

Therapists' Perceptions Toward Social Justice: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The number of children of minoritized backgrounds from low socioeconomic backgrounds has increased in the United States. This shift has heightened concerns about the well-being of these children. Play therapists, trained to work closely with children, are expected to meet the needs of all children and promote social justice advocacy on behalf of their clients including children. Existing scholarship is limited, however, when understanding play therapist efforts to engage in advocacy. This phenomenological pilot study explored play therapists' perceptions of their social justice advocacy. The main findings revealed five themes: social justice, advocacy, training, challenges, and suggestions. Implications of these findings, future research directions, and limitations of the study are discussed.

Keywords: therapists, social justice advocacy, training, counselor educators

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Ethnic and racial diversity among children in the United States continues to grow, with 47.3% of children aged 17 years and younger classified as White, 25.7% as Hispanic or Latino, 13.2% as Black or African American, and 13.8% as American Indian or Alaska Native (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Non-White children, as part of historically minoritized groups, are more likely to experience marginalization and reduced access to the same resources as their White majority peers (Dermer, 2024). Further, families from marginalized groups are more affected by poverty, which contributes to mental health challenges (Dermer, 2024). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2023), 12% of children in the United States live below 100% of the poverty level, and among these children, more than one in five (22%) has a mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder. Reports prior to 2023 indicated that increasing mental health issues deeply affect marginalized children, who are not provided sufficient mental health care (Hoffmann et al., 2022). Consequently, play therapists, who are uniquely positioned to meet children's social and emotional developmental needs, should recognize child poverty as a serious and urgent matter.

Play therapy is a type of psychotherapy that utilizes children's instinct to play as the main form of communication for evaluating their behaviors and feelings (Landreth, 2012). According to the literature, many play therapists have a limited understanding of their clients' culture and tend to advocate for children on an individual level (e.g., working one-on-one to access resources), with less engagement at the community (e.g., collaborating with local organizations) and systemic (e.g., changing policies) levels of social justice advocacy (Ceballos et al., 2012).

Social justice is the belief that all individuals in a just world have equal opportunities, benefits, and rights (Chang et al., 2014). Although social justice has been a focus of research for decades, attention to it has expanded in the 21st century. Bradley et al. (2012) indicated that while mental health practitioners advocate for their clients, their efforts are largely limited to the individual level.

Ramírez et al. (2017) investigated advocacy attitudes among graduate students enrolled in programs accredited by the American Psychological Association and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. Results revealed that students scored very low on alliance-building and system-level collaboration, suggesting their limited inclination to promote social change efforts. In a related study, Sanabria and DeLorenzi (2019) examined whether a social justice pre-practicum course could support the development of social justice identity among counseling students. Results indicated that participation in the social justice pre-practicum course boosted students' social justice advocacy identities, enhanced their understanding of inequality, promoted their engagement in advocacy efforts, and fostered connections between their advocacy and professional roles.

Another qualitative study conducted by Sinclair et al. (2024) involved interviews with seven licensed clinical counselors to explore their experiences with social justice advocacy. Six themes emerged from the data: (1) professional identity, (2) experiences of emotional discomfort and gratification, (3) advocacy across micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels and the skills required for effective advocacy, (4) the impact of identities on advocacy, (5) advocacy-related challenges, and (6) advocacy successes. The results revealed how counselors navigated the emotional, ethical, and systemic aspects of their social justice engagement. However, because Sinclair et al. (2024) focused on mental health counselors, it is unclear whether similar findings would be discovered among school counselors.

Feldwisch and Whiston (2015), however, did examine practicing school counselors' self-endorsement of social justice advocacy and found alignment between school counselors' self-endorsement of advocacy and their scores on the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment. Their findings indicated that counselors working in recognized comprehensive programs, such as those recognized by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and consistent with the Indiana Gold Star guidelines, scored higher on social justice advocacy measures

than counselors in non-recognized programs. Feldwisch and Whiston (2015) suggested that many school counselors value advocacy; however, less is known about how these values are implemented in daily practice. In another study involving school counselors who were members of ASCA, Parikh et al. (2011) investigated factors that influenced this group's ability to act on their commitment to social justice advocacy. They discovered that members' political ideology and belief in a just world (BJW) were statistically significant predictors of their social justice advocacy. Results also suggested that personal beliefs played a significant role in school counselors' social justice advocacy work. Similarly, Jones (2013) examined school counselors' social justice advocacy and found a negative relationship between belief in a just world and multicultural counseling awareness. They also found a positive relationship between multicultural counseling knowledge and multicultural counseling awareness. These findings indicated that school counselors with more exposure to multicultural education tended to have more positive social justice attitudes (Jones, 2013). Other studies examining school counselors' social justice attitudes have revealed that, although school counselors were aware of the importance of advocacy within their profession, many lacked training in how to engage in effective advocacy efforts (Annett, 2015; Wright, 2020).

While extensive research has investigated social justice advocacy among school counselors and other mental health practitioners, only a few studies have focused on the social justice efforts of play therapists (Chase & Post, 2022; Elmadani & Post, 2023; Parikh et al., 2013). Chase and Post (2022) found that attitudes about trauma-informed care and cultural humility were strong predictors of social justice attitudes for play therapists. In a study like the Parikh et al. (2011) project, Parikh et al. (2013) discovered that social justice advocacy was positively correlated with the political views of participants, highlighting the importance of political beliefs in shaping play therapists' social justice attitudes. Their findings also underscored the importance of awareness of diversity-related issues, such as oppression and its impact on well-being.

Similarly, Elmadani and Post (2023) examined how color-blind attitudes and multicultural education were related to advocacy among play therapists. The results revealed that color-blind attitudes and engagement in multicultural activities or workshops contributed significantly to the prediction of advocacy. Specifically, play therapists' intentional involvement in training and workshops was associated with their increased awareness and knowledge about injustice and multicultural issues. Therefore, these findings highlight the need for the continued support of play therapists' involvement in advocacy-focused training and professional development.

Overall, the current body of scholarship on play therapists and social justice advocacy remains limited. Few quantitative studies have examined play therapists' social justice advocacy, and there is a need for a qualitative study to better understand play therapists' experiences of social justice advocacy. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to address this gap in the literature.

Methodology

Participants

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, recruitment emails were sent to professional associations, including the Association for Play Therapy, the ASCA, and the Association for Child and Adolescent Counseling, as well as online counseling network listservs such as CESNET. The recruitment materials indicated the purpose of the study, which was to explore play therapists' views and perceptions about social justice. Snowball sampling was used to allow participants to recruit other play therapists, thereby building a larger sample size. Convenience sampling also was used to recruit individuals who were readily accessible.

The sample included five female participants. Two participants self-reported as Asian, one as White, one as Hispanic, and one as African American. Participants' ages ranged from 41 to 45 years, with an average age of 43 years. Four participants had more than 10 years of play therapy experience, whereas one participant had one year of experience. In terms of multicultural courses completed during graduate training, two participants took one course each, two completed three courses each, and one took two courses. Moreover, four individuals participated

in multicultural educational activities in addition to formal courses, such as workshops or trainings, with their total hours ranging from 20 to 100 hours and an average of 95 hours.

Four of the five participants were members of the Association for Play Therapy. Four participants identified their socioeconomic status as upper middle class, and one lower middle class. Three participants held doctorates in counselor education and supervision, while two earned master's degrees in mental health counseling.

Demographic Questions

Prior to the semi-structured interviews, participants completed demographic questions assessing gender, race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, years of practicing play therapy, highest level of education, and the number of multicultural courses completed in graduate programs. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and to clarify the purpose of the study.

Participation was described as entirely voluntary, and the confidentiality of responses was emphasized in the introductory letter. Individuals were notified that they would receive a \$20 Amazon gift card as compensation upon completion of the interview. Participants also were informed that their involvement in the study had the potential to enhance training and the practice of social justice, and the scholarly literature within the field of play therapy.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore play therapists' perceptions of social justice advocacy. The interviews were conducted by the first author via Zoom and lasted from approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The first author is a counselor educator who completed two qualitative research courses, one during a master's program and another during doctoral studies. In both courses, training was provided on qualitative research design, interview techniques, and transcript coding by an experienced qualitative course instructor. In addition, the first author has published and co-authored several qualitative studies.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed by the first author after each interview. The participants also checked their transcripts to ensure their accuracy. The interview questions were generated through a review of the existing literature on social justice advocacy to increase their alignment with the purpose of the study. All questions were original, clearly worded, and open-ended to encourage participants to share their lived experiences and perceptions on social justice advocacy. The interview protocol included questions on participants' conceptualizations of social justice, experiences with advocacy, advocacy-related training, and factors that contributed to their engagement with advocacy.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study used the constant comparative analysis method, which entails breaking the data into units that can be grouped, compared, and interpreted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The coding process involved choosing raw words from the transcript, merging these words into codes, clustering codes into categories, and finally synthesizing categories into themes, which were considered the results of the study.

Before the data analysis began, both researchers discussed the study's purpose, research questions, and confidentiality procedures to enhance the study's credibility. The second author, who had no prior experience with coding, was trained and guided by the first author through examples of coding transcripts and ongoing mentorship.

The researchers completed reflection journals before the interviews and after reviewing each transcript to increase their self-awareness throughout the process. These journal reflections focused on the interviewers' current thoughts, emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and views (e.g., empathy and desire for fairness). The journals helped the researchers to interpret the data collected based on participants' experiences.

Given that both authors held strong personal interests on social justice, they engaged in the practice of bridling to reduce their potential bias during interpretation of the data. Bridling is a reflective practice that researchers can use to reveal deeper self-awareness about themselves (Stutey et al., 2020).

The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author. All interviews were completed before the commencement of the coding. Both researchers coded the first two transcripts independently after several readings to ensure familiarity with the data. Each researcher then met to compare and merge their independent coding results; and no discrepancies were identified. Coding of the remaining transcripts was completed independently, followed by several meetings to compare, discuss, and merge their codes into themes.

Researcher Subjectivity

The first researcher identifies as a person of color with experience in mental health and school counseling. He has experience teaching and publishing on multicultural and social justice topics. He completed reflective journals, and he is aware of his and open to others' cultures, values, views, and backgrounds. The second researcher identifies as a woman of color with experience in working with diverse populations through non-profit organizations and childcare services. She is aware of her and others' cultures, values, views, and backgrounds.

Results

Social Justice

Social justice can be described as equal opportunities, rights, and access to resources for all individuals in society (Chang et al., 2014). Participants' comments on social justice were grouped into three fundamental categories: equality, equity, and oppression. Respondents indicated the importance of equality, particularly in relation to the fair distribution of wealth, power, and opportunities. As stated by two participants, social justice involved an "equal distribution of opportunities and privilege" and "an equal distribution of power, wealth, privileges, and rights to all individuals." Additionally, one person believed that equality required meeting individual needs across political, academical, and societal levels.

Respondents also focused on equity, asserting that everyone should receive equitable resources based on their needs. One individual described this perspective by stating that social justice involved "creating more equitable access to resources and opportunities for marginalized groups, Indigenous peoples, and descendants of formerly enslaved Africans."

To understand social justice, participants explored the importance of injustice rooted in oppression. All respondents described oppression as occurring in different forms that created injustice and marginalization. One person indicated that oppression can be seen as racism and discrimination against specific groups. Other participants described marginalization as occurring in different ways, including microaggressions and outright racist comments.

Advocacy

To address the lack of social justice and the negative impact of oppression, advocacy stood out as the next theme in participants' responses. Advocacy refers to actions taken as a form of activism or representation of a marginalized group (Salla et al., 2023). This theme emerged from the following categories: evidence of advocacy, levels of advocacy, awareness of advocacy, political involvement, and factors impacting advocacy. Respondents shared that they advocated by helping clients access resources and by maintaining connections with the communities they served. As described in participants' interviews, advocacy involved "promoting equity and diversity, along with access" and "staying in touch with the local community, with the people you are trying to advocate for, rather than just talking about it."

Respondents demonstrated a fundamental awareness of advocacy and its purpose. They indicated that awareness of advocacy is believing that justice requires action rather than passive acknowledgement; it involves active, on-the-ground efforts to organize change. Participants reflected on this in several statements, "I feel like there are so many groups of people or small demographics in our country that need help advocating for equal rights or equal opportunities," and "I need to do more advocacy on multiple levels." By discussing how advocacy goes

beyond individual-level action, respondents also highlighted the value of political involvement. They claimed that political involvement entails voting together as a community and openly discussing political issues that directly impact clients. For example, participants reported, "Voting is being able to get support from other entities," and "My involvement is at my state legislator level than the national level." Additionally, they recommended that being involved in nonprofit and professional organizations played a role in supporting therapists developing advocacy, "I love being a member of the American Counseling Association," and "I want to give credit to organizations that support this work."

Training

Lack of training was first mentioned by participants, with graduate education receiving heavy discussion. What is taught in graduate education plays a role in participants' performance and the services they provide to clients. Participants shared that they did not receive formal training that could prepare them for advocacy roles. As described by one person, "There were multicultural classes we were required to take, but I don't think those encouraged us to advocate for any particular groups."

In contrast, respondents described post-graduate training as an ongoing process that included continuing education, mentorships, and relationships that helped them to develop their advocacy skills. For instance, one individual explained, "What helped me become an advocate for social justice includes my mentor and relationships with my wise elders, participation in professional counseling organizations such as the American Counseling Association, the Multicultural Counseling and Development division, being a part of ACES, and networking." Another person said that training occurred after graduation, sharing, "I don't think I received any training during graduate school—maybe some social justice journal articles."

Challenges

Participants indicated several difficulties that limited their advocacy engagement. A lack of time was noted on many occasions by the respondents, as reflected in statements such as, "I don't have the time," "I'm just super busy," and "I have my own practice, which is almost like a full-time job." Others described competing professional and personal responsibilities, noting, "I manage other counselors and staff here," and "I'm also a full-time professor and have family and kids who are involved in so many things, including sports." Respondents also identified limited experience as a difficulty that discouraged them from engaging in advocacy. One person stated, "I don't have experience in community organizing or things like that."

Discussion

This pilot study revealed that social justice is a vital responsibility for play therapists when helping clients reach their fullest potential. The findings support Feldwisch and Whiston's (2015) work on the importance of receiving equitable access to resources. Given the importance of social justice in the therapeutic practice, play therapists should prioritize enhancing their knowledge and pursuing education to deepen their understanding of social justice (Elmadani & Post, 2023).

Although our participants reported advocating for their clients, their efforts were limited to the individual level. There was no evidence of advocacy in a broader form, such as community- or public-level efforts (Bradley et al., 2012). Respondents also were aware that their advocacy efforts focused on individual-level actions and noted the need to extend their work to community and societal levels. To do that, it is important for therapists to foster a more positive and open-minded attitude toward social justice and increase political involvement (Parikh et al., 2013).

Findings from this study indicated that participants did not receive formal training specifically designed to support their advocacy development. Respondents shared that their graduate programs offered multicultural courses to train students to work with diverse populations, but not include advocacy training. This finding is consistent with Elmadani and Post (2023), who found that graduate programs did not provide this type of training.

Although the individuals in the current study acknowledged and expressed a desire to engage in more advocacy work, they prioritized other activities in their lives. These results support Wright's (2020) findings, which indicated that their participants expressed their lack of advocacy experience, struggled to make time for advocacy activities, and preferred engaging in community events, as they were more accessible and a better fit for their schedules than other forms of advocacy.

Like all research, the current results should be viewed considering its limitations. The sample for this pilot study was very small; only a few females agreed to be interviewed, which limits the generalizability of the findings. While this study aimed to provide in-depth and rich data, the results may not be representative of the broader population. Another limitation is related to social desirability. Individuals who completed this study may have had an interest in social justice, which could have influenced their responses. Moreover, persons without an interest in social justice may have shared different content during the interview. Therefore, it continues to be important to investigate factors that may prevent play therapists from prioritizing social justice advocacy. It also is important to conduct studies that compare the social justice advocacy efforts of play therapists working in different settings, as they may have different perspectives.

Regardless of this study's limitations, the current findings offer several promising implications for counselor educators and play therapists. For counselor educators, increasing play therapy students' knowledge about social justice is crucial. Social justice can be infused into education by having students engage with articles, books, and videos to increase their awareness and understanding. Another implication for counselor educators is the use of field projects designed to help play therapy students understand and develop advocacy skills. Experiential learning outside the classroom (e.g., nonprofit organizations and community centers) can expose these students to real-world environments in which social justice issues are addressed. Hands-on experience is valuable in counseling training, especially for students who are from more privileged backgrounds and may have limited exposure to marginalized individuals.

Counselor educators also can model in their practice and share their knowledge in their professional settings. Further, they can create field trips and community visits to help students explore the experiences of marginalized groups. These trips can increase play therapy students' motivation to engage in social advocacy and improve their skills when performing such work. As therapist-parent communication was viewed by our participants as an important factor in the therapeutic process, an important implication of this study is when working with children, play therapists should develop relationships not only with the child but also with their parents.

In conclusion, this study suggested that play therapists should consider expanding their advocacy to community and public levels to create more systemic change. It also revealed the need for innovation in multicultural courses, including incorporating field work and practical assignments on advocacy. Finally, this study provides a useful framework and starting point for further exploration and research on play therapists' social advocacy efforts.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

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

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