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# Social climate in social work training : the influence of the learning environment on the emerging social worker's professional identity as an agent of social justice

Tatiana Martínez

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Tatiana Martínez  
Social Climate in Social  
Work Training: The  
Influence of the Learning  
Environment on the  
Emerging Social Worker's  
Professional Identity as an  
Agent of Social Justice

### **ABSTRACT**

In Master of Social Work programs, one of the objectives of the field practicum is the development of a professional self. A field placement agency may encourage, discourage, and/or limit the student's ability to implement social justice interventions in their work with clients which may impact their development of a professional identity as it relates to social justice. In this exploratory study, qualitative data was obtained through eight semi-structured interviews. The findings confirm that the social climate of a field placement agency influences the student's ability to develop aspects of their professional identity dedicated to engaging in social action activities. Additionally, these experiences were found to have long-term consequences on the student's later professional behavior in advocacy work as well as in relationships with supervisors and other social workers.

**SOCIAL CLIMATE IN SOCIAL WORK TRAINING: THE INFLUENCE OF  
THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT ON THE EMERGING SOCIAL WORKER'S  
PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AS AN AGENT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2017

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2008) indicates that “the mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (para. 1). The social work value system is deeply rooted in social justice. The NASW (n.d.) defines social justice as “the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities” (para. 2). Within the Code of Ethics, the ethical principle that “social workers challenge social injustice” encourages members of this field to oppose oppressive practices and promote sensitivity to cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers also have a commitment to pursue responsiveness from social institutions, organizations, and communities in regard to the needs and social problems impacting the most vulnerable individuals in our society (NASW, 2008, para. 2). Thus, as clinical social workers, our profession dictates not only a commitment to expert clinical knowledge, but also an obligation to advance social justice and empower disadvantaged populations.

In Master of Social Work (MSW) programs, one of the objectives of the field placement experience is the development of a professional identity. As interns, we may find ourselves working in agencies that may encourage, discourage, and/or limit our ability to implement social justice interventions to support clients; thus, impacting the development of the aspect of our professional identity dedicated to engaging in social action activities. My thesis seeks to understand how the social climate within a social work placement agency may influence the emerging social workers’ professional identity

as an agent of social justice and social change. For this purpose, the study will focus on the field placement experiences of students who are pursuing a master's degree in social work and social workers who have graduated from a social work master's program within the past 2 years. In this study, *social climate* of a mental health agency refers to the influence on interns of the collective attitudes and perceptions held by staff regarding social action initiatives on behalf of the clients served there. This term will be used interchangeably with *organizational climate*.

As previously stated, one of the objectives of the MSW field placement is the development of a professional identity. The process that psychotherapists undergo as they learn and establish a professional self, mimics that of human development as it progressively leads to the therapist's individuation and identity formation (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986). A professional identity is considered an essential aspect of the social work profession and its establishment is regarded as crucial during the training process.

Just like in child development, it is important to consider the influence that the environment may have on the social work trainee. *Social climate* as defined by Moos and stated by Flarey (1991) is the "'personality' of a setting or environment" (p. 37). Several factors contribute to this composite environment, including peer cohesion, involvement, supervisory support, autonomy, work pressure, task orientation, clarity, control, innovation, and physical comfort (Flarey, 1991). Allodi (2010) explains that social climate is an essential factor in educational processes that affects the students' "self-concept, motivation and performance (Fraser, 1986)" (p. 89). Therefore, a careful analysis of the social climate within training agencies is necessary to ensure adequate support for the development of a new social worker's professional identity.

In 2010, Litvack, Mishna, and Bogo conducted an exploratory study seeking to identify and describe graduate social work students' emotional reactions to experiences in field education. Among other findings, their research identified the student-field instructor relationship and the organizational environment as having a considerable effect on the students' experiences, both as protective and risk factors (Litvack, Mishna & Bogo, 2010).

As the professional self emerges in and as an outcome of social interactions, oppressive dynamics within the agency may have an impact in its formation (Dominelli & Campling, 2002). The configuration of the self is a product of the cultural context, formed through local politics and moral understandings, and it is socially constructed by those in power (Cushman, 1995). Thus, a consideration of oppressive and/or limiting forces appears to be essential in understanding professional identity development.

A significant amount of literature exists regarding the development of a professional self (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Slay & Smith, 2011); however, there is a lack of research examining the interaction between social climate within a social work placement agency and the development of the social worker's professional identity as it relates to social justice.

My hope is that this study will encourage students, educators, clinicians, researchers as well as others interested in the field of social work to reflect on how social climate in field placement agencies may influence the social worker's development of a professional identity as an agent of social change. Moreover, I hope this study will motivate members of the field to find new ways to improve social work education and honor the profession's commitment to support marginalized and vulnerable populations.



Slay and Smith (2011) define *professional identity* as “one’s professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences” (p. 85). This study will utilize the given definition which will be used interchangeably with the term *professional self*.

For the purpose of this study, *social justice intervention* is defined as any action taken towards advancing the economic, political or social rights and/or opportunities of any vulnerable or marginalized individual/s.

*Ingroup* will be defined as a group of individuals “about whose welfare a person is concerned, with whom that person is willing to cooperate without demanding equitable returns, and separation from whom leads to anxiety” (Triandis, as cited by Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p. 38). On the other hand, *outgroup(s)* will be defined as a group(s) of individuals that are “perceived as disconnected, unequal, or threatening in some way” (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p. 38).

The term *collective narcissism* refers to, “An ingroup identification tied to an emotional investment in an unrealistic belief about the unparalleled greatness of an ingroup” (de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson & Jayawickreme, 2009, p. 1074).

The term *oppression* will be defined as a relationship of dominance and subjugation between categories of people that benefits one group through the systematic exploitation, abuse, and injustice of the other. (Johnson, 2000).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

I found an abundance of literature discussing the process of professional identity development (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Slay & Smith, 2011) and social climate in educational and organizational environments (Allodi, 2010; Flarey, 1991; Moos, 1979). However, there is a lack of research examining the interaction between social climate within a social work placement agency and the development of the social worker's professional self as an agent of social justice and social change. To comprehensively explore this relationship, this review is presented in five categories of literature: social justice in social work education, social climate, professional identity development, organizational identity and organizational group dynamics. This study was prompted by the lack of research and literature addressing this topic as well as its relevance to the field of social work.

#### **Social Justice in Social Work Education**

Social work is the only helping profession with a deep-rooted history of commitment to social and economic justice as well as human rights and peace. These core values are reflected in the code of ethics of social work organizations at provincial, national, and international levels. In 1948, the United Nations developed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), an international agreement which set forth a common standard for economic, civil, cultural, and social rights. The NASW Code of Ethics upholds the standards established in the UDHR and emphasizes the social worker's ethical commitment to advancing social justice and promoting social change (Lundy, 2011). In this way, the role of the social worker as an agent of social justice and

social change is recognized as an essential core value of the profession not only at a national level but also internationally.

The Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) is an U.S. national association whose mission is to enhance “the quality of social work education for a professional practice that promotes individual, family, and community well-being, and social and economic justice” (CSWE, 2017, para. 2). The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) are a set of guidelines utilized by the CSWE to accredit baccalaureate and masters’ level social work programs. In 2008, the CSWE shifted the focus of their curriculum from a content-focused to a competency-based approach that requires students to demonstrate through practice the competencies identified in this educational policy (CSWE, 2015). Central to this change was the identification of field education as the signature pedagogy of social work. Field placement is recognized as the integrative stage of social work education as it provides students with the opportunity to implement their academic learning and engage in professional interactions that demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and values of the profession (Boitel & Fromm, 2014). On the EPAS, the third competency listed indicates that the social work curriculum must “advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice”, and requires social workers to:

- apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels; and
- engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice (CSWE, 2015, p. 8).

In this way, during field placement, social workers must demonstrate not only an understanding of social justice issues but evidence of active engagement in social justice and social change.

In 1992, the United Nations Centre for Human Rights in collaboration with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) published “The Manual for Schools of Social Work and the Social Work Profession” (1994) which was later revised in 1994. This manual recognized social workers as professionals in the protection and advancement of human rights (IFSW, 2010), and provided social work students, educators, and practitioners with a comprehensive educational reference to existing social justice and human rights issues as well as the tools to address these. As depicted in “The Manual for Schools of Social Work and the Social Work Profession” (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, et al., 1994),

The profession’s need to serve as faithful employee has had to live alongside its obligation to serve the consumer of its practice. According to the profession’s code of ethics and mission statements of schools of social work, service to people is the higher consideration...Advocacy of such rights must therefore be an integral part of social work, even if in countries living under authoritarian regimes such advocacy can have serious consequences for social work professionals (p. 5).

In this way, social justice and human rights are considered a primary concern in social work practice and must be at the forefront of all ethical decisions and professional considerations.

## **Social Climate**

“The Manual for Schools of Social Work and the Social Work Profession” (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, et al., 1994) regards field work as a fundamental aspect of social work education that provides students with the opportunity to engage in the practical application of the knowledge attained through academic coursework. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of helping students develop awareness of human rights considerations in all areas of social work regardless of the students’ subfield of interest.

Taking care to ensure that dignity and respect as well as coping skills are preserved and enhanced in clients or client groups will shape students’ professional attitudes...Much will depend on the knowledge and attitudes of both instructors and students. The limits and possibilities provided by social, economic and political systems; possible constraints of organizational structures; cultural traditions; and the recourse to legal protection are, among many others, elements that will need to be explored within the microcosm of a particular individual and collective problem, not in a comfortable classroom discussion, but in the reality of life and pain (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, et al., 1994, p. 46).

This text highlights the relevance of the social work field training environment – which includes its social climate –in shaping students’ professional attitudes in regard to human rights, and in turn, social justice. The attitudes held by staff and systems involved in the student’s educational process is said to play a crucial role in shaping the student’s professional self. The text discusses the topic of field work training very briefly and fails

to address the impact that organizational climate can have on the development of a social worker's professional identity in terms of her/his commitment to social justice.

Rudolf Moos (1979) developed a socioecological framework to analyze the social environment and identified four major categories: social climate, physical setting (e.g. architecture or physical design), organizational factors (e.g. agency size, salary, and affluence) and human aggregate (e.g. age, race, ability level, and socioeconomic status). Furthermore, he conducted analyses of the environment of institutional, educational, primary care, and psychiatric treatment settings and designed scales to measure the social climate found within each (1979). The term social climate refers to the collective attitudes and perceptions held by staff regarding, among other variables, “policies, practices, and procedures of [the] workplace and the behaviors that [are] rewarded, supported, and expected there” (Ehrhart, K., Ehrhart, M., & Schneider, 2005). The literature suggests that social climate plays a significant role in students' educational processes and learning outcomes (Allodi, 2010; Davidovitch & Casakin, 2015; Davis, 2003; Joe, Hiver, & Al-Hoorie, 2017; Moos, 1979; Rutter, 1983). Additionally, the social climate in a learning environment influences the students' “self-concept, motivation and performance (Fraser, 1986)” (Allodi, 2010, p. 89) which points out to its relevance in the development of the professional self.

According to Moos (1979), social climate is composed of three major dimensions: *relationship*, *personal growth*, and *system maintenance and change*. The variables within each of these dimensions vary depending on the setting and are based on the organization's primary goals. The relationship dimension refers to: the extent to which individuals are invested and committed to their work (involvement), how friendly and

supportive they are towards each other (peer cohesion), and the degree to which management is supportive of employees and encourages them to be mutually supportive (supervisory support) (Flarey, 1991). This dimension also includes the degree to which individuals feel able to express themselves openly (Moos, 1979). On the other hand, the personal growth dimension includes: the extent to which employees are encouraged to make their own decisions (autonomy), the importance placed on work efficiency and completion (task orientation), the degree of pressure and time urgency that surrounds the work (work pressure). Lastly, the systems maintenance and systems change dimension refers to the degree to which employees know what to expect in an ordinary work day and how clearly policies, rules, and expectations are communicated (clarity), the extent to which leaders use rules, power, and pressures to maintain employee compliance (control), the degree of comfort with change and the use of new approaches (innovation), and the extent to which the physical environment contributes to a positive work environment (Flarey, 1991).

Litvack, Mishna, and Bogo (2010) conducted an exploratory study seeking to identify and describe graduate social work students' emotional reactions to experiences in field education. Their findings highlighted the student-field instructor relationship and the organizational environment as having a significant impact on the students' experiences, both as protective and risk factors. Participants demonstrated a high attunement to organizational culture and dynamics, and reported that "the environmental context affected them intensely" (Litvack, Mishna & Bogo, 2010, p. 238). Thus, the social climate within which the development of the professional identity takes place is indicated to have a notable impact on the student's emotional state and functioning.

## **Professional Identity Development**

The term *identity* can be defined as the many attributes and meanings attached to an individual by the self and others (Gecas, 1982; Ibarra, 1999). Identities are constructed through social interactions and are based on idiosyncratic factors, group membership, and social roles (Ibarra, 1999). Friedman & Kaslow (1986) review the stages of professional development through a childhood developmental lens which simplifies the examination of this process by providing a framework to identify the trainee's progress. This process mimics Erikson's identity scheme as well as Mahler's separation-individuation model. The stages in the trainee's learning process are: *excitement and anticipatory anxiety, dependency and identification, activity and continued dependency, exuberance and taking charge, identity and independence, and calm and collegiality*. These stages are considered flexible and a certain degree of overlap and retrogression is expected particularly as the student faces new challenges or complex circumstances. After these stages are completed, the clinician achieves individuation from the supervisory relationship (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986). Through a developmental perspective, this article presents a comprehensive review of the formation of the professional self, but it neglects to address the influence of the ethical environment that the trainee may encounter at an organizational or systemic level. Another limitation of this theory is that differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ableism are not considered and, therefore, it does not capture the complexity of diverse identities found in the social work field.

In clinical social work, self-awareness is considered essential in the development of a professional identity (Urdang, 2010). As indicated by Urdang (2010), there is a triad



of omniscience, benevolence, and omnipotence that is present in all mental health students which must be balanced by undergoing a reorganization of the self. “[The] student’s capacity to help is a very limited and bungling tool until he has undergone severe discipline, accepted change and achieved reorganization in himself to the end that his thinking and action may become truly responsible. The beginnings of this change must take place in the two years of professional school experience but it is by no means finished in this brief time. (p. 27)” (Urdang, 2010, p. 524). An understanding of psychodynamic theories as well as attention to the process of transference and countertransference are considered beneficial in the development of self-awareness. The cultivation of self-awareness should be supported in both the academic setting and the field placement (Urdang, 2010). The process of self-awareness becomes particularly relevant when professional identity development occurs in an agency where the social climate is not supportive or conducive to the student’s learning particularly as it pertains to social justice.

Race, gender, sexual orientation, and ableism, among many other factors, are important aspects in the formation of a professional identity. Racial identity development theory indicates that racially marginalized individuals must process and learn to identify racist attitudes and beliefs of both internal and external origin, and develop an active awareness of racism and oppression to address such issues in an effective manner as they develop their identity as therapists (Jernigan, Green, Helms, Perez-Gualdron, & Henze, 2010). Thus, all aspects of an individual’s social identity must be considered during their professional development as a social worker; however, particular attention must be given

to identities that are marginalized and oppressed since dynamics of power may more deeply influence their professional identity formation.

### **Organizational Identity**

*Organizational identity* can be defined as “the features of the organization that members perceive as ostensibly central, enduring, and distinctive in character that contribute to how they define the organization and their identification with it” (Gioia & Thomas, 1996, p. 372). Thus, organizational identity reflects an organization’s self-view. It constitutes a shared cognitive structure that guides major organizational functions such as interpreting the environment, identifying objectives, developing strategies, and acquiring resources (Whetten & Foreman, 2014). Moreover, organizational identity provides a collective sense of “who we are as an organization” and “what makes us special” (Whetten & Foreman, 2014, p. 3). Since social climate is a process that involves shared perceptions, the processes leading to the emergence and maintenance of an organizational identity must be considered in its examination. Therefore, an exploration of the development of organizational identity and organizational identification can contribute to our understanding of social climate (Whetten & Foreman, 2014) as well as its influence on individual and collective identities within an organization.

*Organizational identification* (OID) refers to each organizational member’s perception of the degree to which their personal identity is consistent with the organization’s identity. Individuals who assume a new professional role have to negotiate their developing identity based on their interactions with others as well as themselves (Whetten & Foreman, 2014). Ibarra (1999) explores the notion of *possible selves* as a mechanism of professional identity change. Markus and Kunda (1986) define possible

selves as a self-concept construction that helps individuals identify a future self through the trial of temporary selves. As an individual embraces a new professional role, there is a process of experimentation with familiar and unfamiliar behaviors which contributes to the creation of possible selves. This process includes the learning of new social norms and rules that will dictate the individual's conduct; this includes symbolic details such as attitudes, mannerisms, and rituals (Ibarra, 1999). As the individual's identity adapts to fit the group's social identity, social norms bear a significant power in shaping moral attitudes. Individuals are intrinsically motivated to behave in a way that is consistent with other ingroup members; as a result, the person may shift previously held attitudes and behaviors to become increasingly compliant with the group's norms (Schweigert, 2016). An individual's self-concept relies on the social context for its manifestation and expression. It will pose resistance to challenges and disconfirmation, but it will ultimately adjust to the social conditions (Markus & Kunda, 1986). Possible selves arise from an individual's past and present self-view and are thought to affect emotion, attention and memory as well as self-regulatory behaviors (Hamilton & Cole, 2017). Thus, the interaction between the organizational identity and the individual's developing professional identity will result in a self that has, at least to some degree, been influenced by the negotiation between the two and the moral value system held by the ingroup.

Organizational climate as it relates to ethics refers to the collective perception of what constitutes ethically correct behavior and the manner in which ethical issues are addressed within an organization (Grojean, Resick, Dickson, & Smith, 2004); it originates from the personal values and integrity of organizational founders (Grojean et al., 2004; Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013) and is perpetuated by organizational

leaders (Grojean et al., 2004). Leaders play an essential part in the development and maintenance of ethical cultures as well as behavioral integrity within organizations (Grojean et al., 2004; Mendonca, 2001; Palanski & Vogelgesang, 2011). An organization's code of ethics highlights the ethical values that should dictate the leader's behavior in order to encourage a positive moral climate among organizational members (Mendonca, 2001). In this way, leaders' attitudes towards the organization's code of ethics as well as their behavioral implementation will set a standard of expected behaviors within an organization. Hekman, Steensma, Bigley, and Hereford (2009) conducted a study in which they measured the degree to which medical professionals are compliant with administrative social influence and found that compliance was dependent on the degree to which employees identified with the profession and the organization. Employees were found to be most susceptible to administrative social influence – in terms of new professional behaviors – when they strongly identified with the organization but weakly identified with the profession. On the other hand, when employees strongly identified with the profession and weakly identified with the organization, administrative social influence was ineffective and even counterproductive in promoting new professional behaviors (Hekman et al., 2009). This research highlights the relevance of the development of a professional identity that strongly identifies with the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) and its value system as a means to promote ethical behavior in all organizational climates.

### **Organizational Group Dynamics**

As previously indicated, the development of the professional self is to some degree influenced by interpersonal exchanges and identity negotiations within an

organization. Therefore, it is essential to consider the effects that oppressive and limiting forces may have on the social worker's professional identity formation. Power dynamics are an essential part of oppressive processes. Power operates at personal and structural levels, and it is influenced by social, cultural, economic and psychological factors. These factors play a crucial role in how individuals and/or groups gain differential access to resources and privileged positions (Burke & Harrison, 1998) and must be examined as part of the MSW student's professional identity development.

### **Summary**

This literature review highlights the relevance of the interaction between social climate within a social work field placement setting and the development of the social worker's professional identity as an agent of social justice and social change. Specialists in a variety of fields indicate that social climate plays a significant role in students' educational processes and learning outcomes (Allodi, 2010; Davidovitch & Casakin, 2015; Davis, 2003; Joe, Hiver, & Al-Hoorie, 2017; Moos, 1979; Rutter, 1983) as well as in ethical practices among organizational members (Mendonca, 2001; Whetten & Foreman, 2014). This highlights the relevance of social climate in the social worker's professional identity formation as it relates to social justice. Moreover, since an individual's professional identity is developed in and as an outcome of social interactions the organizational identity of an agency is considered significant in this developmental process (Ibarra, 1999; Whetten & Foreman, 2014). Thus, it is important to examine the organizational identity of a field placement setting to ensure the ethical formation of a student's professional identity. Furthermore, supportive, oppressive, and/or limiting forces within an agency will impact the development of a professional self (Burke &

Harrison, 1998; Dominelli & Campling, 2002) and must be considered in the field training process. Although, the literature review did not explore in depth the influence of race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, ableism, and the presence of marginalized identities, these are key areas to consider in further studies as they are pertinent to a social worker's professional identity development.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to research the influence of the field placement environment on the social work student's professional identity as an agent of social change. In MSW programs, one of the goals of the field placement experience is the development of a professional self. A field placement agency may encourage, discourage, and/or limit the student's ability to implement social justice interventions in their work with clients. This may impact the development of the student's professional identity as it relates to social justice. My thesis seeks to understand how the social climate within a social work field placement agency may influence the emerging social workers' professional identity formation as an agent of social justice and social change. For this purpose, the study focuses on the field placement experiences of students who are pursuing a master's degree in social work and social workers who have graduated from a social work master's program within the past 2 years.

A significant amount of literature exists concerning the development of a professional self (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Slay & Smith, 2011) as well as the social climate within educational and organizational environments (Allodi, 2010; Flarey, 1991; Moos, 1979). However, there is a lack of research examining the interaction between social climate within a social work field placement agency and the development of the social worker's professional identity as an agent of social justice and social change. Due to the scarcity of literature, I selected an exploratory design. As indicated by Engel & Schutt (2013) in an exploratory study, "The goal is to learn "what is going on here" and to investigate large amounts of relatively unstructured information" (p. 18). This was a

qualitative study involving 8 participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone and included questions regarding the students' experiences during their field placement.

### **Sample**

Purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling method was used to explore the field placement experiences of MSW students. Purposive sampling is innately biased since the goal is to collect data from a very specific group. However, the need to locate such a sample offers justification for the sampling method. This type of sampling does not allow for generalization; therefore, the results of this research study will only aim to represent the voices of a limited number of MSW students.

This study was open to current social work students pursuing a master's degree in social work and social workers who had completed their degree within the past 2 years. To meet inclusion criteria participants had to be at least 18 years of age and reside in the United States. Additionally, participants had to be currently completing or have completed at least one clinical field placement. This study excluded students who had completed less than 180 hours of field placement practice. The minimum number of participants required for this sample was 8. Due to the profession's commitment to human rights and social justice, the feasibility of gathering the sample was high.

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Committee (see Appendix A for Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter), I began the recruitment process through two different channels by: a) Posting the recruitment flyer (see Appendix B for recruitment flyer) and the social media recruitment post (see Appendix C for social media recruitment post) on my own personal Facebook site and on



the "Smith Social Workers Speakeasy" Facebook Group, and b) By sending an email (see Appendix D for recruitment email) with the recruitment flyer as an attachment to social worker friends to share with students and professors in the field who were encouraged to forward it to others. The recruitment email included information regarding the study, eligibility requirements, and the researcher's contact information. Potential participants were asked to contact me to verify the eligibility requirements (See Appendix E for screening tools). Since the number of respondents was minimal and many did not meet the initial criteria due to limitations that excluded field placements completed within schools and hospitals, I requested a change in protocol (see Appendix F for change in protocol request) to include any field placement organization as well as request approval to post the recruitment flyer and the social media recruitment post on "Social Work Subreddit" at Reddit.com and "Social Work A'18" Facebook group. For both groups, permission from moderators (See Appendices G and H for moderator recruitment posting approvals) was obtained prior to submission of the protocol change request. The changes were authorized by the Human Subjects Review Committee (see Appendix I for change in protocol approval). Upon successful verification of participant eligibility requirements, I discussed with each individual the purpose of the study, the participant's role, and the consent process. At this time, respondents who expressed a desire to participate scheduled a date for the phone interview and were informed that they would receive a consent form (see Appendix J for consent form for individual interview) via email. Participants were asked to review, sign, and return the consent form to the researcher prior to the phone interview. Furthermore, I forwarded participants a link to the NASW

Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008) to facilitate and encourage its review prior to the call since a good understanding of it was necessary to answer the interview questions.

### **Ethics and Safeguards**

In accordance with federal regulations and the ethics of the social work profession, the identities of study participants have been kept confidential through the use of pseudo-names. Special attention was paid to conceal potentially identifying content. As indicated by federal regulations, all research materials including recordings, transcriptions, notes, analyses and consent forms have been and will continue to be stored in a secure location for three years. If materials are needed beyond this time, they will be stored until no longer necessary, and consequently destroyed. Electronic data and audio files has been and will remain password protected during the storage period. Non-electronic materials have been stored in a locked drawer and will remain there for the stated period of three years.

To allow for a full understanding of the study's purpose and the objective of data collection, participants were provided with sufficient time to review the Informed Consent form. Additionally, they were informed about their ability to withdraw from the interview at any point and/or to refuse to answer questions without the need for further explanation. Prior to the interview, questions were emailed to participants to ensure their comfort with the content. Participants were encouraged to voice any concerns and/or withdraw their participation from the study if they experienced any distress. For privacy purposes, at the beginning of the interview participants were reminded to be in a private location. Throughout the call, I monitored the participants for signs of distress and discomfort. Participants were also encouraged to seek support from fellow social work

students and clinicians to discuss any uncomfortable feelings that emerge as a result of reflecting on their MSW internships. A potential benefit for participants was the opportunity to share and reflect on their social work field placement experiences.

### **Data Collection**

In order to explore MSW students' experiences during their field placements, qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted over the phone. All interviews, with the exception of one, were audio recorded for the purpose of transcription and analysis. The non-recorded interview, per the request of the participant, was documented through comprehensive handwritten notes. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview guide (See Appendix K for interview guide) was a self-developed instrument based on the literature that guided the focus of this study. The questions developed were consistent with the overarching question and were based on resources presented by various specialists who focused on topics relevant to this research.

### **Data Analysis**

Theme analysis was the method used to examine the data. To address this study's research question, the qualitative data was categorized and analyzed according to themes and subthemes. Data that did not fit within the theme categories was noted.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

This chapter outlines the findings from the data collected during eight semi-structured phone interviews in which participants were asked about their MSW field placement experiences as they relate to the development of their professional identity as agents of social change. Two major themes emerged in the analysis of the qualitative interviews. First, conflicts of interest rooted in business relationships or of a financial nature were reported as significant factors limiting social justice interventions within field placement agencies. Second, elements of the social climate within the organization were identified as influencing the MSW student's ability to develop a professional identity as an agent of social change. The findings are organized in four major sections: professional identity in social work: subjective definitions, identity development: students' expectations, and implementation of social justice interventions. This last section is divided into three subcategories: conflicts of interest, organizational attitudes, and perceived impact on professional identity.

### **Demographic Data**

In terms of educational background, three participants reported obtaining a BSW degree prior to their enrollment in a graduate level social work program. Five participants indicated currently being enrolled in an MSW program, and three participants identified as social workers who had completed their MSW degree within the past two years. Participants reported completing field placements in a variety of settings: hospital-based therapeutic school (1), mental health clinic (5) comprehensive case management agency (1), and homeless youth center (1). Almost half of the participants (3) reported

completing a field placement at a mental health agency that was contracted to provide school-based services.

### **Professional Identity in Social Work: Subjective Definitions**

Participants were asked to describe their professional identity as a social worker. Half of the participants (4) mentioned social justice as part of their description, including “treating everyone for their inherent worth and dignity...that’s just really a core part of my belief system”, as well as, being “an agent for social change”. Four respondents described their identity in terms of establishing “genuine connection[s]” with clients, indicating that “the relationship piece is what I really identify when I think about my identity as a social worker. It’s that human piece. That connection”. Two participants described their professional self as being limited by their agencies as a result of conflicts of interest rooted in business relationships. One of these participants described her professional identity as,

“Someone who is committed to antiracism work, social justice, intersectional feminism...but those words don’t really mean anything sometimes.

Unfortunately, professional identity sometimes will conflict with being in an agency”.

Findings regarding what appears to be conflicts of interest in terms of financial or business concerns of the agency and their goals as helping organizations were prominent throughout the interviews and are discussed in more detail in a subsequent section later in this chapter. A few respondents who identified as first-year students depicted their professional self as still forming, and two of these participants described a shifting process involving a previously held professional identity in a different line of work. One

participant reported her own marginalized and privileged identities as essential to her professional definition as a social worker. Other participants who did not include these aspects of their identity in this initial description, stated their relevance to their role later in the interview. The answers to this question portray a strong identification with a commitment to social justice in approximately half of the participants.

### **Identity Development: Students' Expectations**

When asked about their expectations regarding how their identity as a social worker would be formed during the field placement internship most participants (5) anticipated the exploration of clinical treatment modalities, settings, and/or populations. One participant shared, “I wanted to learn how to [work with individuals] with severe trauma”. Another participant commented,

“I wanted to work with young adults. So that was one thing, the other thing that I wanted to find out during my internship is whether I wanted to be inpatient or outpatient. And my internship gave me that answer”.

A few respondents (3) described that prior to the field practicum, they had an idealized perception of the identity development process as well as the career itself. One participant shared this realization by laughing while indicating, “Oh yes! I had such high in the sky expectations. I was so idealistic about it when I started”. Another participant who also indicated that her field experience differed significantly from her expectations explained,

“I think that we can sometimes go into this field with this kind of hero complex...I'm gonna make the world a better place, and I'm gonna change the world, and I'm gonna fix everything...and my first field placements were both

very humbling experiences...Not that I am not [making a difference now] but I think that my perspective on how I'm doing that had to change".

Other themes that emerged included an expectation to shift from a previously held professional identity to a new one as a social worker, feeling unprepared to conduct clinical work, and not knowing what to expect during the field placement.

### **Implementation of Social Justice Interventions**

Participants were asked about their agency's attitudes towards addressing or raising issues of social justice. Half of the respondents reported feeling discouraged by supervisors or agency staff from implementing social justice interventions. The following is a statement by a participant who provided school-based services.

"I have one client at a different school...I was seeing her younger brother but he was recently sent to a different school because of behavioral issues. And [my current client] is in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and her...brother is a year younger than her. And she felt like he was being wrongly pinpointed as being troublesome... [Other kids] were doing the same things that he does but they weren't getting in as much trouble which was something that I kind of felt too. And he is black and there is a lot of literature that...has shown that black boys get targeted and seen as being problems in schools more than white kids do. And her school is predominantly white. And I talked with my supervisor about, like how, I could say something like that in session with her and I was told not to...She said that [it] would create an extra worry that if she was not already identifying she didn't need that right now.

Another participant who was placed within a mental health clinic indicated,

“At one agency where I intern, they had a policy that for individuals who come in to therapy, if you miss two sessions, up to the first session you would get a call but if you miss the second session, they would just discharge you...I don't think [the agency staff] were understanding what the clients were going through because of their mental illness...and when I talked to my supervisor, he said, ‘of course it comes down to the money!’...My field instructor was very dismissive of it, [he said], ‘well that's just how it is. That's how we keep these doors open’. He just said that! So, right away, even if I said that I needed to do something, I felt discouraged. Oh, that's it?! That's just it. It's just boiled back down to the money. Follow the money”.

Three participants reported being both encouraged and discouraged from addressing issues of social justice. A respondent shared an experience of advocating for a client who was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder and reported that “there's been many times where I have to speak up to my supervisor or speak to the psychiatrist's supervisor because they are not providing adequate care...[But] my agency for the most part really advocates for the underdog”.

One respondent reported receiving significant support from his field placement agency in terms of advocacy work, and explained,

“Working with at-risk and homeless youth, a lot of them are part of the LGBTQ community, and then after the election took place it caused a big societal risk among that population. So, kind of uncertainty and different emotional state of flux. So, I worked with a lot of youth about actions they could take, and kind of, let them know about different marches that are going on and different protests so



that way they could have some agency and maintain their voice in the situation that was going on”.

Almost half of the participants reported being discouraged from implementing anti-racism interventions. A couple of respondents reported being deterred by supervisors from addressing concerns regarding clients being stigmatized due to their diagnosis. Two participants shared that their agencies do not focus significantly on issues concerning social justice, and are more concerned with the clients’ behavioral symptomatology — indicating, “I feel like [my agency] doesn’t really take a social justice standpoint...we focus more [on] the behaviors and I haven’t had the chance to do [social justice work]”.

Two participants reported being directly discouraged by supervisors from doing advocacy work, indicating, “I often was told that the advocacy work that I was doing was not within the scope of my role as a social worker”. Another participant explained,

“I remember my supervisor sitting me down and telling me ‘if you keep going and keep trying to do all of these things that are not actually possible you are not gonna be a social worker, you are gonna be an advocate, but you can’t be a social worker’. Which is a really crappy thing for a supervisor to say”.

Almost half of the participants reported that their agencies conducted a variety of social justice related activities to advance human rights. One interviewee indicated participating in professional trainings involving “best practices to work with transgender” clients and LGBTQ members. Another participant shared,

“My agency has been really great with the immigration bans that have been coming out. We have been putting posters in the bathrooms and areas where we know clients might be that tell them what their rights are [in case] immigration

agents tried to talk to them. We have it in 5 different languages all throughout our agency which I think makes it very clear that we stand with them without them needing to ask which I think it's very important".

Thus, field placement organizations engage in a variety of activities aimed at advancing social justice. However, MSW interns' initiatives to implement social justice interventions were very often discouraged by both, agency staff and supervisors.

**Conflicts of interest.** Over half of the participants shared feeling discouraged on one or more occasions from conducting a social justice intervention due to challenges they encounter related to their business relationships and obligations to the community, issues related to the funding source contractual expectations, and financial interests within their agency. An interviewee who provided school-based services shared an experience of approaching her supervisor about advocating for a black client who she perceived as being unfairly targeted by school staff due to "stereotypes of black youth".

"I would say [to my supervisor], 'I think it is within my role to advocate for this client' and [my supervisor] would say, 'No. Your role is to provide therapy. Advocacy is not your role' ...In school-based [work] you are based on a contract. You are essentially contractors coming into the school so the school can decide each year if they want to keep your agency as a contractor. So, there's a huge power differential there because if you piss off the school, the school can say 'we don't want you here anymore'. So, your agency is very invested in you not pissing off the school ever. And that makes for a really tricky place to do advocacy work from. Your client is technically the kids...but our client actually became the school and the administration and that's what makes it really complicated".

Another participant shared,

“We get paid for the clients as a program because we have clients and we need about 180 clients. Well, I’ve seen certain team meetings where we weren’t going to graduate someone because we didn’t have anyone to replace them with and still wanted the money. This was kind of accepted. We need money to carry on working so it was like, this is what we need to do. We need to find some new people, when we find them then we can graduate this people. I kind of understood the tension that the program needs to carry on. Allegedly [the program was] about recovery, but our primary focus is not really recovery, our primary focus is they arrive and they are going to be here. And, don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying they are being abused. We make sure they have a good place to live and they are well cared for but the idea of helping them make a recovery, or maybe not a recovery but to improve, is not really the driving force of the program...I’ve had these conversations with my supervisor and he says, ‘well yeah it’s true’. His line is ‘we only recently moved to recovery [model] in the past [few] years’”.

These experiences highlight the limitations that administrative and cultural constraints within field placement agencies may impose on MSW students’ ability to engage in the development of an identity as an agent of social change.

**Organizational Attitudes.** Half of the participants reported feeling disappointed during their field placements in response to organizational attitudes towards clients. A few respondents shared feeling “frustrated”, indicating, “There’s ways we can help and we are not doing it. That’s what I found frustrating”. Another participant shared her

disapproval of the agency's staff lack of display of genuine care towards clients, indicating,

“Say for instance, a client would come into the office and it would be just ‘Hi Ms. Jones. What are you here for? Okay, we’ll get you into the doctor’ But they didn’t really care to ask the client ‘how are you today, how’s things going?’. Just having that connection, that human connection.”

An interviewee described witnessing “mockery of clients” by staff, and explained,

“So, I’m asking all this kind of [clinical] questions, and I’m getting ‘oh, that’s just so and so’, and basically ‘they are bat shitcrazy’”.

Another participant shared her experience providing school-based services,

“And there [were] a lot of...things that teachers said that were really racist, but they were not anything that I could call out or anything I could do anything about. And, when I spoke to my supervisor about it, she would just say ‘listen, this school has fired the last 2 therapists who have been here and they are really not happy with us so just don’t say anything’.

These respondents expressed feeling surprised by the negative organizational attitudes towards clients witnessed during their field placement. Furthermore, these experiences elicited strong emotional reactions in most participants as well as internal turmoil regarding their ability and limitations to support and advocate for their clients. Half of the participants mentioned power differentials as a factor influencing their decision to not continue to discuss social justice concerns with their supervisor, explaining, “As a social work intern, at the time you don’t have power, you don’t have a voice really because you are an intern, you know”. Thus, power dynamics within the student-field instructor

relationship as well as the organization were recognized by participants as having a significant impact on their ability to advocate for clients.

**Perceived impact on professional identity.** Half of the participants reported a decrease in trust and changes in the way they relate to supervisors and other organizational members as a direct result of their field placement experiences. One participant reported experiencing repetitive negative attitudes from her field supervisor in response to her desire to advocate for clients. The respondent identified as having graduated over a year ago and indicated, “I learned not to trust my supervisors with important things”. Another interviewee who graduated from her MSW program almost two years ago shared,

“That [field placement experience] really has changed how I interact with other social workers. I’d like to think that they would treat everybody the same...it’s really kind of shaped how I advocate for my clients and also what I choose to share with my supervisor”.

Thus, during the field practicum, supervisory attitudes towards social justice interventions emerged as having a long-term impact on the students’ future professional behavior as advocates of social change.

### **Summary**

The findings presented in this chapter reflect the field placement experiences of MSW students during the beginning development of their professional identity as agents of social justice and social change. About half of the participants mentioned social justice when defining their professional identity as a social worker. However, during data analysis, it became evident that the participants who did not initially include this element

in their subjective definition had been very invested during their field placement, at least initially, in the advancement of human rights and social justice. Elements within the social climate of the field placement setting, including factors belonging to relationship dimensions, personal growth dimensions, and systems maintenance and systems change dimensions, were highlighted by participants as influencing their ability to implement social justice interventions and further their professional identity formation as agents of social justice. Organizational control focused on the maintenance of business relationships, funding, and other financial interests was repeatedly emphasized by the majority of participants as the most salient factor impacting their ability to implement social justice interventions. In the following chapter, I will examine how these findings relate to previous research and discuss their implications for the field of social work.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

The objective of this qualitative study is to explore how the social climate of field placement agencies may influence the professional identity development of master-level social work students as agents of social justice and social change. The findings confirm that the social climate of a field placement agency impacts the MSW student's ability to develop aspects of their professional identity dedicated to engaging in social action activities. These findings are consistent with the literature presented in previous chapters highlighting the relevance of social climate in social work field placement training. This chapter is organized as follows: 1) key findings, 2) strengths and limitations, 3) implications for social work education, and 4) recommendations for future research.

#### Key Findings

Data analysis led to two major findings. First, factors within the social climate of field placement agencies were found to influence MSW students' ability to implement social justice interventions. Second, organizational control rooted in the maintenance of business interests and relationships emerged as a factor limiting students' ability to engage in social justice interventions. In the following subsections, I examine how these findings relate to previous research: 1) identity formation in social work, and 2) social climate within the field placement agency.

**Identity Formation in Social Work.** Participants' responses indicated a perception of social justice as an important value of the social work profession congruent with the NASW Code of Ethics (2008). Participants shared their expectations regarding the development of a professional self as perceived prior to the start of their field placement – these included assumptions about clinical learning goals as well as feelings

of unpreparedness, insecurity, and an idealization of the profession. These findings point to an initial phase of professional identity development as depicted by Friedman and Kaslow (1986) which highlights excitement and anticipatory anxiety as the student's emotional state during the beginning of their training process. Furthermore, students' narratives described relational and attitudinal shifts in their own work with clients as well as supervisors and other organizational members shortly after beginning their field placement; this may suggest what Urdang (2010) depicted as a process of reorganization of the self.

**Social Climate Within Field Placement.** Participants reported that their program's classroom curriculum focused greatly on issues of social justice and inequality. On the other hand, field placement training was reported to have a greater focus on clinical practice with very limited social justice interventions. Participants reported a variety of elements within the social climate at their organization that restricted the development of their professional identity by limiting their ability to engage in social action activities. These variables can be analyzed using the three major dimensions of Moos' (1979) social climate framework. First, in terms of the systems maintenance and systems change dimension, most participants reported feeling discouraged by agency members from engaging in social action activities when these interfered with organizational administrative processes or the management of business relationships. Thus, organizational control was emphasized as a major factor impacting the students' professional identity development. Within the relationship dimensions, participants emphasized supervisory support and involvement in social justice work as variables that greatly impacted their attitude towards engaging in social justice work.



This is consistent with the literature by Litvack, Mishna, and Bogo (2010), which highlights the supervisory relationship and the organizational climate as having a significant impact on the emotional reactions of students to environmental and social circumstances. In the personal growth dimension, students' autonomy to advocate for their clients was described by many participants as being restricted by organizational control.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There are several strengths present in this study. First, this research contributes to a basic understanding of the relevance of social climate in graduate-level field training agencies as well as its influence on students' professional identity formation. Moreover, this study contributes new findings to the field of social work education and may serve as a basis for subsequent research in this important topic. The use of a qualitative method

This study had several limitations including the use of purposive sampling, a small sample size, and data from subjective-self reports. The use of purposive sampling as well as the small sample size prevent the generalization of the study's results. Therefore, the findings are only representative of the voices of participants and cannot be assumed to be characteristic of the experiences of all MSW students. In terms of reliability and validity, the interview questions were designed by this researcher thus a certain level of bias is expected. Lastly, the data analyzed was based on subjective self-reports which may be susceptible to the fallibility of memory and/or social desirability bias.

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

This study's findings have direct implications for the field placement training of MSW students. The attitudes held by staff members and supervisors regarding social action interventions within master-level field training organizations were found to significantly

influence MSW students' ability to develop aspects of their professional identity dedicated to the advancement of social justice and social change. Furthermore, students' experiences during their field practicum were found to have long-term consequences on their professional behavior as advocates and in their relationships with supervisors as well as other social workers. The field of social work has a deep-rooted history of commitment to social and economic justice – thus, the training undergone by social workers must reflect the profession's values not only within the academic setting but also in field training.

This study contributes to the gap in literature that examines the interaction between social climate within field placement agencies and the development of the MSW student's professional identity as an agent of social justice and social change. I hope these findings encourage students, educators, and professionals in the field of social work to expand on this research and propose innovative ways to improve social work education and honor the profession's commitment to the advancement of human rights and social justice.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The social work profession would benefit from further research that focuses on social justice education within field placement settings in addition to continuing to explore the role of social climate in professional identity formation. Social justice is an important value of the social work profession and it is important that emerging social workers are trained within an environment that acknowledges and supports this central aspect of the social worker's identity.

This study did not collect participants' demographic data; future research should include this information and examine how intersectionality may shape the results.

## **Conclusion**

In addition to exploring and answering the research question, this study's purpose was to motivate educators, students and other professionals in the field of social work to find new ways to contribute to the improvement of field placement education in order to honor our profession's commitment to support marginalized and vulnerable populations. Although this study lacks generalizability, it highlighted the relevance of social climate in graduate-level field placement training and presented important findings identifying barriers within the social climate at field placement agencies that often limited student's professional identity development by hindering their ability to engage in social justice work. Further study using larger samples is necessary to explore this topic, and through improvements in the quality of field placement training, continue to support our profession's core commitment to social justice and the empowerment of disadvantaged populations.

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## Appendix A

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

March 26, 2017

Tatiana Martinez

Dear Tati,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Michael Murphy'.

Michael Murphy, Ph.D.  
Subjects Review Committee

CC: Elaine Kersten, Research Advisor

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Flyer



## SOCIAL CLIMATE IN SOCIAL WORK TRAINING

Share how your positive, negative, or neutral experiences during field placement influenced the development of your professional identity as an agent of social justice and social change.

Eligible participants will meet the following qualifications:

- 18 years of age or older.
- MSW student or have graduated from a social work master's program within the past 2 years.
- Completed a field placement or a minimum of 180 hours of field placement at a mental health agency.

This study requires your participation in a phone interview that will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

**Thank you for your time and support! ❤️**

## Participants Needed!

Looking for  
participants who  
are willing to  
share their MSW  
field placement  
experiences

30 - 45 Minute  
Phone Interview

Identifying  
information will  
be kept  
confidential

### TO PARTICIPATE CONTACT:

Tatiana Martínez  
tmartinez@smith.edu

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

## Appendix C

### Social Media Recruitment Post

Hi everyone,

I am currently completing my Master's Thesis at Smith College School for Social Work and I need your help! I am looking for participants for my research study which explores how social climate at mental health agencies may influence the emerging professional identities of MSW students in terms of their role as agents of social justice and social change. Elements that contribute to social climate of a treatment environment refer to the effect of the collective attitudes and perceptions held by staff about specific issues (such as practice of social justice on behalf of clients or client advocacy) that may occur within that environment.

Eligible participants will meet the following qualifications:

- 18 years of age or older.
- MSW student or have graduated from a social work master's program within the past 2 years.
- Completed a field placement or a minimum of 180 hours of field placement.

This study requires participation in a phone interview that will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes. During this interview, I will ask you questions regarding your experience at your field placement agency including a discussion of supports, limitations, and/or dynamics encountered that may have influenced your beliefs, values, and/or perspectives of your personal role in social change as well as the social work profession's commitment to social justice. You will receive a copy of the questions prior to the interview.

If you would like to participate or need more information, please email me at [tmartinez@smith.edu](mailto:tmartinez@smith.edu). Also, feel free to share this post with anyone who may have an interest in participating. This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

Thank you for your time and support!

Tatiana Martínez

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Email

Hi everyone,

I am currently completing my Master's Thesis at Smith College School for Social Work and I need your help! I am looking for participants for my research study which explores how social climate at mental health agencies may influence the emerging professional identities of MSW students in terms of their role as agents of social justice and social change. Elements that contribute to social climate of a treatment environment refer to the effect of the collective attitudes and perceptions held by staff about specific issues (such as practice of social justice on behalf of clients or client advocacy) that may occur within that environment.

Eligible participants will meet the following qualifications:

- 18 years of age or older.
- MSW student or have graduated from a social work master's program within the past 2 years.
- Completed a field placement or a minimum of 180 hours of field placement.

This study requires participation in a phone interview that will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes. During this interview, I will ask you questions regarding your experience at your field placement agency including a discussion of supports, limitations, and/or dynamics encountered that may have influenced your beliefs, values, and/or perspectives of your personal role in social change as well as the social work profession's commitment to social justice. You will receive a copy of the questions prior to the interview.

If you would like to participate or need more information, please email me at [tmartinez@smith.edu](mailto:tmartinez@smith.edu). Also, feel free to share this post with anyone who may have an interest in participating. This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

Thank you for your time and support!

Tatiana Martínez

## Appendix E

### Screening Tools

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. Are you currently an MSW student?

**Follow up:** If yes, how many hours of field placement have you completed? (You can provide the number of months with the average number of weekly hours)

**Follow up:** If no, how long ago did you graduate?

1. In what type of agency did you complete your field placement? (For example: outpatient clinic, IICaps, etc.).

**Appendix F**

First Change in Protocol Request

**2016-2017  
RESEARCH PROJECT PROTOCOL CHANGE FORM  
Smith College School for Social Work**

You are presently the researcher on the following *approved* research project by the Human Subjects Committee (HSR) of Smith College School for Social Work:

**Social Climate in Social Work Training: The Influence of Learning Environments on the Emerging Social Worker’s Professional Identity**  
**Tatiana Martínez**  
**Elaine Kersten/ Michael Murphy, Ph.D.**

.....  
Please complete the following:

I/we am/are requesting changes to the study protocols, as they were originally approved by the HSR Committee of Smith College School for Social Work. These changes are as follows:

1. Change the inclusion criteria to include participants who have completed a field placement or a minimum of 180 hours of field placement at any agency.
2. Include permission from the moderator at Social Work subreddit at Reddit.com to post my flyer on this site.
3. Include permission from Facebook administrator to post my recruitment flyer/message on the Social Work A'18 group.

.....  
 I understand that these proposed changes in protocol will be reviewed by the Committee.

I also understand that any proposed changes in protocol being requested in this form cannot be implemented until they have been fully approved by the HSR Committee.

I have discussed these changes with my Research Advisor and he/she has approved them.

**Name of Researcher(s):** Tatiana Martínez

**Date:** March 30, 2017

PLEASE RETURN THIS COMPLETED FORM TO Laura Wyman at [LWyman@smith.edu](mailto:LWyman@smith.edu) or to Lilly Hall Room 115.

**Include your Research Advisor/Doctoral Committee Chair in the ‘cc’**



## Appendix G

### Reddit Moderator Recruitment Post Approval



The screenshot shows a Reddit interface with a blue header. On the left is the Reddit logo and the word 'reddit'. To the right are navigation buttons: 'MESSAGE', 'send a private message', 'inbox', and 'sent'. Below the header, there are links for 'all', 'unread', 'messages', 'comment replies', 'post replies', and 'username mentions'. The main content is a message from the subreddit 'r/socialwork' titled 'Research Study'. The message text reads: 'Hello! My name is Tatiana Martínez and I am a second year Master's student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am currently in the process of obtaining HSR approval to conduct the research study for my thesis and I was hoping to obtain your permission to post my recruitment flyer/message on Socialwork subreddit. Unfortunately, I cannot share the flyer/message until HSR authorizes the study but I was hoping that you could approve the posting contingent upon your review of the materials. I look forward to hearing from you, thank you! -Tatiana Martínez'. Below this are three replies. The first reply asks 'What does your sample pool require?' and lists requirements: '-18 years of age or older. - MSW student or have graduated from a social work master's program within the past 2 years. - Completed a field placement or a minimum of 180 hours of field placement.' The second reply says 'Go for it.' and the third says 'Great, thank you!'.

**We allow research to be posted to this subreddit if your survey is targeted towards social workers (e.g. CPS workers, therapists/LCSWs, have worked with the elderly, social work students, etc). We do not allow surveys that are not targeting social workers (e.g. Parent of a child with X, have been diagnosed with anxiety, etc.). If you are a researcher and want to post your survey here, please send us a modmail before posting**

## Appendix H

### Facebook Moderator Recruitment Post Approval

WED 6:11PM

Hi M. [redacted] my name is Tatiana Martínez and I am a second year Master's student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am currently in the process of obtaining HSR approval to conduct the research study for my thesis and I was hoping to obtain your permission to post my recruitment flyer/message on the Smith College School for Social Work A'18 group. Unfortunately, I cannot share the flyer/message until HSR authorizes the study but I was hoping that you could approve the posting contingent upon your review of the materials. I look forward to hearing from you, thank you!

3:30AM

M. [redacted] M. [redacted] accepted your request.

Hi - Definitely - however I can support!

7:38AM



Thank you so much! 😊

## Appendix I

### Change in Protocol Approval



Tati Martinez <tmartinez@smith.edu>

---

#### Change in Protocol Form

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**Laura Wyman** <lwyman@smith.edu>  
To: Tati Martinez <tmartinez@smith.edu>  
Cc: Elaine Kersten <tootieedward@verizon.net>

Sat, Apr 1, 2017 at 3:43 PM

Hi Tati,

Your Protocol Change Request has been approved. You are good to go.

Best,  
Laurie  
[Quoted text hidden]

--  
Laura H. Wyman  
Administrative Assistant/Research Sequence  
Smith College School for Social Work  
Lilly Hall  
Northampton, MA 01063  
(413) 585-7974  
[lwyman@smith.edu](mailto:lwyman@smith.edu)

**Appendix J**

Consent Form for Individual Interview



2016-2017

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA**

.....

**Title of Study:** Social Climate in Social Work Training: The Influence of Biased Learning Environments on the Emerging Social Worker’s Professional Identity

**Investigator(s):**

Tatiana Martínez

.....

**Introduction**

- You are being asked to participate in a research study regarding the field placement experiences of social work students in an agency.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently pursuing an MSW degree or have graduated from a social work master’s program within the past two years. You are also at least 18 years of age and reside in the United States. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is to explore how social work interns’ experiences during field placement affected their evolving identity as agents of social change.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master of social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- Participate in an interview via telephone that will last between 30 and 45 minutes.
- You will be asked questions regarding your experiences during field placement.

**Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- This is a low risk study.
- The study has the following risks: The participant may become uncomfortable or distressed by the content discussed in the interview.

- Participants are encouraged to discuss with colleagues the influence that social climate can have on their professional identity as social change agents.

### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

- The benefit of participation is the opportunity to share and reflect on your field placement experiences.
- The benefits to social work/society are to understand the experiences of social work students in the development of

their professional identity. In addition, this research hopes to identify future areas for research.

### **Confidentiality**

- Your participation will be kept confidential. To protect your confidentiality, a pseudo-name will be used and special attention will be paid to conceal content that may identify you. You will be provided with an adequate amount of time to review the Informed Consent form to allow for your full understanding of its purpose and how the interview information will be used. Audio files and transcripts will be encrypted and password protected. Additionally, this consent letter will be kept separate from notes and transcripts.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years per federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report I may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

### **Payments/gift**

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email at [tmartinez@smith.edu](mailto:tmartinez@smith.edu) prior to April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

### **Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, *Tatiana Martínez* at [tmartinez@smith.edu](mailto:tmartinez@smith.edu). If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

### **Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You

will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep. You will also be given a list of referrals and access information if you experience emotional issues related to your participation in this study.

.....

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

**[if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]**

**1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix K**

### Interview Guide

1. In what type of agency did you complete your field placement? (For example: outpatient clinic, IICaps, etc.)
2. How do you describe your professional identity as a social worker?
3. Did you have any expectations about how your identity as a social worker would be formed during your field placements? Please describe.
4. During your field placement, were there times when you felt the need to support a client through a social justice intervention? Please describe.
5. How were you encouraged or discouraged by agency staff from addressing or raising issues of social justice?
6. Please share examples of any other field placement experiences that you consider relevant in terms of your professional identity development as it relates to social justice and social change. (You may want to consider agency dynamics, the supervisory relationship, NASW core values, etc.)