

Erin Harris
Counselor as Social Justice Advocate
EDG 6328: Professional Orientation
Dr. Johnson
02/23/2005

Counselor as Social Justice Advocate

Social justice in counseling involves actively advocating for equitable access to mental health services for all individuals, particularly marginalized and underserved populations. It requires counselors to develop cultural competence to recognize the unique needs of diverse clients and to understand the societal factors contributing to trauma and mental health challenges. Social justice-oriented counselors take responsibility for promoting practices, policies, and systemic changes that reduce disparities and foster inclusivity in mental health care.

Prevalent Social Justice Issues

Access to quality mental health care remains a challenge for racially and ethnically diverse populations. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals are less likely to receive treatment despite experiencing higher rates of stressors such as poverty, discrimination, and historical trauma (Alegría, Atkins, Farmer, Slaton, & Stelk, 2010). Financial limitations, cultural stigma, and a lack of culturally competent providers create additional barriers (SAMHSA, 2017). Historical mistreatment, including unethical medical experiments, fosters deep distrust in healthcare systems (SAMHSA, 2017).

As a result, marginalized communities face increased rates of untreated depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Notably, suicide among Native American youth is 2.5 times higher than the national average, making it the highest rate among all racial and ethnic groups (Ramirez, 2019). Addressing these disparities requires targeted advocacy efforts, including policy changes to improve insurance coverage, increased recruitment and training of diverse mental health professionals, and the implementation of community-based programs to reduce stigma and expand access to care (APA, 2019).

Structural discrimination in schools and workplaces continues to limit opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds, affecting their financial stability, career growth, and mental health. In education, practices like the school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately affect Black and Latino students, increasing their chances of incarceration (Alegría, Canino, & Pescosolido, 2009). For instance, Black students are more likely than their white peers to face suspension, expulsion, or arrest for similar behaviors. Implicit biases in teaching materials and methods often promote a Eurocentric perspective, sidelining diverse viewpoints. Underfunded schools in marginalized communities frequently lack essential mental health resources, leading to increased stress and disengagement among students. These disparities highlight the need for systemic changes to create equitable educational environments for all (Burstein, 2024).

Discrimination in educational and workplace settings further exacerbates mental health challenges for these populations. In schools, students from minority backgrounds may face implicit biases, leading to disparities in disciplinary actions and academic expectations (Brown & Chu, 2012). Such environments can foster feelings of alienation and stress, negatively impacting students' mental health and academic performance. Similarly, in the workplace, racial discrimination can manifest through limited opportunities for advancement, unequal pay, and a lack of representation in leadership roles (Hampson, Watt, & Hicks, 2020). These experiences not only hinder professional growth but also contribute to psychological distress, including anxiety and depression.

In the workplace, racial and gender pay gaps persist, with Black and Latina women earning significantly less than White men for the same work. Microaggressions, exclusionary practices, and limited leadership opportunities create additional stress and burnout for employees of color (Sue, 2010). To combat these inequities, schools must implement anti-racist policies and expand access to mental health resources. Workplaces should establish equitable hiring and pay practices while fostering diverse leadership representation. Strengthening mental health support systems in both education and professional settings is crucial to addressing the psychological stressors caused by systemic discrimination and ensuring long-term well-being for culturally diverse individuals (Arredondo & Toporek, 2004).

Self-Reflection

Reflecting on my journey as an educator in several Title I schools, I've come to recognize how my personal experiences and worldview have shaped my approach to social justice advocacy. Working in environments where many families have limited English proficiency has been both challenging and enlightening, compelling me to confront and reassess my own biases. These experiences have reinforced my belief that equity in education must extend beyond access to resources, it must also encompass the dismantling of systemic barriers that hinder students from marginalized backgrounds.

Initially, I grappled with the misconception that language barriers equated to a lack of knowledge. This flawed perspective, rooted in implicit bias, risked underestimating the capabilities and potential of my students and their families. Recognizing this, I committed to critical self-reflection to identify and address these biases, understanding that they could inadvertently perpetuate systemic inequities (Almager, 2018). To bridge the communication gap, I acquired access to translators and incorporated visual aids during meetings and instructional sessions. This approach not only facilitated better understanding but also fostered a more inclusive environment where families felt valued and respected. Engaging with families in their preferred language acknowledges their role as essential partners in their children's education and promotes a sense of belonging (Baker, Wise, Kelley, & Skiba, 2016).

Beyond language barriers, I have witnessed firsthand how structural discrimination in education disproportionately affects students of color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of my students faced challenges related to food insecurity, lack of access to healthcare, and limited academic support at home. These factors, compounded by implicit biases in the classroom, can result in lower expectations from educators, disproportionately harsh disciplinary practices, and a lack of culturally responsive instruction (Burstein, 2024). As a result, I have come to view social justice advocacy as a critical component of my professional identity, requiring me to not only provide equitable learning opportunities but also challenge broader systemic issues that perpetuate educational disparities.

However, this journey has not been without its challenges. Confronting my own biases required an uncomfortable yet essential introspection. I realized that unintentional prejudices could manifest in lowered expectations or misinterpretations of students' abilities. For example, I have observed, in the past, that occasionally teachers were more likely to view students who struggled with English as being less academically capable rather than recognizing that they simply needed additional language support. By acknowledging and addressing these biases, I strive to create a more equitable educational experience (Almager, 2018). Furthermore, advocating for systemic change in schools can sometimes be met with resistance from administrators, colleagues, or even parents who may not recognize the urgency of addressing these disparities.

To effectively navigate these challenges, I rely on several key strategies. First, I actively seek out professional development opportunities focused on cultural competency and inclusive teaching practices. By continuously educating myself, I can ensure that my advocacy efforts are informed and effective. Second, I prioritize relationship-building with students and families, recognizing that trust and open communication are essential for creating an inclusive educational environment. Lastly, I engage in policy advocacy at both the school and district levels, pushing for initiatives such as increased funding for bilingual education programs, equitable disciplinary practices, and the hiring of more diverse educators (American Counseling Association, 2018).

In essence, my commitment to social justice advocacy is an evolving process, continually shaped by personal experiences and reflective practice. By actively challenging my assumptions and embracing inclusive strategies, I aim to contribute to an educational landscape that honors and uplifts every student's unique background and potential. Through intentional action, I hope to create an environment where all students or clients, regardless of language, race, or socioeconomic status, have the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

Navigating Interactions with Clients

As someone deeply passionate about counseling and advocating for the well-being of diverse individuals, I recognize the critical role that the Multicultural and Social Justice

Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) play in shaping ethical, effective, and culturally responsive counseling practices. These competencies serve as a guiding framework for counselors to enhance their self-awareness, understand clients' worldviews, foster meaningful counseling relationships, and engage in advocacy efforts that address systemic inequalities (Ratts et al., 2016).

One of the key aspects of the MSJCC is counselor self-awareness, which requires me to examine my own privileges, biases, and assumptions as I engage with clients from different cultural backgrounds. This self-reflection is essential because my perspective, shaped by my personal experiences, education, and social identity, inevitably influences the therapeutic process. By continuously working to understand how power, privilege, and oppression impact both my clients and myself, I can create a more inclusive and affirming space for healing (Ratts et al., 2016).

Equally important is understanding the client's worldview, which acknowledges that each individual's identity is shaped by personal, cultural, and systemic factors (Ratts et al., 2016). I am committed to meeting clients where they are, recognizing their lived experiences, and validating their challenges within the broader socio-political context. This means integrating cultural humility into my practice, allowing clients to define their own experiences rather than imposing assumptions about their struggles or strengths.

The counseling relationship is where these competencies truly come to life. I strive to build relationships based on trust, respect, and authenticity, recognizing that cultural factors influence communication, rapport, and engagement in therapy (Ratts et al., 2016). I also acknowledge that my clients' experiences with systemic discrimination, whether in education, healthcare, or employment, can directly impact their mental health. By addressing these realities, I can help clients process their emotions while also exploring ways to navigate and challenge oppressive systems (Ratts et al., 2016).

Beyond the individual counseling setting, I am deeply invested in advocacy efforts at multiple levels, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy. My goal is not just to support clients in managing their personal struggles but also to challenge the structures that contribute to their distress. This means advocating for more equitable mental health policies, working to increase access to culturally competent care, and ensuring that counseling spaces are truly inclusive (American Counseling Association, 2018). I recognize that effective advocacy requires both action and collaboration, whether it's engaging in social justice initiatives, participating in policy discussions, or working alongside marginalized communities to amplify their voices.

Ultimately, my passion for counseling extends beyond providing individual support. I am committed to systemic change that fosters equity, healing, and empowerment for all individuals, particularly those from historically marginalized communities. The MSJCC framework aligns

with my vision of counseling as not only a profession but a calling, one that requires continuous growth, self-reflection, and an unwavering commitment to justice (Ratts et al., 2016).

Integration of Personal and Professional Values

Reflecting on my personal values and professional ethics, I find a profound alignment in my commitment to social justice advocacy. The ACA Advocacy Competencies emphasize the necessity for counselors to engage in both individual and systemic advocacy, aiming to dismantle barriers that hinder client development and well-being (American Counseling Association, 2018). This framework resonates deeply with my belief in promoting equity and inclusivity within diverse communities.

Working in a rapidly growing area north of Fort Worth, I serve a student population rich in cultural diversity, with a significant number of Hispanic families and students from various global backgrounds. This demographic landscape presents unique challenges, particularly concerning language barriers and cultural differences. My personal experiences have reinforced the importance of culturally responsive practices, such as employing translators and utilizing visual aids to ensure effective communication and foster an inclusive environment.

However, navigating this path is not without potential challenges. One ethical dilemma involves balancing respect for cultural values with the imperative to address practices that may conflict with ethical standards or student well-being. For instance, certain cultural norms might discourage open discussions about mental health, posing a barrier to providing necessary support (Abdullah & Brown, 2011). To address this, I plan to employ counseling strategies that are both culturally sensitive and ethically sound. This includes continuous cultural competence training, seeking supervision when faced with cultural dilemmas, and engaging in open dialogues with students and families to build trust and mutual understanding.

Integrating my personal values with professional ethics involves a commitment to ongoing self-reflection and education. I aim to stay informed about the diverse cultural backgrounds of my students and the systemic issues affecting them. By doing so, I can advocate effectively for policies and practices that promote equity, such as implementing school-wide programs that celebrate cultural diversity and providing resources tailored to the unique needs of our community (American Counseling Association, 2018).

In essence, my approach to social justice advocacy is rooted in a harmonious blend of personal conviction and professional responsibility. By embracing both, I strive to serve my community with integrity, compassion, and a steadfast commitment to equity for all students and future clients.

References

- Abdullah, T., & Brown, T. L. (2011). Mental illness stigma and ethnocultural beliefs, values, and norms: An integrative review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 31(6), 934–948.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2011.05.003>
- Alegria, M., Atkins, M., Farmer, E., Slaton, E., & Stelk, W. (2010). One size does not fit all: Taking diversity, culture, and context seriously. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 37(1–2), 48–60.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-010-0283-2>
- Almager, I. (2018). Teacher bias in the classroom: Utilizing Personal Experiences. *SoJo Journal*, 4(1), 17–29.
- Arredondo, P., & Toporek, R. (2004). Multicultural Counseling Competencies = Ethical Practice. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 26(1), 44–55.
<https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.26.1.hw2enjvqve2p2tj6q>
- American Counseling Association. (2014). *ACA code of ethics*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- American Counseling Association. (2018). *ACA Advocacy Competencies* (Updated 2018).
<https://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/competencies>
- American Psychological Association. (2019). *Their role in maintaining racial disparities in PreK–12 education*.
<https://www.apa.org/about/policy/racial-disparities-taskforce-report.pdf>
- American Psychological Association. (2020). *Role of psychology and APA in dismantling systemic racism in U.S.* <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/dismantling-systemic-racism>
- Baker, T. L., Wise, J., Kelley, G., & Skiba, R. J. (2016). Identifying barriers: Creating solutions to improve family engagement. *School Community Journal*, 26(2), 161–184.
<http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx>
- Brown, C. S., & Chu, H. (2012). Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Academic Outcomes of Mexican Immigrant Children: The Importance of School Context. *Child Development*, 83(5), 1477–1485. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01786.x>
- Burstein, S. M. (2024). The Patchwork of World History in Texas High Schools Unpacking Eurocentrism, Imperialism, and Nationalism in the Curriculum, 1920–2021. *History*

Teacher, 57(2), 273–274.

Hampson, M. E., Watt, B. D., & Hicks, R. E. (2020). Impacts of stigma and discrimination in the workplace on people living with psychosis. *BMC Psychiatry*, 20, Article 288.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02614-z>

Herlihy, B., & Corey, G. (2014). Boundary issues in counseling: Multiple roles and responsibilities (3rd ed.). *American Counseling Association*.

MacLeod, B. P. (2014, January). Addressing clients' prejudices in counseling. *Counseling Today*. American Counseling Association.

Ramirez, A. (2019, September 9). American Indian suicide rate increases. *National Indian Council on Aging, Inc.* Retrieved from <https://www.nicoa.org/national-american-indian-and-alaska-native-hope-for-life-day>

Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Butler, S. K., Nassar-McMillan, S., & McCullough, J. R. (2016, January). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies: Practical applications in counseling. *Counseling Today*. American Counseling Association.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017). *Suicide clusters within American Indian and Alaska Native communities: A review of the literature and recommendations*.

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. <https://library.samhsa.gov/product/suicide-clusters-within-american-indian-and-alaska-native-communities/sma17-5050>