Exploring Factors That Foster Social Justice Courage and Action Among Counselor Trainees

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Abstract

The mental health profession calls on counselors and psychologists to engage in social justice advocacy and charges psychology and counseling training programs with preparing future professionals for this critical work. Yet research has found a persistent gap between counselors' intentions to engage in social action and their actual participation in activism. This study proposes that courage is a critical missing link that can bridge this gap. Specifically, we examine how counselor trainees develop the courage to confront systemic injustices through deliberate action despite the risk of adverse consequences. Understanding this process can inform innovative training strategies to better equip students for social action upon entering the field. Using a qualitative design, the study found that social justice courage is a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components, including conviction, critical consciousness, self-awareness, risk-taking, and support networks. Implications for training, professional practice, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: social justice courage, counselors in training, psychologists in training, advocacy, counselor education

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This exploratory study examined courage as a critical factor in bridging the gap between the intent to promote social justice and taking meaningful action. While the focus is on counselor trainees, the findings may have broader relevance for training programs in counseling and psychology, as well as for practicing counselors and psychologists throughout their careers. Given the close connection between mental health and social justice, psychologists and counselors are uniquely positioned to address systemic inequities that contribute to psychological distress (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; American Psychological Association [APA], 2017). Recent societal crises, such as the challenges to human rights and constitutional rights, disregard for fundamental concepts of social justice, racialized violence, and political unrest, have intensified the psychological impact of systemic oppression on marginalized communities. These widespread disruptions create uncertainties and unpredictability, leading to increased rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, and PTSD (e.g., Gale et al., 2020; Paradies et al., 2015; World Health Organization, 2022). This evidence underscores the ethical responsibility of psychologists and counselors to integrate social justice action, advocacy, and activism into their professional practice (ACA, 2014; APA, 2017).

Extensive literature highlights the need to move beyond individual and group interventions towards an ecological approach that addresses systemic inequities (e.g., Arrendondo & Perez, 2003; Chung & Bemak, 2023; Deblaere et al., 2019; Fietzer & Ponterotto, 2015; Fouad & Prince, 2012; Green et al., 2008; Kozan & Blustein, 2018; Murray et al., 2010; Olle, 2018; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Singh et al., 2020; Toporek et al., 2009; Vera & Speight, 2003). This shift has prompted research into the development of social justice orientation, emphasizing three key components: awareness, intent to engage in social activism, and actual social action behavior (e.g., Dollarhide et al., 2016; Fietzer & Ponterotto, 2015; Hoang et al., 2020; Keum et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2016; Sinclair et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2010; Torres-Harding et al., 2012, 2013, 2015; Watts et al., 2003). While these studies offer insight into how individuals develop social justice identities and intentions, they also reveal a troubling disconnect between social justice activism intent and actual engaged social action (Chung & Bemak, 2023; Dollarhide et al., 2016; Hoang et al., 2022; Keum et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2016; Watts & Guessous, 2006; Williams et al., 2021). Some factors that hinder individuals from bridging the intent-action gap include fear of professional, career, and personal repercussions, such as job loss or being alienated by colleagues, friends, and family members (Hoang et al., 2020; Keum et al., 2022). Internalized fears, such as self-doubt and a fear of failing as an advocate for social justice, as well as the emotional toll of social activism, also have been cited as contributing to this gap (Goodman et al., 2011). Subsequently, the intention-behavior gap remains a significant challenge (Chung & Bemak, 2023; Sheeran & Webb, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2024).

This exploratory study examined mechanisms that bridge the gap between intention and behavior in social justice action. Building on prior studies, we explored the concept of social justice courage, which involves risk-taking behavior, as a possible factor in addressing this disconnect. We defined social justice courage as the capacity to confront systemic injustices through deliberate and planned action despite the risk of adverse consequences. While the literature highlights the need for further investigation into the transition from intention to action (Bemak et al., 2011; Green et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2010; Pillen et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2011), we propose that social justice courage may help explain this gap. To support this premise, we briefly review the psychological concept of courage and its relevance to social justice action, followed by a presentation of our study.

Psychology of Courage as it Relates to Social Action: A Brief Overview

Courage has been deliberated throughout history, dating back to the Ancient Greeks and Eastern Sages, and continues today with philosophers and social scientists. Yet, there is still no agreement on the definition of courage (Pury & Lopez, 2010). Ancient Greeks, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, viewed courage as the ability to act in ways that make a meaningful difference, closely tied to virtues like generosity, kindness, and

understanding (Putnam, 2010). Aristotle distinguished courageous actions from those driven by fear, which he believed constituted cowardice. Stoic philosopher Epictetus viewed courage as everyday moral actions, integrity, and resisting peer pressure (Putman, 2010). Existentialists, such as Sartre, connected courage and freedom, believing that individuals have choices about their actions (Putnam, 2010). Eastern philosophies, such as Confucianism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism, define courage as preserving awareness and integrity, even when resisting social pressures to do otherwise (Putman).

Despite disparate views and cultural differences, contemporary discussions from a Western framework generally categorize three types of courage: physical, psychological, and moral (Putman, 2010). Physical courage involves facing death or bodily harm for an honorable cause or self-sacrifice (Ukrainians deciding to stay and defend their country from the Russian invasion). Psychological courage involves confronting and overcoming personal obstacles (such as personal fears, anxieties, resistance to taking risks) (O'Byrne et al, 2000; Putman, 2010). Moral courage involves genuineness and integrity underscored by ethical and moral beliefs and values (human rights activists). These types can overlap, as seen with Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani schoolgirl shot by the Taliban who demonstrated physical, psychological, and moral courage, continuing global advocacy for girls' education (BBC, 2013).

Psychologists and counselors engaging in social advocacy often demonstrate not only moral courage, but also physical and psychological courage. Research finds that adversity, fear, and risk-taking behaviors are precursors to courage, accentuating a complex connection between fear and courageous action (Rachman, 2010). Fear may hinder action, courage may do the opposite. While fear does not eliminate courage, courageous people may still be afraid.

Although research has explored characteristics of courage, little is known about how it develops (Goud, 2005). Evidence suggests courage can be learned (e.g., soldiers in high-risk situations gaining increased confidence and reduced fear) (Rachman, 2010). Studies predominantly focus on high-risk professions (such as the military, law enforcement, and firefighters). Yet understanding how courage is acquired is also crucial for social justice-oriented psychologists and counselors (Bemak et al., 2011; Green et al., 2008; Malott & Knoper, 2012). We propose that social justice courage may be a critical link between intention and action in mental health social justice engagement.

In summary, research has clearly demonstrated that social justice-oriented psychology and counseling programs assist students in developing social justice awareness, attitudes, identity, and the intention to engage in social activism (e.g., Beer et al., 2012; Chui et al., 2014; Keum & Miller, 2020; Keum et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2010; Torres-Harding et al., 2015). However, the intention to act does not always lead to action (Hoang et al., 2020). Consistent with prior findings (Dollarhide et al., 2016; Hoang et al., 2020), we observed that while many graduate students reported strong social justice identities and intentions, only a subset of them engaged in activism. This led us to focus on counseling students who took action despite potential consequences, to explore how emotional resilience and courage may help bridge the gap between intention and behavior.

Focusing on training programs offers a valuable opportunity to examine how social justice courage develops during the formative stages of counselors' professional identity. Unlike practicing professionals, trainees are in a critical period during which their attitudes, values, and behaviors are still developing. Understanding this process can inform training approaches and practices that better support the transition from intention to action. Our research was guided by the following questions: What factors contribute to the development of social justice courage that lead to social action? Once identified, can social justice courage be taught, developed, and sustained?

Method

Participants

We employed criterion-based purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to recruit 13 counselor trainees/students from a mid-Atlantic Master's degree counseling program (seven were enrolled in the clinical mental health counseling program and six were in the school counseling program) who demonstrated social justice action as observed by the authors in their respective counseling program courses. Classroom observations, self-reported social justice actions, and consistent narrative patterns were considered in the purposeful sampling and recruitment of participants. The authors' observations were discussed to achieve consensus on whether students met the criterion for purposeful sampling. All participants therefore met the following criteria: (a) Cognition - evidence of social justice, awareness, understanding, and acknowledgment of social injustices during class discussions; (b) Emotion - expressed a genuine passion, intentionality, and motivation towards social action; (c) Behavior - took visible action, such as respectfully challenging classmates on issues of biases, prejudices, privilege, and power; and (d) Social Action beyond the classroom that involved critical consequences, such as, risking parental financial tuition support, threatening long-term relationships, loss of lifelong friendships, familial conflict, and job loss. The selection criteria ensured participants had observable and self-reported experiences of courageous social justice engagement. Demographic information was collected for age, gender, religious belief, race, and ethnicity. The sample consisted of 13 students aged 24 to 50 (M = 32, SD = 7). Seven participants self-identified as White women, two as African American women, two as Black men, one as an African Muslim woman, and one as a Latina.

Research Team

We used consensual qualitative research (CQR) to explore how students in training developed social justice courage. CQR is particularly well-suited for exploring understudied topics, such as social justice courage, especially in cases where psychometrically sound measures are unavailable. It also enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences, attitudes, and beliefs (Hill & Knox, 2021). To reduce researchers' potential bias, our diverse research team included two faculty members (an Asian woman cross-cultural psychologist as primary investigator, a White man counselor educator as auditor - both had CQR experience), and two doctoral students (a Latina clinical mental health counselor and a White woman school counselor), both trained in CQR in their doctoral qualitative research courses, as well as taking CQR workshops and training. Both doctoral students employed the CQR methodology in their respective doctoral dissertation topics, which differed from this study. Before conducting the study, the research team held reflexive discussions to examine their personal biases and expectations related to the social justice intention-behavior gap, in order to minimize the potential for bias during data analysis. Fear of repercussions, such as job loss or personal and professional alienation, emerged as a key barrier. To address this, the team emphasized transparent and open communication, creating space for members to respectfully challenge one another when potential biases surfaced. Any identified biases were addressed through collective agreement, and the team regularly engaged in reflexive discussions to minimize their influence on data analysis and interpretation.

Procedure and Data Collection

The Institutional Review Board approved the study. Thirteen students in the final semester of their master's-level graduate studies were invited via email to participate, and all agreed. To avert conflicts of interest, faculty researchers were not current instructors of the participants, and doctoral researchers had no prior contact with the participants. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was ensured, and no personal information was collected.

Interview Protocol

The research team developed a semi-structured interview protocol comprising 14 open-ended questions, based on the existing literature on social justice and the psychology of courage. Questions explored definitions of social justice courage, barriers to action, strategies for overcoming those barriers, and sources of courage (e.g., "What does courage mean to you?"; "What helps you to act courageously despite repercussions?" and "Where do you get your courage from?"). The protocol was tested with two focus groups of eight master's-level students who were not study participants, leading to revisions. The revised protocol was then piloted with three non-participant doctoral students (African American, Muslim American, and White) from the same university, which resulted in a final set of 10 interview questions. The full interview protocol is available upon request.

Interviews

Individual participant interviews, consistent with CQR methodology, were conducted, emphasizing in-depth exploration within each session (Hill & Knox, 2021). The Latina research team member conducted all face-to-face interviews, which lasted 45-60 minutes each. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by the same researcher (Patton, 2015), and the transcripts were stored in a secure, password-protected file accessible only to the research team. Identifying information was removed and replaced with participant codes. After interviews were transcribed, participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy and make any modifications. After reviewing the transcripts, none of the participants requested any changes, and each provided verbal confirmation that their transcripts were accurate.

Data Analysis

Following established CQR protocols, the diverse research team conducted systematic coding and thematic analysis to ensure reliability and accuracy (Hill & Knox, 2021). Reflexivity practices and triangulation methods, such as cross-analysis, stability checks, and external auditing, strengthened the credibility of the findings. Focusing on counselors in training, the study provided unique insights into the development of social justice courage. Data were analyzed over six months using a collaborative, multi-phase process consistent with the CQR methodology (Hill & Knox, 2021). Independently and in private settings, the research team, excluding the external auditor, reviewed one transcript to identify preliminary domains, reached consensus through discussion, and applied the domains to subsequent transcripts. Coding and domains were refined iteratively through consensus meetings.

Core ideas were developed by independently summarizing content within each domain for individual cases, ensuring consistency with participants' exact wording. Interpretation was avoided by refining content collaboratively. The external auditor reviewed and suggested revisions, which were incorporated through a team consensus, followed by a cross-analysis that identified patterns and similarities across cases. Data were then categorized and labeled using standard CQR frequency labels: "general" (12–13 cases), "typical" (7–11 cases), and "variant" (2–6 cases) (Hill & Knox, 2021). Consensus was reached on all categories and frequency labels. To ensure the stability of the findings, two initially withheld cases were later analyzed. Results confirmed the consistency across domains, categories, and frequencies.

Trustworthiness

In this study, CQR was designed to ensure trustworthiness through several strategies. First, to enhance the reliability of interview questions, the initial protocol was tested with two focus groups, revised, and then piloted with three individual interviews before being finalized. Second, to minimize personal biases, the research team (excluding the external auditor) discussed differences in the coding of the data until they reached consensus. Third, ongoing discussion during coding and analysis allowed the team to reflect on personal and social biases, further supporting consensus-building. Fourth, participants reviewed their transcripts to confirm accuracy. Finally, an external auditor reviewed and critiqued the entire data analysis process to ensure that all decisions were grounded in the data.

Results

An in-depth analysis of the interview data revealed five interconnected domains that underscored the complexity of social justice courage: (a) social justice courage components; (b) personal and social factors influencing social justice courage; (c) barriers to action; (d) overcoming barriers; and (e) social justice training. Each domain included three to five categories that together offered a framework for understanding how social justice courage may help bridge the intention-behavior gap. The first domain captured participants' definitions of social justice courage, while the remaining domains explored mechanisms that support its development. Table 1 presents these domains, associated categories, and their frequency of occurrence. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality.

Domain 1: Social Justice Courage Components

The social justice courage components domain included four categories based on participants' views of what constituted social justice courage, reflecting cognitive (awareness), emotional (intent), and behavioral (action) dimensions. Social justice principles (a typical category), was expressed by more than half of the participants. In contrast, three additional general categories—social justice conviction, risk-taking behavior, and taking action—were evident across the entire sample. Together, these categories integrated awareness and intent, highlighting the factors that promote movement toward meaningful social justice action. Understanding these components provided insight into how the participants' translated intentions into activism.

Social Justice Principles

Social justice principles, observed in over half of the participants (n = 9), emerged as foundational to social justice courage. Interviewees emphasized morals, ethics, and integrity as core to guiding their behavior and resilience in social justice contexts. Upholding these principles often required stepping outside one's comfort zone and adhering to ethical commitments despite systemic barriers. For instance, one participant stated, "The ethical part, do not harm, do good. I don't feel good about myself if I am not providing the good services or the services the client needs just because of a policy or a procedure." (Tyler, 33)

Another interviewee highlighted the intrinsic connection between courage and ethical action, describing courage as, "The ability to do what fear tells you not to do, to have faith to do the right thing." (Kris, 28)

Social Justice Conviction

Social justice conviction, a general category observed by all participants (n = 13), reflected deeply held values and beliefs motivating action despite challenges. Interviewees described this conviction, rooted in ethics, spirituality, and moral frameworks, as driving their social justice courage. One individual shared:

> The conviction of what you are doing is right. That if I don't do it, nobody else will do it. That it is my job to act in the best interest of my clients… if I don't do it, no one else will advocate for them. (Jamie, 50)

Another described how conviction enables people to persist despite opposing viewpoints:

> Totally standing up for things you believe and things you think are right, you overcome different points of view. You may have to push to fight against it. I stand out for the things I believe in. (Taylor, 30)

Risk-Taking Behavior

All participants (n = 13) identified risk-taking behavior as a key component of social justice courage. They recognized the personal, professional, and societal risks involved in social action and defined courage as the ability to act despite these risks. For example, one interviewee noted:

> Social justice courage means doing the right thing, no matter what. It could mean losing support or colleagues or friends…speaking out when you see a problem, even when no one else is speaking up. (Austin, 26)

Another emphasized the importance of persevering despite potential consequences:

> To go above and beyond and not worry about the risks, to know that there are risks, and to fulfill your mission, even though it may cause you to lose your job…to pursue despite the potential consequences. (Cameron, 35)

Taking Action

All participants identified the final general category (n = 13), taking action as the cornerstone of social justice courage. They emphasized that translating principles and convictions into concrete behaviors was essential and that, without action, social justice courage remained theoretical. One person explained, "You need to be active to say you have social justice courage; you can think you are courageous, but if you don't say or do something, then it's not real social justice courage" (Alex, 27). Another emphasized the necessity of action, stating, "You can't be courageous if you are quiet, a coward, or just avoiding it (action)." (Kelsey, 40)

Domain 2: Social Justice Courage Personal and Social Factors

The Social Justice Courage Personal and Social Factors domain reflected how personal traits and external influences interacted to shape and sustain social justice courage. It included three interconnected categories: social justice awareness (variant category), strong sense of self (typical category), and social support and self-care (typical category). These categories highlighted the internal resources and external networks that supported individuals' engagement in activism.

Social Justice Awareness

Social justice awareness, a variant category observed in just under half of the participants (n = 6), described a foundation in developing social justice courage. Participants viewed awareness of systemic injustices as a crucial initial step in transitioning from intention to action. For example, one person stated, "First, it is important to become knowledgeable about the problems and what's happening in society right now, so the first barrier to being courageous is knowledge" (Blake, 24). Another interviewee emphasized the connection between awareness and courage, "A lot of social justice courage is the level of awareness. I think a lot of people are not aware of really what's going on. To have that courage, you need to know what's going on." (Ainsley, 31)

Strong Sense of Self

A strong sense of self, a typical category observed in most participants (n = 10), emerged as a core personal attribute essential for developing and sustaining social justice courage. Interviewees emphasized the importance of self-awareness, self-confidence, and clarity of individual values as vital prerequisites for developing the courage to challenge injustices. For instance, one participant shared, "You need to know who you are and understand who you are…I think a lot of people do not know how to find that courage because they do not know who they are." (Avery, 27)

Another highlighted the connection between self-awareness and resilience:

> The courageous thing is that you have to know who you are and what you believe. You need to know yourself. That's the key thing. Having the strength to stand up for what you believe in and determination to keep going, maybe when everything is not working in your favor, you keep going for what you believe is right. (Marley, 34)

Social Support and Self-Care

Also, a typical category, interviewees (n = 8) emphasized that social support and self-care were critical to sustaining their social justice courage.They described support from family, friends, colleagues, and supervisors who share their values as essential to their ongoing advocacy efforts. Additionally, self-care practices were recognized as crucial for managing emotional reactions and sustaining long-term activism. For example, one participant explained, "Being around supportive people who encourage you…find that coalition around you of people that can support you" (Lee, 26). Another participant stressed the importance of self-care, "Having a life outside of it (social justice work), too. Having the time to do what you like, taking time to do self-care." (Kelsey, 40)

Domain 3: Barriers to Social Justice Action

Barriers to the Social Justice Action captured the challenges interviewees faced or anticipated in engaging in social justice work, highlighting factors that may undermine courage. These barriers reflected a combination of internal fears, professional concerns, and considerations for client welfare. This domain consisted of three categories: internalized fear (a typical category), professional and career fear (a typical category), and fear for clients (a variant category). Together, they revealed the emotional and systemic obstacles that may weaken the connection between intention and behavior.

Internalized Fear

Internalized fear, a typical category that included self-doubt and vulnerability, was reported by most participants (n = 11) as a common barrier to engaging in social action. Interviewees frequently reported questioning their knowledge, skills, and credibility, which led to hesitation and second-guessing their ability to advocate effectively. For example, one person explained, "The barrier is, quite frankly, my self-fear; when I second-guess myself, what are the repercussions of what I am about to do?" (Blake, 24). Another individual highlighted the impact of self-doubt and the fear of provoking anger:

> I don't know that I'm capable. I don't know that I am, and I hate to use the term, good enough, to advocate because I don't know my own strengths. I kinda focus on my weaknesses; there's this fear too of pissing people off. (Cameron, 35)

Professional and Career Fear

Also, in the typical category, professional and career fear was identified by most participants (n = 10) as a significant barrier, with concerns about job security, alienation from colleagues, and repercussions within bureaucratic systems. These fears reflected a tension between personal values (awareness-intention) and professional responsibilities, underscoring the systemic risks of challenging inequities. For instance, one person shared, "It could be a potential job situation if people don't necessarily align with your view; either you don't want to work there, or they don't want you to work there" (Lee, 26). Another interviewee described the conflict between systemic challenges and personal responsibilities:

> The major fear for me is to challenge systems that may then turn against you, such as losing my job. In this time, the economy, with responsibilities, with a family, it is hard not to think about it. (Jamie, 50)

Fear for Clients

A smaller but significant group of participants (n = 4) identified fear for clients as a barrier within this variant category. Concerns centered on the potential harm clients might face when encouraged to speak out, especially in the context of systemic discrimination or power imbalances. This fear impacted interviewees' willingness to move from awareness and intention to action. For example, one person explained:

> The fear is mostly for my clients. If, for example, my client is discriminated against and we work on client empowerment, and he speaks out, then he can possibly lose his job, or they can make it hard for him to keep his job, with possible repercussions (Taylor, 30)

Domain 4: Overcoming Barriers

The Overcoming Barriers domain captured how participants persisted in social action despite challenges. Three variant categories were identified: role models for the next generation, speaking on behalf of others, and spirituality/beliefs. Interviewees also referenced social support and self-care (a typical category in the Social Justice Courage Personal and Social Factors domain) and social justice conviction (a general category from the Social Justice Courage Components domain) as key motivators for continuing their activism despite potential repercussions.

Role Model for Next Generation

A small group of participants ($n = 4$) identified being a role model for the next generation as a motivating factor for continued social action, despite potential personal consequences. They expressed a desire to model courage and advocacy for their children. For example, one individual explained:

> I have small children, so I want to be their example. I want them to be fighters, not being afraid to stand up to what they believe. Not to be afraid to intervene. To make a difference…my passion definitely… this motivates me, and it helps me to set up an example for my children. (Cameron, 35)

Another person stated, "I want to be a good example for my children, so I think of that a lot. (Tyler, 33)

Speaking on Behalf of Others

A small but significant group of participants ($n = 5$) identified speaking on behalf of others, particularly clients, as a key reason for being socially active despite potential repercussions. They viewed advocacy as a professional and ethical responsibility, particularly when clients were unable to speak for themselves. For example, an interviewee explained, "Being able to speak out, and being able to speak out for a group who don't have a voice" (Alex, 27).

Another individual stated:

> The people I'm advocating for. I see what they are going through; the families are going through. It is hard to sit back and see what happens. When I think about those situations, I think about the child and the family and what they are going through. I have the means to speak up for many that can't. (Marley, 34)

Spirituality/Beliefs

A small but significant group of participants ($n = 4$) also reported that spirituality or religion motivated them to continue social activism despite potential consequences. For example, one person noted:

> Spirituality is the key to success. Believing in something means that you take action around what you believe in. And that required me to stand up in instances that I wouldn't have stood up. And that gave me more strength to do the right thing…made me courageous and helped me also be willing to do the right thing. (Jamie, 50)

Another individual stated:

> Well, honestly, it is my faith and my beliefs. Yeah, I have a believe in God. He tells me that I have to love people and help people. So that gives me the courage to do it. And he'll take care of me no matter what happened. Whatever that means, if I need to find another job or move on, that's fine. I still need to do what is right. (Ainsley, 31)

Domain 5: Social Justice Training

Social Justice Training highlighted the vital role of graduate programs in fostering social justice courage. The training program offered participants key opportunities to become knowledgeable, introspective, and develop skills that led to courageous social justice action. Four categories emerged: one general category (graduate training program); two typical categories (genuine and fearless in-depth self-reflection, and safe and brave spaces for developing social justice courage); and one variant category (faculty role models).

Graduate Training Program

All interviewees (n = 13) in the general category described their graduate training program as instrumental in cultivating social justice courage by providing the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed for activism. They noted that the program broadened their understanding of injustices and fostered courage, equipping them with strategies to address these issues. For instance, one participant highlighted the transformational impact:

> The program helped me to really shape my views on what I think is right. What I think is valuable… It has helped me be courageous and helped me understand different views, and it has helped me understand how to stay calm and work through differences with other people. (Taylor, 30)

Another person reflected on how the program heightened their awareness of systemic injustices:

> We were talking about white privilege. It was hard for me to sit back and hear, me being white and part of the upper middle class…I mean, it was hard and difficult to hear, but having the courage to speak out and ask questions, and at the same time having the courage to admit some of the privileges that my family did have, which I did not want to admit at first. Having the courage to have a discussion was pretty big for me. Having the courage to do that was something I never saw myself in that situation before. (Ainsley, 31)

Genuine and Fearless In-Depth Self-Reflection

Most participants (n = 10) in the typical category emphasized the importance of self-reflection for personal and professional growth, which they viewed as critical for developing social justice courage. The graduate program offered interviewees' opportunities for introspection, enabling them to challenge their assumptions, values, and beliefs. One person explained the process as foundational:

> Having the courage to challenge yourself first. You need to know yourself, who you are, what your values are, before you can go out, speak about them, and speak to others. If you want to have people on your side and believe in what you believe, you need to be passionate about what you do. And I think it starts with the courage to challenge yourself, and once you have been able to do that, then you can go to challenge others. (Tyler, 33)

Another individual highlighted the importance of embracing discomfort and reflecting:

> Have the courage to be brutally honest with yourself. Have the courage to be able to hear things that are, that make you uncomfortable. Have the courage to, you know, to look at things from the perspective of others…so it is just to be open and to be honest. (Kris, 28)

Safe and Brave Environment for Developing Social Justice Courage

Participants in this typical category (n = 7) emphasized the importance of safe and brave spaces in their training program. The safe and courageous spaces were marked by trust, openness, and respect as crucial in fostering honest introspection and building social justice courage. One person explained:

> It's a safe place. I think our professors do that really well; they make the classes a safe space for us to practice, you know, where you can be real with your classmates, and it's easier to transfer that to the real world. (Lee, 26)

Another individual added:

> One of the things that instantly gave me courage, to take an emotional risk, was Dr. X's classes … those became a safe place for any student to express themselves. And I took an emotional risk to talk about my experience, my personal life, and how I arrived there. We talked about something that was very vulnerable to me. And I felt safe; I didn't feel attacked when there were several students that did not have the same experiences as I did … we were able to share in a safe way…Dr. X made it a point to keep it a safe for everybody, even for those with ideas and beliefs that come across radical in their approach to things. It was even safe for those, even for anyone, to even say the most outrageous things. (Avery, 27)

Faculty Role Models

In the variant category, a smaller group of participants (n = 3) identified faculty role models as influential on developing social justice courage. Role models exemplified a commitment to social justice by actively engaging in advocacy and bridging the gap between theory and practice. One interviewee expressed admiration for faculty who modeled social justice values:

> I admire Drs. X. and Y. They walk the talk, not just talk the talk. They are great leaders, and they put their beliefs into action. They have the theory and academic knowledge, but they put it into action, and that's what was most meaningful to me. (Kelsey, 40)

Discussion

The extent to which social justice awareness and intention correlate with social justice action remains understudied (Hoang et al., 2020). This study explored whether social justice courage bridged the gap between intention and behavior. Although the study involved counselors in training, we believe the findings may have relevance to both counseling and psychology students, as well as practitioners. Participants identified three interrelated components of social justice courage leading to action: social justice principles (awareness), conviction (intention), and risk-taking behavior, which we connected with courage. The findings suggested that social justice courage was complex and multidimensional, aligning with moral courage (O'Byrne et al, 2000; Putman, 2010). Similar to moral courage, our respondents emphasized that social justice courage involved actively challenging unjust ethical and moral issues, despite potential repercussions.

The findings revealed that developing social justice courage involved a relationship between internal attributes (social justice principles and conviction, strong sense of self, and self-care) and external networks (social support) (Chapman-Hilliard & Parker, 2022; Medvide, 2022). Self-awareness and a strong sense of self were key to participants sustaining courage, results that were consistent with Kendi's (2023) and Bell's (2016) findings on resilience in advocacy. The emphasis on critical consciousness aligned with Freire's (1996) concept of conscientização, where awareness of systemic inequities catalyzes action. Interviewees highlighted the importance of social support, echoing Brown's (2018) concept of "courage-building collectives," which reinforced courageous action. Additionally, respondents reframed self-care as both a strategy for preventing burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016) and a critical courageous practice essential for sustaining their long-term engagement in social justice work.

Participants identified internalized fears, professional and career concerns, and fear for clients as key barriers to social justice action, reinforcing the well-documented gap between intention and behavior (Hoang et al., 2020; Keum et al., 2022). Internalized fear, marked by self-doubt and fear of failure, aligned with Goodman

et al.'s (2011) findings on the emotional toll of advocacy, while professional concerns resonated with Miceli et al.'s (2008) research on the risks of whistleblowing. Fear for clients reflected the ethical tensions discussed by Prilleltensky (1997) in balancing social advocacy with client welfare. These barriers often intersect with internal fears, compounding professional and ethical risks.

The current results also offer insights into how social justice courage can be sustained in the face of barriers and challenges (e.g., Chang, 2022; Sanabria & DeLorenzi, 2019). Participants described essential strategies for maintaining social justice courage through self-awareness, self-care, and social support. Additional motivators included serving as a role model for the next generation, acknowledging one's privilege, fulfilling a moral obligation, and speaking on behalf of those without a voice. Spirituality, conviction, a strong sense of self, and supportive networks also played a role in interviewees overcoming barriers (Dollarhide et al., 2016; Hoang et al., 2020). Although the Overcoming Barriers domain consisted of three variant categories (role models for the next generation, speaking on behalf of others, and spirituality/beliefs), it is essential to highlight that these CQR categories captured unique and diverse perspectives, adding to the richness of the data. Additionally, these variant categories helped identify areas for future research.

The findings underscore the critical role graduate training programs play in developing social justice courage (e.g., Abraham et al., 2022; White et al., 2024), and bridging the gap between intention and action. This study extends prior research by providing concrete insights into how programs can move beyond raising awareness to actively cultivate courageous social justice action. Transformative elements, such as opportunities for introspection, skill-building, safe and brave spaces, and faculty role modeling, were instrumental in broadening participants' awareness of systemic injustices and equipping them with the courage to engage in social activism. As one interviewee (Alex, 27) stated: "…program that requires the ability to look introspectively, to look inside and be able to identify strengths and the fears, the challenges… there was some courage there, but that sent me to another level." This reflection was consistent with hooks (1994) assumption of education as liberatory praxis, capable of empowering individuals. Safe and brave spaces were particularly impactful, fostering the trust, openness, and constructive discomfort vital for growth (Arao & Clemens, 2023; Chung et al., 2018; Green et al., 2008; Murray & Crowe, 2016; Sanabria & DeLorenzi, 2019). Faculty mentoring and role modeling that bridged theory and practice also supported the development of social justice courage (Hoang et al., 2020).

This study offered a multidimensional examination of social justice courage, integrating cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions that shape how counselors bridge the gap between intentions and action. Our findings highlight the interconnected roles of personal conviction, ethical principles, risk-taking behavior, self-awareness, and support networks in fostering engagement in social activism. Notably, participants' identification of fear for clients as a barrier to action has brought attention to the relational and ethical complexities that are often underexamined in current mental health training frameworks. These insights underscore the importance of viewing social justice as both a courageous and iterative process—one that evolves through reflection, risk, and resilience.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study offered valuable insights about social justice courage, several limitations warrant further discussion. There was no focus on intersectionality and how overlapping identities, such as race/ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic status, positionality, religious beliefs, and disability, shaped counselors' formulation and expression of social justice courage in training (Hoang et al, 2020). Future research should explore how these dynamics affect training outcomes and how programs can more effectively support diverse populations of social justice-oriented mental health professionals.

The study also focused solely on master's-level counseling students and did not include counseling psychology or doctoral-level trainees. Although counseling students were the intended population, the findings have the potential to be relevant to counseling psychology students, doctoral students in counselor education, and

even later-career professionals. Future studies should investigate these groups to examine courage as a potential bridge between social justice intention and action.

Another limitation was the underemphasis on structural and institutional barriers to social action, such as organizational biases and restrictive learning environments. These systemic factors significantly constrain counselors' ability to act courageously. Future studies should examine these barriers in greater depth to better understand how institutions and training programs can create supportive environments that empower mental health professionals to effectively challenge systemic inequities (Bayne et al., 2024; White et al., 2024).

While the purposeful sampling strategy used was appropriate for exploring the components of social justice courage, it presented some limitations. One potential issue was the reliance on observed and self-reported behaviors, which may introduce social desirability bias, as participants might have overstated their actions to align with perceived expectations. To mitigate this, the inclusion criteria were triangulated through classroom observations, self-reports, consistent narrative patterns, and researcher consensus. Additionally, focusing exclusively on individuals who had already demonstrated social justice courage may limit the generalizability of findings to those still developing this capacity. Nonetheless, the depth and richness of the current findings were consistent with the goals of qualitative research, which emphasizes detailed exploration of complex phenomena.

The study's focus on social justice courage within a training environment may not fully capture the complexities individuals face in less structured professional settings. Future research should broaden the participant pool to include individuals from different training programs, at different stages of social justice development, and working across varied professional contexts. In addition, the long-term sustainability and impact of social justice courage warrant further study. Research could examine how psychologists and counselors sustain advocacy efforts over time, manage challenges such as burnout or secondary trauma, and evaluate the systemic and mental health outcomes of their work. In conclusion, while this study provided a critical foundation for understanding social justice courage, and its role in bridging the intention–action gap, addressing these limitations through future research will enrich the field and strengthen the profession's capacity to promote equity and justice.

Implications for Training Programs

The findings offer actionable recommendations for enhancing graduate training programs to foster social justice courage effectively. Structured opportunities for self-reflection, such as journaling, guided discussions, and case-based learning (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Murray et al., 2010; Sanabria & DeLorenzi, 2019), are essential. These practices support critical examination of personal values, biases, and assumptions, aligning with Schön's (2017) model of reflective practice. Additionally, facilitators must create learning environments that balance psychological safety with constructive challenge, fostering honest and reflective dialogue, as well as productive discomfort, necessary for growth (Arao & Clemens, 2023; Chung et al., 2018).

Training could incorporate role-playing scenarios, ethical decision-making exercises, and resilience-building workshops to help students navigate the risks associated with social justice advocacy (Chang, 2022; Murray & Crowe, 2016). These activities address personal, professional, and systemic fears, empowering individuals to act with confidence despite potential repercussions (Brown, 2018). Faculty play a pivotal role in modeling social justice courage by embodying social action in practice (Bayne et al., 2024; White et al., 2024). Collaborating with faculty on real-world projects can further bridge the gap between theory and practice (Chung & Bemak, 2012).

Self-care must be recognized as a fundamental component of advocacy and justice work (Abraham et al., 2022; Bemak et al., 2011; Chung & Bemak, 2023). Training programs can incorporate modules on stress management, mindfulness, and work-life balance to encourage students to adopt sustainable self-care practices. This aligns with Maslach and Leiter's (2016) findings on self-care's critical role in preventing burnout and sustaining long-term engagement. Additionally, fostering social support networks through peer connections and mentorship opportunities can create communities of practice that can mitigate the isolation that may accompany social action and provide vital emotional reinforcement (Bell, 2016). Finally, training programs could frame social justice

courage as a lifelong skill. Workshops focused on managing self-doubt and reframing setbacks as opportunities for growth can empower students to view advocacy as an ongoing journey, emphasizing the importance of continuous learning and personal development. These strategies prepare individuals to engage in social justice work effectively and sustainably (Sinclair et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Social justice courage is essential for counselors and psychologists who strive to challenge systemic injustices and advocate for meaningful social change that benefits their clients and communities. As Saint Augustine poignantly stated, "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage - Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are" (Augustine, n.d., as cited in Chung & Bemak, 2023). This powerful sentiment highlights the critical role and interrelationship of physical, psychological, and moral courage in transforming awareness into deliberate action. The voices of our participants further encapsulated the core of this study's findings: "Social justice courage is being capable to do what you are absolutely terrified to do" (Austin, 26), and "Courage is taking the risk to speak up if you see an injustice…taking a risk...and hope that everyone else would follow you" (Marley, 34). These statements underscore the multidimensional nature of social justice courage, and its profound potential to inspire transformative social action. In conclusion, we turn to one of the most enduring beacons of courage, Nelson Mandela, who said, "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man (person) is not he (she, they) who does not feel afraid, but he (she, they) who conquers that fear" (Mandela, n.d., as cited in McKenna, 2024).

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The authors of this study have no competing interests to disclose.

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Table 1

Summary of Social Justice Courage Domains, Categories, and Frequencies

Domains	Categories	No of Cases	Frequency
Social Justice Courage Components	Social Justice Principles	9	Typical
	Social Justice Conviction	13	General
	Risk-Taking Behavior	13	General
	Taking Action	13	General
Social Justice Courage Personal and Social Factors	Social Justice Awareness	6	Variant
	Strong Sense of Self	10	Typical
	Social Support/Self-Care	8	Typical
Barriers to Social Action	Internalized Fear	11	Typical
	Professional and Career Fear	10	Typical
	Fear for Clients	4	Variant
Overcoming Barriers	Role Model for Next Generation	4	Variant
	Speaking on Behalf of Others	5	Variant
	Spirituality/Beliefs	4	Variant
Social Justice Training	Graduate Training Program	13	General
	Genuine Fearless Self-Reflection	10	Typical
	Safe/Brave Environment for Developing Social Justice Courage	7	Typical
	Faculty Role Models	3	Variant