Understanding Privilege and Engaging in Activism: Elevating Social Justice in Social Work

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Abstract: In order to best serve clients and be effective "social change agents," social workers must unpack their own privilege, learn about injustice, and work to dismantle interconnected systems of oppression. One way to do so is through engagement in social activism. This cross-sectional study examined intersectional demographic identities and knowledge of racial and heterosexual privilege as related to participation in political and social activism among a sample of 310 MSW students. Knowledge of heterosexual privilege was positively associated with engagement in political and social activism. People who identified as bisexual, gay, lesbian, or queer, as well as macro-focused students, reported significantly more activism engagement. A statistically significant difference was found in activism according to an intersectional race and gender variable and a race and sexual orientation variable as well. The study highlights the importance of including a critical approach to social work education that centers discussions about systems of power as oppressive forces that impact marginalized people and communities. MSW curricula must encourage engagement in advocacy and understanding of privilege for clinical and macro students alike.

Keywords: Social justice; social work; activism; privilege; intersectionality

Social workers have an obligation to question and oppose systems of oppression that perpetuate social injustice and racial inequality. On the individual level, that begins with an understanding of privilege—both one's own privilege and the ways that privilege is created and maintained through cultural norms and structures. Dissecting systems of power and how those systems of power impact people on a variety of levels is at the heart of enacting sustainable, long-lasting change. Since privilege and oppression do not exist one dimensionally, an intersectional approach to privilege is needed. From a more macro-focused perspective, engagement in broader policy and system change is often demonstrated through participation in social action. Tenets of social justice and racial equality are explicit in social work values and must be instilled in social workers during their educational tenure.

Intersectionality

Defining intersectionality is a challenge, as it bucks clearly delineated classifications (Collins, 2015), opting for a more inclusive both/and approach. It is a way to consider a person as a whole made up of overlapping and sometimes clashing identities that are impossible to disaggregate (Crenshaw, 1991; Hancock, 2013). Intersectionality also requires a thorough examination of the ways that systems of oppression interact with one another to control and subjugate people of different identities. At its core, intersectionality is about the relationship between people in different coalitions as they relate to power and

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privilege. Intersectionality requires a rejection of clean, distinct categorizations of different people. Audre Lorde (1984) expressed her frustration of "constantly being encouraged to pluck out some aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing and denying the other parts of the self" (p. 120). In a seminal work, Crenshaw (1991) explained these aspects as coalitions—and sometimes future potential coalitions—that exist within individuals. Presenting these aspects of the self as coalitions requires that we consider the shared space of solidarity and heterogeneity (Carastathis, 2013; Cole, 2008). This is in opposition to an identity focus, which is centered on the idea of harmonious homogeneity and belonging (Carastathis, 2013).

In spite of—or perhaps because of—the world's complexities, social workers need to approach the world through an intersectional lens. Social workers must recognize interacting systems of oppression and how those systems impact people's lives (Simon et al., 2022). In other words, social workers must interrogate the "matrix of domination" (Collins, 1990, p. 227) as it relates to individuals and communities. Only by understanding and addressing interlocking oppressions can real change happen. Otherwise, individual client lives may only improve in one-dimensional, superficial, and temporary ways. As is done with an intersectionality lens, social workers must center relationships and the ways that identities are connected to privilege, power, and oppression. Social work pushes its workforce to center clients as the experts in their own lives, recognizing that an outsider has a limited understanding of someone as they affect and are affected by their environment (National Association of Social Work, n.d.).

While social work's values are clear, the theoretical framework through which to approach those values remains less so. Cultural competency, diversity, and multicultural approaches have all been applied to social work education, but have failed to address the nuanced, multi-leveled needs of the populations we serve (Pulliam, 2017). Critical Race Theory (CRT) aligns with the professional values of the National Association of Social Work (NASW) and Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and moves beyond social work's false micro/macro dichotomy (Pulliam, 2017). Intersectionality is one of CRT's core tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Privilege

One way that social justice commitment can be considered on an individual level is through understanding the role of privilege in the social worker's own life, the lives of clients, and the world more broadly. Privilege protects people in the dominant group from "many kinds of hostility, distress and violence" and works to "systematically over empower certain groups" (McIntosh, 1989, p. 11). Without discussions about privilege and power, education about diversity and social justice falls short. When the latter occurs without the former, the learner is able to ignore personal responsibility and imagine privilege as merely a theoretical concept enacted by a distant other (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). Addressing privilege is an important first step for social workers. Acknowledging one's own privilege is often met with resistance within master of social work (MSW) classrooms (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Abrams & Moio, 2009). Garcia and Van Soest (1997) surveyed 43 MSW students enrolled in a required course on diversity and

oppression and found that 71% of White students identified White privilege as a barrier to understanding and learning about oppression.

Social work is based on the idea of meeting people where they are, which requires social workers to be knowledgeable and reflective about the historic and current systems of oppression that impact clients' lives while maintaining a firm understanding of themselves and their own positionality. This is true for social workers in all fields, as intersecting systems of oppression impact clients' lives in child welfare, education, criminal legal, substance use interventions, financial social work, and in all other systems and institutions. Unless social workers unpack their own privilege, they will not be able to be open to clients as experts of their own lives. Instead, their interpretation of clients will be done through an unexamined, yet omnipresent lens of privilege and unconscious biases unchecked without that examination (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Keenan, 2004). The intersection of privilege and power influences knowledge and becomes action. Deliberate, social justice-oriented practice can only be realized once privilege and power are acknowledged and explored. This exploration must be a continual process for social workers interacting with individuals, communities, and institutions, especially given social work's history of contributing to and compounding control. Though social work began with a concern for Black people, that concern largely deteriorated until the Civil Rights Movement. The profession has continuously failed to investigate and be transparent about that complicated history or the way White people and/or social workers have been complicit in at best ignoring and at worst attacking Black people's well-being (Snowden et al., 2021).

Centering conversations about privilege is not a new idea. In the seminal work, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," McIntosh (1989) explained that White people are often taught about racism as something that disadvantages people of color, but not that benefits White people. This lack of understanding and acknowledgement of privilege begets unconscious oppression and bias. Thus, White people are taught to see themselves as the neutral ideal and so understand their goal to be to lift up people and communities of color to be more like them (McIntosh, 1989). Given the common racial, gender, and economic differences between social workers and social work clients, this elitist perspective cannot be ignored. Social workers need to manage personal bias and individual values through self-awareness and self-regulation in their work with marginalized communities. They must first acknowledge their own biases, privilege, racism, and power, and recognize the complex ways that systems and structures construct and are constructed by such influences before they will be able to address them in their work. Though these types of processes and courses are necessary, it is important to recognize the harm they may inflict on non-White students. In courses about racism—a standard in many MSW programs—White students learn about White Supremacy and consider their own whiteness critically, perhaps for the first time and perhaps while their Black and Brown peers are forced to witness micro- and macro-aggressions, clumsy "awakenings," and white guilt (Hanna et al., 2021).

Activism

Social activism is one avenue through which social workers can apply their knowledge of and dedication to addressing systemic oppression. Activism provides a through-line for various levels of social work and illustrates social workers' understanding of strategies to address structural, marginalizing barriers that impede equality and justice. Activism is also connected to intersectionality, which requires a broader view of how people and systems interact to create and reinforce power and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984). Allyship is an iterative, perpetual process that requires going beyond self-reflection and towards actively disrupting racism and other forms of oppression (Gates et al., 2021; Massey & Johnson, 2021). Aguilar and Counselman-Carpenter (2021) caution us against the assumption that actions done with good intentions are more than a mirage, and point out that White female heterocentric social workers have used certain strategies (e.g., hiding behind the data, participating in anti-racist book clubs, and crying) to avoid impactful discussions and actions about combating racism and other forms of oppression. Activism must dismantle the systems that perpetuate marginalization and oppression, with social workers engaging as "Woke Disruptors" who center social justice (Donohue-Dioh et al., 2021, p. 1045). Despite clear assumptions by both NASW and CSWE that social activism is a requirement for all—and not just macro-focused social workers—few studies have examined MSW student participation in social activism (Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013). Social activism participation among social work practitioners seems to range from 44% to 99%, depending on the measures and definition of activism used, which suggests that individuals generally report engagement in activism, but there is a lack of clarity around type or amount of such engagement (Domanski, 1998; Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013; Rome, 2010).

Studies regarding the impact of social work education on one's social activism are limited and discordant. Mizrahi and Dodd (2013) cited two diverging studies of social work populations. In the first, Lane (2011) found that 63% of political social workers surveyed stated that their MSW education contributed to their political activism. Earlier, in a study of licensed social workers, Ritter (2008) reported that 21% of respondents agreed that their MSW coursework increased their political activism. These differences may reflect how post-MSW employment influences one's view of the impact of their education, or may illustrate a difference between macro and clinical social workers. In a study of MSW students before and after completing their degree, Mizrahi and Dodd (2013) found that background and demographic characteristics, curricula, and MSW program culture all contributed to students' social activism. A study of bachelor of social work (BSW) students identified the strongest predictor of social activism was simply receiving an invitation to participate in a political event (Swank, 2012). Hsu and colleagues (2022) also found social networks to be important: social work students who reported discussing racism with their networks had greater awareness of racism.

Two recent studies identified sexual orientation and gender identity as factors associated with social work students' political activism. Atteberry-Ash and colleagues (2022) found more frequent protest participation among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer social work students; students with LGBQ friends; individuals who participated in classes or activities about LGBQ issues; those who were in advocacy groups; and students who

had a strong activist identity compared to heterosexual students who did not engage in those activities. This study found that the most important factor in protest participation was belief in their identity as someone who works towards social change (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2022). Another article written about the same study reported that having more transgender and non-binary (TNB) people in their network, a clinical/macro focus, and taking a course on power, privilege and oppression were all associated with an increase in engaging with TNB activism (Holloway et al., 2022).

Outside of social work students, prior research shows that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people participate in more social movements than heterosexual people (Swank, 2018). In fact, studies have shown that LGB individuals are more likely to participate in feminist (Fisher et al., 2017) and other movements beyond LGB rights movements (Anderson & Jennings, 2010; Carroll & Ratner, 1996). One study showed that LGB people were more likely than heterosexual people to participate in LGB, peace, environmental, and economic justice movements (Swank, 2018). Swank and Fahs (2013) considered intersectional identities as they related to activism and found that White lesbians were less likely to attend protests and vote than lesbians of color, but noted that race was less of a predictor of activism for gay men than were experiences of discrimination. Those researchers also found that personally experiencing heterosexist discrimination and publicly revealing their sexual identity were also associated with more queer rights activism (Swank & Fahs, 2013).

One study of nearly 200 college students found that awareness of heterosexual privilege and resistance to heteronormativity were both associated with greater engagement in gay and lesbian rights activism (Montgomery & Stewart, 2012). Researchers also found that, among a sample of college students, heterosexual privilege awareness predicted activism for women, but not for men (Montgomery & Stewart, 2012). Another study asked people of color to identify White allies as well as friends (who they did not believe to be strong allies), the distinction being that the friends were not people they felt they could depend on for support if confronted with a race-related issue (Ostrove & Brown, 2018). Ostrove and Brown (2018) found that allies reported more awareness of White privilege, greater willingness to confront White privilege, and more remorse related to White privilege than did their friends. The people of color who nominated these participants reported that allies displayed more affirmative behaviors and a greater willingness to engage in social change (Ostrove & Brown, 2018). Ezell (1993) and Rocha (2000) found that African American MSW students and social workers were more politically active than White students and social workers, but other researchers (Andrews, 1998; Parker & Sherraden, 1992; Ritter, 2008) found that race was not a factor in students' electoral activities. A more recent study of Black and Latino college students concluded that prior activism, immigration status, experiences of microaggressions, and political efficacy all contributed to participation in racial justice and immigrant rights protests (Hope et al., 2016).

Social Work and Social Justice

While some studies have examined how identity and social networks are associated with engagement in activism, no recent studies have investigated how knowledge of privilege and intersectional identities are associated with activism. Exploring how social work values are being manifest in social workers themselves necessitates consideration of the factors associated with knowledge of privilege and engagement in activism. Both knowledge of privilege and engagement in activism are aligned with social work values and an intersectional approach. This study examined the question: Are MSW students' age, race, sexual orientation, gender, clinical/macro concentration, knowledge of heterosexual privilege, and knowledge of racial privilege associated with greater involvement in political and social activism?

Method

This exploratory study used a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between various demographic characteristics, knowledge of privilege, and involvement in activism in a sample of MSW students and recent graduates.

Sampling Procedures

Participants were drawn from a convenience sample of students from five of the top 20 MSW programs in the United States, as identified by *U.S. News and World Report* (2019). Those five schools were included because MSW program staff agreed to participate when contacted by a research team member. The schools are located in geographically diverse, mostly urban parts of the United States. A professor or school administrator from each school sent a survey link embedded in an e-mail to the target population, which provided an additional level of trust for recipients (Dillman et al., 2014). Additionally, 100 respondents, selected at random, received a $20 Amazon gift card. University of Maryland Baltimore IRB approval was received.

Measures

The web-based survey took about 15 minutes to complete, and questions were deliberately ordered to be "like a conversation," starting with broader demographic items and progressing towards more sensitive topics (Dillman et al., 2014, p. 230). Although the survey consisted of eight different standardized justice-oriented scales, this analysis focused on three standardized scales dedicated to knowledge of privilege and participation in activism, along with demographic items.

Demographics. A variety of demographic information was collected in this survey. This inquiry focused on age, race, gender, sexual orientation, and social work concentration. Age was maintained as a continuous variable. Participants were asked to select all races with which they identified. Options included White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Asian, Native American, Non-Hawaiian Pacific Islander, "other" (with a space to specify), and prefer not to say. For this analysis, race was dichotomized,

with White/Caucasian as the reference group, and a general people of color (POC) category created for all others and those who identified as more than one race. Participants who chose not to disclose their race were excluded from the analysis. A question regarding gender included options for cismen, ciswomen, trans men, trans women, non-binary, prefer to self-describe (with a space to specify), and prefer not to say. Gender was dummy-coded for this analysis, with cismen as the reference group, ciswomen in one category and trans, genderqueer, and non-binary people in another. One participant did not disclose their gender identity and was excluded from the analysis. The question regarding sexual orientation included options for people who identified as straight/heterosexual, gay or lesbian, bisexual, other (with a request to specify), and prefer not to say. Sexual orientation was dummy-coded, with straight/heterosexual as the reference group, bisexual as one category, and queer (which included gay, lesbian, queer, pansexual, asexual, and questioning) as a third category.

Participants indicated their social work concentration in a question that included four options: micro/clinical, macro/policy, combination of both, and undecided. Social work concentration was dummy-coded, with clinical and undecided combined as the reference category (combined to reflect that undecided may indicate that they are a first year student and because undecided usually defaults to clinical training), and macro and dual as the two other categories. Two intersectional variables were created and considered in bivariate analyses. One reflected the intersection of race and gender and the other the intersection of race and sexual orientation, both using the categories described above to create six new categories for each variable. Therefore, the race and gender variable included cismen who were White, cismen who were POC, ciswomen who were White, ciswomen who were POC, trans/non-binary White people, and trans/non-binary POC. The race and sexual orientation variable included heterosexual White people, heterosexual POC, bisexual White people, bisexual POC, queer White people, and queer POC.

Knowledge of Privilege. Two measures, the Privilege and Oppression Inventory (POI; Hays et al., 2007) and the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS; Neville et al., 2000), were used to measure knowledge of heterosexism and racial privilege in this study. The Heterosexism Awareness POI subscale was used to measure one's heterosexism awareness through ten questions on a 6-point Likert-type scale. The Heterosexism Awareness subscale included items about the lack of power of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people in the legal system and in general, and LGB people's safety, opportunities, value, and experience with discrimination overall. Hays et al. (2007) validated the POI with counselors and counselor trainees and had a Cronbach's alpha of .95 overall, with .81 for the heterosexism awareness subscale (Hays et al., 2007). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .91 for Heterosexism Awareness. Scores for the POI subscale were summed, and higher scores indicated greater awareness of heterosexism.

The racial privilege CoBRAS subscale consisted of summed values and was used to examine knowledge of racial privilege. The subscale consisted of seven questions on a 5-point Likert scale. Questions addressed participants' beliefs about White people having advantages, racial and ethnic minorities having equal opportunities as White people, the role of race in who is incarcerated and who receives social services, and White people's role in racial discrimination. Neville and colleagues (2000) validated CoBRAS with

college students and community members, with a Cronbach's alpha of .91. For this study, Cronbach's alpha was .84 for racial privilege and .91 for CoBRAS overall. Lower scores indicate more knowledge of racial privilege.

Engagement in Activism. In order to measure participants' engagement in activism, the Political and Social Advocacy (PSA) subscale of the Social Issues Advocacy Scale (SIAS; Nilsson et al., 2011) was used. SIAS had a Cronbach's alpha of .93 for the overall scale and PSA (Nilsson et al., 2011). For this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .87 for the PSA. SIAS was validated with undergraduate and graduate students from counseling, psychology, nursing, education, and medicine (Nilsson et al., 2011). The PSA subscale includes eight items using a 5-point Likert scale. PSA items ask about a participants' participation in demonstrations, meeting with policymakers, volunteering, and financial contributions regarding political and social issues as they relate to participants' personal and professional values. Higher summary scores indicate more engagement in political and social activism.

Data Analysis

All analyses were performed using SPSS Version 25. A multiple regression was done to determine the association between age, race, sexual orientation, gender, social work concentration, and knowledge of racial and heterosexual privilege as related to political and social activism. All assumptions for this analysis were met. An a priori power analysis conducted with G*Power using an alpha of .05, power of .80, determined that a sample of at least 118 participants was needed to detect a medium effect size (f^2=.15; Cohen, 1988). Missing data were addressed through listwise deletion, leading to a slightly smaller sample (n=297) included in the multiple regression. Bivariate tests, including *t*-tests and ANOVA, were conducted for relevant variables, as well as for two intersectional variables that were not included in the multiple regression. ANOVA tests, with Tukey's post hoc tests, were conducted to examine differences in participants' engagement in political and social activism.

Results

Sample Characteristics

The only inclusion criteria for this study was completion of at least one semester of coursework in an MSW program in 2018 or 2019. Therefore, participants consisted of part-time and full-time students, as well as graduates who completed their MSW degree in 2018 or after. Nearly 2,500 students from five MSW programs received a link to the online Qualtrics survey.

While there was an initial response rate of 18% (*n*=453), only 13% (*n*=310) met the inclusion criteria. Study respondents had an average age of 29 (*SD*=7.9), were mostly ciswomen (86%) and White (74%; see Table 1). The majority of respondents identified as heterosexual (69%) and the most common MSW concentration was clinical (48%).

Table 1. *Sample demographics* (*n* = 310)

Variable	*M* (SD)
Age (years)	29 (7.9)
	***n* (%)**
Gender	
Ciswoman	267 (86%)
Cisman	24 (8%)
Trans/Non-binary/Genderqueer	19 (6%)
Race	
White	230 (74%)
Black/AA	35 (11%)
Asian	11 (4%)
Other	17 (5%)
Multiple	13 (4%)
Prefer not to say	6 (2%)
Sexual Orientation	
Straight/Heterosexual	211 (68%)
Gay/Lesbian	20 (6%)
Bisexual	50 (16%)
Queer/Pan/Asexual/Questioning	23 (7%)
Prefer Not to Say	6 (2%)
Concentration	
Clinical	150 (48%)
Macro	41 (13%)
Both	107 (34%)
Undecided	14 (5%)

Bivariate Associations

Results from bivariate analyses are shown in Table 2. The *t*-test did not show a statistically significant difference between Political and Social Activism (PSA) subscale means by race. In terms of gender, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) model was significant, $F(2, 306)=3.37$, $p=.036$, with Tukey's post hoc test indicating that the mean score for cismen ($M=21.5$, $SD=7.5$) was significantly lower than the mean score for trans/non-binary people ($M=27.1$, $SD=6.7$, $p=.033$). The ANOVA test for sexual orientation and PSA was also significant, $F(2, 300)=14.07$, $p<.001$, with the post hoc test indicating significantly lower mean scores for heterosexual people ($M=22.0$, $SD=7.0$) than for both bisexual people ($M=26.9$, $SD=7.3$, $p<.001$) and queer people ($M=26.1$, $SD=6.0$, $p=.001$). There was no difference in political and social activism between people who identified as bisexual and those who identified as queer.

For social work concentration, the ANOVA test was significant, $F(3, 306)=6.6$, $p=.029$, with Tukey's post hoc test indicating significantly lower mean PSA scores for clinical students ($M=21.8$, $SD=7.1$) than for both macro ($M=26.8$, $SD=5.9$, $p<.001$) and dual macro/clinical respondents ($M=24.3$, $SD=7.0$, $p=.026$). The ANOVA test for the race and gender intersectional variable was also statistically significant, $F(5, 297)=2.77$, $p=.018$, and Tukey's post hoc test indicated that White trans/non-binary people ($M=28.7$, $SD=5.0$) had significantly higher mean PSA scores than White cismen ($M=21.0$, $SD=7.3$, $p=.032$)

and White ciswomen (M=22.8, SD=7.3, p=.030). Lastly, in terms of the intersection of race and sexual orientation, the ANOVA model was significant, F(5, 292)=6.24, p<.001. Tukey's post hoc test showed that heterosexual White people (M=21.6, SD=7.2) had significantly lower mean PSA scores than bisexual White people (M=26.6, SD=7.3, p=.001), bisexual POC (M=27.7, SD=7.7, p=.028), and queer White people (M=25.6, SD=6.1, p=.024). Age was not associated with greater political and social activism (r= -.038, p=.251), but heterosexism awareness (r=.259, p<.001) and knowledge of racial privilege (r= -.235, p<.001) both were.

Table 2. *Mean Differences by Demographics and Political and Social Activism*

		n	Mean (SD)	t/F(df)	p
			SIAS-PSA Scores		
Race	White	228	23.0 (7.3)	-1.55 (302)	.121
	People of Color (POC)	76	24.5 (6.7)		
Gender	Cismen	24	21.5 (7.5)	3.37 (2, 306)	.036*
	Ciswomen	266	23.2 (7.1)		
	Trans/Non-Binary	19	27.1 (6.7)		
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	209	22.0 (7.0)	14.07 (2, 300)	<.001**
	Bisexual	50	26.9 (7.3)		
	Queer	44	26.1 (6.0)		
Concentration	Clinical	148	21.8 (7.1)	6.60 (3, 306)	.029*
	Macro	41	26.8 (5.9)		
	Dual	107	24.3 (7.0)		
	Undecided	14	22.4 (8.8)		
Race + Gender	White Cismen	17	21.0 (7.3)	2.77 (5, 297)	.018*
	POC Cismen	6	24.0 (8.7)		
	White Ciswomen	196	22.8 (7.3)		
	POC Ciswomen	65	24.7 (6.4)		
	White Trans/Non-Binary	14	28.7 (5.0)		
	POC Trans/Non-Binary	5	22.4 (9.2)		
Race + Sexual Orientation	White Heterosexual	151	21.6 (7.2)	6.24 (5, 292)	<.001**
	POC Heterosexual	53	23.2 (6.3)		
	White Bisexual	37	26.6 (7.3)		
	POC Bisexual	13	27.7 (7.7)		
	White Queer	35	25.6 (6.1)		
	POC Queer	9	27.9 (5.8)		

* p < .05, ** p < .001

Factors Associated With Political and Social Activism

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate whether MSW student age, race, sexual orientation, gender, macro concentration, knowledge of heterosexual privilege, and knowledge of racial privilege were significant predictors of political and social advocacy. The overall regression model was significant (R^2=.17, F(10, 286)=5.89, p<.001). Many of the factors in this model were significantly associated with political and social activism (see Table 3). Specifically, compared to heterosexual people, individuals who are gay, lesbian, queer, pansexual, asexual, or questioning (β=.15, p=.021) and people who are

bisexual (β=.20, *p*<.001) reported more political and social activism. Macro-focused students (β=.18, *p*=.002) and dual clinical/macro students (β=.13, *p*=.032) reported higher PSA scores than clinical and undecided students. Lastly, respondents who reported more heterosexism awareness (β=.18, *p*=.015) reported being more politically and socially active.

Table 3. *Multiple Regression Model for Political and Social Activism* (n=297)

Variable	*B*	SE B	β	*p*	95% CI
(Constant)	10.40	5.19		.046	
Age	.04	.05	.04	.441	[.92, 1.09]
People of Color	1.76	.92	.11	.055	[-.06, 3.57]
Queer[1]	2.93	1.27	.15*	.021	[.44, 5.41]
Bisexual	3.96	1.11	.20**	<.001	[1.78, 6.13]
Ciswomen	1.16	1.50	.06	.440	[-1.79, 4.10]
Transgender/Genderqueer	1.06	2.22	.04	.633	[-3.31, 5.44]
Macro	3.86	1.21	.18*	.002	[1.48, 6.24]
Macro/Clinical Combination	1.90	.88	.13*	.032	[.16, 3.64]
Heterosexism Awareness	.17	.07	.18*	.015	[.03, .30]
Racial Privilege Knowledge	-.04	.11	-.03	.735	[-.259, .183]
Model Statistics					
R^2	.171				
F	5.89**				

* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .001
[1] Includes gay, lesbian, pansexual, asexual, queer, and questioning

Controlling for all other predictors, people who identified as queer and bisexual reported 7% and 10% (respectively) more political and social activism than heterosexual people. Compared to clinical and undecided students, and controlling for all other predictors, dual students reported a 5% increase and macro students reported a 10% increase in PSA scores. For every one point increase in respondents' score on the Privilege and Oppression Inventory (POI) Heterosexism Awareness (HA) subscale, there was a .17 (.4%) increase in PSA score, controlling for all other predictors. Race, age, gender, and knowledge of racial privilege were not associated with political and social activism in the model.

Discussion

Although some individual factors were associated with greater political and social activism, an intersectional view provides a more nuanced understanding. In this study, sexual orientation was significantly associated with political and social activism. Controlling for all other predictors, people who are bisexual and people who are gay, lesbian, queer, pansexual, asexual, or questioning reported more political and social activism than heterosexual people.

The relationship between bisexual identity and social activism is especially interesting from an intersectional lens, which requires considering the complicated, overlapping

dimensions of the world. Almost definitionally, bisexual people occupy the liminal space in between heterosexual and gay and lesbian worlds. They are not considered to be full members of either group, but continue to be seen as "other" by both. This perspective offers a consistent outsider view of the world, while also providing some inroads into both groups. The fluidity and flexibility of this position leads people who are bisexual to report being less judgmental, more accepting, and less interested in creating strict categories for others (Rostosky et al., 2010). It may also help them to develop a more nuanced view of oppression and privilege, and to be uniquely situated to value coalitions—within themselves and in social justice work.

Macro and dual social work concentrations were also strong indicators for political and social activism in this study. Students with a macro or combined macro/clinical concentration reported significantly more political and social activism than clinical or undecided students. This was not surprising, given the focus of macro social work to consider the ways that systems and policy impact marginalized people. There have been studies linking macro students to a greater understanding of structural concerns and connecting their social work practice to policy and social change (Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013). Students with a dual clinical/macro concentration may feel more comfortable with the necessary both/and intersectional approach. It may be that their dedication to understanding both the clinical and the systemic concerns of the world as related to marginalized communities has encouraged an investigation into their own privilege and the ways that systems of oppression impact individuals. In macro social work, the focus is not only on how policy and social structures function. Instead, macro social work requires an interpretation of the relationship that policies and social structures have with marginalizing people. If clinical courses concentrate on clinical interventions that impact an individual, without fully centering person in environment—as social work requires—clinical students may be unaware or unversed in the power of organizing and activism.

There is a certain privilege of not having to think about privilege. If a person believes that the world is generally a fair, just place, then it becomes easy to imagine that individual successes are deserved and that people who have struggled are somehow lacking. This pertains to all types of privilege. By not considering society's underlying oppressive forces, a person does not have to think about the multitude of ways that those oppressive forces marginalize others. In this mindset, there is no need to unpack the complexity of matrices of oppression. The fact that heterosexism awareness was significantly associated with activism in this study was not surprising. What was noteworthy was the small effect found in this study. This may require a more nuanced examination of coalition variables and privilege than was possible in this study.

The lack of a significant association between knowledge of racial privilege and activism in this study was also notable. This may reflect an educational experience that includes discussions of racial privilege but a lack of belief in the necessity to engage in activism. It may also be the case that social workers rate themselves more highly on measures of knowledge than marginalized groups would rate them—which could be useful knowledge for addressing this gap (Ostrove & Brown, 2018). In their study of social work students, Hsu and colleagues (2022) found that individuals with liberal political affiliation

who supported the Black Lives Matter movement had move awareness of various types and levels of racism. However, the researchers did not examine protest involvement.

It was also unexpected that, controlling for other predictors, race was not associated with social and political activism. This lack of statistical significance is also surprising given the long history of Black political social workers (see Shepherd & Pritzker, 2021 for a detailed history). That said, previous studies have been inconclusive about the relationship between race and activism (Andrews, 1998; Ezell, 1993; Parker & Sherraden, 1992; Ritter, 2008; Rocha, 2000). Activism has increased in the United States in recent years, including activism among Black people, both prior to and during the summer 2020 protests in response to the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (Auxier, 2020; Towler & Parker, 2018). Studies have shown that White people who feel that they can affect change are more likely to participate in social movements that support Black people (Blankenship et al., 2017). It could be that social workers are more likely to believe that they can affect change on a broader scale, which may make students of different races equally likely to participate in social and political activism. Across all races, this sample scored very highly on the Awareness of Racial Privilege Scale. Lack of variation among that indicator may have made it difficult to determine the relationship between knowledge of racial privilege and activism. The assumption that the people of color racial category was homogeneous may also be a concern, which Crenshaw (1991) noted as a common problem generally. This category aggregated people who identified as Black or African American, Asian, "other", and multiple, which are, of course, not identical identities or categories. Even without collapsing this variable, there was not a statistically significant difference in reported political and social activism. A more diverse sample may have helped to better understand this association.

A social worker's job should be to work towards creating a socially just society that eliminates the need for social work. This is only possible if all social workers are aware of the interlocking systems of oppression that create inequity and dedicate themselves to dismantling oppressive structures. This cannot be done if each social worker only considers individual clients or even a single system of oppression, as may be the case with some, especially clinical, social work students. Social workers must interrogate their own part in subjugating ideologies and systems, from both a personal and professional perspective. Only through identifying their own positions within the historic and current world can social workers challenge those positions and address privilege and oppression (Suárez et al., 2008). They must understand themselves as part of a greater whole, and heed indigenous activists' words often credited to Lilla Watson (1985): "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Implications

This study has many important implications for social work. Given the association between heterosexism awareness and social and political activism, social work educators should consider the ways that heterosexism and other isms are taught in the classroom. Perhaps pushing students to more deeply understand and critically examine large systems

of power will galvanize them to be more active in advocacy efforts for clients in broader and more diverse ways. Additionally, the strong association between macro social work and activism is important to highlight. This shows a clear need for clinically-focused social work students to incorporate advocacy and activism into their toolkits, which aligns with recent appeals (Kang, 2022). In light of the calls from NASW and CSWE for social workers to be engaged in activism and policy change, MSW programs may need to include more macro-focused components in clinical or generalist courses. Additionally, given the level of engagement in social and political activism by LGBQ people, perhaps social work educators need to find ways to learn and build from the activism of those communities. Perhaps this finding is an indication that a more intersectional perspective leads to greater political and social activism. In which case, social work programs must incorporate more intersectional perspectives in readings, classrooms, and assignments. Additional research is needed to better understand the ways that coalitions are related to knowledge of privilege and engagement in activism. Furthermore, having people from communities of intersecting marginalized identities—like social work clients—report their perceptions of social work students' knowledge of privilege may add a useful and nuanced dimension to the field.

Limitations

Although there were many important findings in this study, there were some limitations as well. Several additional topics could have been included in the survey to provide additional explanatory power for political and social activism behaviors. For instance, political affiliation, socioeconomic class, and questions regarding social networks could have been helpful to create a more complete view of participants' social activism. There is also a concern regarding this study's ability to fully consider knowledge of privilege. An additional subscale that measured awareness of sexism was included in this study but was excluded from analysis because of a strong ceiling effect with little variability among the sample of MSW students. There were no scales in the study used to determine knowledge of privilege as it relates to cisgender people, certain religious groups, class, able-bodiedness, or any other area of identity. Though the sample for this study had over 300 respondents, it may not have been diverse enough to allow for a comprehensive view of intersectional identities, which could have provided a more nuanced analysis. For instance, the list of the top 20 MSW programs according to *U.S. News and World Report* was used as the study's sampling frame, but none of these programs was based in a historically Black college or university, Hispanic-serving institution, or tribal college or university. Inclusion of those institutions would have added greatly to the study's racial and ethnic diversity. Lastly, it is challenging to determine the temporality of some of the relationships examined here, like heterosexism awareness and macro social work as they relate to social and political activism. It may be that people who are more politically active are more likely to engage in macro social work or they may develop a better understanding of heterosexism through their activism.

This study was created from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, which includes intersectionality as a core tenet (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), but the study did not center CRT or intersectionality as much as it could have. Respondents were not asked about their experiences, attitudes, or behaviors related to group membership and marginalization,

which would have allowed for an interpretation that did not assume subjugation (or privilege) based solely on categorization (Bowleg, 2008; Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999). Though intersectional variables were created for bivariate analysis, they were not included in the larger model. Additionally, while some researchers present coalition specification as appropriate for analysis of intersecting experiences of oppression (Carastathis, 2013; Cole, 2008), there has been opposition to an additive approach that assumes that each stigmatized identity adds to a person's oppression (Bowleg, 2008; Hancock, 2007, 2013). Lastly, there is the issue of assumed similarity within groups that were considered in this analysis (e.g., aggregating all people of color), which may have resulted in the loss of important variation.

Conclusion

As a profession, social work and its workforce must be dedicated to end injustices on both individual and macro levels. Social and political activism is an important tool for affecting broader social change. If MSW students are to become the "social change agents" that MSW programs purport to produce, there must be a push for students to have better understandings of privilege and power. Being unaware of how intersecting systems of oppression impact people at the margins of society is a way of being an accomplice and is a form of oppression in itself. Only through deep reflection and interrogation of these systems and the way they impact us all—by reinforcing racism, sexism, heterosexism, patriarchy, ableism, ageism, and other ideologies of subjugation within us, between us, and as society as a whole—can we begin to support clients, communities, and one another.

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