

## A Social Justice Approach to Undergraduate Psychology Education: Building Cultural Diversity, Inclusion, and Sensitivity Into Teaching, Research, and Service

Susanna Gallor  
University of Massachusetts Boston

**ABSTRACT.** As a discipline that addresses a broad range of human experiences across the lifespan, the field of psychology has a responsibility to ensure that human diversity is reflected in education, training, research, and valuable service that is often targeted to diverse communities across society. Multicultural and diversity psychology has pushed the field to examine an array of individual and cultural differences, and to make multicultural competence a defining feature of psychological education, training, and research. Adopting a social justice approach to psychology, particularly undergraduate psychology education and research, can help to ensure that the field meets this social responsibility and more intentionally addresses implications of individual and systemic oppression. This editorial seeks to articulate what a social justice approach means for undergraduate psychology education and begins to explore social justice principles and strategies that can be applied in teaching, practice, and research.

For the past few decades, the psychological literature has highlighted a need for the integration of social justice education and training in professional psychology graduate programs (Burnes & Singh, 2010). Subsequently, scholars, researchers, and practitioners have identified principles and ideals underlying social justice education and training in psychology graduate programs, particularly counseling and clinical graduate programs. Many have explored and developed concrete strategies for clinical supervisors, faculty, and researchers so that they will have the skills to teach and apply social justice in coursework and training activities. I have personally benefited from such a value and focus early in my doctoral training. It has been challenging and rewarding to continue learning about social justice theory and practice. Since starting to teach undergraduate psychology majors and becoming involved with Psi Chi as the Diversity Director, I have begun to wonder: What about the integration of social justice education and principles in the academic experiences of undergraduate psychology students?

### What Is a Social Justice Approach?

I have previously facilitated social justice education trainings, and they all start with an exercise in which participants are asked to cocreate a working definition of *social justice*. Of course, there are definitions out there, and we can always start with how social justice is generally defined by scholars, activists, researchers, and educators. However, the very process of developing one's own definition, or of a group coming to a consensus about their definition, is in and of itself part of a social justice approach. When constructing a definition, a few themes often stood out no matter who was part of the group at the time, including the importance of active participation in the learning process; the integration of personal awareness, social action, and advocacy; and the use of systems perspectives in exploring and understanding psychological and interpersonal dynamics.

Having a social justice approach moves beyond multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion, although it encompasses all of these. Approaching education, scholarship, and practice from a social justice

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perspective involves action and interaction, critical inquiry, and personal commitment. Being social justice oriented means that one approaches academic and psychological practices with the primary goal of reaching, including, more deeply understanding, and advocating for historically marginalized and oppressed groups. It also means that scholars, practitioners, and educators are inclusive of dominant and majority group voices and perspectives to deepen understanding and social action. As Enns and Forrest (2005) stated, “multicultural education is about and for all people, not only those who are identified as disadvantaged or at risk” (p. 5).

### **A Social Justice Approach for Psychology Undergraduates**

In an academic context, particularly in the context of psychology undergraduate education, I believe the field can apply many concepts, principles, and strategies from such pedagogies and frameworks as multicultural education, social justice education and training, liberation psychology, and feminist psychology. Much of the literature has focused on graduate-level education and training. However, some literature has discussed undergraduate psychology education with a social justice orientation. That is, although the topic of social justice does not seem directly addressed in the literature, certain themes and ideas stand out that align with many social justice frameworks in education and training. Generally, a social justice approach in psychology undergraduate education means demonstrating the genuine value in exploring opportunities to think critically and creatively about how to best understand, teach about, and serve a wide range of individuals and communities. A social justice approach further means intentionally integrating the perspectives of those whose experiences have been marginalized or ignored—in all areas of psychology and in all modalities of psychology education and service.

One prominent social justice theme entails the empowerment of learners as well as educators by encouraging students, research assistants, teaching assistants, and others to cocreate, cofacilitate, and coparticipate in all academic and scholarly endeavors. For example, there are many rich discussions and examples of how service learning activities or projects not only can enrich the learning objectives and outcomes in a course, but also how these activities benefit communities and organizations (Toporek & Worthington, 2014). O’Brien, Risco, Castro, and Goodman (2014)

defined *service learning* as “experiential education in which learning is enhanced through volunteer work and reflection” (p. 973). In their description of how undergraduate student learning was assessed in a service learning course where students worked with children living in a shelter for survivors of intimate partner violence, O’Brien et al. (2014) illustrated how service learning can be a powerful “instrument of social justice.” Specifically, undergraduate students first were educated about intimate partner violence in a didactic course, and then the students had the opportunity to participate in the service learning experience in which they provided support and psycho-educational groups to children living in shelters for survivors of intimate partner violence. This innovative way of learning was an opportunity to put their knowledge into practice, solidify their learning, and offer a valuable support service to a community in need. With the integration of service learning into undergraduate education, we can start to identify and shape a more socially relevant psychology. Infusing scholarship and practice relevant to diversity in both the process (e.g., experiential learning) and the content of education exemplifies a social justice orientation (Enns & Sinacore, 2005).

Another way to create a classroom climate that emphasizes participative and interactive learning might be to incorporate more group discussion activities—either in smaller groups or as a large group—during which students are encouraged to explore ideas through personal experiences and examples. The goal is to help students to see themselves in relation not only to themselves, their immediate relationships, and contexts, but also to broader sociocultural and contextual influences. Furthermore, educators can make course content more inclusive by incorporating textbooks, materials, and sources that address a diversity of perspectives, worldviews, and research findings. Watts (2004) offered some specific examples of how educators also can reconceptualize conventional ideas in U.S. psychology into concepts that reflect cultural relativism and social justice principles. For example, theories and implications of constructs such as self-efficacy or self-esteem/self-concept can be reconceptualized as “collective efficacy,” “group solidarity,” or “empowerment.” Similarly, “moral development” can be explored as “cultural development” or “sociopolitical development.” In clinical contexts, educating students about a psychotherapy theory and strategy such as cognitive behavioral therapy can be expanded to include discussions about “critical consciousness raising,” or a process

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of learning to think critically about accepted ways of thinking, underlying assumptions, and other internalized ways of thinking and feeling that serve to reinforce oppressive schemas and subsequent structures of inequality.

Similarly, another theme in the literature has emerged around making research more inclusive and social justice oriented. For example, *participatory action research* is a research methodology that grounds the research in community participation and action. This approach involves research participants themselves in every step of the process—from conceptualizing the research questions to collecting and analyzing data, and to codeveloping conclusions and recommendations. The theory and knowledge gained through this kind of collaboration is grounded in context, aimed at promoting change, and empowering for both researchers and participants/community members. Moreover, Toporek and Worthington (2014) discussed how engaging participants in the process of participatory action research, or other qualitative research approaches in which participants engage with researchers, may allow for more depth and grounded theory in analysis. One example offered was to create an advisory group of participants who can reflect on the process and provide guidance for the project at different stages of the research. Burton and Kagan (2009) also offered examples of action research when describing ways to conduct “community psychological work” with people with learning difficulties. One example was to organize “health awareness groups” to provide opportunities for both researchers and participants to explore and understand experiences from the individual’s point of view, listening and enabling people to get together to share common concerns as well as potential solutions. Generally, the goal in research, particularly undergraduate research, should be more intentionality around choosing what problems to study, what populations to study, and what procedures and measures to use.

Finally, although not specifically informed by social justice principles or ideas, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a teaching paradigm that certainly aims to achieve a key social justice goal: to increase equity and access in classrooms. UDL offers practical and effective teaching practices that meet the needs of different kinds of learners. By applying learning, assessment, and disability research and theories, the UDL framework helps educators understand learner differences as well as the impact of different disabilities on educational

and academic experiences and needs. Through the use of new media in the classroom and flexible teaching and assessment practices, UDL helps educators to truly create universal access to educational materials for all students. Educators can commit to learning about and striving to use a UDL paradigm in their classrooms so that material and activities are more broadly accessible. Waitoller and King Thorius (2016) further articulated how UDL is consistent with a social justice approach through their discussion of how students with “dis/abilities” have historically experienced oppression in terms of who accesses learning and whose abilities are recognized and valued. The authors added that “pedagogies that value ethnic, racial, and language differences simultaneously and intentionally must be committed to disrupting those that have historically pathologized students’ abilities” (p. 367).

### Social Justice Education as a Responsibility

Dykstra (2012) stated the following:

Psychology is an ethical-political endeavor. Its practices are influenced by and influence our societies. Knowledge gained about learning directly impacts a child’s experience in school. How we interpret depression and other mental health symptoms leads to the development of interventions undertaken by millions. The fact that psychology has such an immediate role in our societies impresses upon us the need to develop a form of praxis that is acutely aware of this responsibility. (p. 9)

It has been well-established that society has and will continue to become increasingly diverse and multicultural. Across the globe, contexts of political, social, cultural, and demographic changes have slowly but consistently contributed to a more diverse student body in higher education. Subsequently, this has led to campus communities that are filled with individuals from many cultural backgrounds and with vastly diverse experiences. Because of how intricately intertwined the individuals are with their social contexts, from the standpoint of psychology education, people cannot be understood independently from their social contexts, and psychology as a discipline cannot be learned without the examination of knowledge within a historical, political, cultural, and social context.

On a final note, it is imperative to recognize the challenges of reconceptualizing and adapting one’s approach to teaching, mentoring, and

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research. Perhaps we can consider an equally important but less daunting act of becoming a more social justice oriented educator—to make a personal commitment to engage in active and ongoing professional development. Seeking out additional training, literature, and knowledge of multicultural and social justice education and theory is in itself a statement of one's commitment to a social justice approach. Having a social justice approach is more than just a set of instructional techniques and research strategies—it should be a philosophy, a way of looking at society and the world from psychological perspectives. By adopting a social justice approach, the field of psychology can become a more inclusive discipline.

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*Author Note.* Susanna M. Gallor, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Boston.

Special thanks to Dr. Jennifer Weiner for her assistance in preparation of this editorial.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Susanna M. Gallor, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA 02125. E-mail: [Susanna.Gallor@umb.edu](mailto:Susanna.Gallor@umb.edu)

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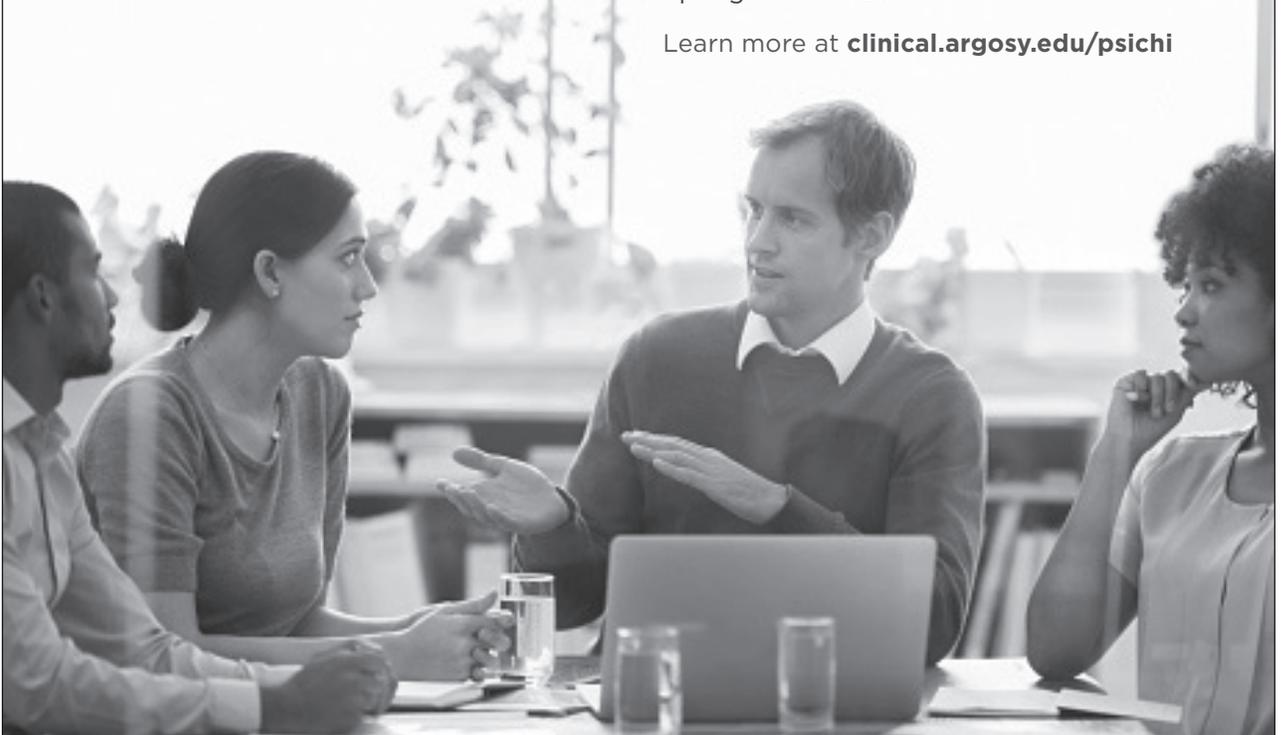
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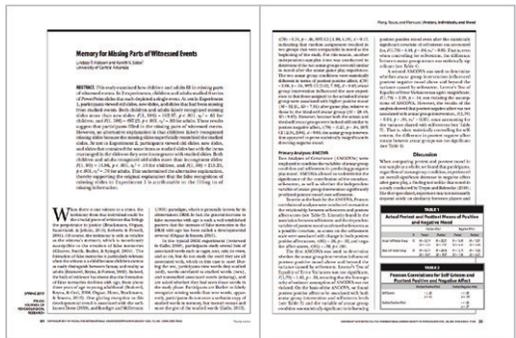
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