as social workers" (Atteberry-Ash, 2022, p.45). Given that social justice is a core value of the profession, how it is conceptualized directly impacts how practitioners, researchers, and educators interpret and address societal issues. Indeed, each of the discursive strands identified within this study influences how social problems are conceptualized and guides social work educational standards and professional priorities. Finally, and of most importance to this study, for better or worse, social justice discourse is one of the keyways to cultivate critical

consciousness among professionals, students, and academics. This affects not only individuals and communities who come into contact with social workers but society as a whole. With this in mind, the following paragraphs discuss some of the implications of this CDA for social work theorizing, education, and resistance.

***Theory***

This study's findings demonstrate the need for reconsidering and expanding social work's theoretical and epistemological foundations of social justice. In many ways, this study challenges existing social justice paradigms. Enlightenment values and assumptions are significantly limiting within social work scholarship because they draw from Western thought traditions that not only reinscribe the supremacy of whiteness within theory but also keep conceptualizations of justice bound to a presupposed state. Further, key Enlightenment assumptions throughout the discourse, such as rationality, individual rights, and universalism, have oversimplified the complex nature of social injustices that may inadvertently perpetuate a monolithic orientation to social justice that overlooks other and more radical perspectives. Social work theorizing about social justice is pregnant with possibilities if a broader range of epistemological perspectives are considered moving forward.

This entails recognizing the limitations of Enlightenment legacies such as liberalism (as this study and others have begun to do) (Bell, 2012; Hudson, 2017), followed by the incorporation of alternative epistemologies such as poststructuralism and queer theory (as some of many potential alternatives). Social justice conceptualizations stand only to be enriched from the inclusion of frameworks that follow not only from the academic context of dead 18th-century white men but also from the frameworks that

encourage multiplicity, lived experience, power analyses, and a fundamental skepticism of the state. Moreover, including alternative epistemologies within social justice conceptualizations might encourage participatory and collaborative knowledge production, moving the profession away from Eurocentric and authoritarian legacies of knowledge production. By moving beyond a narrow reliance on Enlightenment principles by incorporating diverse epistemologies, social work theorizing may be better equipped to address the complexities of structural and institutional oppression while theorizing novel, contextually grounded, and transformative approaches to social work, such as abolitionist approaches.

### *Education*

Social justice is paramount to social work, so much so that the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandates that U.S.-based schools of social work create social justice-based curricula to become and remain accredited (CSWE, 2022). Consistent with the findings of this study, scholars have noted that dominant social justice discourses remain limited, mainly due to their anchoring in the Enlightenment and its derivative liberalism (Hudson, 2017). This study illuminated this, revealing an over-reliance on professional definitions grounded in Enlightenment assumptions as the primary sources for conceptualizing social justice.

Social justice classes are pivotal in how future social workers think and practice. Because of this, social work education must not ignore the myriad limitations of an over-reliance on dominant knowledge sources. Social work educators may find affirmation or novel insights from this study demonstrating some limitations inherent within hegemonic social work conceptualizations. Though the data emerges from the context of social work

scholarship, educators may want to engage this data to encourage critical thinking in their students, guide their deconstructions and conversations about social justice within classroom settings, or glean insights from this data to reorient to critical discourses.

My study's findings indicate that epistemology should not be taken for granted and that it is beneficial to center critique alongside the presentation of social work knowledge. To be sure, "the capacity to critique is essential to activist practice" (Morley, 2019, p. 443), and marginalizing critique of social work knowledge claims can result in "intellectual dead zone[s]" (Giroux, 2015, p. 122). Instead, schools of social work and social work educators may consider (or continue to promote) the inclusion of non-dominant epistemologies (e.g., decolonial, queer, and anarchist) and experiential knowledge from past and present activists of social justice (e.g., oral histories like the podcast *It Did Happen Here*). In other words, it is a version of social work that is *disruptive,* one that "aims to create political and social change by collectively refusing to cooperate with social relations and institutions that are deeply ingrained [e.g., hegemonic knowledge/practices]" (Feldman, 2022, p. 766). Through diversification of knowledge sources, social work education can better equip students with robust and multifaceted social justice conceptualizations grounded in the complexity of real-world activist practices and legacies. When social workers are educated with and encouraged to debate and practice an expansive and nuanced version of social justice, they are better positioned to engage critically with the profession and its context, dream of alternative practices, and question the limitations of sanitized approaches to social change.

### *Academic and Professional Resistance*

I hope that this study's findings offer tangible insights into what is felt by so many: that social work has a long way to go in terms of living up to its social justice values and goals (Murray et al., 2023), social justice discourse draws primarily from Eurocentric thought traditions (Akinyela & Aldridge, 2003), and scholarship that advances palatable practices and mainstream theories may perpetuate harm in their failure to fundamentally challenge the white supremacist status quo (BlackDeer & Ocampo, 2022).

This study has implications for social work scholars and practitioners interested in pushing scholarship and professional practice to be more radical, critical of social work "truths," and resistant to the subtle and seductive presence of neoliberalism within conceptualizations of social justice. For example, social work scholars who draw from alternative frameworks to conceptualize social justice (e.g., abolitionist and anarchist social workers) might want to use this data to justify the urgent need for novel social justice conceptualizations. Likewise, social work practitioners could use this study's findings to justify a more radical theoretical framework. In this way, this knowledge could be used, weaponized even, to justify radical social work practices that expand current social justice practices and epistemologies that push beyond the liberal framework for self/social change. In other words, the knowledge generated from this study could be employed strategically to support and advocate for social work approaches and paradigms that go beyond the current mainstream approaches to social justice. The study's findings may also be of interest to social workers who are interested in social justice practices for their intrinsic value, not an instrumentalized version of social justice

that is used to differentiate the profession, recruit students, establish best practices, and graduate social justice technocrats from schools of social work.

Moreover, radical scholars and professionals who have much to share by way of practice experience and alternative theorizations may want to use this data to demonstrate that social justice discourse within high-impact social work journals is devoid of deeply radical epistemologies and activist practices. Even a cursory examination of history reveals that radical approaches are incredibly effective at catalyzing broadscale social, cultural, and political transformations. Here, I am talking about practices such as mutual aid, direct action, self-defense, anti-fascism, and coalition building, and epistemologies such as queer of color critique, decolonial, queer, critical race, and anarchist theory. The lack of scholarly engagement with the aforementioned is particularly striking given that multiple articles in the sample were written after the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the 2017 white supremacist "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, and the George Floyd rebellions of 2020.

An unabashed embrace of transgressive and transformative epistemologies and rich social justice practices that are rooted in anarchist, BIPOC, queer, and working-class resistance legacies (the three are not mutually exclusive) is necessary to not only push back against taken-for-granted norms within social work but to fundamentally reconfigure it. By speaking from diverse localities and introducing non-dominant knowledge and practices to the profession, social justice discourse's technocratic, moralizing, and dogmatic tendencies may be challenged as the discourse is stretched, subverted, and transformed.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) constitutes a methodological approach characterized by meticulous scrutiny and nuanced investigation (Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak, 2015). However, CDA's theoretical affinity with poststructuralism has likely contributed to scholars' infrequent engagement with the quality criteria commonly associated with mainstream research approaches. According to Leotti et al. (2022), this omission is likely due to the methodology's epistemological stance, which critically challenges conventional concepts of rigor and objectivity. That said, it bears mentioning that the interpretive and profoundly subjective nature of CDA can increase the occurrence of bias throughout the study and make replicability hard.

To mitigate this, this study's epistemological assumptions were critical of traditional notions of rigor, standardized techniques, assessments, and claims of objectivity. Following scholars of CDA who contend that CDA, though critical and qualitative, can still use criteria to ensure rigor (Leotti et al., 2022), this study's trustworthiness was demonstrated through an explicit articulation of the project's purpose and utility, coupled with methodological coherence via a clear description of the study's paradigm (axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology).

Though this study begins to demonstrate how social justice discourse is conceptualized within contemporary high-impact social work journals, and from this, valuable insights into the discourse's connection to power and hegemonic norms, it has limitations. First, sourcing a sample from high-impact social work journals proved generative because they demonstrate typical epistemic and stylistic norms. Further, academic articles highlight emerging trends and critical issues within social work. However, as was evident in the sample, academic journals are biased towards particular

perspectives that marginalize alternative viewpoints and neglect robust philosophical debate. To address this, future studies may include a study of course syllabi from social work social justice courses. Though I have argued that mainstream social work literature impacts social work students and practitioners (and thus society at large), a critical discourse analysis of school syllabi could foster insights into what knowledge sources *beyond* academic publishing are being engaged within classrooms and perhaps stand up to dominant conceptualizations of social justice in exciting ways.

Another limitation that emerged is this study's conceptualization of 'contemporary.' This study conceptualized contemporary as a ten-year time span, which is in keeping with the commonplace understanding of historical increments (Chappell, 2019). However, I came to feel that contemporary is a bit of a misnomer given that the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the George Floyd Rebellions have changed so much about the ways social and racial justice are discussed (or actively silenced) within the United States. These *massive* cultural, political, and environmental upheavals necessitate deep engagement with social justice in the post-George Floyd and post-Donald Trump world (though 'post' may soon be inaccurate, given that at the time of writing this Trump is the Republican primary frontrunner). Though I set out to examine social justice discourse over ten years, future analyses of social justice would be strengthened and nuanced if conducted within a smaller time frame. Given that the language of social and racial justice has undergone rapid changes, a smaller time increment could allow for deep engagement with the discourse in a particular period/context that aims to capture the discursive particularities and temporal dynamics more accurately.

Finally, interpretive research is strengthened when done in conjunction with other scholars (Cornish et al., 2013). Because of the independent nature of dissertation research, this study was primarily conducted alone, which emerged as another limitation of the study. Conducting the CDA in relative isolation engendered a sense of unease, as I consistently questioned the limitations of my singular perspective and, subsequently, the potential for analytic oversight. To mitigate this, I reflexively memoed throughout this study. I wrote out emerging thoughts and questions that allowed me to see my thinking in action and better reflect on how my assumptions and perspective impacted my analysis. Additionally, I piloted the structural analysis on three articles and elicited feedback from peers before using it on the general sample to ensure consistency in my interpretive framework. I documented all the updates to my analytical tool and adjustments made during the analysis. When I felt stuck methodologically and analytically, I consulted with peers about my emerging interpretation to gain additional insights. In light of this and the deeply theoretical nature of CDA, future studies of social justice discourse would benefit from interdisciplinary collaborations to mitigate bias and subjectivity, increase reflexivity, and support analytical checks and balances that strengthen the study's credibility.

## Conclusion

This CDA identified four salient themes throughout the social work literature: 1) the prevalence of Enlightenment values and assumptions within conceptualizations of social justice; 2) the instrumentalization of social justice in ways consistent with neoliberal assumptions; 3) the hegemony of professional organizations to conceptualize

and contextualize social justice; and 4) some moralizing tendencies that suggest the moral rightness and goodness of social justice within social work. Cutting across these related yet distinct findings were similar discursive patterns, linguistic strategies, and power relations. For example, a discursive pattern evident throughout some of the articles was the use of the first-person plural (e.g., us/we), which conveys a sense of homogeneity in values and thoughts for the profession. In addition, many articles used professional citations and "expert" opinions to lend authority and credibility to the discourse.

This relates directly to the influence of power. Power was exceedingly abundant as only specific social work organizations and (inferred) epistemologies were called on to conceptualize social justice, marginalizing alternative paradigms while reinforcing the legitimacy and authority of hierarchical institutions. These results indicate that social justice is conceptualized within high-impact contemporary social work journals through normative professional frameworks (e.g., CSWE, NASW) and dominant cultural ideologies (e.g., neoliberalism, liberalism).

Following in the footsteps of other critical social work scholars, I have attempted to "unpick the ideological content of any language emanating from the ruling class of a society [e.g., academia as one institution of the ruling class]...to identify the link between the language and the specific social world it seeks to represent, including its distortions of reality which have the potential to undermine its hegemony" (Holborow, 2015, p. 121). In doing so, this study has demonstrated that the discourse of social justice within high-impact journals leans disproportionately on Enlightenment assumptions, instrumentalized social justice for professional aspirations, and speaks of social justice as a singular capital T truth, not to be reimagined but returned to its rightful position as the "heart" of the

profession. On the other hand, discursive discontinuities sought to center race, draw from activist practices, and critically grapple with the contexts in which social justice is conceptualized and practiced.

When I began this study, I speculated that social work's versatile engagement with social justice implied three initial traits, each distinct yet fundamentally interconnected (e.g., goal, practice, and value). Upon its conclusion, I found this to be the case. I interpreted social justice discourse as aspirational, serving as a goal for or inspiration to the profession. Additionally, it was instrumental in guiding practices and decisions within the profession. Lastly, it is a guiding and central value of the profession. Importantly, these interpretations frequently coexisted, as social justice discourse functioned constitutively or singularly, depending on the context. These dual functions of social justice discourse underscore its multifaceted nature, demonstrating its centrality within the profession.

Finally, I hope one crucial belief guiding this study has remained clear: This study operates from the assumption that different worlds are possible. Capitalism, the state, settler-colonialism, white supremacy, misogyny, ableism, and cissexism, a list that sadly could go on ad infinitum, are not inevitabilities. They are human-made practices and phenomena and can be undone and practiced differently *right now*. As well-known critical social work scholar Jan Fook counsels, "Destructive discourses are only as powerful as the degree to which they go unquestioned" (Gallop, 2019, p. 492). Language matters and the profession must not misperceive normativity as neutrality since how we talk about social justice has material consequences. The unexamined thought traditions

from which social justice typically draws remain dangerous in their ability to reinscribe the status quo if not engaged skeptically, even profanely.

Though social work is starting to reckon with the legacies from which it originates, the limitations of its present, and put forth *possibly* more liberatory directions for its future (up to and including the abolition of social work) (Hunter & Wroe, 2022 Maylea, 2021), it is crucial that the profession remains equally as critical of its "good" intentions, "radical" epistemologies, and sacrosanct values throughout the process. Social work scholars can begin this by further engaging in studies that deconstruct and critically grapple with social work maxims, truths, and ideologies. Whole other philosophies, practices, and ideas await exploration!

So I encourage social work/ers to find practices and thought traditions that resonate with their lived experiences. Pull social justice down from the professionalized and transcendent realm, bring it into your worlds, and enjoy seeing what novel experimentations emerge. Perhaps from this, social work may no longer seek static definitions, professional legitimation, and utility since it may be an ineffable, immediate, and urgent version of social justice that people have sought all along.

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APPENDIX A: Social Work Journals Generated From Eigenfactor

| Journal Title | |
|---|---|
| *Administration in Social Work* | *Qualitative Social Work* |
| *Affilia: Feminist Inquiry in Social Work* | *Research on Social Work Practice* |
| *Clinical Social Work Journal* | *Smith College Studies in Social Work* |
| *International Social Work* | *Social Work* |
| *Journal of Social Work Education* | *Social Work in Health Care* |
| *Journal of Social Work Practice* | *Social Work in Public Health* |
| *Journal of Social Work* | *Social Work Research* |

APPENDIX B: Number Of Articles Included In Sample (Per Journal)

| Journal | Number of Articles in Sample |
|---|---|
| *International Social Work* | *1* |
| *Journal of Social Work Education* | *9* |
| *Journal of Social Work* | *3* |
| *Research on Social Work Practice* | *2* |
| *Social Work* | *6* |
| *Clinical Social Work Journal* | *2* |
| *Smith College Studies in Social Work* | *2* |

Note: Of the 14 journals I searched, my final sample came from only seven journals (half of the original list).

**Below are the journals that did not have articles that met my study's inclusion criteria:**

*Administration in Social Work*
*Affilia: Feminist Inquiry in Social Work*
*Journal of Social Work Practice*
*Qualitative Social Work*
*Social Work and Public Health*
*Social Work in Health Care*
*Social Work Research*

APPENDIX C: The Dataset (Reading Order for Structural Analysis)

| | Author | Article Title | Journal | Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Asakura, K., & Maurer, K. | Attending to Social Justice in Clinical Social Work: Supervision as a Pedagogical Space | *Clinical Social Work Journal* | 2018 |
| 2 | Atteberry-Ash, B. E. | Social Work and Social Justice: A Conceptual Review | *Social Work* | 2022 |
| 3 | Atteberry-Ash, B., Nicotera, N., & Gonzales, B. | Walk the Talk of Power, Privilege, and Oppression: A Template Analysis | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2021 |
| 4 | Beltrán, R., Hacker, A., & Begun, S. | Environmental Justice Is a Social Justice Issue: Incorporating Environmental Justice Into Social Work Practice Curricula. | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2016 |
| 5 | Bradley, C., Maschi, T., O'Brien, H., Morgen, K., & Ward, K. | Faithful But Different: Clinical Social Workers Speak Out About Career Motivation and Professional Values | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2012 |
| 6 | Bryson, S. A., Mehrotra, G., Rodriguez-Jenkins, J., & Ilea, P. | Centering Racial Equity in a BSW Program: What We've Learned in Five Years | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2022 |
| 7 | Carlson, J., Nguyen, H., & Reinardy, J. | Social Justice and the Capabilities Approach: Seeking a Global Blueprint for the EPAS | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2016 |
| 8 | Gatenio Gabel, S., & Mapp, S. | Teaching Human Rights and Social Justice in Social Work Education | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2020 |
| 9 | Goode, R. W., Cowell, M., McMillan, D., Van Deinse, T., & Cooper-Lewter, C. | Preparing Social Workers to Confront Social Injustice and Oppression: Evaluating the Role of Social Work Education | *Social Work* | 2021 |

| | Author | Article Title | Journal | Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | Gregory, J. R | The Imperative and Promise Of Neo-Abolitionism In Social Work | *Journal of Social Work* | 2021 |
| 11 | Hair, H. J. | Supervision Conversations About Social Justice And Social Work Practice | *Journal of Social Work* | 2015 |
| 12 | Harrison, J., VanDeusen, K., & Way, I. | Embedding Social Justice within Micro Social Work Curricula | *Smith College Studies in Social Work* | 2016 |
| 13 | Jeyapal, D. | The Evolving Politics of Race and Social Work Activism: A Call Across Borders | *Social Work* | 2017 |
| 14 | Johnstone, M. | Centering Social Justice in Mental Health Practice: Epistemic Justice and Social Work Practice | *Research on Social Work Practice* | 2021 |
| 15 | Kam, P. K. | Back to the "social" of social work: Reviving the social work profession's contribution to the promotion of social justice | *International Social Work* | 2014 |
| 16 | Keenan, E. K., Limone, C., & Sandoval, S. L. | A "Just Sense of Well-Being": Social Work's Unifying Purpose in Action | *Social Work* | 2017 |
| 17 | Kim, H. C. | Challenge to the Social Work Profession? The Rise of Socially Engaged Art and a Call to Radical Social Work | *Social Work* | 2017 |
| 18 | Lee, E., Kourgiantakis, T., Hu, R., Greenblatt, A., & Logan, J. | Pedagogical Methods of Teaching Social Justice in Social Work: A Scoping Review | *Research on Social Work Practice* | 2022 |
| 19 | Lee, E., Kourgiantakis, T., & Hu, R. | Teaching Note-Teaching Socially Just Culturally Competent Practice Online: Pedagogical Challenges and Lessons Learned During the Pandemic | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2021 |

| | Author | Article Title | Journal | Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 20 | Nadan, Y., Weinberg-Kurnik, G., & Ben-Ari, A. | The Political Dimension of Multicultural Social Work Education | *Journal of Social Work* | 2016 |
| 21 | Nicotera, A. | Social Justice and Social Work, A Fierce Urgency: Recommendations for Social Work Social Justice Pedagogy | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2019 |
| 22 | Slater, E. L. | Private Practice Social Workers' Commitment to Social Justice | *Clinical Social Work* | 2020 |
| 23 | Slayter, E. M. | Teaching Note-"By Any Means Necessary!" Infusing Socioeconomic Justice Content Into Quantitative Research Course Work | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2017 |
| 24 | Varghese, R., & Kang, H. K. | Essential Knowledge for Clinical Social Work Practice: Social Work Faculty Perspectives | *Smith College Studies in Social Work* | 2019 |
| 25 | Windsor, L. C., Shorkey, C., & Battle, D. | Measuring Student Learning in Social Justice Courses: The Diversity and Oppression Scale | *Journal of Social Work Education* | 2015 |

APPENDIX D: Detailed List of Articles Per Journal (N=25)

| Journal of Social Work Education - 9 | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Atteberry-Ash, B., Nicotera, N., & Gonzales, B. (2021). Walk the Talk of Power, Privilege, and Oppression: A Template Analysis. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *57*(1), 7–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1661917 |
| 2 | Beltrán, R., Hacker, A., & Begun, S. (2016). Environmental Justice Is a Social Justice Issue: Incorporating Environmental Justice Into Social Work Practice Curricula. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *52*(4), 493–502. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1215277 |
| 3 | Bradley, C., Maschi, T., O'Brien, H., Morgen, K., & Ward, K. (2012). Faithful But Different: Clinical Social Workers Speak Out About Career Motivation and Professional Values. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *48*(3), 459–477. https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2012.201000043 |
| 4 | Bryson, S. A., Mehrotra, G., Rodriguez-JenKins, J., & Ilea, P. (2022). Centering Racial Equity in a BSW Program: What We've Learned in Five Years. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *ahead-of-print*(ahead-of-print), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2022.2119354 |
| 5 | Carlson, J., Nguyen, H., & Reinardy, J. (2016). Social Justice and the Capabilities Approach: Seeking a Global Blueprint for the EPAS. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *52*(3), 269–282. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1174635 |
| 6 | Gatenio Gabel, S., & Mapp, S. (2020). Teaching Human Rights and Social Justice in Social Work Education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *56*(3), 428–441. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.165658 |
| 7 | Lee, E., Kourgiantakis, T., & Hu, R. (2021). Teaching Note-Teaching Socially Just Culturally Competent Practice Online: Pedagogical Challenges and Lessons Learned During the Pandemic. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *57*(sup1), 58–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1935367 |
| 8 | Nicotera, A. (2019). Social Justice and Social Work, A Fierce Urgency: Recommendations for Social Work Social Justice Pedagogy. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *55*(3), 460–475. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1600443 |
| 9 | Slayter, E. M. (2017). Teaching Note-"By Any Means Necessary!" Infusing Socioeconomic Justice Content Into Quantitative Research Course Work. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *53*(2), 339–346. |

| Journal of Social Work - 3 | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Gregory, J. R. (2021). The imperative and promise of neo-abolitionism in social work. *Journal of Social Work : JSW*, *21*(5), 1203–1224. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017320952049 |
| 2 | Hair, H. J. (2015). Supervision conversations about social justice and social work practice. *Journal of Social Work : JSW*, *15*(4), 349–370. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017314539082 |
| 3 | Nadan, Y., Weinberg-Kurnik, G., & Ben-Ari, A. (2016). The political dimension of multicultural social work education. *Journal of Social Work : JSW*, *16*(3), 362–379. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017315579152 |

| Social Work - 6 | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Atteberry-Ash, B. E. (2022). Social Work and Social Justice: A Conceptual Review. *Social Work (New York)*, *68*(1), 38–46. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swac042 |
| 2 | Goode, R. W., Cowell, M., McMillan, D., Van Deinse, T., & Cooper-Lewter, C. (2021). Preparing Social Workers to Confront Social Injustice and Oppression: Evaluating the Role of Social Work Education. *Social Work (New York)*, *66*(1), 39–48. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swaa018 |
| 3 | Jeyapal, D. (2017). The Evolving Politics of Race and Social Work Activism: A Call across Borders. *Social Work (New York)*, *62*(1), 45–52. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/sww069 |
| 4 | Keenan, E. K., Limone, C., & Sandoval, S. L. (2017). A "Just Sense of Well-Being": Social Work's Unifying Purpose in Action. *Social Work (New York)*, *62*(1), 19–28. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/sww066 |
| 5 | Kim, H. C. (2017). A Challenge to the Social Work Profession? The Rise of Socially Engaged Art and a Call to Radical Social Work. *Social Work (New York)*, *62*(4), 305–311. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swx045 |
| 6 | Windsor, L. C., Shorkey, C., & Battle, D. (2015). Measuring Student Learning in Social Justice Courses: The Diversity and Oppression Scale. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *51*(1), 58–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2015.977133 |

| Clinical Social Work Journal - 2 | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Asakura, K., & Maurer, K. (2018). Attending to Social Justice in Clinical Social Work: Supervision as a Pedagogical Space. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *46*(4), 289–297. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-018-0667-4 |
| 2 | Slater, E. L. (2020). Private Practice Social Workers' Commitment to Social Justice. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *48*(4), 360–368. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-020-00746-z |

| Smith College Studies in Social Work - 2 | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Harrison, J., VanDeusen, K., & Way, I. (2016). Embedding Social Justice within Micro Social Work Curricula. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, *86*(3), 258–273. https://doi.org/10.1080/00377317.2016.1191802 |
| 2 | Varghese, R., & Kang, H. K. (2019). Essential Knowledge for Clinical Social Work Practice: Social Work Faculty Perspectives. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, *89*(3-4), 200–219. https://doi.org/10.1080/00377317.2019.1702344 |

| Research on Social Work Practice -2 | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Johnstone, M. (2021). Centering Social Justice in Mental Health Practice: Epistemic Justice and Social Work Practice. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *31*(6), 634–643. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211010957 |
| 2 | Lee, E., Kourgiantakis, T., Hu, R., Greenblatt, A., & Logan, J. (2022). Pedagogical Methods of Teaching Social Justice in Social Work: A Scoping Review. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *32*(7), 762–783. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315221085666 |

| International Social Work -1 | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Kam, P. K. (2014). Back to the "social" of social work: Reviving the social work profession's contribution to the promotion of social justice. *International Social Work*, *57*(6), 723–740. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872812447118 |

APPENDIX E: Illustration of Structural and Fine Analysis

| **Structural Analysis** |
| --- |
| Article Title: Social Justice And Social Work, A Fierce Urgency: Recommendations for Social Work Social Justice Pedagogy<br>Author(s): Nicotera<br>Publication Year: 2019<br>Journal: Journal of Social Work Education<br>Topic: articulating and applying the "Circle of insight" to define and engage social justice in SW curriculum |
| Main Objective(s):<br>1. What is the article's main topic and subtopic(s)?<br>a. Social justice framework for SW pedagogy, use as a tool to better define and understand social justice (p. 461)<br>2. What is the article's goal(s)?<br>a. Use the circle of insight to examine social work's notion of SJ (p. 462)<br>b. "It is my hope and belief that using the circle of insight to examine and critically reflect on my experience as a social work educator, in light of relevant social justice social work research, will help social work educators and the social work profession better understand and practice social justice." (p. 464)<br>3. Who is the article's intended audience?<br>a. Social work admins and instructors |
| Theoretical/Epistemological Orientation:<br>1. Does the article name its theoretical orientation? If so, what?<br>a. Circle of insight framework: see, reflect, act<br>b. "The see-reflect-act circle of insight framework, discussed in greater detail later, combines concepts from indigenous healing and peacemaking circles, restorative justice processes, Aristotelian philosophical traditions, Catholic social teachings, liberation pedagogy and theology, nonviolence training from the civil rights era, and social science inquiry (Nicotera, 2018)" (p.462)<br>2. Is one implied, if not?<br>a. "This dialectical, open process is also purposeful and enlightening because it moves toward enlightenment— critical consciousness (Reisch & Garvin, 2016)"(p. 462) - may want to unpack his use of enlightenment here, though not specifically alluding to The Enlightenment |
| Vocabulary:<br>1. What are the key terms used in reference to social justice? (official def. on pg. |

472)
    a. Love, liberation, justice, insight, gather facts, reflect, multidisciplinary knowledge, ethical principles, act, authenticity, bold, Five Cs: context, consistency, care, critical self-examination, constructive action, political participation, civic engagement, multicultural activism, heals, reconciles, and restores (all NV rhetoric)
2. What are recurring themes throughout the article
    a. Lack of definitional clarity around SJ, needs clarity, SJ need clarity on how to integrate SJ into the curriculum

Tone:
1. What is the overall attitude of the article? Sanctimonious, Patronizing
2. Examples:
    a. "The circle invites us to thoughtful and constructive action rather than impulsive and destructive reaction. It challenges us to refrain from acting until the first two phases of the circle have been engaged." (p. 463)

Omissions:
1. What is conspicuously absent from the discourse strand?
2. What viewpoints/epistemologies are marginalized as a result of the omission(s)?

   Terms relevant to the discourse strand (generated from the literature and my current critiques of what could be relevant to the discourse strand, though under-discussed): access, **anarchism**, anti-oppression, anti-oppressive practice, collective transformation, critical race theory, **decolonial theory**, **decolonization**, equality, equity, feminist theory, freedom, human rights, inclusion, **liberation**, queer liberation, queer theory, radical, self-determination, social transformation, structural change, structural social work, transformative practice, transformative justice

Discursive entanglements:
1. What is the relationship between the various discourse strands referenced in the article?
    a. Social justice and nonviolence
2. How do the discourse strands overlap?
3. Examples:
    a. "political theorist Sharp (1973) categorizes 198 methods of social justice, nonviolent action that have been used by individuals and people globally over the years. Thus, our capacity, our place and perspective, our resources, our experience, and the extent of our engagement with the first two phases of the circle all influence how we respond, and what we choose to do." (p.463)
    b. MLK references on pg. 467

Discourse position:

1. Based on the discourse strands and discursive entanglements within the article, what is its overarching perspective?
    a. Discourse position: social justice must be defines and applied as “social work’s unifying theme” (p. 466)
    b. SJ is something that can be standardized - converted into multi-step process
2. Examples:
    a. “As discussed, the circle of insight invites a dialectical, open, purposeful, and enlightening see-reflect-act cyclical transformation process. It also incorporates what I refer to as the circle’s ABCs (and D and E): authentic, bold, committed dialectical engagement (Nicotera, 2018), which can provide important preliminary and process considerations for the work of social justice–infused social work curricular transformation.” (p. 467)
    b. “I hope and trust that the circle of insight process and considerations and resources presented here can provide a framework and tools to engage in a courageous and critically important process of curricular transformation, a process that will enable us to more effectively address the injustices of the current historical moment.” (p. 472)

| Fine Analysis |
| --- |
| **Characterization of the Discourse Plane:**<br>**1. Why was the article selected? How does it typify the discourse strand?**<br>This article was selected because it represented many of the themes that emerged during multiple rounds of structural analysis. It is an excellent example of multiple discursive strands converging - neoliberal competence, the need for explicit definition, Enlightenment assumptions, and social justice's centrality ("heart") within the profession. It is especially representative of the idea that social justice is a concept that would benefit from standardization/universalized forms of engagement. The article is especially strong on 'social justice needs definition,' 'social justice competence,' 'social justice as the heart of the profession,' and 'embedded liberalism'<br><br>**2. Who is the author? What is their status within social work?**<br>Anthony Nictoera, JD, DSW<br>Assistant Professor at Seton Hall University and Director of NYU's nationally recognized Post-Master's Certificate Program in Spirituality and Social Work.<br>Well-known "leader" in social justice and peace teaching/writing<br>Adjunct Faculty at New York University (NYU)<br><br>**3. What type of article is it?**<br>Theoretical/Commentary article - presents "circle of insight" as theoretical/definitional framework for social justice; offers insights based on author's experience<br><br>**4. What year was it written?**<br>2019 |
| **Text Surface:**<br>**1. What is emphasized in the abstract (including keywords)?**<br>The indefinability of social justice within social work; present/apply "circle of insight framework"<br><br>Keywords: "tool"; "defining"; "research findings"; "ethical codes"; "curricular transformation" - where is freedom? Liberation?<br><br>**2. What topics are addressed within the article? What themes/subthemes are touched upon?**<br>Topics: present and apply a framework for social justice pedagogy - use as a tool to better define and understand social justice.<br><br>Themes/subthemes: lack of clarity regarding social justice, define social justice, standardize social justice curriculum |

**3. How do the themes overlap?**
Because social justice is at the "**heart** of the social work profession," it must be clearly **defined** and **applied** in social work courses.

**Rhetorical Devices:**
**1. What argumentation strategies are employed (e.g., logical, emotional)?**

*Appeals to authority* (cites multiple "experts" in social justice, including himself, MLK, Friere, hooks, and IFSW/CSWE)

**Example(s)**: "It is my hope the circle of insight (see Figure 1), a tool I created over the past 18 years teaching social justice courses to traditional (18–21 years of age) and adult (22 years and older) undergraduate students from various disciplines and my 12 years as a school of social work adjunct faculty member can help educators integrate social justice more effectively into social work curricula and can contribute to the profession's efforts to define and better understand social justice (Nicotera, 2018)." (p. 461)

*Appeals to tradition* (locates his brand of social justice within civil rights legacy/non-violence)

**Example(s)**: "The see-reflect-act circle of insight framework, discussed in greater detail later, combines concepts from indigenous healing and peacemaking circles, restorative justice processes, Aristotelian philosophical traditions, Catholic social teachings, liberation pedagogy and theology, nonviolence training from the civil rights era, and social science inquiry" (p. 462)

"In the spirit of King's fierce urgency of now, our world desperately needs social workers and the social work profession to deepen its struggle to create a new world by renewing its commitment to define, teach, and practice social justice" (p. 467)

*Appeals to emotions* (evoke benevolence and a sense of urgency)

**Example(s)**: "Scholars and researchers affirm that social workers are often well-trained to empathize and address micro, immediate needs, but not to address macro, underlying issues of social and economic injustice that create the suffering that those in need and on the margins experience (Reed & Lehning, 2014; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). We can and must do better. It is worth the effort. Not to do so is itself an injustice and carries the risk that we ourselves become complicit in perpetuating an oppressive, unjust system." (p. 466)

"The classroom is political, and we must not shy away from engaging students in a way that invites the integration of pedagogy, practice, and politics. Emphasizing this point, Picower (2015) reminds us that teaching social justice has political dimensions

and carries with it a responsibility for challenging inequities and working together to create a more just society." (p. 467)
"In the fierce urgency of now, transforming our social work curricula has the potential to create a lasting legacy of love and foster deeper commitment to the collective task of constructing King's new world" (p. 467) - *also appeal to authority since he cites King

*Appeals to ethics* (presents himself as virtuous, references his expertise in social justice)

**Example(s)**: "Reflecting on my experience in light of relevant research, including assertions by numerous social work researchers and experts that social justice should serve as social work's unifying theme and organizing value (Marsh, 2005; Mohan, 2002; Morgaine, 2014; Hodge, 2010; Solas, 2008; Van Soest, 1992a, 1992b; Van Soest & Garcia, 2008), I have come to believe that to fully embrace our professional, ethical commitment to social justice and ensure students are prepared to practice in a way that is consistent with this commitment, we must enrich and infuse social work curricula with social justice principles and pedagogy" (p.466)

*Inclusive pronouns* (attempts to create a sense of unity with the reader/s) - we/us/our

**Example(s):** "When I asked Ira Colby, social work leader, author, educator, policy and clinical social worker, former dean, and former president of CSWE, about the heart of **our** social work understanding of social justice, he said that for him **we** must ask one critical question when contemplating social justice action: Is it (**our** action or policy) fair and just?" (p. 473)

"How does **our** action or policy affect the disadvantaged, vulnerable, and oppressed? If it harms, oppresses, or discriminates, then it violates **our** commitment to social justice. If it heals, reconciles, and restores, it respects, and is consistent with, **our** commitment to social justice." (p.473) - *this quote also evidences that the author assumes that social justice is being conducted by those who are not simultaneously oppressed (expertise/SJ expert discourse implied)

"In the fierce urgency of now, the world desperately needs **us**. In the fierce urgency of now, let **us** begin" (p.473)

**2. What idioms, sayings, metaphors, and cliches are present?**

*Cliches:*

"we must meet the problems of injustice as we meet clients' problems as they are, not as we would want them to be" (p. 467)

"*Bring all to the table* [emphasis added]…as well as those primarily affected by social

justice pedagogy and practice: the vulnerable, oppressed, and disadvantaged" (p.468) - to what table?

"Collaborative co-creators" (p. 468)

"we must pay particular attention to all voices, especially those from the margins, for they help us to see more clearly the reality of oppression and injustice" (p.468)

**3. What vocabulary does the article use?**

Urgent, tool, framework, process, social action, activism, advocacy, fair and just, individual rights, liberties, freedom

**4. What sources of knowledge are referenced (e.g., science, statistics, other social work scholars, other disciplines, etc.)? (intertextuality)**

*Social work texts - regurgitation of social work canon*
**Example(s):** 10 texts listed on p. 470 in addition to citing the NASW's social justice priorities and resources and IASSWs resources.

**Ideological Statements:**

**1. What notion of social justice does the article convey?**
*Rational practice*
**Example(s)**: "The circle invites us to thoughtful and constructive action rather than impulsive and destructive reaction. It challenges us to refrain from acting until the first two phases of the circle have been engaged. It takes into consideration the reality observed, in light of lessons learned and principles critically reflected on, and only then is action considered" (p.463)

**2. What assumptions about social justice underlie the article?**
*Training in social justice leads to better social justice activists*
**Example(s):** "We also must confront honestly the fact that we are not as well educated about, and trained in, social justice theory and practice as we need to be" (p.467)

"if we fail to authentically address this deficit—the need for social work educators and leadership to better understand social justice theories and applications—we cannot expect social work students to have a clear enough understanding of what social justice is to be able to promote and practice it" (p.468)

*Social justice is practiced by those in positions of privilege for the "disadvantaged"*
**Example(s):** "Transforming social work curricula requires boldness in our willingness to bring all to the table, including students, educators, researchers, practitioners, and

leadership, as well as those primarily affected by social justice pedagogy and practice: the vulnerable, oppressed, and disadvantaged." (p. 468)

*Social justice is about access to systems*
**Example(s):** "Equal access to basic liberties and opportunities" (p.472)

*Social justice is about repair and reconciliation with unjust structures*
**Example(s):** "Engagement with persons and groups that is restorative, in that it seeks to heal, reconcile, and repair broken, fractured personal and social relations, and structures" (p. 472)

**3. What thought traditions is social justice embedded within?**
Liberalism: "Equitable distribution of resources; equal access to basic liberties" (p. 472); "[social justice] respects and promotes individual rights, liberties, and freedom, and social responsibility, accountability, and the common good" (p. 472)

Non-violence: "nonviolence training from the civil rights era" (p. 462)

Neoliberalism: "Reflecting on my experience in light of relevant research, including assertions by numerous social work researchers and ***experts*** that social justice should serve as social work's unifying theme and organizing value" (p. 466)

**4. What assumptions about social transformation underlie the article?**
*Knowing better = doing better*
**Example(s)**: "It is my hope and belief that using the circle of insight to examine and critically reflect on my experience as a social work educator, in light of relevant social justice social work research, will help social work educators and the social work profession better understand and practice social justice." (p.464)

"Research has shown that despite the complications and concerns inherent in defining and delivering social justice classes, they do make a difference" (for who? In what context?)

*Social transformation occurs through political participation and civic engagement*
**Example(s):** Arguably, a lack of political participation, civic engagement, and multicultural activism has contributed to the fierce urgency of our current divisive, discriminatory, and oppressive economic, political, cultural, and social climate." (pgs. 471-472)

**5. What is presented as an arena for social justice? What is presented as the means with which to enact social justice? What is deemed as effective social justice practice?**
Social work education/Curricula change
**Example(s):** "I hope and trust that the circle of insight process and considerations and

resources presented here can provide a framework and tools to engage in a courageous and critically important process of curricular transformation, a process that will enable us to more effectively address the injustices of the current historical moment." (p. 472)

Effective social justice practice = engaging in the circle of insight

Tools: engagement with oppressed people, education of all persons (education as primary tool to affect change/enact SJ

**6. Who/what needs to change in order to realize a more socially just world?**
Social work pedagogy and curricula regarding social justice needs to change so social workers re/commit to social justice and a more socially just world can be realized

**7. How are patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and heterosexism taken up, if at all?**
These concepts are conspicuously absent from this text which suggest superficial and universalized understandings of social issues, color blind/gender-blind analysis, maintaining binary of liberator (privileged)/liberated (oppressed), allows structural context to go unchallenged - which, in turn, allows for this assimilationist/reformist perspective to make sense.

**8. Who/what is missing?**
See above. A glaring omission is the role that direct action groups and grassroots movements more generally have had on influencing the discourse of social justice within social work and their role in perpetuating social justice more broadly. Besides the peace groups and civil rights legacy mentioned, it is assumed that knowledge generated with academia has real-world consequences for oppressed people - which further perpetuates epistemic oppression by re-centering social work canonical knowledge about social justice to define it. There is also the total omission of radical analyses - fundamental structural/systemic change is omitted in favor of liberal reforms.