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# Unlocking Doors: Providing MSW Programs and Students with Educational “Keys” to Social Justice

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**ABSTRACT.** How can social work educators identify what constitutes social justice as a practice, as a social work stance? How can we teach our students to recognize this stance, to work toward it, to practice it, and to live it? Symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman’s concepts of keys and keying, as underscored in his work *Frame Analysis*, provide useful tools for helping students to recognize the value of social justice within social work educational encounters and to apply this value when they enter the field. The concepts of keys and keying can also help programs to assess and amplify their commitments to social justice.

**KEYWORDS.** Social justice, social work education, symbolic interactionism, activism, Erving Goffman, social work program assessment, progressive pedagogy, social work values and ethics, critical thinking, applications of theory to practice

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the theory of symbolic interactionism, society and social interactions are the essential features of human experience. Our society creates and fosters us as individuals. Although each of us can be said to have a sense of self that is continuous and in some ways consistent throughout a lifetime, interpersonal communication and interactions are integral processes, and their significance to human life and meaning making cannot be underestimated. According to symbolic interactionism, human intersubjectivity and interrelatedness are crucial to the ways we aim to constitute ourselves. The symbols and signs that we create help to mediate between people and between the minds of individual actors who are involved intimately in all communicative experiences.

Symbolic interactionists claim that concepts of self and society develop within our minds *because of* language in face-to-face interaction; interactions come first, not individual consciousness. In developmental models and, in particular, in evolutionary models, this point of view is, of course, quite different. The question often posed in these cases is whether models, language, significant symbols, mind, self, and society itself all emerge *after* (or as a result of) human interactions. Some philosophers, linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, cognitive scientists, and others have wondered if interaction creates the cognitive hard-wiring that is elaborated as the languages and communication that we have as individuals and as society members.

In our work as social workers and as social work educators, we interpret social justice as a vital expression of human interaction that is deliberate and not merely natural because, according to the theory of symbolic interactionism, human actors behave interactively to create our experiences. Thus, a choice to behave in a socially just way is made possible within this framework. It may not always be obvious or easy to make such a choice, especially in the context of exploitative relations (as they exist, for example, within capitalism), in which there is a disincentive to be considerate of others.

According to Section 6 of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (1999), social workers are obligated ethically to strive for social justice. The authors define a commitment to social justice as a demonstrated investment in fighting multiple forms of oppression, including racism, homophobia, ableism, sexism, agism, classism, and so on. We understand these forms of and expressions of institutional, collective, as

well as individualized oppression to be created interactively; they also exist distinctly from one another.

Why, as social workers, do we hold our ethics so dearly and defend them so fiercely? Social work ethics, including a commitment to social justice, are not merely views, they are features embedded within a value system to which we should adhere, and they are not merely one set of ideas among a sea of equally weighted options from which we might choose. The idea that all interpretations somehow hold equal validity is referred to as extreme relativism. Citing Wakefield, Thomas (2004) notes, "It is one thing to argue that all perspectives need to be given consideration. However, it is entirely another matter to state that no perspective is better than any other because there is no means to determine the relative validity of different interpretations" (p. 6). Thomas continues, "If truth is merely constructed from consensus and there are no objectively true facts about cause and effect, then social work's claim to professional competence is merely arbitrary; having no objective validity, because the concept of help presupposes that social work practice can cause a benefit to the client. Yet we know that poverty, abuse, violence, mental illness, etc., are objective aspects in many of our clients' problems, and thus preclude the total dissolution of objective truth" (p. 6).

If we are to teach social justice effectively inside and outside of our classrooms, we cannot fall prey to extreme relativism. Goffman's (1974, 1986) idea of keys and keying can help us grapple with questions of social justice more effectively than might otherwise be the case. Although it is probably true that Goffman does not theorize power and agency adequately, when we apply his concepts of keys and keying to power dynamics and a striving for social justice, we have useful tools for supporting programs in developing and assessing continuously how social justice is presented. These tools are differently useful for educating social work students about praxis by encouraging them to recognize and internalize the program's social justice keys in their classrooms and in the field. We want to socialize our students to identify and obtain the keys they need in order to critique injustice and to promote justice in their professional and personal lives, while in school and later. To do this we need to be aware of our own keys, as well.

If we define ourselves within a symbolic interactionist framework, social workers are social actors who make choices and who must assert actively and creatively their right to enact social justice—in the face of or despite capitalism, one might say. This assertion is framed by intentionality, and we understand *intentional* to refer to shared meanings and shared

messages, not individual intentions alone; this definition also relates to symbols in action.

Symbols in action are a central concern for symbolic interactionists and for those who use symbolic interactionism as a theoretical template to understand the world in which we live. In recent years, a number of authors have explored symbolic interactionist applications within social work, nursing, rehabilitation, psychology, psychiatry, and related realms of education and practice (Anglin, 2002; Cummings & Galambos, 2002; Dennis & Martin, 2005; Forte, 2002; Forte, et al., 1996; Hollingsworth, 1999; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Mancini, et al., 2005; Shaw, 1998; Walsh, 1995a, 1995b). Others have sought to reinvigorate symbolic interactionist work within the academic disciplines of sociology, social work, anthropology, and so forth (Dennis & Martin, 2005; Manning, 2005). Social work educator James Forte has labored to help social workers, social work educators, and social work students as well as others redress what he sees as the forgotten legacy of connections between social work and symbolic interactionism (Forte, 2004a, 2004b). As Forte (2001) notes, "The resonance of symbolic interaction with [the] pressing concerns at the turn of the millennium can be cast in terms familiar to social workers: those of diversity, internationalism, strengths, and social justice. Interactionists have always been concerned with issues of diversity" (p. 8).

Symbols contain both iconic and indexical qualities in a variety of life arenas; social justice has its own symbolizations, too. Social workers have various working definitions of social justice, but how do we identify social justice as a practice, a stance? As authors, our understanding of social justice derives from a progressive view in relation to the radical left tradition in social work, especially as underscored by Mullaly and forwarded by Fook. Payne (2005) discusses how Mullaly and others might help social workers to "reform the present social order with a progressive view which should be the basis of radical social work" (p. 237). As Payne notes, "Fook argues that a radical tradition in social work connects with a concern with the social rather than the personal, extended by the radical critique . . . [and] the problems with radical social work led to a search for alternatives, of which postmodern and poststructural ideas were important. Critical social theory connected to these permit a more useful form of radical social work: *critical social work*" (p. 241, original emphasis). With these ideas in mind, how can we as social work educators strive, together with our students, to recognize social justice, to work toward it, to practice it, to live it? Symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman's ideas of keys and keying may help to provide some answers to these questions.

## LESSONS FROM GOFFMAN

According to Goffman (1974, 1986), who adapted the term *frame* from anthropologist Gregory Bateson, a frame is the context or environment in which human beings enter, interact with one another, and interpret subjectively the meanings of their interactions. In considering how change occurs within these contexts, Goffman provides the concepts of keys and keying. According to Goffman, a key is “the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else” (p. 43). Therefore, keying holds a promise to help individuals and groups rethink or reexamine the nature, the norms, and the very interactions in which they are engaging. As is elaborated later, keying can have direct implications for creating social change as social work students, social workers, and social work educators work together toward social justice.

Five typical characteristics of keying are: (1) systematic transformation; (2) an awareness on the part of participants that transformation can and may occur, and that they have roles to play in that process; (3) the idea that cues will be available for participants to recognize when the transformation begins and thereafter, and that the participants themselves have a say in how these cues are created in the first place; (4) the understanding of a key’s possible extension and application to broader contexts, scenarios that extend beyond the particular situation that is taking place; and (5) the belief that “the systematic transformation that a particular keying introduces may alter only slightly the activity thus transformed, but it utterly changes what it is a participant would say is going on.” (p. 45).

Offering specific details, Goffman (1974, 1986) describes five types of keys: (1) Make-believe, (2) Contests, (3) Ceremonials, (4) Technical redoings, and (5) Regroundings. We believe that three of the keys—Make-believe, Technical redoings, and Regroundings—have immediate application to teaching social justice in educational settings. The other two keys, though conceptually important to sociological inquiry, have less direct application, we find, to the social work educational process with respect to program mission, pedagogy, and student learning. Therefore, we concentrate on these three keys for conceptual development and application.

Make-believe, as a keying structure, can include both a daydreaming component that is solitary and that “occurs in the mind, there being little outward behavioral accompaniment” and dramatic scriptings that offer

snapshots of reality via a form of staged production (p. 53). Technical redoinings are keys that can incorporate the practicing and demonstrations of an act. Here, the actors involved learn about activities in a laboratory or other experimental setting that is not the context for real activities of engagement but rather a simulation space like a laboratory or experimental setting. As Goffman notes, “[All of the persons involved should] share the same appreciation of what it is that is happening while it is happening, namely, an experiment of a particular kind” (p. 73). Finally, Regroundings are keys that occur when the actors involved engage in interpretation and interaction that are “radically different” from the norm (p. 74). Therefore, actors enter into a process that transforms them so that they begin thinking about and perhaps engage critically with issues and contexts in very new ways.

Goffman emphasizes that the keying process can be repeated; that is, interactions that have been transformed can be transformed again. Based on this insight as well as the authors’ selection of the three relevant keys to social justice education in social work, the following premise is forwarded: these keys, as ideal types, can be located on what we refer to as a spectrum of key engagement in social justice. This spectrum has two important characteristics: (1) a dual focus on understanding keying from both a program perspective and a student perspective; and (2) a conceptualization of the spectrum as a progression.

In terms of the spectrum’s first characteristic, the authors understand social work education as a dialectical enterprise in which a program and its students influence each other mutually in development and design (i.e., organizational life cycle, student learning). Social justice, as a topic of instruction with its associated theories, histories, research studies, policies, and practice interventions, exists dually in social work education. Social work programs at the bachelors and masters levels need to teach it, and social work students need to learn it.

Social work programs charged with the mandate by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) to deliver social justice content rely on the manifest centrality of social justice in their missions, curricula and course syllabi, and assignments as well as on more latent (and therefore perhaps harder to assess) examples of social justice as realized in faculty members’ pedagogy in the classroom. Two professors who teach policy might both have “understanding social justice” as a key learning objective on their syllabi, yet the realization of such an objective in the classroom might vary widely. Similarly, students’ understanding and commitment to learning about, contemplating, and doing social justice work, for example

through social advocacy, is dependent on their conceptions of what social justice is. Here, Van Soest's (1996) discussion of the variables (i.e., belief in a just world; advocacy related to moral exclusion) that influence students' stances on social justice help define how students arrive at such conceptions.

With this beginning discussion of the actors' roles in the interaction relating to social justice education, what, then, is the nature of how such programs (to borrow an analogy from economics) "supply" social justice education, and how do or might students "demand" it? Specifically, what is the process by which and to what extent do both social work programs and social work students engage in social justice? How do these educational dynamics demonstrate varying levels of subscription to a progressive stance? These questions reference the spectrum's second characteristic: its progressive nature, and how that applies to both the program and the student body.

From the program's perspective, No Keying implies that content on social justice education is absent from its mission, curricula, and syllabi. The Make-believe component of the program's spectrum might include a contemplative approach to social justice; that is, that social justice is included as part of a mission, and social justice readings may be included in syllabi. However, in this example, social justice's inclusion remains at a somewhat illusory level. Although technically included, the program, through its administration, faculty, and staff, might not be fully committed to engaging in social justice beyond its requisite inclusion in a mission statement or course readings. A program's achievement of the Technical redoinings key would be characterized by a fuller commitment to engaging in social justice education as evidenced by a program (through its courses, for example) involving students in classroom and field activities that highlight social justice. Finally, when a program is transformed through the Regroundings key, its focus on social justice is an avowed hallmark of the program. This commitment to social justice is showcased by a program's focus on social justice in every course and particularly in extracurricular programming with social justice themes and in organizational relationships that actively foster social justice in local, regional, and other communities. Some might think that this example is above and beyond a typical social work program's commitment to social and economic justice as required by the CSWE accreditation standard (2004).

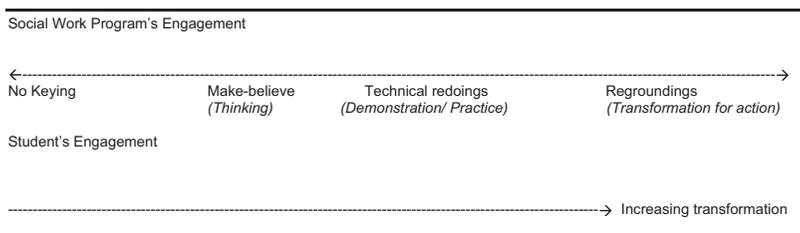
The progressive spectrum can be applied similarly to describe a student perspective. At one end of the continuum is No Keying, which implies that

no amount of transformative process is occurring. Next is Make-believe, and in this case students might “daydream” about social justice; they might conceptualize oppression and the corresponding needs and forms of action necessary to remove this oppression. Or students might learn about social justice through a video on racism, for example, that serves as a dramatic scripting. Following Make-believe is Technical redoinings, through which students move from mere imagination to actual participation in mock activities related to social justice. Finally, at the other end of the spectrum is Regroundings, which implies that students have sufficiently internalized the importance of social justice education to the extent that they can think *and act* independently in their commitment to achieving it. Figure 1 illustrates the program and student key spectrum described herein.

It is important to note, drawing on the progressively transformative nature of keying, that both the program’s and the students’ placements on this spectrum are dynamic, and keying at one point may stimulate movement to another location. Finally, increasing transformation may occur as each key becomes a prerequisite to transforming the keying process, thereby deepening an engagement with social justice education from both the program’s and the students’ perspectives.

Empirical research is essential to measure fully this model of key engagement in social justice as well as to identify differing levels of awareness of and commitment to social justice on the parts of both programs and students. Van Soest’s (1996) *Social Justice Advocacy Scale* (SJAS) is a good example of the sort of reliable scale (Cronbach’s alphas were .92 and .93 at pre-test and post-test, respectively) that was developed to measure demonstrations of advocacy. Specifically, the 80-item SJAS gauged the likelihood that students would state that they would

FIGURE 1. Spectrum of Key Engagement in Social Justice.



advocate on behalf of a variety of oppressed populations (members of racial and ethnic minority groups, women, individuals who are gay and lesbian, and people with disabilities) as well as what they would do if they witnessed harm (that is, assessed by their bystander behavior). However, Van Soest's focus, grounded in a theoretical framework that is centered on concepts including just world and moral exclusion, does not address principally the role of the educational process itself in delivering and inspiring acts of social justice.

### **APPROACHES TO SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

As noted earlier, one working definition of the term *social justice* comes from the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (1999), which states:

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

Therefore, engaging in social justice incorporates an understanding of oppression, the empowering of those who have been oppressed, and the education of others about oppression and concerted social change efforts.

The social work literature documents social work education's link to social justice. As mentioned before, CSWE embraces and requires a social and economic justice ethical standard as a critical component in social work education (CSWE, 2004). CSWE has also established a Commission for Diversity and Social and Economic Justice (Raheim, 2006). Van Voorhis and Hostetter (2006) suggest that education curricula and activities promote awareness of social justice and strategies to reduce social injustice. Social injustices subtend social and psychological problems. Understandably, social justice should be promoted in social work education (Dean, 2004). A paradigmatic shift that incorporates a social

justice orientation to practice (Finn & Jacobson, 2003) can be used in education. For example, Reeser & Leighninger (1990) detail the rationale and process of developing a concentration on social justice that emphasizes the individual/society dialectic, theories and histories relating to social justice, and an appreciation of grassroots change from the bottom up. They argue that “it is important to work for expansion of social justice content in the curriculum” because it honors the profession’s heritage and provides tools for students to practice social justice in their careers (p. 86).

According to Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington (2006), a number of “social work academic programs have developed innovative approaches to diversity and multiculturalism that incorporate intergroup dialogue using pedagogical and experiential dialogue techniques, as well as extracurricular intergroup dialogue opportunities” (p. 307). These authors understand the term *intergroup dialogue* to be “a process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues about which views differ, often to the extent that polarization and conflict occur” (p. 304). Examples of these societal issues (also called flashpoints by the authors) include “politics, racism, religion, and culture” (p. 303). Adding their own helpful voices to a legion of other voices that have long commented on these subjects, Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington claim appropriately that for social workers, social work practitioners-in-training and social work educators, identifying flashpoints can lead to an understanding of the need for societal change. In turn, social workers as activists can seek increasingly effective venues in which such changes might occur. We understand the process of keying to be a crucial dimension of this emergent process.

When teaching about social justice, students can maintain both an ongoing structural analysis of poverty and a sense of optimism (Gasker & Vafeas, 2003). In a recent study, social work graduates all identified social justice as a major goal of social work (Weiss, 2005). Other studies have shown that it is important to explore the role that students’ ethnic and religious backgrounds play in the students’ ideas about social justice (Faver, Cavazos & Trachte, 2005). Therefore, faculty should attend to students’ backgrounds and provide supportive classroom atmospheres for dialogue and debate that explore their beliefs about factors that both influence and reduce oppression. Taking the issue of poverty, for example, faculty can help students identify how they have come to think about individuals who are poor and the systematic underpinnings that create and maintain poverty’s existence.

Although it is important to address social justice actively in social work education, Roberts and Smith (2002) describe the “illusion of inclusion”

that can occur when advocating for social justice. The authors describe incorporating racial diversity within a social work faculty as an example of social justice. Roberts and Smith caution that although social justice may be touted officially, latent structures that promote ongoing racial prejudice and discrimination substantially impede the realization of this aspect of social justice. Moreover, faculty members should reflect on their own privilege (Vodde, 2001) when teaching social justice in the classroom.

What lessons can be learned from the literature, then, regarding social justice's inclusion throughout the course and field curricula? Social justice should be embraced explicitly and shown more than perfunctory attention. Additionally, the ingredients of social justice education include addressing the individual within a historical social context, using theory, learning about grassroots change, providing opportunities for debate and discussion, identifying how privilege and culture manifest within the educational frame, and maintaining students' sense of optimism. A tall order indeed. Using Goffman's concept of keying holds the promise of addressing how deeply a social work program is committed to social justice (via its curricula, courses, and supplemental program activities by providing keys to unlock students' minds) as well as where students are in terms of being ready to accept the keys and engage in the lesson of social justice.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: FINDING YOUR KEYS***

Using this approach, a variety of implications for social work education exist for program development, individual coursework design, and field instruction, as programs engage in their own keying processes that ultimately influence students' keying process with respect to learning social justice. Program development includes using the keys of day-dreaming, dramatic scripting and technical redosings. Programs can assess how social justice content is presented in the general curriculum as well as in supplemental programming (e.g., forum presentations, special film screenings, and follow-up discussions that focus on an aspect of social justice) and can make changes that promote increased keying from the program's perspective. For example, a program might conduct a review of how strongly social justice is situated, even centered, within the program's mission and goals. Additionally, programs can establish linkages with local and regional agencies and community groups that will

provide venues for program administrators, faculty, and staff to engage in social justice.

In the classroom, individual instructors can assess the form, emphasis, and specific content of social justice in their human behavior, practice, policy, and research classes. Whether a course simply needs fine-tuning or requires a major overhaul, an instructor's approach to delivering course content (in readings, assignments, lectures, experiential activities, inter-group dialogues, and so forth) can be said to reflect a type of keying. The outcomes of these assignments in response to the type of keying anticipated are important to consider. For example, is the goal of a policy course to introduce students to particular social justice content through assigned readings? The daydreaming key may be implemented in order to stimulate students' thinking; in turn, they will be encouraged to reflect further on the value of social justice. Are specific lectures planned that address a major component of social justice? This teaching technique can be considered a form of dramatic scripting. If students become increasingly active participants and practice mock activities such as community organizing in the classroom, then the program engages in the technical Redoings key. Many programs actually have students commit to some type of social justice-related service to the community. Conceptually speaking, this teaching approach is an intermediate step between a technical redoing and a regrounding, because although the students are engaged in real community work, the impetus for the students to volunteer still resides in the class assignment versus any truly independent initiative that they might demonstrate. Such an independent initiative, the authors argue, is essential for the fully transformative nature of regroundings to be realized. As noted earlier, the construction of measures that assess empirically the outcomes of these educational processes would be an important step in testing the model's validity. Additionally, qualitative research promises to highlight the strengths, nuances, and limitations of this model.

In a parallel fashion, field instructors need to be made privy to students' classroom assignments so that they can encourage students to learn about and promote social justice in the field. Field instructors ought to be familiarized fully with a program's commitment to social justice. Supervisors can also assess both their agency's commitment to social justice and their own, so as to identify the level of support for social justice that students can receive from their field placements. Field instructors and the agencies they represent have varying commitments to social justice that can be examined explicitly based on the keying spectrum.

It is perhaps only when students graduate that true regroundings can occur because, as mentioned previously, regroundings are keys for engaging in social justice that rely on a full transformation of the professional social worker with respect to social justice. Specifically, this keying process might be characterized as social workers who were introduced to and embraced previous keys in school and now have the awareness, passion, and commitment to initiate independently acts of social justice, regardless of scale. For example, a social work student might create a support group when there was none before for youths who are transgendered, or a social work practitioner could help organize a coalition that addresses the needs of those who are imprisoned. Our hope as authors is to join a legacy of progressive and radical-left conversations regarding how best to transform current social work curricula, including the development of creative approaches to learning by doing. Schools of social work play crucial roles in unlocking the doors of future professional social workers by providing students with the necessary keys to understanding and working with vulnerable groups. It is then that social workers become proactive, social justice-oriented citizens as well as social work activists.

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