"I Am a Change Agent": A Mixed Methods Analysis of Students' Social Justice Value Orientation in an

Undergraduate Community Psychology Course

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Abstract

Learning experiences that connect students to communities and provide them with opportunities to reflect and apply theories to real-world challenges can promote a value orientation toward social justice. This study uses a mixed methods design to investigate students' value orientation toward social justice in an undergraduate community psychology course and the extent to which community engagement contributes to this orientation among a cross-sectional undergraduate sample of racially diverse students at a minority-serving institution. The analysis of outcomes collected across three different course offerings revealed that students enrolled in the course possessed a more favorable orientation toward social justice (*Mdn* = 150.00) and that the course had subtle effects in improving this orientation (*Mdn* = 152.32, *Z* = −1.73, *p* = .08, *r* = −.22). An analysis of students' value orientation across each course offering revealed a significant between-course effect, *H*(2) = 5.86, *p* = .05. Students enrolled in courses with an emphasis on completing the community engagement assignment in a group demonstrated a more positive value orientation. Qualitative findings further explicate how the course increased students' awareness of social inequalities and, for some, their social justice behaviors.

Keywords: social justice, undergraduate education, community psychology, value orientation

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Working with diverse individuals across different communities to solve problems is a worthwhile learning experience for students in the undergraduate psychology major (Gallor, 2017). According to the American Psychological Association's (2013) guidelines for undergraduate education, students should be able to "adopt values that build community at local, national, and global levels" (p. 16). Theoretically, a student who completes an undergraduate major in psychology should possess personal and professional values that respect sociocultural diversity and honor positive community relationships.

Offering an undergraduate community psychology course to students may be one way to strengthen community engagement and build competence in advocacy and sociocultural diversity. The emergence of community psychology as a subfield in psychology in the 1960s and its emphasis on ecological principles, prevention, and systems change (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010) provides an opportunity for undergraduate students to gain experience in applied research and a new perspective of psychology (Henderson & Wright, 2015; Jimenez et al., 2016; Lichty et al., 2019; Schlehofer & Phillips, 2013). Furthermore, the field's broad focus on understanding interactions between systems and individuals and the degree to which systems interfere or promote well-being (Society for Community Research and Action, 2019) may be particularly valuable to students who possess a more favorable value orientation toward social justice.

Aligning learning to the value orientation of students may be an essential process in helping to increase the retention of racially diverse students in the psychology major and the graduate pipeline. According to Garibay (2015), racially diverse students are more likely to express working for social change as important to their choice of major and career interests. Unfortunately, the degree to which research on the scholarship of teaching and learning has focused on the value orientation of racially diverse students and the benefits of community engagement on students' learning remains

underdeveloped. This study seeks to address this current gap by using a mixed methods design to assess

the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: Do racially diverse students who enroll in an undergraduate community

  psychology course possess a high-value orientation toward social justice?

- Research Question 2: Do racially diverse students who complete an undergraduate community

  psychology course demonstrate gains in their value orientation toward social justice?

- Research Question 3: Does the type of community engagement (individual vs. group) influence

  students' value orientation toward social justice?

The discussion will center on the value community engagement offers to psychology students

and, more specifically, racially diverse students.

A Value Orientation Toward Social Justice

Individuals transition through different systems in their socioecology, to include the family and

schools, and begin to construct meaning and develop a worldview (Betancourt et al., 1992; Lee et al.,

2010). Interactions, messages, and observations of others inform how individuals develop their core

beliefs and values (Betancourt et al., 1992; McClintock & Allison, 1989; Messick & McClintock, 1968).

van Zomeren et al. (2008) articulated how the messages individuals receive from their environment as

well as models observed from others can shape perceptions of group advantages and disadvantages.

Such beliefs and related attitudes evolve into a value orientation and influence individual motivations

and goal attainment. According to Messick and McClintock (1968), most people will possess one of three

types of value orientation: cooperative, individualistic, or competitive. Individuals who possess a

cooperative value orientation are more likely to exhibit a high commitment to helping others and to set

goals that align with the broader collective (McClintock & Allison, 1989), whereas individuals who adopt

an individualistic orientation are more likely to value self-preservation and to focus on their needs over

others (Murphy & Ackermann, 2014). Experiences and interactions one may have across their

socioecology can either affirm or challenge such values. Moreover, individuals are likely to actively seek

those experiences that affirm such values. For instance, Caldwell and Vera's (2010) qualitative study

using a sample of doctoral counseling psychology students found that those who modeled cooperation

over competition were more likely to engage in service-related activities and exhibited a high-value

orientation toward social justice. Understanding a student's value orientation can provide insight into

motivations and interests in social justice work.

A value orientation toward social justice indicates a student is likely to possess an awareness of

social disadvantages and express a value in working to improve well-being and justice for all people

(Gallor, 2017; Hardiman et al., 2007). Interactions with influential others (e.g., parents and peers),

cultural beliefs, and institutions socialize individuals to develop an awareness of and unfavorable

attitudes toward injustice (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Lee et al., 2010). Individuals who possess a value

orientation toward social justice also develop such values from first-hand experiences and an affinity

toward others (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Garibay, 2015; Georgetown University Center on Education and

the Workforce, 2017). Several scholars have attempted to examine such values by citing that those who

decide to engage in civic action or activism are often motivated from their own shared experiences with

injustice and an awareness of distinctions observed across their environments and group disadvantages

(Thomas et al., 2012; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Consequently, a value orientation toward social justice

may be quite salient among racially diverse students and influence their decision in choosing a major

and career (Garibay, 2015; Gibbs & Griffin, 2013; McGee & Bentley, 2017).

The Role of the University in Social Justice Education

The university environment provides a learning context in which students are likely to encounter

experiences that alter their beliefs and worldview or further affirms them. Many universities infuse

social justice principles and social justice education into departmental, curricular, and professional

training standards (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Gallor,

2017; Nagda et al., 1999; Stearns, 2009; Teasley & Archuleta, 2015). The adoption of social justice

principles and education is perceived as a necessity in preparing students to meet the social needs of an

increasingly diverse population (Adams et al., 2016). Students learn about individual biases and global

challenges and engage in reflection before working with historically marginalized and oppressed groups

(Gallor, 2017). Such learning experiences include the critical examination of values and inequalities and

the immersion of students in diverse communities as volunteers or service providers. The university

environment, therefore, becomes an intervening point in students' lives that can influence their

attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral intentions to pursue specific work experiences (Grant, 2012;

McInerney, 2012; Mitchell & Soria, 2016).

Community engagement functions as "a collaboration between institutions of higher education

and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange

of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Driscoll, 2008, p. 38). Students

become essential resources to a community by offering their services, time, and knowledge;

simultaneously, the community functions as a space and resource for students to gain knowledge of

human behavior, development, and motivation (Gallor, 2017; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2015; McAuliff

et al., 2013; Schlehofer & Phillips, 2013). For instance, Ginwright and Cammarota (2015) reported

several advantages of placing undergraduate students in international community settings to conduct

applied research on issues related to health. They found that having opportunities for students to reflect

on their learning and form relationships with diverse community members increased awareness of

structural and economic inequalities and social justice behaviors. Mitchell and Soria's (2016) analysis of

more than 3,000 undergraduate students similarly found that those involved in community engagement

experiences were more likely to demonstrate positive changes in attitudes, an affinity toward

empowering others, and an increase in advocacy behaviors. When students have the opportunity to

apply course theories to practical problems and model collaboration in community settings, they are

likely to increase their sense of agency and gain relationship-building skills (Adams et al., 2016; Gallor,

2017; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2015; Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012; Zimmerman et al., 2013).

Higher education is a critical context to assess the value of social justice education and

community engagement on student learning. Community engagement may be an essential feature of

social justice education because it places students outside the traditional classroom and into spaces

where they can experience service-learning (Hardiman et al., 2007; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008;

Schlehofer & Phillips, 2013). Gallor (2017) proposed that students working with a wide range of

individuals and diverse communities are an essential piece of instituting social justice in undergraduate

education. Whereas experiential learning connects learning to applied experiences (Simons et al., 2012),

service-learning involves learning from service to one's community (Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012).

Students begin to work within local communities, collaborate with others, and develop competence in

the values of fairness, respect for human dignity, and diversity. McAuliff et al. (2013) found

undergraduate students volunteering in communities and working with organizations were more likely

to develop favorable attitudes toward social justice. Learning thus becomes a vital outcome in

community engagement experience when it transforms how students think of others and see

themselves and increases their efficacy to advocate for justice (Friedland, 2004; Grant, 2012; McInerney,

2012; Nagda et al., 1999; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Method

The present study employs a mixed methods design to assess a value orientation toward social

justice in a sample of racially diverse students enrolled in an undergraduate community psychology

course. The research design uses the typology QUANTITATIVE + qualitative to emphasize the

quantitative phase and complementary role of the qualitative phase in the mixed methods design

(Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The design of the study provides a descriptive analysis of students' social

justice orientation using a validated metric (Torres-Harding et al., 2012) and further explicates findings

through the interpretive analysis of qualitative responses (Esterberg, 2002).

Context

The institutional review board approved the research design and protocol for this study. The students selected for the study were from an undergraduate community psychology course offered over 3 subsequent years at a minority-serving institution in the southeast region of the United States. The university enrolled students who majority self-identified as first-generation (52%), and 77% identified as a member of a racially diverse group (to include Black/African American, Hispanic, or mixed ethnic/racial groups). The minority-serving institution provided a vital context to investigate undergraduate community psychology education because a majority of students represent groups underrepresented in the field of psychology and those students may have limited to no exposure to community psychology (Bauer et al., 2017; Simmons & Smiley, 2010).

Participants

The study included a cross-sectional sample of undergraduate students. Of a total of 72 students enrolled in the undergraduate courses, 61 provided informed consent (89% of enrollment). Of those students who did not provide informed consent, five withdrew, and the remaining chose to opt out of the study. Course size varied from 18 to 28 students. The majority of students self-identified as African American (85%) and female (87%). Table 1 provides an overview of student demographics for each course offering. Seventy-seven percent of students indicated that they were majoring in psychology, and the remaining 23% majored in social work, education, and interdisciplinary studies. The majority of students were completing their 3rd year in college, and the average age of students in the sample was 21.5 years (*SD* = 4.25).

Course Structure

The faculty member offered the undergraduate course to different cohorts of students over 3 subsequent years. Each course offering met twice a week for 1.5 hr during a 15-week-long spring

Table 1

Characteristics of Students Enrolled in the Undergraduate Course

Characteristic	Course offerings			Total (*N* = 61)
	First (*n* = 15)	Second (*n* = 28)	Third (*n* = 18)	
Age, *M* (*SD*)	20.5 (1.6)	22.6 (8.1)	21.4 (3.0)	
Ethnicity or race				
Black or African American	14	23	15	52
White or European American	0	3	0	3
Other [a]	1	2	3	6
Gender				
Female	11	22	15	48
Male	4	6	3	13
Grade level [b]				
Senior	9	16	3	28
Junior	4	8	12	24
Sophomore	2	2	3	7

[a] The "other" classification was composed of students who self-identified as Latina, Filipina, or multiracial. [b] All students did not provide their grade level.

semester. The primary structure of the course included readings on principles and competencies in community psychology (Kloos et al., 2012) and 20 hr of service offered through a community engagement assignment. The faculty designed the community engagement assignment to expose students to research and some form of social advocacy in a community setting (Carmony et al., 2000). The structure of the course included consistent topics and assignments, such as preparing an advocacy report and an advocacy/informational video on the community engagement experience (see Henderson, 2017; Henderson & Wright, 2015). The advocacy report consisted of a statement of the issue or problem, research outlining the pros and cons of the advocacy statement, and a call to action. Similar to the report, the multimedia video included a call to action and aimed to improve student skills in using visual media, text, and music to convey a message.

There were several moderations offered in the community engagement experience. The first course offering allowed students to choose a community site of their preference and complete the report as an individual submission. Students had minimal opportunities to discuss or share assignments with peers in the course, and roughly 30% did not complete their service in the community surrounding the university and elected to complete it elsewhere. In the second course offering, the faculty member identified local agencies near the university and required students to complete the report and video as a group submission. The students had to choose an agency from the list and focus their topic on services offered. Some course time was devoted to students working in their groups and moving through activities related to their topic. In the last course offering, students worked as a class in conducting a needs assessment for a local neighborhood revitalization project. Course time was devoted to having class discussions on challenges arising in the local neighborhood and connecting group topics to revitalization efforts. Students were divided into small groups to work on individual sections of a final report and a class video submission (Henderson, 2017).

Measures

The study included an online version of the Social Justice Scale (SJS; Torres-Harding et al., 2012) and an open-ended assessment designed by the faculty member. The SJS is a 24-item scale designed to assess social justice in four domains: Attitudes Toward Social Justice, Perceived Behavioral Control, Subjective Norms, and Behavioral Intentions. The scale consists of a 7-point Likert rating ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Cumulative scores range from 24 to 168; higher scores indicate a more favorable value orientation toward social justice. Students' response in the courses aimed to confirm the reliability of the scale; Cronbach's alpha on the subscales ranged from .82 to .95.

The open-ended assessment required students to review the definition of social justice outlined by Kloos et al. (2012) and then describe the degree to which the course increased their awareness and commitment to social justice. Specifically, in one essay, students were required to describe how the

course increased their awareness of social justice issues, followed by a second essay on how the course

increased their commitment to social justice. The free-writing process aimed to gain as much descriptive

text as possible from students using a focused prompt.

Procedure and Analysis

At the beginning of the course, students were informed about the study and encouraged to

complete the consent form and SJS online within the 1st week of class. In the last week of class,

students received information about completing the SJS measure via email and were provided with a

deadline before the final exam. All students who completed the online measure at the beginning and

end of the course received two extra points toward their final grade (translating to about 2% of their

total course grade). At the end of the course, students received a prompt asking them to reflect on their

experiences and to indicate their level of agreement with items on the SJS. Responses from the SJS at

pretest and posttest were downloaded into a spreadsheet, coded, and entered into SPSS Version 25 for

analysis.

The faculty member provided the option of completing the open-ended assessment on the last

day of the course. Completing the assessment was voluntary; about 95% of students completed the

assessment. Responses from the open-ended assessment were transcribed and coded by a research

assistant. The research assistant was a former student who received training in qualitative methods and

had the opportunity to review the syllabus and observe one of the courses before coding. Deductive

coding included a review of individual responses across each course, the literature, and items on the SJS

to generate unique codes (Esterberg, 2002). Following this step, the research assistant prepared an

audit trail to review all responses and organize similar codes into categories related to social justice

attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. A total of 54 codes emerged at this stage of analysis. The lead author

reviewed the final codes with the research assistant to establish a level of agreement (90%) and

organized codes into a spreadsheet to establish intercoder reliability (Cohen's κ = .78).

Codes and transcripts were uploaded into NVivo Version 10 to perform text queries. Using codes such as "advocacy" and "change," text queries can assess the frequency of codes in the transcripts, similar words, and relationships (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). For example, codes such as "advocacy" and "change" were coded into a relationship node such as "behavior." Queries led to finalizing 21 consistent codes, where 17 codes were consistent across all three courses (81%). We used NVivo to visualize relationships in the data by clustering codes into similar groups, which guided the thematic categories outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Thematic Categories With Codes Across Course Offerings

Theme and code cluster	Course offering (% coverage)		
	First	Second	Third
Awareness of social justice issues			
Change thinking	20	30	36
Diverse issues	1	7	7
Diverse people	9	12	7
Domestic violence	1	36	1
Ecological systems	36	42	48
Local community	11	18	29
Immigration	83	1	26
Inequalities	62	42	52
Mental health	26	4	1
Behavioral control			
Changing roles	3	6	7
How to change	22	24	32
Make a difference	5	18	14
Social justice behaviors			
Activist	4	14	16
Advocate	3	12	22
Build community	1	1	3
Committed	1	4	13
Involvement	1	3	19

Results

Quantitative Results

A review of the descriptive results suggested that cumulative student scores on the SJS were nonnormally distributed; skewness at the beginning of the courses ranged from −1.15 to −0.31 (SE = 0.30) and kurtosis ranged from −0.60 to 1.04 (SE = 0.60). Descriptive analysis of students' scores on the SJS at the end of the course showed skewness that ranged from −1.56 to −0.01 (SE = 0.30) and kurtosis that ranged from 0.30 to 2.86 (SE = 0.30). There was an outlier in the last course offering, a result of incomplete items. Removal of the score did not alter the skewness of the data.

The lead author performed nonparametric tests to assess score changes in students' responses (Grech & Calleja, 2018). The lead author then subtracted the posttest scores from the pretest scores to rank data from lowest to highest. A focus on the median assessed permutation in scores and differences across groups and time (Hunter & May, 1993; Leong & Austin, 2006). A Wilcoxon signed-ranks test indicated that students' cumulative scores on the SJS at the end of the course slightly increased (Mdn = 152.32) but were not significantly higher than their scores at the beginning of the course (Mdn = 150.00, Z = −1.73, p = .08, r = −.22). Analysis across the subscales suggested there was no significant difference in scores from the beginning to the end of the course across all subscales except subjective norms. Student scores on the Subjective Norms subscale revealed a slight but significant increase at the end of the course (Mdn = 20.87) compared to scores at the beginning of the course (Mdn = 19.00, Z = −2.32, p < .05, r = −.29). Table 3 presents the results in detail.

We used the Kruskal–Wallis test to explore differences in scores on the SJS between course groups. The analysis revealed significant between-groups differences in students' scores on the composite SJS, $H(2)$ = 5.86, p = .05, and the Subjective Norms subscale, $H(2)$ = 6.72, p < .05. Comparisons across course offerings revealed that students in the second course offering had the greatest increase in scores on the SJS from beginning (Mdn = 144.00) to the end of the course (Mdn = 157.00). Results

Table 3

Median Scores Across the Course Offerings From Beginning to End of the Course

Measure	Beginning of course			End of course			Difference	
	Mdn	Min.	Max.	*Mdn*	Min.	Max.	*Mdn*	*p*
Social Justice Scale composite	150.00	119.00	171.00	152.32	123.00	168.00	−2.32	.08
Attitudes subscale	74.50	56.00	77.00	74.04	59.00	77.00	0.46	.46
Behavioral Control subscale	32.00	20.00	41.00	32.49	25.00	35.00	−0.49	.51
Subjective Norms subscale	19.00	5.00	28.00	20.87	13.00	28.00	−1.87	<.05
Behavioral Intentions subscale	26.00	17.00	28.00	25.47	16.00	28.00	0.53	.29

Note. Min. = minimum; Max. = maximum.

suggest that cumulative scores on the SJS at the end of the course were significantly different between students in the first and third course offerings (U = 83.00, r = .44). Scores on the Subjective Norms subscale were significantly different between students in the first and second course offerings (U = 141.00, r = .32) and between students in the first and third course offerings (U = 89.50, r = .41).

Qualitative Results

Results from the qualitative phase of the study complemented quantitative findings and allowed us to understand, more broadly, change in students' value orientation toward social justice. There were some unique course variations in the analysis. For one, the majority of student responses in the first course offering focused on awareness and changes in attitudes about social justice issues, whereas responses in the second and last course offerings were more likely to mention behavioral control and actual behaviors. A majority of codes clustered under the theme called "improved awareness and attitudes toward social justice." Codes in the awareness category included an increased awareness of systemic factors on individuals and an increased awareness of issues related to domestic violence, immigration, and mental health. Other codes under the theme suggested students perceived the course as exposing them to different backgrounds and perspectives. This finding was consistent across all three course offerings and evident in this quote from a student (self-identified as Latina/Black, female,

second-course offering):

> I can admit I was ignorant to the fact of why I thought immigrants migrated over to the United
>
> States. My beliefs were immigrants just came over here to take our jobs and get all the money,
>
> because I always heard from people they would work anywhere as long as they were getting
>
> paid but knowing what I know now it is so much bigger than that. Even when I had to participate
>
> and interview individuals for my community project, one of my interviewee[']s parents was an
>
> immigrant, and he was sharing the harsh treatment they suffered in their old country. I believe
>
> it should be programs and networks that help these people out and make it a little easier for
>
> them; they deserve rights just like the rest of the us born here or not.

Codes clustered under behavioral control and social justice behaviors varied across courses. These two themes captured students' beliefs about their ability or capacity to address injustices (Ajzen, 2002) and their articulation of actual behaviors. Behavioral control captured three codes, and social justice behaviors represented five codes in the data. Student responses under Behavioral Control indicated that the course helped them identify where inequalities exist and possible ways to address them. One respondent who self-identified as a 20-year-old African American male (third course offering) wrote the following:

> I am aware of social justice and the resources we have around our community. Change in the
>
> community and the powers, privileges, and oppressions that people face bring together a
>
> community! I am aware that "I am a change agent."

Student responses indicated how the course and community engagement experience increased not only their awareness of the local community but of their power to address local challenges. Social justice behaviors appeared less frequent in student responses in the first course and more frequent in the second and last course offerings. Social justice behaviors included responses where students mentioned involvement in building communities or some form of advocacy. In this quote, the student

(self-identified as African American, female, third course offering) spoke to this directly:

> Overall, I feel that my research [experience] . . . was fulfilling. I learned a lot about intervention
>
> and success. I am more prepared to create programs and events that can target girls of different
>
> generations and demographics. Even though one thing was unsuccessful, I know that through
>
> failure, there is absolute learning if you can correct mistakes. My personal goals have been
>
> confirmed through the experience. Young girls everywhere are struggling with the same issues
>
> and need consistent guidance and uplifting.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the degree to which racially diverse students who enroll in an

undergraduate community psychology course possess a value orientation toward social justice and the

course influence on such an orientation. The results from the descriptive analysis indicated that most

students' scores at the beginning of the course hovered in the high end, with the lowest score being

130. A majority of students in the undergraduate course self-identified as African American; thus,

findings were consistent with previous literature. Research conducted by Thomas et al. (2012), for

example, found that one's social identity can have a significant effect on one's desire to pursue justice.

The authors indicated that individuals who ascribe to identities that align with more marginalized or

disadvantaged groups are more likely to seek others who share similar experiences and advocate against

disadvantages. Other studies examining students majoring in broad science, technology, engineering,

and mathematics courses found those who self-identified as a member of a racially marginalized group

were more likely to possess a higher orientation toward social justice when compared with other

students (Garibay, 2015; Gibbs & Griffin, 2013). Another study examining undergraduate students' social

justice attitudes and beliefs found that African American students were more likely to express creating

equality and combatting injustice as relevant to their interests (Torres-Harding et al., 2014).

Assessing incoming scores suggest some alignment between students' value orientation and

description of the course. For example, course objectives included increasing student knowledge of

systems that promote social inequality and ways to address systemic change. Those students who

already possessed a value orientation toward social justice more than likely reviewed the description of

the course, were possibly attracted to it, and decided to enroll. Previous studies have found a link

between students' orientation toward social justice and their selection of a college major and career

interests (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Gibbs & Griffin, 2013; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008). Although the results

do not focus on the selection of major or career, they reveal underlying factors that could contribute to

the kinds of learning experiences students may seek for themselves. Assessing students' incoming value

orientation toward social justice may contribute to understanding the kinds of learning experiences that

students value and future behavioral intentions in course selection and enrollment (Bringle & Steinberg,

2010; Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

Overall, incoming scores on the SJS led to a ceiling effect that may limit conclusions on the

courses' impact on student learning. Results from the nonparametric analysis further validate the small

effects the course had on changing students' value orientation toward social justice. Nonetheless, the

results do suggest the subtle increase in students' social value orientation toward social justice may be

more dependent on how students perceive others' involvement in such behaviors rather than the

course content itself. Students enrolled in courses with an emphasis on groups rather than individuals

completing the community engagement project had higher scores on the SJS at the end of the course.

This finding suggests there may be value in engaging in community settings and conducting research as a

group versus as an individual. Hunn (2014) suggested that group learning can strengthen trust, create a

sense of common interest, and foster an overall sense of belonging for African American students.

Thomas et al. (2012) also found that perceiving others as having similar interests and identities can

increase an individual's engagement in collective and civic action. Increasing opportunities for group

engagement where students can collaborate, discuss common issues, and observe others in modeling

social justice behavior may be an essential driver in shifting student perceptions.

Comparing differences across the courses also revealed that students in the second course offering demonstrated a significant increase in their scores on the SJS compared with students in the first and last course offerings. Again, this course required students to work in small groups to share challenges and complete the community engagement assignment rather than working as a class or as an individual. This finding suggests that working on a project and sharing challenges as a group while maintaining some degree of autonomy from the broader class may have been particularly valuable in shaping value orientations toward social justice in this sample of racially diverse students.

This group effect on perceptions of social justice was further validated by examining students' scores on the Subjective Norms subscale. Students' scores on the Subjective Norms subscale fell within a normal distribution compared with the composite SJS and other subscales. That is, students were more likely to have more varied levels of agreement on whether they had individuals around them engaging and participating in social justice work. By the end of the course, students' scores on the Subjective Norms subscale hovered in the high range. According to van Zomeren et al. (2008), individuals who perceive a high level of civic engagement in others around them are likely to adopt similar behaviors and beliefs. The results reveal some subtle effects in students' value orientation toward social justice. More importantly, the results suggest that the ability to work in groups influenced students' subjective norms.

The qualitative findings complement the quantitative results by revealing that a majority of students perceived the course experience as expanding their awareness of local communities and issues of diversity. These findings corroborate the small effects evident in the quantitative results and previous literature highlighting the benefits of social justice education on undergraduate students. For example, a previous study conducted by Cattaneo et al. (2019) examined the benefits of infusing social justice education into an undergraduate psychology course. The authors found that, after completing the course, students were less likely to blame individuals for their poverty, focused more on systemic

influences, and displayed an increase in commitment to address community problems. This shift in

perspective aligns with competencies in community psychology that value ecological principles and

advocacy (Christens et al., 2015; Kloos et al., 2012). Jimenez et al. (2016) further articulated that when

undergraduate students have the opportunity to complete a course in community psychology, they

begin to see how they are an essential resource in project leadership and community organizing.

Similar to the quantitative results, the qualitative findings suggest some advantages for students

doing work as a group versus as individuals. In the courses with groups completing the community

engagement assignment, student responses were more likely to express social justice behaviors

compared with students in the first course offering who worked independently. It is possible to conclude

that having others around students working on similar activities or for similar causes is beneficial in

improving social justice behaviors. Students who begin to demonstrate changes in attitudes and beliefs

may feel more efficacious about their social justice behaviors when they interact with others who

support and affirm such behaviors (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

Assessing the value orientation of racially diverse students enrolled in the undergraduate

community course corroborates the work of other scholars (Mitchell, 2007, 2014; Simons et al., 2012) as

well as offers new insight into how such learning can translate into other valuable skills and

engagement. Several bodies of research highlight the link between social justice attitudes and beliefs

and improvements in political self-efficacy and civic engagement (Moely et al., 2002; Watts & Flanagan,

2007). When students begin to see how they can make a difference in the lives of others, it can

potentially increase their efficacy toward achieving other related tasks and goals. Students who are able

to develop a value orientation toward social justice increase their sense of agency and are likely to

pursue career opportunities that place them in positions to combat inequalities (Gallor, 2017; Hardiman

et al., 2007; Simons et al., 2012). Moreover, increasing students' involvement in reciprocal relationships

with community members to solve problems can serve as a predictor of continued social justice

advocacy (Mitchell, 2007, 2014).

Limitations of the Present Study

The conclusions from this study have some limitations. For one, we did not include a control or

comparison group in our study design to determine if there were any distinctions in students' value

orientation toward social justice between those enrolled in the undergraduate community psychology

course versus nonenrolled students. Future research should consider the use of a more diverse sample

and students in other psychology courses to determine effects and guide stronger conclusions. A second

limitation in this study is that students' incoming scores were high, which limits interpretations of any

effects of the course on their value orientation. We aimed to address this issue by focusing on the

median of the group and by using nonparametric analysis.

Last, we acknowledge other confounding factors not addressed in this study. The faculty

member teaching the course shared a racial identity with students in the course and espoused a social

justice pedagogy. Scholars have argued that a faculty member's orientation and sharing identities with

students can significantly impact shaping students' attitudes and behaviors (Funge, 2011; Lott & Rogers,

2011). We also acknowledge that faculty as well as the way items were phrased on the SJS may

influence students to rate themselves higher on the scale due to perceptions that such beliefs are

considered socially desirable (Arnold & Feldman, 1981). The study findings are limited by an inability to

control for these factors or compare students' orientation in the course with other students.

Conclusion

The potential increase in the number of racially diverse students who will enter universities and

who are in search of experiences that are relevant and prepare them to address broader challenges in

society provides an opportunity to understand the connection between students' value orientation and

learning in psychology. Identifying ways to infuse community engagement into the undergraduate

experience where students learn to reflect, analyze systems, and model advocacy may be a way to

retain students' interest in the field of psychology and, more broadly, in completing college (Reed et al.,

2015). Findings from this study are highly valuable to the field of community psychology and other

subdisciplines in which members are interested in increasing the number of racially diverse students in

their major and continuing onto graduate school. To date, eight of the 61 students who enrolled in the

undergraduate community psychology course went on to pursue and obtain a master's degree in

community psychology or a related psychology discipline. Mapping the value orientation of students to

specific learning experiences can potentially increase persistence in the psychology major as well as

prepare the next generation of advocates, practitioners, and researchers for the psychology workforce.

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