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A call to action: The use of Photovoice to increase awareness of the migration and integration needs of Yazidi youth refugees in Canada

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Abstract

Exposure to traumatic stressors is common among refugees. This is true for Yazidi refugees, who have experienced immense pre and post-migration trauma. Two separate, but often concurrent, outcomes of exposure to traumatic events are posttraumatic responses and posttraumatic growth. While both are common, the literature tends to highlight negative outcomes. This study explored the migration experiences and needs of Yazidi youth refugees in Canada. Using Photovoice, an arts-based research design that placed the youth at the helm of the research process, the perspective of Yazidi youth was explored. Data was analyzed using participatory analysis, structured from Wang and Burris (1997) three-stage approach. Through collaborative discussions, five themes were identified by the youth: Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences, Bullying and Racism, Help Families in Iraq, Rise Against the Oppressive Government, and Desire to be There to Help. Within these themes, the youth demonstrated the ability for growth and emotional distress to coexist. The use of Photovoice as a research design allowed youth to be placed in control of the data generation and analysis, and this facilitated their empowerment. Recommendations were shared to support youth in maintaining control over their narratives, while emphasizing the importance of building relationships and working with youth to tackle systemic and structural issues.

Keywords: participatory action research, Photovoice, posttraumatic growth, refugee youth, Yazidi youth

A call to action: The use of Photovoice to increase awareness of the migration and integration needs of Yazidi youth refugees in Canada

Refugees are migrants who have been forced to flee their country in search of safety and are unable to return due to the threat of persecution associated with war, violence, or mass disorder (Henkelmann et al., 2020; UNHCR, n.d.). Refugees are commonly exposed to multiple harmful and traumatic stressors (Ahmad et al., 2020). Past and current trauma experiences are often at the core of the adverse effects experienced with their physical health, mental health, and adjustment to a new country (Beiser & Hou, 2016; Ceri et al., 2016; Henkelmann et al., 2020). Despite higher occurrences of trauma-related disorders, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Chan et al., 2016; Kirmayer et al., 2011), there are many instances of resettlement success for refugees (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019; Kartal et al., 2018). While a substantial body of literature suggests that positive change can occur from trauma experiences (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004), these experiences are underrepresented.

Yazidis, an ethnically Kurdish group situated in the Sinjar region of Northern Iraq, are a distinctive population of refugees who have endured profound and on-going trauma (Canada, Parliament, House of Commons. Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration [Government of Canada], 2018; Kizilhan & Noll-Hussong, 2017). Marginalized due to their unique ethnic and religious identity, they have often been faced with the ultimatum to convert their religion or face execution (Asher-Schapiro, 2014). In 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) perpetrated the 74th recorded genocide against the Yazidi people, leaving nearly 200,000 Yazidis displaced and even more fearing for the lives and wellbeing of themselves, their families, and their broader community (Asher-Schapiro, 2014; Government of Canada, 2018).

While there is considerable research on refugee pathology and growth, research with Yazidi refugees has primarily focused on highlighting traumatic experiences and their negative impact. There is limited attention to growth after trauma for Yazidi youth refugees in Canada. This study was intended to contribute to this gap in research by utilizing an arts-based methodology to understand Yazidi youth refugees' migration experiences and needs. It explored their experiences of trauma while highlighting their strengths and growth. This was accomplished by implementing a Photovoice design. The study was situated within a larger participatory action research (PAR) project examining the experiences of Yazidi youth refugees. The study took a holistic and social justice-oriented approach to identifying barriers and facilitators to resettlement for Yazidi youth refugees, with a focus on identifying the supports they still required. Within this approach, there was a central goal of empowerment and advocacy, fostered through illuminating the voices of the youth participants and being guided by their ideas on how to meet the needs of their community.

Interplay of Trauma, Age, and Refugee Status

Trauma can be understood as the emotional response to a distressing event (American Psychological Association [APA], n.d.), whereas PTSD refers to the immediate and long-term impact of exposure to trauma involving death, threat of death, serious injury, or sexual violence (CMHA, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2018; Mash & Barkley, 2014). Trauma and subsequent PTSD can be the result of direct experience with the aforementioned, witnessing it, learning it has occurred to someone close to you, or by repeated or extreme exposure to the adverse details of the trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; CMHA, 2016). The impact of trauma is influenced by many factors, including age and experiences.

Given the variability in Western and Eastern cultures in what constitutes normal development and the interpretations of certain behaviours, focus should be placed on understanding the developmental tasks associated with adolescence and young adulthood (13-25) (Hazen et al., 2008). This extended developmental period encompasses identity formation (Shahimi et al., 2024), increased independence, the establishment of close interpersonal relationships, and—particularly in emerging adulthood—residential instability and the consolidation of autonomy in education, career, and intimate partnerships (Arnett, 2000). These developmental characteristics make youth particularly vulnerable to the impacts of trauma (Milan et al., 2012; Tsujii et al., 2017),

with effects manifesting in self-image, self-regulation, trusting others, sense of safety, and self-efficacy (Marquer et al., 2015; Mash & Barkley, 2014; Tsujii et al., 2017). During this period, traumatic stress can diminish one's ability to regulate internal states (self-regulation) (van der Kolk, 2005) and disrupt critical transitions to adult roles. Exposure to trauma during adolescence and emerging adulthood impairs functioning across different domains (social, interpersonal, developmental, educational, physical health, and occupational) (APA, 2013), placing youth at an increased risk for psychopathology, substance use, and quality of life deficits (Milan et al., 2012; Tsujii et al., 2017).

For refugees, exposure to trauma often begins before migration (Beiser & Hou, 2016; Kartal et al., 2018). During migration, their pre-migration trauma experiences are compounded by new traumas that occur (Beiser & Hou, 2016; Kronick, 2018). Research with Yazidi refugees has identified high occurrences of PTSD (Ibrahim et al., 2018). Richa et al. (2020) found a 70% incidence rate of PTSD among Yazidi refugees in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, and Ibrahim et al. (2018) discovered a prevalence rate of 90% in internally displaced Yazidi refugees. For Yazidi youth refugees, there have been significant impacts on their quality of life, including physiological symptoms (e.g., headaches, incontinence) and psychological symptoms (e.g., jumpy, cautious, and isolating from others) (Ceri et al., 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Post traumatic Growth

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is another possible outcome of experiencing traumatic stress (Sleijpen et al., 2016; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). PTSD and PTG are distinct constructs that are not mutually exclusive (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). PTG refers to the positive change and growth that result from psychological struggle following an adversity (Collier, 2016), leading to improvements in various areas of a person's life (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). For PTG to occur, following a traumatic event, a person must process their struggles and incorporate their experiences into their personal beliefs, rebuilding their worldview to include the new information (McCormack & McKellar, 2015; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Although the trauma itself may continue to be distressing, the individual experiences a shift in their assumptions about the world, which results in positive benefits (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004). PTG is indicated if the person shows: greater appreciation of life and altered priorities; warmer, more meaningful relationships; a stronger sense of personal strength; recognition of new possibilities or directions for their life; and/or spiritual growth (Collier, 2016; McCormack & Strezov, 2021; Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004).

The potential for PTG is influenced by age, the nature of the trauma experienced, and the amount of social support received (Chan et al., 2016; Sleijpen et al., 2016). While trauma exposure can disrupt development and create adverse outcomes (Milan et al., 2012), age is also a mitigating factor for PTSD (Ahmad et al., 2020). During adolescence, many brain-based developmental changes are caused by experiences, not genetics (Perry, 2002). The fact that the brains of youth are more receptive to environmental input means there is considerable potential for PTG under the right environmental circumstances (Mohr, 2014; Perry, 2002).

PTG has been observed in many populations, including refugees and those who have experienced war and attempted genocide. Chen et al.'s (2016) study revealed PTG following genocides, the holocaust, and war, and Preiss et al. (2022) found significant levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms and PTG in first-generation Holocaust survivors. PTG is common among refugee populations (McCormack & Strezov, 2021), and has been observed in different populations of refugees, including Syrian refugees (Chan et al., 2016; Rizkalla & Segal, 2018).

Art, Research, and Post-Traumatic Growth

There is a connection between art and PTG. Art is a powerful means to support personal and social transformation (Goessling et al., 2021; Wright, 2021), and in both research and practice it is an effective approach for helping individuals cope with trauma (Mohr, 2014). Arts-based research offers participants and researchers a way to express themselves that does not rely on language (Lam et al., 2020; van der Vaart et al., 2018), which promotes an understanding of others' experiences that might otherwise be hard to access (van der Vaart et al.,

2018). It also can foster a sense of hope (Wright, 2021). Interpersonal consequences happen as well, as art brings together people of different ages and generations, and encourages understanding, cultural sharing, and renewal (Humpage et al., 2019; Jokela, 2019). The effects of this extend beyond strengthened communities and can influence system-level change by shaping policies and promoting broader systemic improvements (Goessling et al., 2021; Sanon et al., 2014).

Verbal approaches to working through traumatic experiences may not be appropriate for all. Neuroimaging studies have shown that being exposed to traumatic reminders can influence blood flow in the brain, deactivating the expressive speech center needed to express thoughts and feelings (van der Kolk, 2006). Arts-based research and therapeutic work provide a way to explore trauma and facilitate recovery from traumatic experiences through non-verbal communication (Harris, 2009). Art is one way of expressing the discomfort associated with trauma in a way that empowers individuals for positive change, and it can help individuals attribute meaning to devastating events, which can facilitate resiliency following adversity (Harris, 2009). As such, arts-based activities are effective in promoting reintegration with children and youth who have witnessed violence and atrocity, and have been uprooted. Therefore, arts-based activities are a viable option to support Yazidi youth refugees in understanding and representing their experiences associated with migration and integration, while exploring the supports they still require. Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate this option with Yazidi youth refugees.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a Photovoice methodology grounded in PAR. It represented the third phase of a larger PAR project with Yazidi youth refugees. PAR emphasizes collaboration between researchers and participants at all stages of the research project, while honouring the goal of promoting social change (Heppner et al., 2016; Kim, 2019). Consistent with this approach, in this study, participants were engaged as co-researchers in all phases of the project (Doucet et al., 2022; Heppner et al., 2016). The researchers and the youth participants jointly explored the central research question of fostering positive change for Yazidi youth and their broader community (Kesby et al., 2007).

In keeping with PAR principles, the specific arts-based method was not predetermined. Photovoice was initially discussed with a community advisory group involved in an art therapy initiative with Yazidi parents at the community agency. With their support, Photovoice was introduced as one of several methodological options and was ultimately chosen by the youth participants as their preferred methodology during an earlier research phase.

This research was conducted with a local community centre servicing newcomer families in a medium-sized city in Southern Ontario, Canada. The research team had an established relationship with the organization, built through past collaboration and volunteer involvement. An advisory team, including the Director of Newcomer Settlement Services, agency staff, and Yazidi youth, were consulted through all phases of the research. Establishing mutual trust was foundational and aligned with the emphasis on relationship building in PAR research (Heppner et al., 2016; Kim, 2019). Prior to and following the study, the Project Coordinator remained actively engaged with the youth through involvement in cultural events and volunteer activities.

Photovoice is an arts-based research approach where participants use cameras to capture images that reflect their perspective (Lam et al., 2020). These photographs are then explored through writing (e.g., writing narratives of their photographs) or dialogue (e.g., individually sharing their photographs) (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017), allowing for deeper understanding (Doucet et al., 2021). The process has proven effective in research with refugee and youth populations, including people with limited language abilities (Coad et al., 2009; Lam et al., 2020).

Curation of the Research Study

Photovoice research can be structured and analyzed in various ways (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Two broad categories include participant-led and researcher-led designs. This study adopted a participant-led analysis, which

enhanced the study's validity and deepened insight into participants' lived experiences. Participant-led approaches involve respondents in all aspects of the research process (Bourke, 2009) and emphasize community-driven action and empowerment (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017; Tsang, 2020).

In the present study, the Project Coordinator served as a facilitator, structuring the analysis while participants led the data interpretation (Nind, 2011). Given that participants are often excluded from data analysis (Nind, 2011), this study emphasized their ongoing engagement to ensure the credibility and impact of the research (Rahman et al., 2022). The analysis followed Wang and Burris's (1997) three-stage process (selecting, contextualizing, and codifying images). The final stage, theories to explain identified concerns, was eliminated as the youth expressed it did not align with their goal of sharing their stories and creating change.

Procedure

The procedure implemented represented a modified version of Latz and Mulvihill's (2017) eight-step methodological script. Steps 3 to 5, which comprised data collection and analysis, were completed over the course of one afternoon.

Step 1: Identification. The research topic was identified in collaboration with the advisory team (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). Together, the target population was determined to be Yazidi youth aged 15 to 25. This age range is based on the United Nations (n.d) definition of youth, which defined a 'youth' as an individual between the ages of 15 and 25. The advisory team then expanded to include Yazidi youth refugees. The study topic was then determined – migration and integration experiences of Yazidi youth refugees – and the study question (“What would you like others to know about your migration and integration experience?”) was finalized. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained.

Step 2: Invitation and Participants. Purposive sampling was utilized (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). Youth were recruited for a full-day art-creation activity through flyers and word-of-mouth. Eleven Yazidi youth, 3 males and 8 females, participated. Their mean age was 17.4 years old ($SD = 2.60$) and they had lived in Canada for an average of 4.3 years. The sample size aligned with typical Photovoice studies (Sanon et al., 2014).

Step 3: Education. Participants were educated on Photovoice and details of the current project were reviewed (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). Upon arriving to the activity, participants were read the Letter of Information and asked to sign an Informed Consent Form. With IRB approval, no parental consent was obtained because individuals 15 and over were determined to be able to understand the risks and benefits of participation and make informed decisions about their involvement. Translation assistance was available through all stages. Participants were instructed on how to use a camera and time was spent reviewing confidentiality and potential risks linked with the study.

Step 4: Documentation. Respondents were divided into four teams, each consisting of two to four people. Each team received one camera (Fujifilm Instax Mini 11 Instant Camera) and was paired with a volunteer from the advisory team for support. Participants were asked to take photos that depicted: 1) their migration and integration challenges, 2) their migration and integration successes, and 3) the support they still needed.

Step 5: Narration. Participants immediately began the narration phase. This marks the data analysis stage of the study, where the youth interpreted their photos and assigned meaning to their images. This phase followed a modified version of the three-stage approach by Wang and Burris (1997), which included selecting, contextualizing, and codifying. First, participants were asked to share and discuss their photos with the group, then they worked together to identify which photos best represented their collective story (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). A total of 16 photos were selected by the participants: seven to depict migration and integration challenges, five to show migration and integration successes, and four to illustrate the ongoing support they needed.

In accordance with Wang and Burris (1997), the youth then worked together, following the VOICE acronym (Voicing Our Individual and Collective Experience), to provide context for the chosen photos and to create a story that represented them (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). Through group discussion, participants told the

story of the photographs and created captions and titles for each. Two to six captions were created for each photo. This categorizing of photos represented the initial step in identifying the photo themes.

Lastly, in line with Wang and Burris (1997), the youth categorized the pictures by identifying five themes, including two concerns needing immediate action (issues) and three concerns for future investigation (themes) (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017; Sutton-Brown, 2014). They initially started by identifying broad categories of themes. Through discussion, the youth began creating a story within these broad themes. The youth received a \$25 gift card as an honorarium and bus tickets to cover their transportation, and they also were entered into a draw to win four cameras and extra film.

Step 6: Presentation. The final art piece included four framed displays: one overview frame and three frames containing pictures, captions, and titles that responded to the specific photo prompts. At the youths' request, this final art piece is being displayed at the local university in the Faculty of Education department to support their goal of raising awareness about the experiences of Yazidis. This is where teachers and counsellors in training attend classes. The results from the activity also have been presented at conferences focused on supporting newcomer settlement and integration, as well as training conferences for mental health professionals.

Results

The youth created five themes (two issues requiring immediate attention and three themes for future investigation) from their photos and discussions about their experiences (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017; Tsang, 2020; Wang & Burris, 1997). These narratives reflected experiences of trauma and adversity while also highlighting strengths, supports, and growth after trauma.

Photo Theme 1: Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences

Youth emphasized the need to educate others about their identity and experiences. In a powerful statement summarizing this, the youth expressed a desire to be heard: "We want people to understand because only Yazidis know about it [the genocide]. We want to be heard." This was referenced in their caption on the photo frame *Support Still Required*, in which the youth expressed the following about the need for support:

We need support to educate others on the genocide and what the Yazidis in Iraq are still dealing with right now. We need support to tell our stories of what happened to us, what ISIS did to us, and why. It is important because we still have family living in this war every day. And there are girls, women, and boys still in captivity or being forced to be ISIS soldiers. There are men still missing that we do not know if they are alive.

Educating others also was important to the youth because "Others think we are fake and acting and that our experiences are not crises." They suggested creating online articles to spread information as one way to educate others about Yazidis. Online learning was a consistent theme throughout the photographs and discussions. Participant #3 disclosed that "I would learn about the Internet and I read articles which helped me learn." This was described in the context of information gathering and learning about activities they could share with their Canadian peers. Participant #4 shared a picture of the computer, explaining that with the computer, "You can help yourself, and the computer helps you help yourself." This was in the context of information that can be gathered through digital platforms.

Figure 1
Computer



Note. This picture, taken by Participant #4, was selected to represent migration and integration successes associated with Technology.

Photo Theme 2: Bullying and Racism

The second issue that arose for the youth was the bullying and racism that took place since arriving in Canada, requiring a need for immediate action. While sharing their photographs, Participant #5 stated: “When I came here, many people were bullying me. I cried too many times.” This feeling of being rejected by others was endorsed by Participant #11, who reported, “People not accepting of you. Neighbours hateful to us and make it hard to feel welcome. Similar to back home because people used to hate each other back home” about their pictures on migration and integration challenges. This idea formed the basis of a photograph chosen by the participants to depict their migration and integration struggles—a photo of a sign where youth expressed, “People were rude. They didn’t respect us, our culture, or our religion” and “people bullied us. They had hate for us and our families.”

Unfortunately, this trend of bullying and racism also occurs in other environments that include adults in positions of power. When describing the challenges associated with school, the youth depicted bullying imposed by teachers in a caption: “Sometimes the teachers show us they don’t like us or care.” Participant #3 also suggested that Yazidis were often blamed for things and not allowed to be heard, reflected in the statement: “If we got in a physical fight they would blame you anyways. Others that live here [born in Canada] would not get in trouble, it would be me.” A collective view among the youth was that support was still needed for their health and dental care to combat the discrimination they experienced. When curating this frame, the caption noted the following: “We [the Yazidis] have been refused help from dentists and doctors because they don’t understand us or because they are racist.” The impact of bullying and racism ran deep within the lives and integration experiences of the youth, and their discussion focused on a need to “[...] create change to make things better,” as captured by Participant #11. They felt one way to foster this would be to have accountability. They brainstormed the idea for a reporting center where professionals could be held accountable, which they felt could combat systemic racism that was being experienced when trying to access health and dental care.

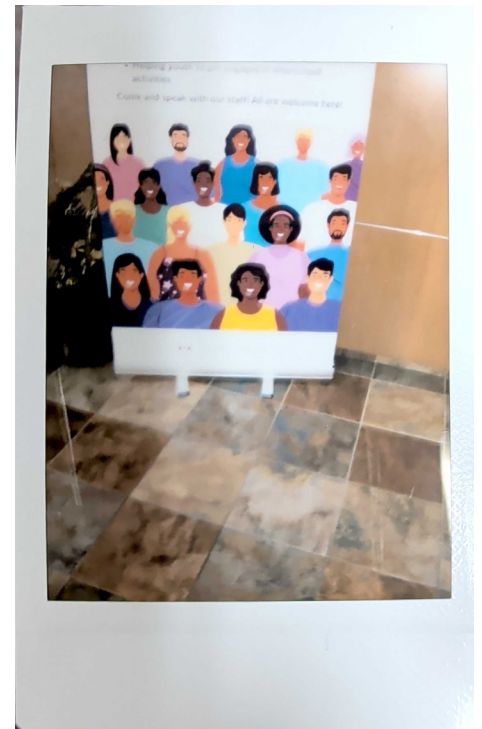
The youth also endorsed the positive impact that others have on their integration experience when they were met with positivity and acceptance. When sharing photos of their successes, the youth identified that forming friendships had given them connection and support. This was endorsed by Participant #6 in the statement, “Having friends here helped to feel safe and better,” and Participant #9 in the statement, “If you need help, you can ask your friends at school anything.” The helpful people at the local community centre also have played an important role in supporting the youths’ basic needs and processing their traumatic experiences. Youth curated the caption “The Centre helps us with documents and bills and gives us opportunities to be involved and face our fears” to accompany a picture of the Centre. The influential role, both positive and negative, that others played in resettling Yazidi youth highlights the importance of supporting positive encounters and combating experiences of bullying and racism.

Photo Theme 3: Help Families in Iraq

The youths’ primary concerns for future investigation surrounded their families and the broader community. Here, concern for Yazidis still in Iraq was at the heart of the message youth tried to capture in response to the prompt “What are the supports you still require?” The youth wrote many captions reflecting this desire to

Figure 2

People



Note. This picture was selected to represent people who contribute to migration and integration challenges for the Yazidi youth.

help their people still in Iraq, including: “The government of Canada, and the countries throughout the world, need to support individuals still in Iraq and suffering,” and “We need others to know what happened because the Yazidis in Iraq are not in a safe place. All we want is support for Yazidis.”

This need for help was twofold. The youth wanted to support Yazidis still in Iraq in finding refuge in Canada, just as they have done. At the same time, they also advocated for helping those in Iraq rebuild their lives there. When discussing this topic, Participant #3 shared the following: “Yazidis don’t want to leave their country, they want to stay and rebuild their houses but they can’t financially.” This led the youth to wonder about many things that warranted further investigation, leaving them with many unanswered questions, including: “How can we support Yazidis who want to remain in Iraq or return to Iraq?” “How can we support Yazidis to rebuild their communities in Iraq?” and “How can we get the government of Iraq to help these individuals?”

The youth expressed a feeling that if others knew what they had experienced and what Yazidis in Iraq continued to experience, more support would be provided to them. Within this way of thinking, the youth suggested that one approach to this theme would be to write letters to the government that could help gather this type of support. However, as Participant #11 stated, it was vital to “find the right way to do that.”

Photo Theme 4: Rise Against the Oppressive Government

The youth also discussed their desire to do something concrete. This centered on a longing to raise awareness of the humanitarian needs of Yazidis in Iraq. Here, there was a trend of raising awareness of the Government of Iraq's practices in order to understand people’s current knowledge of unjust practices. The youth felt that a survey may be an appropriate way to identify the knowledge people had and the stories they had to share, to shed light on the unfair and unjust practices occurring. Participant #3 summarized this by claiming the following: “People would learn it is very discriminatory against people, biased against specific religion and culture.” The youth described their own perceptions of these discriminatory government practices. In some cases, the youth described a gender bias, in which females did not have the same freedom as males in Iraq: “Sometimes we have dreams, and we want to achieve them, but we didn’t always have the support. Didn’t have these chances back in Iraq as a girl.” There was also bias against the entire Yazidi religion and culture. Participant #11 shared this perspective on people in Iraq: “They think Yazidi means terrorist.” These biases have resulted in a lack of support from the Government: “The law did nothing because Yazidi means nothing.” While the youths’ primary concern was to provide support and create action to help Yazidis in Iraq, they felt this was connected to raising awareness of unjust practices.

Photo Theme 5: Desire to be There to Help

Rooted in their desire to do something concrete and their focus on supporting their families and communities, the final theme that emerged was a desire to be in Iraq to help their families and friends. This was hindered by the strict rules on leaving and re-entering Canada before receiving citizenship. When describing these challenges, Participant #7 discussed citizenship challenges: “You can’t leave Canada until you have citizenship,” which means they cannot return home — “We can’t go home [to Iraq].” The ability to get citizenship and have the freedoms that came along with this was made more challenging by the language barrier, as noted by Participant

Figure 3
The Centre



Note. This picture was taken to represent The Centre, which was pivotal in the migration and integration successes of the youth participants. The centre was central in many aspects to resettlement success, including being a place where the youth were surrounded by helpful and supportive people.

#13 when sharing a photograph of a citizenship handbook: “It’s hard to get citizenship because I couldn’t speak the language.”

The youth wanted to educate others on the impact these rules and regulations have on them, including how refugees are perceived. The youth felt that Yazidis have only one chance to enter Canada, which seemed unfair compared to other people, religions, and cultures who “get so many second chances.” They felt this was another form of discrimination. The youth noted that others, including individuals who joined ISIS, have had the opportunity to return to Canada even after leaving for harmful purposes. They described this in their statement:

We have only had one chance and those that have hurt us are allowed back in the country with no problem. What’s the logic in letting these people that left Canada to hurt others return here? These people are leaving Canada and going against Canadian values of freedom and are allowed to come back. Those who are getting hurt by those actions aren’t allowed to enter the country.

All in all, the youth felt it was not fair that people from Canada can leave and fight with ISIS, and then return to Canada and be free, all while the Yazidis were still stuck in Iraq, and the Yazidis in Canada could not leave. They hoped that by sharing this, they could impact policy to allow them to travel back and provide help to their families in need. Thus, the rules surrounding leaving and entering Canada and the impact this had on refugees by being denied entry while others were granted it warrants further exploration.

In conclusion, Yazidi youth in this study were vulnerable in sharing their experiences and needs as related to their pre and post-migration experiences. While their own distress was evident in their individual and collective stories, the youth demonstrated significant personal growth by using their voices for activism. This was evident by their central focus on educating others. While the youth shared the positive impact this would have on themselves and their own adjustment in Canada, predominantly, their goal was to rally support for their families and communities still in Iraq. They also aimed to shed light on the unfair and unjust practices that occur, which have had an immense impact on Yazidi youth, their communities, and their ability to adjust after migration. This included ongoing bullying and racism, the oppression faced by Yazidis by the Government of Iraq, and policies in Canada that seem discriminatory.

Discussion

The experiences and difficulties of the youth in this study, as described in the five photo themes, can be understood as intra- and interpersonal experiences, as well as structural and systemic experiences. This aligns with McLeroy (1988) Social Ecological Model, which highlighted the complex interaction of personal and environmental factors on behavior and well-being, emphasizing the importance of addressing all areas as part of intervention and support (Golden & Earp, 2012). Woven into the discussions we had with the youth also was a clear picture of both post-traumatic responses to trauma and PTG. Throughout this study, the youth represented the ability for growth and emotional distress to coexist, which clearly reflects concurrent constructs of posttraumatic responses to trauma and PTG, as described by Zoellner and Maercker (2006).

Figure 4
Citizenship



Note: This photo, taken by Participant #13, was selected by the youth to represent Citizenship as a challenge associated with their migration and integration.

Intra- and Interpersonal Experiences

Yazidi youth in this study discussed intra- and interpersonal experiences associated with migration, depicting both difficulties, connections, and growth. On an intrapersonal level, the youth struggled with navigating their feelings and experiences related to their traumatic encounters and migration experiences. This was evident by their deep emotion associated with sharing their individual and collective stories of trauma of the genocide and of their missing family members in the theme labeled, “Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences.” It also was observed through the uncertainty they held for the wellbeing of those in Iraq, as described in the theme “Help Families in Iraq,” and the discriminatory practices they experienced noted in the themes “Rise Against the Oppressive Government” and “Bullying and Racism.” Youth described personal struggles with seeing individuals who have targeted their community living freely in Canada, as described in the theme “Desire to Be There to Help.” Their ability to process and live with their experiences was further hindered by their interpersonal encounters, such as seeing those who support and are connected with ISIS, and the general lack of awareness of their experiences. As part of the “Bullying and Racism” theme, the youth described discriminatory encounters with neighbors who had hate for them due to being refugees, individuals who did not respect their religion, and outright discrimination when being refused services or dismissed by health care providers. In other instances, such as with the theme “Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences,” the youth reported that others did not believe “their crises.” While the youth clearly described many instances of discrimination, they also discussed times when they felt misunderstood by others because their stories were not known by others. In contrast, the youth discussed many examples of interpersonal connections that were facilitated their migration experiences. Within the theme “Bullying and Racism,” the youth described the immense positive impact others had on their integration. The friendships formed, and guidance from services and organizations were central to promoting their migration and integration successes.

Structural and Systemic Experiences

While many of the youths’ experiences happened at the intra- and interpersonal levels, numerous instances pointed to structural and systemic problems that need to be addressed in Canada and Iraq. The youth felt impacted personally by the trauma they had experienced through war, violence, and threats to their own and community livelihood, all of which are precursors of posttraumatic responses (Beiser & Hou, 2016; Kartal et al., 2018; Mash & Barkley, 2014). None of those experiences, however, represented intra- or interpersonal problems. This pointed to deeply rooted systemic racism occurring within Iraq. This culture of racism and discrimination allowed for an entire ethnic group to be targeted, violated, and killed for centuries in an attempt to eradicate their population. The youth in this study depicted the nature of the government system in Iraq in the themes “Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences” and “Rise Against the Oppressive Government.”

The Yazidi youth reported feeling physically safe here in Canada, but sadly, post-migration, they continued to experience instances of racism and discrimination. The spread of misinformation and lack of accurate information fostered a culture in Canada where Yazidi young people felt misunderstood, rejected, and discriminated against by peers, neighbors, the school system, and health and dental care providers. As was described in the theme “Desire to Be There to Help,” rules regarding citizenship seemed biased in favor of Canadian natives. In addition, our youth participants had a strong desire to return home to Iraq to see their family members and help their community rebuild. Yet, they were hindered by the strict rules in place in Canada while awaiting citizenship. This called into question the system's structure, which places such strict rules and regulations on refugees. Our Yazidi youth called for action to change this process to allow them to be a part of the change and support relief being provided to Yazidis who remain in Iraq. Moreover, the process of obtaining citizenship was challenging due to other structural barriers, such as the language barrier, which made it difficult for Yazidis to access the system to receive support and pursue citizenship.

Growth

Despite the trauma they experienced, the youth in this study showed significant personal growth, which was in line with PTG (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004). While much of this growth was reflected on an intrapersonal level, the youth expressed hope that their personal development could inspire systemic growth and change. A changed sense of priorities and a recognition of new possibilities for their life (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004) was evident by the way they began to see themselves as activists. They felt a greater sense of personal strength (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004) as they moved from feeling like recipients of support to seeing themselves as agents of change who can support others. It was also evident in how they felt that they could now share their stories to educate others to be heard and seen for who they are. Despite feeling vulnerable in many ways, as a result of discriminatory treatment, the youth established a sense of relative safety in Canada in comparison to before migrating, which allowed them to speak out against their oppression and call for change. This all reflected personal growth across many domains of our Yazidi youth participants, who began to see themselves as agents of change who can move the needle toward larger, system-level change.

Implications

The youth in this study showed a strong ability to express their own views and to create a story that reflected the collective perspective of their community. Using an arts-based research design, which helps overcome the fact that trauma can affect a person's ability to articulate thoughts and feelings verbally (van der Kolk, 2006), the youth were able to move beyond their circumstances to a place where they felt empowered to advocate for themselves and their communities. This research design promoted a sense of community as the youth worked together to move from their individual stories, to creating a collective story and a call to action (Humpage et al., 2019; Jokela, 2019).

Overall, this research emphasized the importance of nonverbal methods for processing trauma experiences and engaging in activism among Yazidi youth refugees (Harris, 2009; Mohr, 2014). As shown in this study, art was an effective way to evoke deep insights into the youths' experiences that might have been otherwise hard to access (van der Vaart et al., 2018) due to trauma's impact on the brain (van der Kolk, 2006) and language barriers. These findings have been, and will continue to be, valuable for program development. Following this study, the researchers helped facilitate the creation of a children's yoga group for Yazidis, providing an opportunity for additional members of the local Yazidi community to process their experiences nonverbally. Furthermore, knowledge from this study should continue to inform program development aimed at supporting Yazidi refugees by offering them diverse and meaningful opportunities to process trauma and engage in self-and-community advocacy through arts-based approaches. Counselors and psychologists also can use these findings to guide their session planning when helping Yazidi refugees and perhaps others who have experienced severe trauma. Further, these professionals can utilize arts-based methods instead of verbal support approaches to assist these populations.

Aligned with the above noted actions, this research highlighted the need for opportunities for Yazidi youth refugees to share and discuss their experiences in contexts where they feel in control of their narrative and empowered. This could involve continuing to foster safe spaces for Yazidi youth refugees to share their stories, while also taking a strengths-based approach to providing support. A strengths-based approach shifts the focus from deficits and challenges to success and growth. In clinical practice, this may involve balancing unpacking past experiences with highlighting areas of resiliency, helping Yazidi youth identify sources of support, and adopting solution-focused approaches that align with their desire for advocacy and change.

This study also illuminated the important role of relationships for Yazidi youth and their resettlement journey, which highlighted the need for a social-ecological approach to understanding and support. It is clear that negative interactions with peers, teachers, and service providers, intertwined with misunderstanding, prejudice, and judgment, left a lasting impact on our youth participants. In contrast, positive interactions that included openness, acceptance, and understanding had a significant impact on the Yazidi youth and their resettlement

experiences. Yazidi youth need support in building these connections with others. The youth in this study believed that sharing their stories was one way to help foster this. They believed if their stories were heard, their community would be more understood and ultimately more accepted by others. Action is needed to support Yazidi youth in their advocacy and activism journeys. As practitioners, those connected with the school system should actively engage in advocacy efforts that help to inform the school community on the experiences of the Yazidi community with the goal of increasing empathy, reducing the risk of triggering traumatic memories, and advocating for practices and supports that would be beneficial. Furthermore, deeper exploration of the role of relationships in the migration experiences of Yazidi youth is needed. This should include a more extensive examination of the prejudicial and discriminatory elements, which our youth described as an issue requiring immediate action.

While discrimination and prejudice affected the youth in this study on intra- and interpersonal levels, it pointed to a much deeper rooted problem of racism and discrimination that is occurring in Canada and Iraq. Structural barriers are impacting the migration experiences of Yazidi youth, which represents a structural and systemic level problem requiring action. Importantly, the youth in the present study expressed a desire to be a part of this action. Thus, action that creates change beyond the personal level for these youth is needed. Action that addresses the barriers they are experiencing and the deeply rooted systemic discrimination is needed. This calls for policy modifications that are informed by the experiences of Yazidi youth and works with this population to create meaningful change. This change needs to address the discrimination and prejudice occurring in Canada, as well as raising awareness of the political climate in Iraq and the subsequent impact of this climate on Yazidis still residing there. On this note, Yazidi youth need to be part of this change. Their voices and the needs of the Yazidi community must be central to the change occurring to ensure those needs are met.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

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

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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

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

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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Declaration of Interest Statement

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

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

Therapists' Perceptions Toward Social Justice: A Pilot Study

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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International Psychology's Responsibility in Social Justice and Social Change

Review of *The Handbook of International Psychology (2nd edition)*, edited by Merry Bullock, Michael Stevens, Danny Wedding, and Amanda Clinton. New York, NY: Routledge, 2025. 634 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-92512-0. \$189.00, hardcover.

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The undertaking of *The Handbook of International Psychology (2nd edition)* must have been a daunting, yet very much needed task. The seemingly Sisyphean task of presenting the history and current state of psychology across the globe has been met yet again in the second edition, very much needed after twenty years since the first volume was published.

The authors are commended for their significant effort in completing the second edition of the *Handbook of International Psychology*. It is an admirable attempt to be inclusive and to represent the practice of psychology, its history, and professional psychological organizations and regulations in various countries. This edition features editors who have contributed extensively to international psychology, primarily through academia, research, and involvement in multiple roles within the American Psychological Association (APA), Division 52, and the Office of International Affairs. The extensive effort, undertaken in collaboration with psychologists and psychology professional organizations, is noteworthy, recognizing the underlying partnerships, networking, and relationship building required to include the numerous countries represented in this edition.

As any other *Handbook*, the volume can be approached in a variety of ways. If interested in a certain country or about to interact with a colleague, client or student from another region, a psychologist might find it very useful to read the relevant chapter. In this way, potentially, the book is a must-have for any mental health professional. With such intended use, it might helpful to be reminded of the need to embrace cultural humility,

while acknowledging the legacy of colonialism in psychology (Zhou, 2025). Each chapter of the *Handbook* offers a list of references and further readings as it aims at providing a general idea of the history of psychology intertwined with the history of a nation; therefore, the volume is a good starting point but by no means comprehensive in terms of unveiling the subtleties, complexities, and controversies regarding psychology in each country.

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The first chapter selected for this overview, Ecuador, located under the section dedicated to Central and South America, was written by three authors from this country. A reader might find out that in terms of training there are currently no doctoral-level programs available in Ecuador and there is no national professional organization that would promote and regulate psychological training and practice; smaller regional and thematic associations are dispersed across the country. The authors highlighted research as one of the weakest areas of psychology in Ecuador, while recognizing that persistent inequality, poverty, and violence constitute challenges where psychologists can be agents of positive change.

Cambodia, a country where psychology has been present for nearly three decades, has been described as a place where professionals “blend Western therapeutic methods with traditional mindfulness practices to enhance understanding and foster tolerance” (Ret & Phan, 2025). The authors share compelling statistical information that helps understand challenges faced by psychologists, for example the fact that “Cambodia’s mental health sector currently receives only 0.02% of the national health budget” (Ret & Phan, 2025). As in case of Ecuador, poverty constitutes a significant challenge, and partnership is seen as key in advancing the field.

Considering systemic inequalities across the globe, one might contrast the training opportunities and resources available to psychologists in the United Kingdom, where Murphy (2025) highlighted the diversity of the population, as well as the impact of imperialism and different historical trains of thought developed in the country, not shying away from topics such as eugenics and racist beliefs. The chapter painted a picture of a diversified landscape of associations and training options, while highlighting the breadth of research virtually impossible to summarize, and thus providing references to publications that may allow the reader to gain an updated, more detailed selection of current studies.

One more example of a chapter featuring a country in a distinct region might be the Dutch Caribbean. The Caribbean, well covered in the volume, includes Dutch, English, French, and Spanish-speaking countries. Dutch Caribbean history opens the chapter, discussing the relationship with the Netherlands, and how it continues to shape the professional training and regulation. Five authors representing different locations share the importance of interdisciplinary practice and flexibility to be able to work in different settings, including community-based facilities. Among challenges, they mention an aging population and climate vulnerability alongside the need for mental health specialists in the aftermath of national emergencies. Authors emphasized that cultural strengths, such as notable faith-based and spiritual resources among inhabitants might be useful to psychologists as they assist in building resilience and increasing protective factors.

This second edition of the *Handbook of International Psychology* may benefit readers by offering a brief overview, primarily of the history of psychology in each country, the development of professional psychology organizations, and, in some cases, the regulation of psychology and mental health laws and legislation. While it is understandable that, due to the number of countries included, a detailed and nuanced discussion is not feasible; however, including key factors make this second edition more valuable and helpful to the field of international psychology.

The second edition of this *Handbook*, to some extent, addresses social justice issues related to the need for mental health care in various contexts and countries. However, it often fails to mention the barriers to accessing care. One way to have made a stronger case for social justice and social change in achieving these goals could have included a framework such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) – such as SDG 3 (health and well-being) and its linkage to adequate living wages (SDG 8), inequities between and within countries (SDG 10) and the need for partnerships (SDG 17). This is only one example of a framework that could embody the goals of international psychology and displays the inclusion of interdisciplinary, macro interventions, such as policy changes, in addressing, for example, a global challenge like health and well-being (UN, 2023).

Another critique of the second edition of the *Handbook* is its lack of discussion about the positionality and power of the four editors, who represent Western mainstream psychology, as well as the colonialism and influence involved when it is imported and exported to different contexts. It also fails to address the unequal role played by voices from academia, research, psychologists, the American Psychological Association, and the Office of International Affairs, as well as the influence of ethnic and social backgrounds, in shaping Western psychology's dominant role in various countries. There is limited analysis of how Western psychology is primarily represented by voices from academia, especially psychologists, and from specific groups of North American ethnic and social backgrounds.

One way to have addressed this issue would be to include an editor from, for example, an Asian, African, or Middle Eastern country (among others) that have made substantial contributions to the field of international psychology, particularly in indigenous psychology or cross-cultural psychology (Kim et al., 2006), or those who have recognized their power and positionality and worked tirelessly to address human rights challenges. Some examples include Brigitte Khoury from Lebanon, who has worked diligently with refugees for many years and contributes to the development of psychology in her country; Pina Marsico from Italy, who also works in Brazil and discusses issues of power and positionality. Pina and Brigitte both contributed significantly to division 52 as APA presidents through their mission and visions in their roles. Another example of an excellent editor would be Nandita Chaudhary, who has extensively worked with children and indigenous populations in India. Lastly, including authors beyond psychologists—such as activists, counselors, humanitarians, individuals with lived experience of global challenges, and those from interdisciplinary fields—also would have embodied the spirit of international psychology and social justice.

According to Stevens (2007), international psychology (sometimes used interchangeably with global psychology) aims to understand and address global issues that cross national boundaries and affect multiple countries through interdisciplinary and collaborative communication. Examples of global challenges include migration, armed conflict, climate change, human rights abuses, terrorism, refugees, well-being, and mental health (Marsella, 1998). To develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding for addressing these global challenges and creating effective macro interventions, it is important to identify macroprocesses like sociopolitical and economic challenges and to develop macro interventions such as effective policies. Thus, to tackle global challenges, understanding macroprocesses like sociopolitical, economic, and technological dynamics and applying macro-interventions such as policy changes is beneficial.

In addition to understanding a country's culture and context, it is essential to analyze its historical background, structures, colonial legacy, politics, and other factors that shape the current beliefs and values of specific groups within that society. Although the second *Handbook* briefly mentioned history in some chapters, such as the chapter on Iran and its influence on psychology and touched on indigenous psychology in chapters about Saudi Arabia and the role of culture in Jordan, these discussions are inconsistent across chapters, which is a significant flaw in this edition. While exploring the history of psychology and its professional organizations in each country is interesting, it is incomplete without including the influence of culture, history, politics, and indigenous psychology in each chapter.

Cultural psychology places importance on the consideration of etic and emic approaches. An etic approach looks at applying an intervention or model of psychology to fit the local culture, whereas an emic approach creates interventions or models that fit the local context (Kim & Park, 2007). Examples of etic approaches are giving individuals mental health diagnoses using the DSM-5 because of their symptoms or experiences without considering wider systemic, structural, political, familial, and societal factors impact how and why individuals may present with those symptoms. An emic approach could use locally constructed interventions to analyze these issues and provide the most beneficial interventions, along with considering the importance of culture (Kim & Park, 2007).

Aside from focusing on a certain country or region, some readers might be interested in a given field or application of psychology. For example, a researcher might seek examples of indigenous psychology constructs in different places across the globe. In this case, the chapter on psychology in Aotearoa New Zealand offered an insight into the Māori psyche. It explains the construct of *whakapapa*, which “binds all living beings together through a common lineage that traces back to the creation of the universe and reminds Māori of the importance of honoring relationships” (Dixon et al., 2025, para. 4). Another example would be the chapter dedicated to psychology in Nigeria, where authors discussed indigenous psychotherapy, emphasizing “ancestral consciousness and familial and communal cosmology as vital elements in healing” (Onyeka Ezenwa et al., 2025, para. 12). Dozens of other references within the book discussed indigenous psychology, allowing the reader to grasp glimpses across the globe, probably also inviting further reflection based on additional resources.

Another use of the volume could be more practical or even administrative, when seeking to understand the requirements related to the practice of psychology or someone’s credentials in terms of education and training. Each of the 85 chapters contained a section with this type of information revealing the diversity of options across the globe. The fact that the editors had asked every author to answer the same questions helps with the comparative reading, for instance if a psychologist is seeking to relocate to another country or explore overseas options with a mentee or student.

In addition, the volume can be used while teaching psychology, assigning individual chapters to students or concentrating on a given region. It likely expands horizons of undergraduate students and might deconstruct some assumptions of graduate students, thus enriching and internationalizing curricula. Especially in cases of preparation for student exchange experiences abroad, an instructor or an administrative staff person might discuss the relevant chapter before and after the student’s trip. An exploration of limitations or even some biases inherent to human beings, also including chapter authors, could provide a way to foster critical thinking and provide insight in how to confront social injustices.

In fact, in terms of limitations, the main criticism of the *Handbook* probably is rooted in the fact that each author brings in their perspective on the complex field of psychology in their country, speaking from a given position of power and authority. Some statements made by authors could be objected to by their colleagues from the same country who represent different interests. For this reason, readers should be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the profiles of authors in the section Author Bios, revealed a wide variety of institutional affiliations and positions. Organized in alphabetical order, it is a helpful resource to understand the context of each chapter, as well as the richness of psychology in terms of professional histories and endeavors, from a global perspective. Some chapters were written by single authors while others by a team of psychologists, residing in the country that they are describing. A recommendation for the future editions of the volume would be to encourage a team approach, possibly with authors including both practitioners and researchers who represent various fields of psychology.

The *Handbook* certainly might be a helpful resource to psychologists, as it provides a snapshot of the state and growth of the psychology discipline across the globe. But can it also promote advocacy for social justice? Can it promote social transformation toward social and ecological justice and peace? Probably indirectly, if read with the mindset of a citizen psychologist. It is noteworthy that the new editors of the volume (compared with the first

edition), Merry Bullock and Amanda Clinton, embody and encourage this approach. In fact, elsewhere, those authors call individual psychologists, as professionals and citizens, to become engaged in policy (Bullock et al., 2023). The emphasis on this dimension transpires from the volume introduction, but it seems that the chapter authors have not been explicitly asked to expand on advocacy in psychology in their countries. The question might therefore be restated in several ways: Would it be too much to ask about the wider context of social justice and action work in each region? Why or why not? It might be that the *Handbook* is a good start and another volume is needed, where those issues, country by country, are discussed in depth.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they do not have any competing interests.

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