

A Call For Social Justice In The American Counseling Association (ACA)

Counselors for Social Justice

A Division of American Counseling Association

Abstract

Leaders and members of seven social justice-oriented divisions of the American Counseling Association (ACA) met at a Social Justice Summit called by the Counselors for Social Justice in March 2019 at the ACA National Convention in New Orleans. The goal of the summit was to create conversations among members of these seven divisions around ways to improve social justice within the ACA. These discussions at the summit were transcribed and summarized for the purpose of creating a document to outline how ACA could improve its social justice practice. The resulting call for social justice in ACA includes three topics derived from discussions of social justice in the counseling profession: social justice in the organization of ACA, social justice for the people in ACA, and social justice at the ACA conference. Implications for improved social justice practice in the organization are provided.

Keywords: Social Justice; American Counseling Association; Counselors for Social Justice; Conference; Professional Development

Social justice is one of the five core values of the counseling profession (*ACA Code of Ethics*; American Counseling Association, 2014), and is defined as actions taken by counselors to remedy social oppression and ensure that all persons have equitable access to resources and opportunities that have historically been reserved for those of privileged life status (Ratts, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2013; Thrift & Sugarman, 2019). Social justice counselors act within certain roles with clients holding oppressed identities, including client empowerment (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012; Martín-Baró, 1994), change agent (Lewis, 2011), consultant, and facilitator of indigenous healing systems that are congruent with the client's cultural beliefs / worldviews (Atkinson, Thompson, & Grant, 1993; Chávez, 2016). Social justice counselors also take on certain roles external to the counseling office to support clients from historically oppressed populations, including various forms of client advocacy (Toporek & Daniels, 2018) and social activism (Chávez, Fernandez, Hipolito-Delgado, & Rivera, 2016; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016; Washington, 2018).

While there are multiple resources to support systemic work with clients such as the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2018), there are concurrently many ways that individualistic paradigms may dominate counselors' everyday interactions with clients from historically oppressed identities. Social justice competencies still need to be promoted at programmatic and organizational levels to counter unexamined privilege held by many counselors. Because most graduate students, counselors, and counselor educators are White American, they may hold White American cultural values (i.e., meritocracy, individualism, mastery, self-determination, achievement [Monk, Winslade & Sinclair, 2008]) and, therefore, might counsel from this cultural worldview (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012). Further, unless directly countered by challenging the "universalistic application of psychological methods and theories based on a European American paradigm" (Ginter, Roysircar, & Gerstein, 2018, p. 490) found in some counseling textbooks (see Ginter et al, 2018, for an example of this challenge), counseling graduate programs may perpetuate these values by teaching Western counseling theories and techniques (Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014), emphasizing an individualistic view of clients. If this individual-centric paradigm prevails, then the counselor may be perpetuating oppression through reliance on privileged values and worldviews (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012; Monk et al., 2008). This dynamic operates at organizational levels also (Dollarhide et al., 2014; Monk et al., 2008), suggesting that social justice must also be practiced at organizational levels to facilitate social justice at the individual level (Dollarhide et al., 2020). In response to concerns about the privilege-based lens of the counseling profession, the leaders of Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ) organized a Social Justice Summit (an ACA Presidential sponsored session) at the national conference for the American Counseling Association in New Orleans in March 2019.

The focus of this Summit was to address questions of social justice in the profession in general and in the American Counseling Association in particular, with the goal of improving social justice for individuals and the association. In the past, these conference sessions have been used to increase awareness of the needs of specific populations; specifically, Brubaker, Harper, and Singh (2010) highlighted a collaborative content session that was presented at the 2010 ACA conference with action strategies to support persons with LGBTQI identities.

The Social Justice Summit was the first time that multiple divisions collaborated to answer questions related to social justice within the profession and ACA as a whole, looking at social justice needs from a broad perspective. The purpose of this article is to present a summary of this discussion at the 2019 Summit with implications for improved social justice activity for ACA and professional counselors.

Method

Summit Description

Discussants. Leaders and members of seven divisions who are all focused on social justice in counseling attended the Summit: Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ), the Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and

Gender Expansive Identities (SAIGE), the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD), the American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA), the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), the International Association of Addictions and Offender Counselors (IOACC), and the Military and Government Counseling Association (MGCA).

Since this was not a study but rather an attempt to capture suggestions for improved social justice, no demographic information was collected. Based on the original notes from the event, there were approximately 60 persons who participated in the discussion, and all seven organizations who were invited were represented by their president and/or president-elect. Overall, the group was mixed in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and age, and included masters and doctoral students, professional counselors, and counselor educators.

Discussion topics. In advance of the Summit, the lead author contacted ACA leadership and received permission to take notes of the meeting (D. Caplan, personal communication). To determine the discussion topics, CSJ leaders consulted with the other division leaders, including personal correspondence with multiple ACA leaders, members, and students; and electronic posts on CESNET. From this process, the following seven questions were developed for discussion at the Summit:

1. How can ACA practice socially just organizational actions that benefit all members and divisions?
2. How can ACA address the class inequities of pursuing a counseling graduate degree?
3. How can ACA act in more socially responsible ways, for example, having the conference in Puerto Rico or other communities to support economic growth?
4. How can ACA more clearly communicate its commitment to social justice?
5. What are some examples of actions that ACA has taken that communicate commitment to social justice?
6. How can your division support social justice awareness in ACA?
7. What can counselors do to enact social justice in their everyday counseling practice?

At the Summit, all division leaders introduced themselves and their associations, and the president of CSJ informed those present of the purpose of the Summit and the process of the discussion. The discussants were informed that there would be notetakers who would try to capture their ideas accurately while protecting anonymity, and the discussants then distributed themselves equally to one of eight groups. The notetakers, who were officers of CSJ and several doctoral graduate students, had volunteered prior to the Summit and had participated in a 90-minute in-person and online training that detailed the content of the questions, the facilitation process, and the importance of accuracy and anonymity. This training involved planning how the questions would be discussed in the groups, how the notes would be taken (handwritten or on computer), what they would do with the notes after the Summit, and the importance of not recording names during the discussion, but instead, trying to capture the essence and emotion of each comment. There was one notetaker in each group discussion; all were women, four were counselor educators and the other four were doctoral students. They facilitated the discussion in each group for all seven questions.

Discussion Summary Process. After the Summit, the notetaker for each group sent typed or handwritten notes to the primary author. If the notes were handwritten, they were transcribed verbatim by two graduate student volunteers and verified by the lead author. Once all the notes were in typed format, the lead author sent all the notes to each person on the writing group. The writing group consisted of 5 members, all of whom were women. One woman identifies as Latina, one identifies as a U.S. citizen from Peru, one identifies as biracial (Caucasian and Japanese), one identifies as African American, and one identifies as Caucasian. The professional roles of the writing team included 2 members who represented CSJ leadership, 2 were counseling practitioners, 3 were counselor educators, and 1 was a counseling MA student (the five members held multiple identities

relative to this project). All members of the writing team have a passion for social justice and all are members of ACA.

The writing team independently clustered the content of the typed notes into topics directly stated in the transcripts. In a process of pattern coding (Soldaña, 2016), each writing team member condensed large amounts of data into a small number of analytic units based on how concepts were expressed; for example, stories of how ACA needed to practice social justice in conferences were kept intact and coded under “improving social justice in ACA conferences,” “cost of ACA conferences,” or “selection of conference cities with social justice issues.” There were three rounds of coding: first independent coding of all data, then a theme-building meeting of all five members; second independent analysis of the themes that were built in round one, then a consensus-building meeting of all five members; finally, third independent analysis of the consensus forged in meeting two, then a third and final meeting in which the consensus was confirmed by all five members of the writing team. This team then organized the themes of the notes into the structure presented below designed to present ideas expressed at the Summit that can improve social justice in the counseling association and in individual counseling work. All general and specific recommendations presented below are taken directly from the discussions at the CSJ Social Justice Summit at the ACA conference in 2019.

Results: Improving Social Justice in ACA

Three main topics emerged from the Summit discussions. The first topic is social justice in the organization of ACA, and within this topic, leadership and communication were highlighted in the discussion. The second important topic to arise from the discussion involved perceptions that ACA should practice social justice focused on three population groups: members, students, and clients. The final topic, social justice at the ACA conference, included five subtopics: (a) process and rules, (b) affordability, (c) accommodations, (d) location, and (e) programs and giving back to the community. Each topic below is a direct presentation of ideas and suggestions offered by those in attendance at the Summit.

Topic 1: Social Justice in the Organization of ACA

Per the ACA website, the mission of the ACA is to “promote the professional development of counselors, advocate for the profession, and ensure ethical, culturally-inclusive practices that protect those using counseling services” (www.counseling.org). Summit participants stated that in order to meet this mission, ACA could first improve its *leadership* in terms of organizational logistics and relationship with divisions. Summit participants discussed various ways that ACA leadership could do more to create conditions of social justice in the organization itself by leading in culturally inclusive, socially just ways and serving as an exemplar of social justice following the tenets of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts, 2016). As stated by the discussants in the Summit, an increase in the number of counselors serving as staff and leaders within ACA would demonstrate leadership by counselors for counselors. Furthermore, the process through which individuals secure ACA leadership positions could be more transparent, as could statements about the required and desired qualifications for elected, appointed, and volunteer positions. The discussants mentioned this would be helpful in identifying good matches between positions and those who aspire to lead, and allowing more counselors from historically underserved populations to understand and follow the path to leadership.

Another leadership issue discussed by participants focused on the silos that exist in the form of the ACA divisions. Discussants talked about how their divisions (CSJ, SAIGE, AMCD, ARCA, ASERVIC, IOACC, and MGCA) are doing robust, social justice-related work; however, that information is not regularly or systematically shared with the greater membership. Discussants further described how recognition of the hard work of divisions would demonstrate ACA’s commitment to and support for the missions of the divisions and

the populations and issues that they represent. A commitment to improved recognition of the work of the divisions could help to unite the various divisions within ACA.

A second subtopic was *communication*. The discussants shared how expanding communication about all ACA divisions, including information about what each division does, how individuals can become involved with various divisions, and how division fees are utilized could be shared through a web-based directory, a clear organizational chart, or a “new members packet” distributed to members and counselor educators. Discussants stated a strong desire for improved information sharing, with fewer silos and restrictions about how divisions communicate with each other, their members, and ACA. In addition, discussants reported that improved communication about the strategies for social justice published by ACA could result in improved outreach to organizations, schools, hospitals, and other community groups, which would increase awareness of opportunities for members to work within communities. Finally, discussants stated that ACA publications should focus more on social justice topics in journals and newsletters. Discussants did give credit to ACA for providing free CEU opportunities for members as well as liability insurance for master’s students. They acknowledged that these are important benefits; however, communication about the existence of these services could be improved.

Topic 2: Social Justice for People in ACA

A second topic in the discussions at the Summit involved perceptions that ACA should practice social justice focused on three population groups: *members*, *students*, and *clients*. Discussants reported they wanted to see social justice practiced in terms of *members*, which included three topics: (a) voice in ACA, (b) access to ACA, and (c) resources for professional development. Discussants wanted a greater voice, suggesting that ACA should regularly collect data that would provide information about member needs and goals, including more Summits at which opinions could be shared with ACA. They stated it would be important for ACA to also collect input from clients, providing them with voice that informs the direction of the counseling profession. This would provide ACA with the living pulse and impact of membership. In terms of the second topic, access, discussants stated ACA could be more affordable in terms of dues and life “costs.” For example, discussants cited leadership opportunities arise that are not inclusive of those who want to serve but who have other life commitments, such as a family. In such a case, discussants suggested creating various levels of leadership would enable counselors to become as involved as their lives allow. Discussants also mentioned that access would be enhanced if members were more aware of various vulnerable populations, such as those with fewer economic resources, those who have been in prison, those with addiction and recovery issues, those with military issues, and those with ability differences. This effort would concurrently improve social justice for clients whose needs would be met through a better educated counseling workforce.

Furthermore, discussants suggested social justice for members would also include resources (the third topic) in the form of literature, data banks, social justice training, mentoring, webinars, and other professional development opportunities that are live streamed or are offered without cost. These resources were cited as helpful for all counselors to learn about innovations in mental health, ethics, specific populations, and social justice. For example, publications such as *Counseling Today* and web-based data banks could offer more information on local/state events and vulnerable populations. Discussants recommended that training in social justice issues could be improved in counselor education programs, including training in gatekeeping around social justice issues, and suggested that training programs that excel in social justice training could be recognized in a new award at the national level. Furthermore, in order to help members become more skilled in social justice, discussants recommended that the new competencies that address the needs of vulnerable populations should be highlighted at events and on the ACA website. Additionally, discussants cited mentoring in social justice as a helpful strategy so that members become more skilled at social justice work, and a national mentoring database could connect new social justice counselors with those with more experience. Another idea

presented by discussants included the suggestion that ACA members could be required to attend social justice training at national, state, or local conferences just as ethics is a required professional development topic, and also ACA could encourage state licensure boards to mandate social justice professional development for license renewal. Additionally, discussants suggested that a social justice topic could be selected by ACA as its focus for social justice action throughout the year, providing professional development, articles in ACA publications, and webinars on that topic. In sum, ACA could allow members more input, provide more access, and provide more training in social justice in order to increase social justice for members.

Focusing on a second population group, discussants articulated how social justice for *students* could be addressed by ACA. They stated that ACA should advocate for changes that would make graduate-level counselor education more accessible. Participants noted that current barriers that prospective students face highlight the high personal costs of higher education--in tuition and textbook costs, the full-time nature of most counselor education programs, and unpaid required field experiences of internships and practica. The discussants highlighted that these barriers pose a significant financial burden to many students, and, as a result, students of certain socioeconomic classes are not able to access a career as a counselor. For example, a single parent who desires a career as a school counselor would have to quit their full-time employment or drop to part time. They would also have to find childcare for the time in classes, practicum, and internship, for which they are not paid. All the while, they are also paying the costs of tuition and books. As described by discussants, the inevitable outcome of systems like this is homogeneity in SES in the profession. Compound this with statistics that suggest poverty is more likely to impact Black and Brown families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), and the homogeneity of the counseling profession becomes not just about class, but also about race. According to discussants, this is harmful not only to persons excluded from pursuing a counseling degree, but also harmful to the populations of clients who feel alienated from mental health services by the lack of professionals who share their identities and experiences (Terrell & Terrell, 1984).

To address some of these issues, the discussants urged ACA to advocate for a cap for program costs and highlight alternative textbook formats that may be more cost-saving to students. Discussants also suggested that ACA could advocate for more part-time programs as options for students who are not able to commit to full-time education, adding that there is opportunity to consider requiring counseling interns to receive payment or to increase awareness around those few internship opportunities that are paid. Additionally, discussants recommended that ACA could provide information to students who are seeking to find programs that may be more able to meet their financial and lifestyle needs.

Presenting suggestions for social justice for the third population group, discussants suggested that ACA should communicate more support for social justice work that impacts *clients and their communities*. Members should be reminded to provide pro bono work and work on a sliding scale to improve access to mental health services by those with limited means. Discussants posited that ACA could remind members to improve the overall community discourse by providing social justice training to local employers and agencies and providing mentoring to children and youth in vulnerable communities. In fact, discussants highlighted that ACA should strongly support counselors' community service, sending the message that counselors care about the community and that counselors are there to serve. While the Day of Service at the ACA conference is a good start, it needs to be expanded to more frequent, year-round, locally established events to emphasize the impact that counselors, supported by ACA, can have on a community.

Topic 3: Social Justice at the ACA Conference

The third topic that emerged from the Summit discussion was social justice at the ACA conference, with five subtopics of *process and rules*, *affordability*, *accommodations*, *location*, and *programming to give back to the community* that emerged. According to discussants, the counseling profession needs to embody

and practice social justice at the ACA conference to remain a profession committed to social justice. The discussants reported that ACA can respond to its members by making the conference accessible to those with ability differences and affordable to those with financial constraints. Discussants suggested that ACA can create innovative conference processes, develop social justice programming, and choose conference locations representative of those communities the profession purports to support, as detailed below.

New conference *processes* are recommended. According to discussants, during the opening ceremony, each ACA division could discuss what they have been working on, highlighting progress on social justice issues. *Rules* about wearing conference badges should be consistently enforced; one participant related witnessing a situation where a Black graduate student was not allowed into an event without a badge but a White student without one was allowed in. Additionally, discussants suggested that ACA should encourage graduate students to present at the conference to further their career opportunities, increase competency and skills, and create networking prospects. It is important to commend the positive work that ACA is already doing at the conference, including town hall meetings, social justice summits, land recognition at the conference, gender-neutral bathrooms, and accessible shuttle services.

Considering *affordability*, discussants suggested that ACA choose conference locations in affordable communities and adjust early bird rates to a more realistic timetable that will allow for travel decisions to be more accurate. Likewise, discussants proposed that ACA offer a reduced registration fee to recognize the expertise of those who will be presenting, to lower penalty costs to those who need to cancel at the last minute, and to explore an ethical sliding payment option for those in need. Discussants suggested that ACA also could explore creating a financial aid package for registration with the support of vendors and local sponsors to increase students' attendance at the conference. Further, discussants recommended that ACA could remove financial barriers for conference attendees by considering offering online live-feed sessions, with closed captioning, to assist those who cannot travel because of a disability and/or high prohibitive costs. In terms of inclusion, discussants suggested that ACA could model advocacy work by facilitating appropriate *accommodations* for conference attendees. For instance, ACA could use Braille to make conference materials accessible and employ sign language interpreters throughout the conference sessions to accurately convey professional development content.

When it comes to *location*, discussants urged transparency about conference city selection and conference planning as relevant to a profession that wants to improve the quality of life of people in the United States. Discussants recommended that ACA could use minoritized vendors to support underprivileged and marginalized communities that have been impacted by natural disasters and/or have a history of political, economic, and/or social oppression. Moreover, discussants urged ACA to think regionally and host the conference in locations needing social justice support, for example, in Native Nations communities. An Indigenous Nation could teach ACA members about their lifestyle and diverse needs, while ACA members can immerse themselves in the culture to learn directly from the community.

Concerning conference *programming to give back to the community*, discussants suggested it could be of advantage to create a distinctive social justice conference, where the current ACA day of service might be institutionalized and expanded to serve the host community that transcends the conference. Moreover, to raise awareness about social justice concerns, discussants urged ACA to advocate for specific conference breakout sessions to address clients' intersectionality of multiple identities and the study of social justice competency interventions (see Dollarhide et al, 2020).

Discussion

Multiple prior works call for social justice in counseling, but presenting a Summit discussion about social justice in ACA has not been published in counseling. The Summit on Social Justice in 2019 and resulting

recommendations to ACA are offered in order to move the profession forward, to bring greater awareness to ACA of the perspectives of leaders and members of the divisions that address social justice. It can be contextualized as an effort to bring one of the ACA core values into sharper focus for the profession.

This article is a summary of the discussion at the Social Justice Summit at the ACA Conference in March 2019. As such, it presents the opinions and perspectives of those in attendance from seven divisions who are committed to social justice in counseling and who are advocates for the issues of various clientele populations: clients who identify as LGBTQI, clients who identify as multicultural, clients who identify as differently abled, clients who identify as holding religious and spiritual identities, clients who identify as living with addiction and legal issues, and clients who identify as having served in the military. This article is intended as a call to action for the profession of counseling and for the association that serves the profession, and it is offered in the hopes that ACA may find some of these ideas to be congruent with its purpose and mission.

Implications

ACA is a national organization designed to support the work of counselors and those who seek counseling. The Divisions present at this Social Justice Summit (2019) represented efforts to address the needs of individuals who may be marginalized, underrepresented, and unheard. Discussants called for improved communication of opportunities for leadership, research, education, and publication that could help to further the mission of each division as well as the ACA overall. Discussants highlighted that strong, representative leadership from ACA would support their social justice work, and in so doing, could improve the lives of countless individuals. Discussants suggested that ACA is strategically positioned to lead the field of counseling into the next development of professional identity that has social justice at its core.

When ACA is focused on social justice, the needs of the members, students in counselor education programs, and clients becomes paramount. Discussants highlighted that members would enjoy improved voice and input, access to the organization, and resources to ensure their professional development in social justice practice. Discussants further opined that students would appreciate support in terms of lower/contained costs and support for paid internships and practica. Finally, discussants suggested that social justice advocacy for clients and their communities would allow ACA to expand its awareness of, and accountability to, the vulnerable populations served by counseling professionals. Ultimately, clients will benefit most from all these actions by ACA because counselors and counseling trainees will be better equipped to meet the needs of historically underserved clients.

Importantly, discussants stated that the ACA conference allows for the counseling profession to build community and professional identity through fostering new relationships and strengthening existing ones. Moreover, to engage in competent social justice and advocacy work, the conference also creates opportunities for further education and the acquisition of new skills to better serve clients. Discussants posited that there is power in being connected to other professionals who believe in social justice and thrive on changing systems of oppression to achieve social equity. Based on these discussions at the Summit, ACA needs to start at home by supporting and bringing dignity to its own members attending the conference, celebrating their uniqueness while promoting social justice as one of its core professional values.

Next Steps

Plans are already in place for another Social Justice Summit to be held virtually in 2021. There are additional plans to present this summary to the leadership of ACA, along with an offer to consult with ACA on as many of these suggestions as possible. Further, a recommendation for a future study could include action research (Stringer, 2014) in which systemic/institutional analyses could be undertaken. In such a study, researchers could examine how ACA is infusing social justice throughout the organization, which would then inform an understanding of areas of organizational challenge. Once these are identified, it would be possible

to identify and examine root causes and strategies for improvement (Stringer, 2014). This effort could result in additional systemic changes for ACA to support social justice values, principles, and practices throughout the organization. The effort also could improve capacity-building for systemic activism targeted at accreditation, licensure, laws, and public policies. Additionally, other action research studies could be performed involving counselor education programs to examine and address systemic and structural barriers to social justice curriculum and content, with the goal of improving social justice practice and training in such programs.

Limitations

The ideas presented in this article were taken directly from a small subset of individuals who are invested and involved with social justice efforts, and who participated in a meeting at a conference. Thus, this is a potential limitation of this project. Further, this was not an empirical study; it was a compilation of ideas offered by those in attendance at one professional meeting. Therefore, the project does not fulfill the rigor of a qualitative research study. There was no attempt to represent the ideas discussed as those of the membership of any participating organization so the content reported cannot be generalized to any counseling organization. Embedded within the Summit discussion was the assumption that ACA needed to improve its expression of and support of social justice; there was no attempt, however, at the Summit or in this article to fact-check the statements or claims of the discussants relative to ACA's actions or inactions.

It is important to note as well that the call to action in this article does not capture the full depth and breadth of action that counselors, individually and collectively, need to undertake to improve equity and social justice in our society. The ideas presented in the Social Justice Summit were a starting point for important conversations about ways that counselors can engage formal and informal communities and organizations to advocate for changes in legislation, policies, and practices that will result in greater social justice for members of oppressed populations. With a focus on the professional association, participants in this discussion examined social justice with a meta-view from a systemic level in counseling.

Conclusion

In closing, hosting this first annual social justice summit at the 2019 ACA convention proved fruitful and productive. About 60 ACA convention attendees participated in this summit and offered thoughtful, honest, and inspiring answers to the questions provided. Additionally, the participants shared their appreciation and gratitude for the safe space that was created at which they were able to speak their truths about social justice within ACA. It is our hope that this compilation of the participants' statements will inspire, guide, and motivate counselors and leaders of ACA and its divisions to enact the necessary changes to catapult our profession into a future where social justice is centralized.

Author Note:

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