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Cultural Diversity in the MSW Learning Space: Exploring Student Awareness, Acceptance, and Perceptions

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Background

- CSWE calls for “engaged diversity and differences in practice” as an accreditation competency (CSWE, 2015)
- Diversity is strongly connected with social work professional and educational values (Ringstad, 2014)
- Social work students should develop a strong consciousness across socially and culturally-diverse groups (Early, Vonk, & Kondrat, 2003)
- Awareness is a requisite for performance as a social worker (CSWE, 1969).
- Comprehensive knowledge of attitudes, values, feelings, and experiences generate success in practice (Cournoyer, 2016)
- Social acceptance is the “presence of an egalitarian atmosphere within an organization, created by egalitarian beliefs and interactions among group members, perpetuated by group norms and practices, and felt by majority and minority group members” (Chen & Hamilton, 2015, p. 587)
- Social work students’ awareness and acceptance about cultural diversity is unexplored in the literature
- This study seeks to explore MSW students’ awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity, and to assess their perceptions of how cultural diversity is experienced and embraced in the MSW learning space

Method

RQ1: What are MSW students’ current levels of awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity, as well as their perceptions of the MSW program learning space with attention to cultural diversity?

RQ2: Do students’ age, race, BSW status, degree of pre-MSW cultural diversity training, MSW social justice course completion, awareness scores, and acceptance scores predict their perceptions of the MSW program learning space with attention to cultural diversity?

Data Collection Procedure

- Setting & population of interest:** IUSSW MSW students
- Sampling method:** Sample of convenience; cross-sectional design
- Selection criteria:** Currently enrolled in an IUSSW MSW program; identified through school’s student email roster
- Data collection procedure:** Online, anonymous survey administered via student email ($N = 648$) by IUSSW administration; survey open 4 weeks; incentive used was randomized drawing for two \$15 gift cards

A Priori Power Analysis

- Alpha = .05; medium effect size = .25; power = .95; needed sample = 95

Conceptual Definitions

- Cultural diversity:** specifically in reference to diversity of race and ethnicity
- Awareness:** affective capacity for, and gauging recognition of thoughts about, cultural diversity
- Acceptance:** Behaviors within culturally-diverse interactions
- Perceptions in the learning space:** student experiences of current practices and norms established by student culture, institutional policies, and classroom engagement (Samura, 2017)

Survey Development

- Demographics:** Age, gender, race, college major, S600 - “Diversity, Human Rights & Social Justice”, pre-MSW diversity training
- Awareness Scale:** 7 items
 - “I think my beliefs are influenced by my culture.”
- Acceptance Scale:** 7 items
 - “I am only at ease with people from my own culture, ethnicity, or race.”
- Perceptions in Learning Space:** 12 items
 - “I believe some aspects of the classroom environment at this SW school may alienate students from culturally-diverse backgrounds.”

Analysis



Criterion	Level of Measurement	Coding/Interpretation
Perception scores	Continuous	12 (negative perceptions) – 72 (positive perceptions)

RQ1 – Descriptive statistics (non-inferential)
RQ2 – Stepwise multiple linear regression analysis

Factors	Level of Measurement	Coding/Interpretation
Age	Continuous	
Race	Categorical	0 = Non-White 1 = White
BSW Status	Categorical	0 = without BSW 1 = with BSW
Degree of pre-MSW diversity training	Ordinal	1 - 8 (# of responses for previous diversity training)
MSW social justice course completion	Categorical	0 = did not complete 1 = completed
Awareness scores	Continuous	7 (low awareness) – 42 (high awareness)
Acceptance scores	Continuous	7 (low acceptance) – 42 (high acceptance)

Results

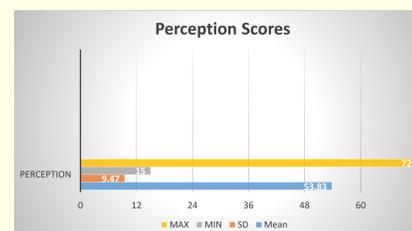
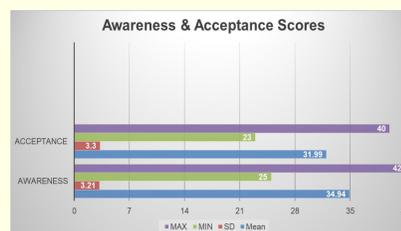
- N** = 146; Mean age: 32 (SD = 9); Female (89.7%); White (non-Hispanic) (80.4%); **BSW** = 37%; **S-600 completion** = 38%
- Post hoc power:** $\alpha = .05$; med. effect size .25; power = .99

Table 4
Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis – Predictors of Perception of Cultural Diversity in the Learning Space^a

Factor	R	R ^{2b}	B(SE)	β	t	p	F	p
Acceptance	.27	.07	-.09(.03)	-.28	-3.43	<.01	10.27	<.01
Social Justice course	.32	.10	-.54(.19)	-.25	-2.81	<.01	7.33	<.01
BSW status	.38	.14	-.47(.19)	-.22	-2.46	<.05	7.09	<.001

^aAdjusted R² = .12
^bSquare root of Perception

Assumptions of MLR tested
Perception severely skewed, reflection & square root transform.



Discussion

- Per the stepwise regression; 3 of the 7 factors are significant predictors of *perception* ($\alpha = .05$)
 - Acceptance, S-600 course completion of social justice course; and having BSW degree
- These predictors were negatively associated with the criterion. Perception scores decreased as:
 - Acceptance scores increased
 - Students went from no BSW to BSW status
 - Students went from not having taken S-600 to having taken it
- It is posited that with undergraduate social work education and completing a graduate course in social justice, diversity, and human rights, students may develop a more critical eye
 - This would empower students with the ability to more carefully consider and evaluate their learning space with attention to how the MSW program enables customs established by student culture, administrative practices, and classroom environments with attention to race and ethnic diversity
- Acceptance scale has very weak internal consistency and therefore, theoretical interpretation of this factor is limited

Limitations

- Expanded demographic response options
- Sample of convenience (external validity)
- Social desirability bias
- Underrepresentation of non-white students
- Obscure conceptual definitions of *awareness*, *acceptance*, and *cultural diversity*
 - Should consider “racial-ethnic identity”

Implications

- The findings of this study are relevant to SW research, curriculum, and education
- Continued understanding through assessment of social work students’ interpretations and application of cultural diversity and its importance within SW educational curriculum
- Schools of social work can infer potential changes within their learning spaces in response to these assessments

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