

February 2024

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### Recommended Citation

Henry, Heidi L. (2024) "Social Justice Identity and Program Evaluation: A Pilot Study of CMHC Students," *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc06rs4A>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/tsc/vol6/iss1/1>

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# Social Justice Identity and Program Evaluation: A Pilot Study of CMHC Students

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Received: 04/04/23

Revised: 08/04/23

Revised: 09/15/23

Accepted: 09/18/23

DOI: 10.7290/tsc06rs4A

## Abstract

Program development and evaluation can be used to address historical inequities in mental health, but they are scarcely studied in counselor education. The purpose of this pilot study was to examine how taking one social justice–focused CMHC management course impacted 66 counseling students' social justice identity and program evaluation understanding. Participating students completed a group program proposal focused on social justice and program evaluation. To assess change in their social justice attitudes, behaviors, and program evaluation understanding, they completed a demographic questionnaire, pretest, and posttest. The results, derived from *t*-tests and Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests, indicated a significant improvement from pre- to post-test in social justice self-efficacy, interest, and program evaluation understanding. Limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

## Significance to the Public

This study suggests counselor educators can choose course activities and assignments facilitating the formation of a social justice identity, while simultaneously improving program evaluation understanding in students. Counselor educators can use course materials and create engaging activities to address relevant social justice and program evaluation CACREP (2016) standards (e.g., 2.F.8.e., 2.F.8.g., 2.F.8.j., 5.C.2.a., 5.C.2.d., 5.C.2.j., and 5.C.2.m.), which ultimately can improve counseling students' knowledge and confidence in using program evaluation to help diverse and underserved clients.

**Keywords:** program evaluation, social justice identity, clinical mental health counseling, groupwork

Program development and evaluation are an integral part of creating services addressing the mental health needs of marginalized populations (Barrio Minton et al., 2021). Historically marginalized populations include but are not limited to low socioeconomic status; diverse sexual and affectional orientations; nonbinary gender identities; and Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color (BIPOC). Additionally, program development and evaluation (F.8) and social justice and advocacy (F.2.b., F.2.h.) are required educational standards in programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016). It could benefit counselor educators to further examine how program evaluation and social justice standards are currently

being taught and to what extent these methods are effective in producing student learning outcomes.

Counselor educators can also investigate how topics such as program evaluation and inequity can be taught collectively to effect broad impact on marginalized populations through the formation of a social justice identity (Messerschmitt-Coen et al., 2022). Deepening counseling students' understanding by infusing social justice and program evaluation activities throughout the counselor education curriculum might also strengthen their commitment to social justice. Using groupwork is one method counselor educators can use to train counseling students to improve understanding of difficult concepts such as program evaluation, and sensitive subjects such as social

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justice, because students often feel more comfortable learning from their peers than instructors (Jaber & Kennedy, 2017). Counselor educators can center social justice ideology as a foundation for all classes, integrate program evaluation assignments in multiple courses in the clinical mental health counseling (CMHC) curriculum, and use groupwork to facilitate the development of a strong social justice identity.

## Social Justice Identity

Historically, the counseling profession emphasized multiculturalism, which is defined as the tripartite phenomena of attitudes/awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work with diverse populations (Sue et al., 1982). Ratts et al. (2015) added principles related to *social justice* forming the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC). Although many counselor educators still focus heavily on multiculturalism without focusing on social justice and advocacy (Hilert et al., 2022), social justice is qualitatively different than multiculturalism and involves microlevel and macrolevel actions counselors take to eradicate individual and social historical inequities (Crethar et al., 2008; Ratts et al., 2015).

Drawing on Bandura's (1986) ideas of social cognitive theory and Lent et al.'s (2001) social cognitive career theory (SCCT), Miller et al. (2009) sought to examine the psychological mechanisms influencing college students' social justice identity by developing a model of social justice identity development, which is assessed by the Social Issues Questionnaire (SIQ), one of the measures used in this study. The model addressed attitudes and beliefs in the domains of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interest, commitment, supports, and barriers. *Social justice self-efficacy* involves an individual's belief in their ability to complete advocacy activities in the following areas: intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, and political/institutional. Social justice self-efficacy involves choices, effort, persistence, and feelings about social justice. *Social justice outcome expectations* are defined as supposed outcomes individuals anticipate when completing social

justice activities. Outcome expectations can be social, material, or self-evaluative. *Social justice interest* involves preference patterns about social justice activities, including likes, dislikes, and indifferences. *Social justice commitment* involves one's goals and intentions for participating in social justice activities. *Social justice supports* include social supports anticipated if they were to engage in social justice activities, that is, factors facilitating goal achievement, and *social justice barriers* involve social factors deterring social justice goal achievement.

## Social Justice in Counselor Education

Taking a single social justice-focused course can increase students' social justice identity. In a one-semester multicultural and social justice counseling course (MCSJC), Messerschmitt-Coen et al. (2022) implemented socially just-focused pedagogical strategies of didactic learning, experiential learning, and process groups, and found significant changes in social justice self-efficacy, interest, and commitment. Moody et al. (2022) infused social justice throughout a single practicum course and studied the phenomenological experiences of five master's students enrolled in the course. They found through reflection journals, conceptualization assignments, and peer, instructor, and client interaction, students reported positive change, including "awareness of social concerns, comfort that stemmed from the confidence gained through practice, a sense of personal responsibility towards social justice, and the motivation to act" (p. 15).

Decker et al. (2016) suggested infusing social justice pedagogy across the counseling curriculum, introducing social change and advocacy theories, incorporating reflective learning activities, assigning real world advocacy work, and integrating case studies and experiential learning. Another way counselor educators can facilitate the development of a social justice identity is by fostering curiosity in their students (Baker et al., 2020), which can result in significantly higher levels of social justice self-efficacy, interest, and commitment. Killian and Floren (2020) found didactic, experiential, and community service learning all contributed to

growth in social justice advocacy readiness, while West et al. (2020) reported that counselor educators believe *preparing agents of change* is an important factor for CMHC training.

## Program Evaluation

Decker et al. (2016) suggest infusing social justice concepts across the curriculum and using a variety of instructional methods to do so; therefore, it could also be beneficial to infuse social justice concepts into nonmulticultural and social justice–focused courses, such as psychopathology, foundations, or management of clinical mental health counseling. It can also be beneficial to introduce social justice with other concepts, such as program evaluation, to promote social justice identity development. Lenz (2022) suggests counselors can use program development and evaluation to address historical inequities and states, “the increased integration of counseling interventions has cued a watershed moment for counselors to regard the inclusion of program evaluation theories and practices as integral features of our professional identity” (p. 1).

Program evaluation in clinical mental health counseling includes a systematic process of collecting and analyzing activities, qualities, and outcomes of programs; the purpose of collecting and evaluating data is to make decisions about the effectiveness, continuation, or modifications to the program (Patton, 2008). Currently, program evaluation is often addressed in the research course in counseling programs because the related CACREP (2016) standards fall under Section 2.F.8 Research and Program Evaluation (2.F.8.c., 2.F.8.e., 2.F.8.g., 2.F.8.h., 2.F.8.i., 2.F.8.j.). Unfortunately, there is much fear among counseling students when it comes to the research course (Davis, 2019), which can negatively impact their attitudes toward program evaluation. By reintroducing program evaluation alongside other concepts, such as social justice, in other courses, students can be exposed to program evaluation repeatedly, which can result in increased understanding (Tamer, 2010) and perhaps confidence in engaging in program evaluation as professional clinical mental health counselors.

Regarding program evaluation in counselor education, Lloyd-Hazlett et al. (2022) found service-learning to be a beneficial pedagogical strategy for promoting professional advocacy and program evaluation competency among master’s- and doctoral-level students from CACREP-accredited counseling programs while simultaneously strengthening the university and community’s relationships. Additionally, Sink and Lemich (2018) analyzed doctoral-level counselor education programs and found only about 25% included a modest level of training on program evaluation. They suggested revising curriculum and pedagogy to bolster students’ research and data analysis competency to become more critical and evaluative thinkers.

## Groupwork

Groups are a commonly used pedagogical tool in counseling, and students are required to participate in group activity according to CACREP (2016) standards (2.F.6.h.). There are several different types of groups, but work groups can be particularly useful in counseling courses. Hutchison et al. (2016) studied groupwork as a pedagogical tool in three different counseling courses across two universities and found using groupwork helped counseling students understand the roles group members assume, improved interpersonal self-awareness, increased recognition of how personal experiences negatively or positively impact expectations, and better connected the importance of groupwork to future counseling experiences. Jaber and Kennedy (2017) suggested online students may gain self-confidence and increased ability when completing groupwork because they feel more at ease with fellow students. Henry and Timm-Davis (2023) suggested group work can also foster connection and support among counseling students, which can aid in successful completion of a graduate program.

In terms of advocacy, there is an important notion that counselors and activists make more change collectively than individually (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016). Groupwork elicits positive change not only in communities but also personally for the

members participating in the groupwork (Pelech et al., 2016). Hilert et al. (2022) found doctoral-level counseling students described “deep exploration” regarding social justice through collaborative conversations and classroom projects with their peers (p. 15), demonstrating that approaching social justice pedagogy from a group perspective can benefit counseling students’ learning.

There is a clear need for CMHC students to learn ways to advocate for their clients (West et al., 2020), and program evaluation is one form of social justice advocacy (Lenz, 2022). Additionally, groupwork can facilitate social justice learning (Hilert et al., 2022); therefore, using a group project in a CMHC course, for example, management of CMHC programs, may be one way to improve program evaluation understanding while simultaneously developing a social justice identity in counseling students. The research questions for this study included:

1. How does completing one social justice–focused CMHC management course incorporating a group program proposal (GPP) impact counseling students’ social justice identity (i.e., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interest, commitment, supports, and barriers)?
2. How does completing one social justice–focused CMHC management course incorporating a group program proposal (GPP) impact counseling students’ program evaluation understanding?

## Method

### Procedures

Prior to conducting the pilot study, the researcher received approval from the institutional review board. Students enrolled in the 2022 Spring I, Summer II, and Fall I sections of a 7-week management in clinical mental health programs online course were invited to participate in the study by the researcher who was also the course instructor. The CMHC management course was a track specific course for all counseling students enrolled in the CMHC program. The main

objectives of the class included recognizing the roles and settings of clinical mental health counselors, evaluating and describing program evaluation strategies to manage and improve program development to better meet the needs of diverse clients, and analyzing the role and implications of diagnosis, treatment planning, and documentation in diverse clients’ lives. The course material and activities addressed several CACREP standards (e.g., 2.F.8.e., 2.F.8.g., 2.F.8.j., 5.C.2.a., 5.C.2.d., 5.C.2.j., and 5.C.2.m.). Content covered included the history and roles of clinical mental health counselors, multiculturalism, social justice, advocacy, diagnosis, case conceptualization and treatment planning, program development and evaluation, record-keeping, and telebehavioral health. The content was facilitated through required readings, interactive activities in the learning management system, and four Zoom synchronous meetings. Evaluation of the learning objectives included quizzes, asynchronous activities (i.e., discussion boards), and a group program proposal (GPP). Table 1 includes a description of instructions for the GPP. Some topics students chose for the GPP included adolescents in foster care, clients with autism spectrum disorder, refugees, immigrants, LGBTQIA+ clients with addiction, and transgender youth involved in the justice system. Regardless of whether they chose to participate in the study, all students were required to complete the course requirements.

Regarding data collection, the course instructor posted a link to the informed consent document in the course announcements the week prior to the start of class, inviting students to participate in the study. Students who chose to participate in the study received a link to a Qualtrics survey to electronically complete a demographic questionnaire, pre- and post-tests, and the required course activities and assignments. The demographic questionnaire asked questions related to age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and the number of credits completed in social justice– and multicultural–related courses. At the start of Week 1 of the course, students were instructed to complete the demographic questionnaire and the pretest prior to completing any course activities and



assignments, and in Week 7, they were instructed to complete the posttest after they finished all course requirements. The pre- and post-tests included Miller et al.'s (2009) Social Issues Questionnaire (SIQ) plus a 9-question researcher created assessment of program evaluation understanding (see Table 2). The purpose of the SIQ was to assess information related to social justice attitudes and

behaviors and the purpose of the 9-question researcher created assessment was to measure students' understanding of program evaluation. The surveys also included a unique code for each student so the researcher could compare their pre- and post-test scores while maintaining student anonymity. The researcher used Qualtrics to collect the data electronically.

**Table 1**

*Group Program Proposal (GPP) Instructions*

Taking on the role of consultants to a community mental health agency, you will work in consultation groups of three to four to develop a program proposal that addresses a gap in programming and services using a multicultural and social justice lens. Choose an underserved population and create a program that fills a gap in mental health services for this population. Include the following elements in your paper.

**Chosen Population and Need:** In this section, describe your chosen population and why you chose that population. Then use qualitative and quantitative data to establish a need for your program.

**Mission, Goal, and Objectives:** Provide a one-sentence mission of your program. Then provide an overall goal of your program and at least three objectives. Consider multicultural, social justice, and advocacy issues when crafting your mission, goal, and/or objectives.

**Program Description and Activities:** Describe your program and activities. Include services offered, physical space considerations, staffing (include role descriptions and qualifications), hours of operation, technological requirements, and a crisis management plan if relevant.

**Fiscal:** Provide a budget for your program and discuss how you will fund this program. Itemize your expenses with a proposal cost for each (e.g., salaries, supplies, rent/utilities, etc.). Identify potential sources of funding (e.g., client payment, managed care, insurance, grants, etc.).

**Stakeholder Benefit:** Identify and discuss how your program will benefit relevant stakeholders, including your clients, families, the community, etc.

**Ethical and Legal Considerations:** Identify and discuss relevant ethical and legal considerations (e.g., ACA code of ethics, ADA compliance, HIPAA, confidentiality compliance, state-specific laws, etc.).

**Marketing Strategy:** Develop a unique and creative marketing strategy to advertise your program. For example, you could develop a website or social media page, create a promotional video, or design an e-brochure for the program that includes your logo.

**Evaluation:** Outline how you will evaluate the overall effectiveness of your program and the satisfaction of your stakeholders. Your evaluation should be directly related to your mission, goal, and objectives. Consider both formative and summative methods of evaluation. The evaluation of the program component should be addressed through a multicultural and socially just lens.

Table 2

Program Evaluation Questionnaire

|                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Instructions:</b> Rate your level of understanding of the following concepts on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being <i>no understanding</i> and 4 being <i>a great amount of understanding</i> . |                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 1.                                                                                                                                                                                              | How creating and implementing programs that address the needs of diverse populations is a form of social justice                                                              |
| 2.                                                                                                                                                                                              | Using qualitative data to help identify diverse, marginalized populations who might benefit from counseling-related programs                                                  |
| 3.                                                                                                                                                                                              | Using quantitative data to help identify diverse, marginalized populations who might benefit from counseling-related programs                                                 |
| 4.                                                                                                                                                                                              | How program implementation can benefit participants, stakeholders, and the larger community                                                                                   |
| 5.                                                                                                                                                                                              | How applying for and obtaining grants can aid in programming for diverse, marginalized populations                                                                            |
| 6.                                                                                                                                                                                              | How relational power dynamics can impact program development, implementation, and evaluation                                                                                  |
| 7.                                                                                                                                                                                              | Using program evaluation strategies to manage and improve program development to better meet the needs of diverse, marginalized populations within the community              |
| 8.                                                                                                                                                                                              | How community partnerships can result in improved programming for diverse, marginalized populations.                                                                          |
| 9.                                                                                                                                                                                              | How sharing program data with stakeholders results in increased accountability, which could improve the quality of programming delivered to diverse, marginalized populations |

Participants

All students who participated in the study already completed at least one three-credit multicultural course in their current graduate program. Seventy-two CMHC students were recruited from the CMHC management course to participate in the study, but only 66 participants remained after deleting students who did not complete the posttest or where it was impossible to match their pre- and post-tests because of missing or identifier code discrepancies. Cohen (1988) suggests a sample size of at least 30 participants needed for medium-to-large effect when using t-tests, and *a priori* G\*Power suggests 45 participants are needed to detect a significant difference at a power of 95% in a paired samples *t*-test (Bartlett, 2022); therefore, the requirement was met with a sample of 66 participants. Participants identified as White/European (*n* = 50), Black or African American (*n* = 5), biracial (*n* = 3), Black Latinx

(*n* = 2), and there was 1 participant in each of the following categories: White Latinx, Black Afro-Caribbean, Black African, Native American, White Arabic, and South Asian. The gender identification breakout of participants was as follows: female (*n* = 47), male (*n* = 14), nonbinary (*n* = 2), transgender (*n* = 1), and other (*n* = 2). Regarding sexual orientation, participants identified as follows: heterosexual (*n* = 54), bisexual (*n* = 4), pansexual (*n* = 3), lesbian (*n* = 2), queer (*n* = 2), and other (*n* = 1).

Instruments

The two instruments used for this study were the Social Issues Questionnaire (SIQ; Miller et al., 2009) and self-report Likert-type items assessing understanding of program evaluation created by the researcher. Participants completed both instruments as part of the pre- and post-test. The questionnaire took approximately 15–20 minutes to complete at

the pretest administration and posttest administration.

### SIQ

The SIQ (Miller et al., 2009) consisted of 52 self-report Likert-type items assessing social justice self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interests, commitment, supports, and barriers. Miller et al. (2007) reported the following internal consistency estimates for each scale: self-efficacy ranged from .94 to .96, outcome expectations ranged from .88 to .92, interests ranged from .81 to .87, commitment ranged from .92 to .94, supports ranged from .75 to .89, and barriers ranged from .63 to .76. Miller et al. (2007) established construct validity for scales through theory-consistent relationships. Self-efficacy subscale intercorrelations with outcome expectations, interest, and commitment ranged from .56 to .67. Outcome expectations subscale intercorrelations with self-efficacy, interest, and commitment ranged from .50 to .53. Interest construct validity was established through a negative relationship with color-blind racial attitudes ( $r = -.60, p < .01$ ). Commitment was also negatively related to color-blind racial attitudes ( $r = -.62, p < .01$ ), and supports and barriers were negatively related to one another ( $r = -.19, p < .01$ ).

The researcher evaluated the internal consistency of each SIQ domain using Cronbach's alpha of the present study's sample. Results indicated acceptable to excellent reliability (George & Mallery, 2003) in self-efficacy pretest ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and posttest ( $\alpha = .96$ ); outcome expectations pretest ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and posttest ( $\alpha = .92$ ); interest pretest ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and posttest ( $\alpha = .91$ ); commitment pretest ( $\alpha = .93$ ) and posttest ( $\alpha = .92$ ); supports pretest ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and posttest ( $\alpha = .91$ ); and barriers pretest ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and posttest ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

Questions in all domains were assessed on a Likert scale of 1 to 9, with 1 indicating lower levels in each domain and 9 indicating higher levels of each domain. Questions in the self-efficacy domain assessed participants' belief in their ability to engage in social justice activities across intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, and

institutional/political areas. Questions in the outcome expectations domain gauged participants' belief in positive outcomes resulting from engagement in social justice activities. Questions in the interest domain assessed participants interest in participating in activities and commitment to future advocacy was assessed. Questions in the supports domain assessed participants' social support expected if they were to engage in advocacy; in the barriers domain, the questions measured participants' social barriers expected.

### Program Evaluation Understanding

The researcher created nine self-report Likert-type items assessing understanding of program evaluation. The questions evaluated understanding of various steps of program development and evaluation on a 4-point Likert scale with 1 = *no understanding* to 4 = *a great amount of understanding*. Higher scores on each item indicated a greater understanding of each phase in program development and evaluation. The prompt provided was "Rate your level of understanding of the following concept." The researcher reviewed textbooks and peer-reviewed articles related to program development and evaluation in counseling (e.g., Calley, 2009), noted reoccurring themes and phases, drafted a comprehensive list of relevant steps and questions, and narrowed them down to the nine questions found in Table 2 because they captured the main goals and purposes related to this study, that is, program development, implementation, and evaluation for diverse populations. The researcher conducted internal consistency for the nine-question survey, and results indicated excellent reliability (George & Mallery, 2003) for both the program evaluation understanding pretest ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and posttest ( $\alpha = .91$ ).



## Results

The researcher used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS; Version 27) to analyze data. Assumptions of normality were met for the self-



efficacy, supports, and barriers subscales of the SIQ, so a paired-samples *t*-test was used to determine change from the pretest to posttest in those domains. Data was not normally distributed for outcome expectations, interest, and commitment subscales of the SIQ and the program evaluation questionnaire based on assessed Kolmogorov-Smirnov coefficients < .05 for the pre- and post-tests for each subscale. The researcher elected to use a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test to determine change from the pretest to posttest because the data was not normally distributed, the sample size was small, and the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test has comparable statistical power to the paired sample *t*-test.

Paired Sample *t*-Test

On the SIQ, the mean scores increased from the pretest (*M* = 119.09, *SD* = 27.01) to posttest (*M* = 135.71, *SD* = 26.77) for social justice self-efficacy. The mean scores increased from the pretest (*M* = 31.30, *SD* = 9.21) to posttest (*M* = 33.21, *SD* 7.41) for social justice supports, and increased from the pretest (*M* = 15.36, *SD* = 7.39) to posttest (*M* = 15.99, *SD* = 7.41) for social justice barriers. The increase in students’ confidence in their ability to engage in social justice activities (i.e., social justice self-efficacy) was statistically significant *t*(65) = -5.04, *p* < .001 with a medium effect (*d* = -.62;

Cohen, 1988). The increase for social supports and barriers was not significant. Although students increased slightly in their social support expected if they were to engage in advocacy, they also increased nominally in the barriers domain, meaning the social barriers expected also increased. (See Table 3 for further information).

Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test

On the SIQ, the mean scores increased from the pretest (*M* = 70.17, *SD* = 12.87) to posttest (*M* = 74.12, *SD* = 12.39) for social justice outcomes expectations, increased from the pretest (*M* = 59.42, *SD* = 15.59) to the posttest (*M* =64.30, *SD* = 13.71) for social justice interest, increased from the pretest (*M* = 25.70, *SD* = 8.19) to the posttest (*M* = 27.49, *SD* = 6.95) for social justice commitment, and increased from the pretest (*M* = 24.49, *SD* = 5.97) to the posttest (*M* = 30.36, *SD* = 4.53) for program evaluation. The increase in social justice self-interest was significant (*Z* = -3.72, *r* = -.46, *p* < .001); the effect size was moderate (*r* = -. 46; Cohen, 1988) and resulted in 19 negative ranks, 43 positive ranks, and 4 ties. The increase in program evaluation understanding was also significant (*Z* = -5.57, *r* = -0.69, *p* < .001); the effect size was moderate to large (*r* = -.69; Cohen, 1988) and resulted in 12 negative ranks, 52 positive ranks, and 2 ties. (See Table 4 for additional information).

Table 3

*Paired Samples t-Test: Overall Program Evaluation and Social Justice Domains*

|                          | Pretest  |           | Posttest |           | <i>n</i> | <i>t</i> -test | <i>d</i> |
|--------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|----------|
|                          | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |          |                |          |
| Self-Efficacy            | 119.09   | 27.01     | 135.71   | 26.77     | 66       | -5.037*        | -0.62    |
| Supports                 | 31.30    | 9.21      | 33.21    | 8.71      | 66       | -1.85          | -0.23    |
| Barriers                 | 15.36    | 7.39      | 15.99    | 7.41      | 66       | -0.678         | -0.08    |
| Note. * <i>p</i> < .001. |          |           |          |           |          |                |          |

Table 4

*Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results for Program Evaluation, Outcome Expectations, Interest, and Commitment*

|                      | Pretest |       | Posttest |       | n  | Z      | r     |
|----------------------|---------|-------|----------|-------|----|--------|-------|
|                      | M       | SD    | M        | SD    |    |        |       |
| Program Evaluation   | 24.49   | 5.97  | 30.36    | 4.53  | 66 | -5.57* | -0.69 |
| Outcome Expectations | 70.17   | 12.87 | 74.12    | 12.39 | 66 | -2.90  | -0.36 |
| Interest             | 59.42   | 15.59 | 64.30    | 13.71 | 66 | -3.72* | -0.46 |
| Commitment           | 25.70   | 8.19  | 27.49    | 6.95  | 66 | -1.94  | -0.24 |

Note. \* $p < .001$ .

 Discussion

Social Justice Identity

The results of this pilot study support the research question that completing a social justice–focused course can positively impact social justice identity, specifically social justice self-efficacy and interest. Sixty-six students completed a management in CMHC programs course, which included participating in a group project developing a program for a historically marginalized population. The researcher assessed a pre- and post-test assessment of social justice identity (i.e., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interest, commitment, supports, and barriers) of each student, and the results indicated an increase in social justice identity with a significant increase for social justice self-efficacy and interest. Outcome expectations, commitment, and supports increased but were not significant. Results are comparable to a recent past study (Messerschmitt-Coen et al., 2022) where students increased significantly in their social justice self-efficacy, interest, and commitment by completing a semester-long multicultural and social justice counseling (MCSJC) course.

Social justice barriers decreased, meaning students reported sensing more social barriers after

completing the course. Although the overall increase was very small (+0.63 change from pre- to post-test; see Table 3), one potential explanation is that students may now be more aware or cognizant of social justice activities and their social circle’s thoughts on these activities because they were immersed in the material for 7 weeks. Alternatively, students have very little control over their social circle’s opinions regarding social justice so little change can be expected because this is a variable outside of their control.

Program Evaluation Understanding

The results of this pilot study also support the research question that completing one CMHC management social justice–focused course involving a group program proposal (GPP) can positively impact counseling students’ program evaluation understanding. The researcher conducted a pre- and post-test assessment of program evaluation knowledge of each student, and the results indicate a significant increase in program evaluation understanding. Program evaluation knowledge and practice for CMHC students and professionals is scarcely studied and reported in the professional literature. Recently, Lenz (2022) urged counselors to consider program evaluation as a way to effect social change in communities, education, and hospital settings. In *The Counseling Psychologist*, a recent edition focused on the

integration of practice, advocacy, and research to address how counseling practices and environments can address the emerging needs of marginalized clients (Moore-Lobban et al., 2021). Delgado-Romero et al. (2021) described how faculty and students collaborated to build a clinic serving bilingual and bicultural clients in the Latino South, where many Latinx people experience anti-immigrant discrimination and other cultural challenges. Lloyd-Hazlett et al. (2022) used service-learning as a pedagogical strategy for promoting professional advocacy and program evaluation competency among master's- and doctoral-level students from CACREP-accredited counseling programs, and they suggest by using service-learning to promote program evaluation competency, communities and university-community relationships were positively impacted. Program evaluation is one method professional counselors can use for macrolevel advocacy within their community, and with today's use of virtual counseling, the impact can be even more far-reaching.

## Limitations

Limitations for this study centered around study design, beginning with participant selection for the study. This was a pilot study based off of 66 volunteer student participants from one course across three semesters at one university with one instructor; therefore, sample bias is present and results have limited generalizability, but the study is easily replicable by other counselor educators. Additionally, students chose to participate in the study, representing potential volunteer bias.

Additionally, the sample came from students in an online program completing a group project. How those groups chose to complete the project, the population they chose to focus on, and who was in the group was entirely up to the students. Also, the researcher did not evaluate the performance of students on the asynchronous discussions or quizzes. These factors were not controlled for in the study and may have contributed to the results.

Additionally, there was no control group for this study, which could have bolstered the support for whether the group program proposal was what influenced the change in social justice identity and program evaluation understanding, or if the change was related to other variables. Surveys were self-report. Although anonymous, students could also have answered survey questions in a socially desirable manner, impacting the accuracy and reliability of self-report data.

## Implications for Counselor Educators and Future Research

There is much research related to the integration of multiculturalism and social justice competencies into the counselor education curriculum (e.g., Celinska & Swazo, 2016; Messerschmitt-Coen et al., 2022); however, there is minimal research studying how counselor educators teach program development and evaluation and how this impacts professional counselors' use of program evaluation in their practice. This is a missed opportunity because development of culturally sensitive evidenced-based programs (EBPs) can be a macro-level advocacy strategy that can have far-reaching effects for communities in need, for example, American Indians and Alaska Natives (McKinley et al., 2019), Latinx population (Delgado-Romero et al., 2021), and LGBTQ adolescents (Goldbach et al., 2023).

It would benefit counselor educators to increase attention and instruction surrounding program evaluation to ultimately improve students' understanding, which could result in positive impact in underserved clients' lives and communities. By bolstering counselors use of program evaluation in their regular practice, this can strengthen the professional identity and main duties of counselors to extend beyond therapy to macro-level advocacy programming. This could result in greater impact than individual counseling.

The use of program evaluation-focused assignments, such as the GPP, is one way counselor educators can promote the importance of program evaluation in counseling students; however,

counselor educators need to conduct additional research analyzing the extent to which program development-focused assignments can influence students' understanding of program development and how they contribute to social justice identity and behaviors. Additionally, the introduction and use of program evaluation-focused assignments can extend beyond just one course. Often program development is only addressed in a research course, which often tends to be a difficult and feared course for counseling students (Davis, 2019). By infusing ideas of program evaluation throughout the curriculum, it can reinforce the concepts learned in their research course, and students can gain a deeper understanding and potentially increase their confidence in developing and evaluating programs as professional counselors. Additionally, clinical mental health counselors may be better positioned to conduct research regarding the impact of program evaluation on underserved clients. By training clinical mental health counselors to conduct and research program evaluation, there could be more development of effective, or even evidence-based, programs addressing client and community needs.

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## Author Information

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

The author reported no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### How to Cite this Article:

Henry, H. L. (2024). Social justice identity and program evaluation: A pilot study of CMHC students. *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*, 6(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc06rs4A>