

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE
COMMITMENT: A GROUNDED THEORY
INVESTIGATION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS
PROFESSIONALS

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As part of the project to create a more democratic society, social justice work is a critical component, especially within higher education. Social justice work comes with a wide array of deeply challenging issues and obstacles to remaining engaged. The purpose of this study was to expose those challenges and understand how individuals traversed those challenges. By looking at what the challenges were and how individuals navigated them, this study also dove into the personal reasons why social justice work can be incredibly challenging.

Through this grounded theory investigation, a model for social justice commitment emerged, which illustrates the iterative nature of social justice commitment. The result is that one's commitment is a cycle of growth, beginning with one's internal and external engagement. As individuals engage in social justice work, nine distinct challenges emerged from the data. These challenges interrupt a person's engagement, and

can either be resolved through the use of three identified motivating forces or can cause a person to retreat to a time of pause. Finally, one of the unique findings within this study was the relationship commitment has with the concept of hope. As challenges increase, individuals have a decreased sense of hope. Hope is a fundamental component of long-term engagement, and individuals appeared to move towards the edge of hope throughout their long-term engagement; however, they did not appear to ever fully leave hope or commitment behind.

Finally, this research moved from the discovery of a social justice commitment model towards the practical implications for such a model. By weaving the identified challenges and the emergent commitment model together, applications were created for individuals, institutions, and future research. The resulting implications focused primarily on critical self-reflection for individuals, an increase in robust content and reflection for institutions, and a new direction for social justice research to explore the affective domain of development.

AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITMENT: A GROUNDED
THEORY INVESTIGATION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

By

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DEDICATION

To all those who have lost or taken their life because of who they are, where they come from, or what they believe. May this project be one more beacon of light to make this world a more just and humane place.

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Research, especially when searching for one's own place in the world, is a relational process. Over the course of my adult life, I have encountered amazing people who helped me grow, develop, and find hope for a better world. Many of the insights and inspirations that shaped this project and my thinking came from conversations with friends, colleagues, and family member. To those who have been present throughout these many years, I am truly grateful.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Context

The promise of American higher education is to promote an engaged and educated citizenry that fosters a “thick” democracy¹ founded in equity, justice, and freedom (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick, 2009; Gandin & Apple, 2002), but in practice, higher education has fallen short of such an aim (Barnett, 1990). Throughout the 20th century, higher education scholars, administrators, and policy makers have called on colleges and universities to uphold the ideals of democratic education, with an often explicit call for attention to marginalized groups (American Council on Education, 1937, 1949; American College Personnel Association, 1994; Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2012; Keeling, 2004, 2006; The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Even with the cacophony of voices for change in journals, at conferences, and in meetings, the academy has defaulted on its responsibility to make meaningful transformation and has not yet ensured the full inclusion of all students, nor those who have yet to gain access to the halls of higher education.

The call for transformative education is not a new one. Counts (1932) dared educators to build a new social order that continues to challenge educators to restructure society into a more just and humane place. Although Counts focused on the schooling of children, the critique is no less applicable to higher education. With microaggressions

¹ Building off Barber (2004), Gandin and Apple (2002) argue that “thick” democracies focus of emancipatory projects for the excluded, which includes citizens in democratic governance.

regularly occurring on college campuses, affirmative action being stripped away through U.S. Supreme Court decisions, and the implementation of policies that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, higher education continues to be a space that tacitly, and sometimes overtly, harbors injustice. To live into the values that higher education espouses, higher education administrators, scholars, policy makers, faculty, students, and local communities must all work towards reshaping the landscape of higher education with a renewed focus on democracy, justice, and citizenship. The ideals of higher education are in one sense utopic; however, as Wright (2010) suggested, utopic ideals provide a compass towards the direction we² must go. Moreover, (re)building higher education requires such a compass to move in the same direction, but which allows individuals to work on unique and differing projects.

This project, rooted in the development of social justice commitment, is part of the larger and more complex project of building a democratic egalitarian society (see Wright, 2010). As a researcher, I envision this work as a means to understanding the ways in which social justice work is challenged in the daily practice of those individuals who are located at the nexus of student learning and involvement and college administration. If we are to embark on a journey towards creating a more just and humane world, then we must understand how to embody the values and enact the practices of social justice. The issue with doing this so far is that social justice remains relatively under-theorized (Gewirtz, 1998; North, 2008) and educational literature has

² I use we first because I am tied to this project, and second to mean those of us who live and breathe in these institutions

focused primarily on how to teach social justice and the factors that contribute to development instead of on the long-lasting commitment needed to sustain a social justice orientation. Thus this project, rooted in the development of social justice commitment, is part of the larger and more complex project of building a democratic egalitarian society (see Wright, 2010). As a researcher, I envision this work as a means to understanding the ways in which social justice work are challenged in the daily practice of those individuals who are located at the nexus of student learning and involvement and college administration.

Problem

In order to move towards an end goal of building a democratic egalitarian society, all institutions and professions would need to work towards such an aim; however, for this study, I focus squarely on the student affairs profession. Although there have long been struggles towards fostering inclusion, scholars and practitioners have continually called on the student affairs profession to uphold the values of developing the whole student, fostering equality and justice, and treating all students with care (Young, 2003). To fulfill these values, student affairs preparation programs, national associations, and local and national conferences have infused diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice into training and development. The field has attempted, at least in part, to take on the “collective responsibility of student affairs professionals to respond more effectively and knowledgeably to diverse student groups on college campuses” (McEwen & Roper, 1994, p. 49).

The goal of infusing issues of social justice into the training and development of practitioners is to develop a more socially just and multiculturally competent field of

scholars and practitioners. The values of multiculturalism are to become culturally competent, in order to work with individuals from different backgrounds, often described as the development of awareness, knowledge, and skills (Pedersen, 2000). Multicultural education is focused on understanding issues specifically around race, ethnicity, social class, and cultural groups (Banks & Banks, 1995); however, some scholars have expanded multicultural education to include a wider spectrum of pluralism (i.e., gender and religion) (Nieto, 1996). Infusing multiculturalism into programs has been, at least in part, successful among student affairs graduate students and professionals (King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Multicultural competencies are fundamental components for developing a social justice orientation. Building off the need to develop awareness, knowledge, and skills, scholars have called for social justice as a means to address and remedy injustice (Rawls, 2001). As a concept, social justice is rapidly growing within educational literature (North, 2008). Within social justice literature, injustice is often categorized into the redistribution of primary goods and services for and the recognition of marginalized communities (Fraser, 1997; Rawls, 2001). Redistribution and recognition are part of an inherently political agenda, and thus social justice is not a neutral process or goal (Bell, 2007; Fraser, 1997; Singh et al. 2012). Understanding social justice development is important in order to ensure that training and development of socially just student affairs practitioners is done intentionally and sustainably.

Social justice orientation is a developmental process that has only recently begun to be understood within higher education. Early researchers in higher education focused on social justice allyship, in order to begin to identify how dominant or privileged groups

come to understand injustice and oppression (Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005). The focus slowly moved towards understanding other identities individuals could embody (i.e., advocates, activists, and educators), along with the factors and predictors of developing a social justice orientation (Arredondo & Perez, 2003; Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, & Landreman, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Munin & Speight, 2010; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). The aim of these works was to understand how to teach and develop privileged groups about issues of social justice. Since most individuals have at least one privileged identity, this research is incredibly helpful for helping introduce beginners to issues of injustice. This work also creates a means for novices to advance in the complexity of their understanding about the ways oppression and injustice operate in the social and institutional arenas. Thus, the limitation of social justice development research is twofold. First, it re-privileges dominant groups by focusing on the needs and learning of individuals in those groups. Second, and more importantly for this project, the current research has yet to explore the continuation of development among individuals who have developed a long-term commitment to social justice work.

In conceptualizing the developmental process, researchers have forecast the issues that may be at play as individuals move towards developing a commitment to social justice. In her book on allyship development, Bishop (2002) lays out the difficulties that exist in learning about injustices. She explains that there are a number of ideas that are difficult to learn about due to prior learned knowledge from family, friends, and social institutions like church, school, and the media. Additionally, understanding oneself in relationship to the world and developing a critical consciousness can be emotionally and

mentally challenging. As Bishop notes aptly, in the fifth stage of allyship development, one must be able to maintain hope. The very nature of social justice work cannot be sustained without feelings of hope and the ability to note small successes. Interestingly, the Bishop's chapters dedicated to healing and maintaining hope are the shortest of all the chapters and say little about both the tangible difficulties that are faced as individuals engage in this work and the emotional toll of their engagement.

Other scholars echo Bishop's (2002) belief that social justice is difficult and one must also maintain that hope is a necessary and vital component of social justice work (Beer, Greene, Spanierman, & Todd, 2012; Broido & Reason, 2005; Goodman, D. J., 2011). Much of the research focuses on the early components of social justice orientation development, highlighting challenges such as guilt, shame, rejection from family and friends, and being challenged to unlearn or relearn information. However, individuals who are more firmly grounded in their commitment to social justice may experience different issues. For example, Ratković, Tilley, and Teeuwsen (2010) document their own struggles as social justice educators, which they identify as painful experiences. For those who engage in social justice work, the challenges are no fewer as they increase their commitment; however, the challenges and process for negotiating such difficult experiences is vital for sustaining a commitment to social justice.

The challenges that occur when enacting and embodying social justice principles can be seen as *critical incidents*, which are personally salient experiences that engender developmental change (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006). Challenging experiences, specifically those that are vividly remembered and which may serve as a developmental turning point, are negotiated and interpreted through a variety

of cognitive and affective processes. The cognitive function is usually, but not always, a relatively conscious process, while the affective responses tend to be more unconscious (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2011). Both processes are important; however, the affective response, which entails the emotions and feelings connected to a specific incident, tends to be the most influential component shaping how the individual responds to the challenge and makes meaning from an experience (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2011). Many scholars argue that the affective domain is formative in the development towards a social justice orientation (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Goodman, D. J., 2011; Reason & Broido, 2005; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005); however, little empirical work has attempted to focus on the affective domain of individuals when faced with challenging social justice incidents.

One of the greatest issues with the conceptualization and implementation of social justice work in the field of education is that there is a level of magical thinking where individuals believe they will somehow know how to negotiate complex and challenging experiences. Although an individual might come to develop a strong commitment to social justice, that individual may not always be able to sustain that commitment if that challenge or the associated pain is too great (Sanford, 1962). In fact, one can reasonably argue that some individuals who want to continue to engage in social justice work might have to leave the work either temporarily or permanently. Unfortunately, this reasonable assumption cannot be confirmed with the current literature around social justice development.

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to understand why social justice can be difficult to sustain, by focusing on identifying the challenges student affairs practitioners experience and how they negotiate those challenges. The literature gives some indication about the potential challenges; however, there is little empirical work on the personal difficulties surrounding social justice educators' experiences. This research is geared towards understanding the following gaps in the literature: (a) the developmental process of commitment or recommitment towards a social justice orientation, (b) identifying challenges in engaging in social justice work, and (c) the response individuals have to such challenges and its relationship to social justice development.

This study addresses the following research questions³:

1. What are challenges that social justice oriented student affairs professionals find as they engage in social justice work?
2. How do these professionals process and negotiate those challenges?
3. Why might a commitment to social justice be difficult to sustain?

By identifying the challenges, along with how individuals negotiate those challenges, this research can begin to explicate the conscious and/or unconscious reasons why social justice commitment might be difficult to sustain. To reiterate, the phenomena under investigation are (1) the challenges of engaging in social justice work and (2) the

³ These research questions have been kept as originally proposed; however, please see Chapter Five for an explicit discussion about the evolution of this research. By keeping the original language of these questions and the subsequent framing and literature review, I demonstrate the assumptions I have as a researcher and the gaps constituted in prior research.

process of negotiating those experiences. To explore these phenomena, I use student affairs practitioners as the case example, because of the value of social justice within the student affairs profession. Lastly, the aim of this research is to move from descriptive analysis towards interpretive and explanatory analysis in an effort to extrapolate the underlying theoretical issues about why social justice work is difficult to sustain.

Overview of Research Methodology

To address these research questions, I employ a grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory is particularly useful for understanding complex and sometimes unconscious processes of development and actions (Star, 2007). Thus understanding why social justice is difficult to sustain over time, with particular attention to the process of negotiating challenging experiences around an individual's engagement in social justice work, is a topic well suited for grounded theory, and more specifically constructivist grounded theory. Constructivism is situated in the gap between the post-positivist leaning of seeking truths and the postmodern movement around multiple realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Thus, a constructivist paradigm is a belief that individuals make meaning through interacting with the world around them. For this study, constructivism is a lens that focuses on the way individuals make meaning from their experiences and the process by which they negotiate those experiences. Using a constructivist grounded theory, I seek to understand personal and social processes through experiences and relationships with participants and other forms of data (Charmaz, 2014).

I briefly cover the arc of the methodology here; however, for a more descriptive analysis, refer to Chapter 3. Using a purposeful intensive sampling, I will be seeking out

“excellent” participants (Patton, 1990). Excellent participants are individuals who have a wealth of experiences with the phenomenon under investigation, and who are willing and ready to share their experiences. In the case of this research, being willing and ready is crucial, in that individuals will be asked to recall particularly challenging and defining moments from the past, which may evoke the negative feelings and emotions that are associated with that experience.

I recruited participants at the American College Personnel Association’s (ACPA) Commission for Social Justice Educators biannual Institute on Social Justice. The institute is designed for social justice educators to more fully develop their awareness, knowledge, and skills around social justice issues and practices, as well as develop networks to share experiences, ideas, and support. Outcomes of the conference include: learn and refine ways to address challenges of infusing social justice into their work, increase knowledge of intersectional approaches to social justice, and developing assessment skills for social justice programs (ACPA, n.d.). This year’s institute is unique, in that the theme for the institute is on “Social Justice and Vulnerability.” By interviewing at this site, I hoped to find participants who are deeply engaged in social justice work and who will qualify as excellent participants. Moreover, interviewing at this conference means that individuals will return to a space where vulnerability is supported and where they have a network of individuals already prepared to support them after the interview.

Using all the data collected, I coded data using a grounded theory methodology framework. Coding is done through a constant comparative process (Charmaz, 2007), whereby the researcher codes data in a constant and iterative relationship with the data

that has already been collected. Upon completion of initial coding, grounded theory methodology requires that relationships be constructed between codes, meaning that a process or action emerges from codes where one code or theme begins to relate to and affect another. Ultimately, through intensive coding and recoding and developing relationships among codes, a theoretical model emerges. The result is a substantive and developmental model that can explain the ways in which individuals interpret challenges and process that experience.

Significance and Contribution

Thus, this research aimed to provide new insight into the challenges of engaging in social justice work and the process by which individuals negotiate those struggles. The continual emphasis on maintaining hope and self-care is critical for engaging in social justice work (Bishop, 2002); however, current scholarship only addresses the need to maintain hope on an anecdotal level. Calling for social justice workers to somehow remain ambiguously hopeful is a disservice both to the individuals who engage in the work and to the struggle for justice more broadly. Thus, this work is grounded in helping individuals who are already engaged and committed to this work be more adequately and fully prepared to sustain, and potentially grow, their level of commitment to social justice work, in an effort to develop and sustain the larger projects of democracy and justice.

Although the goals are broad, the tangible outcomes of this project include developing a practical model of social justice development that homes in on challenging critical moments, the short and long term progressive or regressive development that

follows, and the successful (re)commitment⁴ to social justice work. By focusing on these areas, I hoped to provide a clear road map that shows some of the many obstacles individuals may face when they embark on their journey and helps them to navigate those obstacles that they will inevitably encounter along the way. To be clear, this project is not and should not be about helping individuals avoid all pain, discomfort, or challenges; but instead, I hope that individuals can be more prepared to lean into the discomfort as a space for growth, with the tools and resources to take on those challenges as they may arise.

Definitions

In an effort to offer a foundation, I provide some of the current conceptualizations of major terms within this research. For practitioners, social justice is defined locally, meaning individuals carry their own definition of social justice, which invariably affects their experiences and their interpretation of those experiences (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009; Moyo, 2010; Singh et al., 2010). Additionally, grounded theory is particularly helpful in understanding how individuals construct an idea or term, and the way they enact or embody the idea (Charmaz, 2014; Star, 2007). Moreover, the current way that social justice development is constructed is under-studied. Because of that, the definitions below are simply a foundation; however, the goal of this project is to extend the current understanding of social justice development and social justice orientation.

⁴ (Re)commitment is used to identify that an individual does not commit to an issue once, but instead requires a renewed and ongoing recommitment to social justice work.

Social justice- a concept that typically includes a process and product orientation that remedies social injustices that are created among individuals, groups, and institutions (Bell, 2007).

Social justice development- constructed as a cyclical stage model of awareness, engagement, and commitment. Individuals move from developing awareness about a new social justice issue or social group to learning about and engaging in with the issue or group, and finally developing a more complex and fortified commitment with the issue or group. Embedded in this process are three psychological domains, which consist of cognitive, affective, and behavioral development.

Social justice orientation- is an outcome of the iterative developmental process of awareness, engagement, and (re)commitment to social justice.

Commitment- refers to on-going choices and activities that one plans to pursue in order to sustain their social justice work. Commitment can be understood as strong sense of intentionality and action towards the process and goal of engaging in social justice work.

Negotiation process- is a mostly internal process whereby individuals attempt to overcome an obstacle or difficult experience.

Critical incidents- personally salient experiences or turning points that engender developmental change, caused by either positive or negative experiences (Furr & Carrol, 2003). Critical incidents can lead towards progressive or regressive development.

Affect- the psychological domain that is responsible for the range of moods, feelings, and emotions individuals experience including hope, fear, rejection, and excitement (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2011). Although entwined with the other two psychological domains, behavior and cognition, affective responses to a situation can greatly influence one's perception and judgments about the situation and can influence one's cognition and behavior during and after the situation.

Constructivist grounded theory- a version of grounded theory that bridges postmodern and positivist epistemology, where empirical data can be used to understand multiple social realities and interpret the meaning individuals make from their realities. This viewpoint aims for allowing data to be co-constructed and interpreted between and among participants and researchers (Charmaz, 2000).

Delimitations

As with any research, this work adds only one component to larger projects of creating a more just and democratic society. Herein, I want to provide some clarity around the boundaries of this study. Because this is a study about social justice and the challenges individuals encounter, I want to ensure that this is not solely a study about allyship. Allyship, often defined as those who work with persons from oppressed groups (Bell, 1997; Broido, 2000; Edwards, 2006), does come up in the interviews, in part because allyship can present its own set of challenges. Although these are important stories, I sought out experiences where individuals might have faced challenges where their own privilege may not have been as clear, where those who are targets of oppression are not easily identifiable, or when they might have been working towards justice for a group with whom they identify. Agosto (2010) documents the liminality of social justice

work and problematic conceptions of allyship. The goal here is to understand social justice in a complex manner, where issues, identities, groups, and the struggle for justice are not always defined or evident.

The process of social justice development can be understood as an iterative process of awareness, engagement, and commitment. Although this is conceptually helpful to frame the launching point of this study, the current research appears somewhat simplistic and not very well understood. Edwards (2006) provides a helpful model for understanding the progression towards an ally for social justice, which notes that the underlying motivation for individuals shifts away from working on behalf of individuals to working with people to solve issues. Edwards' model is helpful with this project, because the question becomes: what propels individuals towards or away from the commitment to social justice more broadly? Although this research does not seek to find the actual moment(s) of transition towards an ally for social justice, which I refer to as a full commitment to social justice principles, this research is intended to help to define the ways in which individuals are able to develop and sustain their level of commitment over time.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Within grounded theory methodology, a significant level of debate has occurred about the need for and the use of a literature review. Many traditional grounded theorists have contested that a literature review prior to data collection should be avoided in an effort to remain objective and open to the emergent data (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In contrast, researchers like Hutchison (1993) argue that a literature review can and should inform the current gaps in knowledge and provide context and rationale for the research project. Between these two positions, Smith and Biley (1997) argue that one should read broadly to understand the issues within the subject area and identify gaps; however, the review of the literature should not be overly exhaustive, so as not to become bound to current conceptualizations. In order to generate theory, grounded theory methodology aims to provide a degree of flexibility to fully explore a given topic, without testing prior theories or being bound to existing models (McGhee, Marland, & Atkinson, 2007).

For this study, I rely heavily on constructivist grounded theory, which is significantly influenced by the work of Kathy Charmaz (2000, 2003, 2014). Charmaz (2014) contends that we cannot understand that which is constructed without knowing first how it has been constructed. Constructivists hold that individuals are constantly engaged in a dialogical social process, where meaning and knowledge are generated through the individual's interaction with the social world. From this perspective, researchers are not a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, but instead part of the world that they are studying (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). In other words, researchers should have an open mind, not an empty head (Dey, 1999). These principles

of constructivism rely heavily on the work of Blumer (1969) who theorized the notion of symbolic interactionism, the process by which individuals interact with the world and make meaning of it. Thus, this study's literature review is not intended to be exhaustive, and instead will introduce "sensitizing concepts" that relate to its relevant context (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Dey, 2007; Kearney, 2007). As Blumer (1954) notes, "definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look" (p. 7). Sensitizing concepts thus provide the researcher with a reference point to begin the study and deepen analysis. Doing so means that the literature review becomes a point of departure, instead of a place to reside (Charmaz, 2003).

In an effort to provide a clear road map of the sensitizing concepts that provide context to this study, I will separate the literature review into three sections. First, I provide an overview about the conceptualizations of social justice, theoretically and practically. By exploring these conceptualizations, I demonstrate the ways in which social justice might be understood, which can affect the way individuals engage in social justice and the way they interpret challenging experiences. Second, I provide an overview of the current theoretical and empirical understanding around social justice development. Generally, this includes the developmental process overall, as well as the cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains of that developmental process. Lastly, I explore the concept of critical incidents as personally salient experiences or turning points that engender a developmental change. Together, these sensitizing concepts provide a platform from which to launch this study, which seeks to understand the

challenging incidents that make it difficult for student affairs practitioners to remain engaged in social justice work among student affairs practitioners.

Conceptualizing Social Justice

Theoretical Foundation

Social justice is a concept that has long been debated and refined. The Western tradition of social justice stems from the writing and teachings of Aristotle and Plato, both whom worked towards understanding the principles of justice (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick, 2009). Their ideas about justice, fairness, and social order influenced modern conceptions of social justice; however, the modern philosophical conception of social justice stems primarily from the work of John Rawls (1971, 2001). Influenced by John Stuart Mill's idea of utilitarianism⁵ (1863) and John Locke's proposal of the social contract⁶ (1689), Rawls (1971) builds the foundation for creating a more just society and moved social justice as a concept into the center of U.S. political philosophy (Mapel, 1989). Rawls (2001) focused on the institutional distribution of primary goods, while proposing that this distribution should benefit the least-advantaged in society. Rawls' (1971, 2001) ideas, which focus on institutionalized inequality and those that are the least advantaged, created a new space for scholars to further the ideals of creating a just society.

⁵ John Stuart Mill (1863) advanced utilitarianism, which essentially attempt to determine the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Mill attempted to use this idea to reform society to be more equitable and just.

⁶ John Locke (1689) held that each member of society has certain unalienable rights and has responsibility to be bound by moral laws, which constitutes a social contract.

Building on Rawls' (1971) principles, Iris Young (1990) claims that justice cannot be narrowly defined by only distributional remedies to injustice, and instead must also be understood in terms of domination and oppression. To demonstrate the ways that institutions oppress the least advantaged in society, she argues that institutions exert five forms of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Extending and adding to Young's argument, Nancy Fraser (1997) posits that redistribution and recognition create a "bivariate" collective where both forces are imbricated in the other. For Fraser, and others, redistribution is associated with the process of reallocating primary goods, services, and opportunities that ensure a fair and equitable distribution of those resources, while recognition focuses on ensuring that all individuals are properly recognized and treated with dignity and respect. Because both remedies are so deeply woven together, Fraser (1997) makes a strong case that institutions, as oppressive forces, must be transformed at the deepest levels in order to rectify injustices of distribution and recognition.

These aforementioned theories build upon one another in ways that influence how social justice is infused into disciplines by offering prescriptions for the ways institutions can and should work towards being more just and fair (Brighouse, 2004). In an attempt to make sense of the complexities of social justice, North (2008) identifies the tensions that are inherent within social justice. In doing so, she demonstrates the relationships between and among three sets of dualisms, which are recognition and redistribution, macro and micro spheres, and knowledge and action. As North noted, social justice must be theorized generally, but also adapted into the field and context where it is to be used.

Thus, scholars and educators continuously cycle between advancing theoretical concepts and creating operationalized practices, each informing the advancement of the other.

Definitions of Social Justice in Education

In order to better understand the translation into practice, I attempt to provide some of the definitions that are most common within the educational field. The movement towards social justice in education is still emerging; and although attention to social justice is significantly increasing within the educational literature, social justice is still under-theorized (Gewirtz, 1998; North, 2005, 2008). Normative theories like those of Rawls (1971, 2000), Young (1990), and Fraser (1997) develop explanatory understandings about what justice is, how it operates, and what it looks like; however, these ideas do not perfectly translate into application for educational institutions. Because social justice is complex, dynamic, and context-specific, generalizations often leave social justice as a vague term, with a wide range of interpretations (Moyo, 2010). Thus, scholars have attempted to position social justice within the unique context of education (e.g., Bull, 2008; Gewirtz, 1998; North, 2008). Gewirtz (1998) maintains that social justice “is about the nature and ordering of social relations, the formal and informal rules which govern how members of society treat each other both on a macro level and at a micro interpersonal level” (p. 471). To understand how social justice has been translated into education broadly, I provide several conceptualizations and definitions of social justice.

Social justice in education has been used synonymously with a range of terms like diversity, equality, and inclusion, each with its own strengths and limitations (Blackmore,

2009). With such a range of meanings, social justice has become a sliding signifier (Apple, 2013). In other words, individuals can harness the term for different and competing interests. Conversely, multiple definitions are helpful so that each discipline can adapt a meaning in order to seek remedies of injustice within that context (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009). Once again, the very complexity that gives social justice so much strength in its use and adaptability also provides ample room for misinterpretations or conceptualizations that unconsciously move towards unjust actions. While no definition is wholly perfect, I provide a few of the more commonly cited definitions of social justice within education, specifically stemming from areas of teacher education, counseling psychology, and student affairs and higher education literature.

In an attempt to identify social justice definitions among counseling psychologists, Singh and colleagues (2010) conducted research looking at the conceptualizations and practice of social justice. They found that participants defined social justice as the “promotion of social equality, the minimization of current social inequalities, and the recognition of the context of society” (Singh et al., 2010, p. 785). Additionally, some participants thought of “social justice as an ideal to strive towards, whereas others perceived social justice as being behaviorally and outcome oriented” (Singh et al., 2010, p. 785). An ambiguous definition of social justice, divorced from the more theoretical ideas stated earlier, is due in part from the lack of firm theorization of social justice within the field of education (North, 2008).

One of the highly cited definitions of social justice within higher education is by Bell (2007) from *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*:

Social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. (p. 1)

Although aspirational in its attempt to define social justice, this definition also leaves significant room for interpretation, implementation, and varying outcomes. Below, I provide a short list of definitions that come from educational areas like counseling psychology and teacher education:

- A socially just education requires educational leaders to practice moral outrage at the persistence, if not worsening, of homelessness, hunger, and poverty, which are not going away, but worsening. It requires educational communities to defend and extend principles of human dignity, community, and realization of democratic process; to reinvent a sense of commitment to the public as a social good; and to restructure market models to limited spheres, which improve social relations and conditions of learning. It is about developing learning networks and partnerships premised upon trust and reciprocity between schools, communities, and among individuals. (Blackmore, 2002, p. 218)
- Adequate food, sleep, wages, education, safety, opportunity, institutional support, health care, childcare, and loving relationships. “Adequate” means enough to allow [participation] in the world . . . without starving, or feeling economically trapped or uncompensated, continually exploited, terrorized, devalued, battered,

chronically exhausted, or virtually enslaved (and for some, still, actually enslaved). (Smith, 2003, p. 167)

- [Social justice is conceptualized] as scholarship and professional action designed to change societal values, structures, policies, and practices, such that disadvantaged or marginalized groups gain increased access to these tools of self-determination. (Goodman, L. A. et al., 2004, 795)
- [Social justice focuses on] those groups that are most often underserved, underrepresented, and undereducated and that face various forms of oppression in schools. (Dantley & Tillman, 2010, p. 23)

Here, I want to stress that there is no perfectly constructed definition of social justice or social justice work. Instead, these definitions and conceptualizations show a wide range of social justice interpretations, none of which are right or wrong, but instead demonstrate how social justice is understood and interpreted. The importance of understanding multiple interpretations of social justice is that one's definition influences the way one practices social justice (Singh et al., 2010). Such definitions are the starting point that tints the lens of individuals, as they make meaning from their experiences and guides their future actions as they attempt to sustain their commitment to social justice.

Principles

Within education, social justice has several unifying principles that appear in scholarship and practice. Although not intended to be exhaustive, there are four principles captured in social justice work, which are deconstructing power, fighting oppression, understanding privilege, and advancing liberation (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Johnson, 2006). These principles should always be understood in relationship to

the lived experience of those who are marginalized, and not solely as abstract, theoretical concepts (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Hartnett, 2010). Here, I briefly explain these concepts, in order to provide additional support for the ways that social justice is constructed.

1. *Deconstructing power.* Social justice should always be understood in relationship to power, which is defined as the “ability to control others, events, or resources- to make happen what one wants to happen in spite of obstacles, resistance, or opposition” (Johnson, 1995, p. 209). Although not intrinsically bad, power can be used in coercive and covert ways to subjugate social groups (Hardiman & Jackson, 2007).
2. *Understanding privilege.* Privilege is the unearned advantages enjoyed by members of a dominant group based on identity or perception (McIntosh, 1989; Johnson, 2006). Privilege among agent groups is often perceived as “the way things are,” and in order to understand social justice work, one must understand how one’s dominant identities give access to power and privilege (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).
3. *Fighting oppression.* Oppression is pervasive, restrictive, hierarchical, and complex (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Oppression is an action targeted at a group of people, which restricts or hinders their ability to pursue self-affirmation and self-development and which excludes individuals being more fully human (Freire, 1970; Young, 1990). Thus, fighting oppression is a conscious action that attempts to change the macro and micro levels of social life.

4. *Advancing liberation.* Through the embodiment of the prior principles, liberation is a process of positive transformation. Additionally, liberation is about “a politic of shared power rather than power over” (Pharr, 2007, p.450). Additionally, liberation is the action that moves towards emancipating all individuals and groups from social prejudice, invalidation, coercion, and harm. Liberation seeks to treat all individuals as fully human, with respect and dignity. The aim of social justice work is rather utopic; however, it provides a social compass for navigating towards a more socially just world (Wright, 2009).

Summary of Conceptualizing Social Justice

I lay out the ways in which practitioners may define social justice and the principles tied to social justice work in order to contextualize social justice within education. What makes social justice unique is its non-neutral and politically bound orientation that seeks to transform power structures and actively stop oppression. Even with some unifying principles, individuals must embody and enact their own conceptualization of social justice based on their unique set of skills, abilities, knowledge, and talents (Jenkins, 2009). This leads to various personal conceptualizations, which are parts of the developmental process of learning social justice.

Social Justice Development

Moving from a conceptualization of social justice towards the practice of social justice work is a complex and interactional process. For this research, I use the term *social justice orientation*, which is an internal process whereby individuals endorse the principles of social justice and engage in remedying social injustice, regardless of their own social identities (Caldwell & Vera, 2010). Using the term social justice orientation,

I refer to the social and political orientation one continually develops and refines, but which may or may not be tied to a social justice identity. Thus, developing a social justice orientation is both a process and a goal (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). To understand the process, there are three broad components to social justice development, which are *awareness*, *engagement*, and *commitment* (Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Miller et al., 2009). Generally, awareness is coming to a (re)newed understanding about a social justice issue, cause, or social group. Engagement is the active involvement in social justice work, whether that is allyship, advocacy, activist, etc. Commitment refers to on-going choices and activities that one plans to pursue in order to sustain their social justice work (Miller, et al., 2009). The process by which an individual moves through these stages is not well understood; however, I provide context for the ways these three stages are important for the purposes of this study.

Social justice orientation is an iterative process, meaning that an individual continually goes through all or part of the developmental process. Moreover, the process is relatively linear, in so much as an individual would first have to become aware of a social justice issue, then engage with that issue or with an affected group, and finally become committed or recommitted to the issue or targeted group (Miller, et al., 2009). Beyond this relatively simple progression, there is a dearth of scholarship around the increasing complexity one might go in order to more wholly develop a commitment to social justice. In other words, an individual could become aware of social injustice that occurs around race, become engaged in racial justice, and commit to racial justice; however, there are two issues at play here. First, a commitment to racial justice, for instance, would require significant time and a constant reprocessing between awareness

which builds complexity about the issue, and engaging in racial justice work, which tests the awareness and knowledge through actions. Second, and more importantly for this study, this process may occur for a singular issue (i.e., around race, sexual orientation, poverty, etc.), but is the process different for those who have committed to social justice more wholly, specifically in regards to their (re)commitment? To reiterate, this study is situated as an exploration of the (re)commitment stage, specifically why sustaining social justice may be difficult as student affairs practitioners negotiate the challenges and barriers of their work.

In order to provide some of the sensitizing concepts around the development of social justice orientation, I begin with an overview of the current models of development that exist. One challenge is that most studies conflate social justice orientation and social justice identity (i.e., ally, advocate, educators, etc.). The issue here, and is likewise an issue within this research, is that researchers would be hard pressed to identify social justice oriented individuals, if not for the individual's identity with social justice. Identity can be understood as a marker of a group affiliation. Social justice orientation, rather, is an internal process of understanding social inequality and attempting to remedy those issues (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Identity and orientation may in fact overlap significantly; however, there is little understanding about the development of a social justice identity following a commitment to a social justice orientation, or vice versa.

How an individual self-identifies is one of the easiest ways to determine those individuals who are or are in the continual process of committing to social justice. Although identity may not always reflect actual orientation or behaviors, identity terms can help a person find affinity with others who are like-minded and engaged in similar

processes and goals. To illuminate the different ways scholars have made meaning from social justice development, I begin with some of the literature around allyship (e.g., Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000; Hackman, 2005; Munin & Speight, 2010; Reason, Scales, & Millar, 2005), and advocates, activists, and agents (e.g., Goodman, L. A. et al., 2004; Lewis, Ratts, Paladino, & Toporek, 2011; Miller et al., 2009; Nilsson, & Schmidt, 2005; Nilsson, et al., 2011). Thus, the following section uses social justice allyship as an entry point for how social justice development scholarship emerged.

Social Justice Orientation Development

One of the earliest theoretical understandings of social justice allyship is the work of Bishop (2002) who identifies, identifying a six-step process. The first step in becoming an ally is to develop an understanding of oppression. She argues that oppression must be understood in terms of how it is created, maintained, and how it is continually reinforced by individuals and institutions (Bishop, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005). Step two states that individuals must understand the way multiple oppressions are interlocking and interdependent. Because breaking a cycle of oppression can result in difficult and unconscious pain that often accompanies the work of breaking a cycle of oppression, step three brings those difficulties and pains to a heightened level of consciousness in an effort to heal. Bishop continues with step four, which is about becoming an agent of one's own liberation. This step is based upon the idea that we are all entwined with oppression, whether we inhabit dominant or marginalized identities, and that social justice allies must work towards liberating all of us from oppression. These prior steps solidify into step five, when one becomes an ally. This step is a continual act of becoming. No one ever arrives as an ally, but instead maintains ongoing

commitment to social justice. Bishop concludes her model with step six, acknowledging that the constant act of becoming a social justice ally and enacting change is a struggle at times and requires one to maintain hope.

Using an empirically driven model, Broido (2000) conducted one of the first and only social justice allyship development studies within student affairs. In her phenomenological study, Broido interviewed six White, heterosexual students who identified as allies. She found that these students came into college with relatively open and accepting attitudes about diversity-related issues, and were interested in acquiring new information about issues of social justice (Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005). From there, students began to make meaning of this information through conversations, self-reflection, and taking in multiple perspectives. Leading towards a solid understanding of social justice, individuals built skills to engage in social justice action; however, both self-confidence and invitation to engage in social justice work were heavily influential in individuals' moving towards action. Students were nervous about engaging in the work due to a lack of comfort with their own identities and the perceptions others might have about them, their knowledge, and abilities.

Building on Broido's (2000) and Bishop's (2002) work, Reason, Scales, and Millar (2005) proposed three broad areas of social justice development, specifically for racial justice allies. These areas are: understanding racism intellectually and affectively, developing an increased social consciousness, and encouraging action (Reason, Scales, & Millar, 2005). All three areas, require an individual to develop both intellectual and cognitive abilities and an affective understanding that racism, power, and privilege is a personal endeavor that unearths painful emotions. These emotions can be caused from

cognitive dissonance created from new understandings about power and privilege and can stem from fear, anxiety, and guilt. Reason, Scales, and Millar borrow from D. L. Goodman's (2001/2011) work, which suggests that managing these emotions is necessary in order to help a social justice ally develop. By developing the cognitive and affective domains, individuals can begin to develop a heightened consciousness about their own relationship to other communities, followed by an ability to create action.

Edwards (2006) argues that social justice allyship can be seen as three distinct stages. Although he does not situate these stages within the previous models, Edwards drew from the work of Broido (2000) and Bishop (2002) to delineate the potential motivations for engaging in social justice, which are: aspiring ally for self-interest, aspiring ally for altruism, and ally for social justice. Even though Edwards uses allies broadly, his argument begins to disentangle those who are allies of communities and those who are "allies" for social justice. According to Edwards, social justice allies are always members of dominant groups, who attempt to work with or on behalf of marginalized groups (Agosto, 2010). When individuals are "allies for social justice," they are working for social justice issues, which affect all individuals and which everyone is responsible to remedy. This nuance is particularly interesting, because it moves away from the false dichotomy of dominant and marginalized identities, and creates a new space for individuals to hold multiple marginalized and dominant identities while engaging in social justice work.

Weaving these four models together, a social justice identity is developed by creating an awareness of social (in)justice, becoming engaged in social justice work, and committing or continuously recommitting to a social justice issue(s) or in relation to a

specific social group. Additionally, the affective component that Reason, Scales, and Millar (2005) explicate adds an important element to development. An individual's ability to manage one's affective responses, which includes moods, emotions, and feelings, has developmental significance since pain, anger, or guilt can be obstacles or opportunities for growth. These authors provide some well-articulated models for developing towards a social justice orientation. However, no model addresses what happens once an individual reaches a commitment stage. Even if the process is iterative, how do those individuals committed to social justice negotiate new challenges, especially those that are laden with emotions that are difficult to manage?

Knowledge and Skill Development

Individuals committed to social justice are in a constant process of developing new knowledge and skills (Reason, Scales, & Millar, 2005), which in part are associated with cognition and behaviors. The literature calls attention to many specific types of knowledge and skills that social justice work demands. For instance, some models of development are derived from a theoretical position, which create the ideal components of social justice work, while other models stem from empirical studies, which capture the current skills and knowledge for individuals. For the purposes of this study, I synthesize four major concepts from both theoretical and empirical literature, which include: *content mastery*, *critical consciousness*, *power sharing*, and *creating action* (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Goodman, L. A. et al., 2004; Hackman, 2005; Singh, et al., 2010; Vera & Speight, 2003). I describe these areas below as “sensitizing concepts.” My intent is to identify the beliefs and behaviors that engaged and committed social justice practitioners may use as they navigate difficult situations.

Content Mastery. After becoming aware of social (in)justice, individuals, who pursue a social justice orientation begin to develop content mastery around power, privilege, and oppression (Reason, Scales, & Millar, 2005). Hackman (2005) notes that, “Without complex sources of information, students cannot possibly participate in positive, proactive social change” (p. 104). Content mastery, as Hackman argues, is fundamental to developing a social justice orientation, since it provides the tools to critically understand the world around oneself. The content one must master revolves around one’s ability to understand the complex ways that power, privilege, and oppression operate (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Bishop, 2002; Johnson, 2005). Through a complex understanding of social justice related content, individuals begin to see the implications of both micro and macro level issues, their relationship to social injustice, and the impact it has on the lived experience of marginalized and dominant groups (Hackman, 2005; North, 2008). Through the use of critical thinking and self-reflection, individuals can make meaning from new knowledge and integrate it with prior knowledge.

Critical Consciousness. Critical consciousness appears as one of the most common themes throughout social justice literature and stems, in part, from Freire’s (1970/2005) writing about helping both the oppressor and oppressed to critically think about new knowledge and be self-reflective and self aware (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Self-reflection and critical thinking are tied to one another, as two parts which together help to solidify new ideas with the old. Hackman (2005) positions self reflection as a process of understanding one’s own relationship to issues of power, privilege, and oppression, while critical thinking extends self reflection to also include the ability to understand power, privilege, and oppression from multiple vantage points. Hackman

provides an excellent example from Peggy McIntosh's (1989) article, where McIntosh reflected on her own experience being White that she was able to understand how White privilege operates. McIntosh was attempting to relay how males are privileged, and thus she attempted to see how she might be able to relate her current knowledge about male privilege to a new domain of race. This important illustration shows how her reflection and her critical thinking around oppression were used in order to further her own beliefs and ideas about the way injustice and justice play out within society.

Power Sharing. For those with dominant identities or positions of power, power sharing is an important component. Power sharing includes the redistribution of power, empowering others, and providing room for marginalized voices to be heard (Goodman, et al., 2004; Singh, et al., 2010). Sharing power is the enactment of the principle of redistribution. Often, those with power have made conscious or unconscious attempts to retain it, and thus power sharing is the counter action of this historical injustice where all individuals have access to space and power and where their voices are heard and trusted. The goal is to empower communities and individuals (Vera & Speight, 2003). More radical approaches may include community organizing and civil disobedience as means for grassroots empowerment of communities (Alinsky, 1971).

Creating Action. In order to effectively empower individuals and communities, social justice orientation also requires significant action-based skills. Social justice is concerned with the moving from theory and reflection into action (Freire, 1970/2005). Any action should advance positive social change by transforming social institutions (Fraser, 1997; Hackman, 2005; Young, 1990). Thus, skills and behaviors include participation in demonstrations, navigating politics, and working on policies;

multicultural competencies are developed in order to change the system to be more just and humane for all people (Hackman, 2005; Nilsson, et al., 2011). Knowledge and skills are helpful in the movement towards understanding how individuals address social (in)justice; however, affect is also a critical component in the development and interpretation of social justice experiences. In this study, I separate out the affective components, because emotions and feelings have major consequences on the ways individuals internalize and make meaning of their social justice development (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2011).

Affective Development

Affective development is a primary aspect of this research, because the affective domain is responsible for feelings (i.e., moods and emotions), which are deeply influential in an individual's interpretive process of making meaning of experiences and engaging in future behaviors (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2011). Affect can be simply understood as feelings an individual has (Russell & Feldman Barrent, 1999), while others would expound affect to include one's mood and emotions (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2011). Generally, emotions are more complex than moods and tend to be tied to an individual or experience, while moods are long-term and tend to be less intense than emotions (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2011). Separating these two concepts provides a clearer understanding of how individuals may process their feelings. For instance, an emotional reaction to an incident or person might be typical or atypical for that person, but usually lasts only a brief time. The resulting emotion can influence the behaviors in that moment. Moods tend to last weeks, months, or even years, and can affect how an individual interprets an experience over a long period of time (Cropanzano, Stein, &

Nadistic, 2011). Emotion does “not only feel a certain way; it also carries with it the interpretive meaning we ascribe to an event, object, or person” (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadistic, 2011, p. 8). Thus, understanding emotions are important in understanding how one negotiates difficult experiences, and moods help to clarify how the person tends to feel more generally and to identify if their emotions are typical or atypical.

Unfortunately, scholars have talked only abstractly about how feelings are critical in the development of social justice orientation. Though scholars note that the affective domain is important for development (Bishop, 2002; Broido & Reason, 2005; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005; Goodman, 2011), the bulk of their research is geared towards cognition and behaviors. For instance, Singh and colleagues’ (2010) work on doctoral trainees in counseling psychology suggests that the trainees’ feelings are extremely helpful for understanding how the trainees engage in the work, but they only briefly mention the difficulties of engaging in social justice work. The authors noted that participants often talked about feeling hopeless and being emotionally tired. Singh et al. (2010) stop short of exploring those feelings and the relationship between those feelings and sustaining engagement and commitment to social justice. Like other researchers, they found affect as an integral part of social justice development, but did not explore the ways individuals navigate their feelings.

The little scholars know about emotions and their relationship to developing social justice orientation is usually focused on the initial stages of social justice development. For instance, Goodman (2011) acknowledges that the very nature of social justice work can lead to feelings of being ostracized by or detached from family, friends, and peer groups. Applebaum (2010) explored how pain and discomfort might be

experienced due to guilt (e.g., White guilt), feeling attacked, or feeling anxious about “messing up.” These are spaces that can be painful or uncomfortable for individuals, and their ability to manage those emotions is critical for their positive development towards a social justice orientation (Goodman, 2011). Goodman (2011) and Applebaum (2010), among others (e.g., Broido, 2000, Broido & Reason, 2005), tend to focus primarily on those who are just beginning to orient towards social justice work. However, the emotions that might exist for individuals who are more committed may be different or manifest in different ways.

One notable study explores some of the difficulties of social justice commitment, with some attention to the feelings that arise when engaging in the work. Ratković, Tilley, and Teeuwesen (2010) conducted a self-reflexive study to identify and explore the challenges they experienced when teaching a class rooted in social justice. Their analysis provides examples of when they were challenged in remaining critically conscious as a teacher, leaning about new “difficult information” and their own relationships with privilege and oppression.

In her theoretical work on social justice allyship development, Bishop (2002) argues that after individuals enter into a space of social justice allyship, they must remain hopeful. This crucial step helps to sustain commitment, which is a continual process of developing the affective skills of finding hope, experiencing joy, and being inspired by victories, big or small. Although not empirically supported, Bishop hints that using positive emotions may help individuals navigate the difficult experiences they have. If painful emotions make sustaining commitment difficult, then hopeful emotions might

help individuals remain engaged. For this reason, the affective domain is an important part of remaining committed to social justice work.

Summary of Social Justice Development

Social justice development is a complex process, composed of both an iterative sequence of awareness, engagement, and commitment and the interaction among cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains of development. As individuals develop in both arenas, they build on old knowledge with the acquisition of new knowledge, acquire skills that can help transform themselves and the world around them, and negotiate the emotions and feelings that arise throughout their process. A wide array of models attempts to peer into these processes in an effort to describe how people develop from awareness of social injustices towards a commitment to social justice work. Each model identifies differing components of the process; however, little attention has been paid to the individuals who have already developed a strong commitment towards social justice. Moreover, there is a clear need to understand the challenges of sustaining such a commitment, especially in relationship to the difficult emotions and feelings that may influence the actions of recommitting to or disengagement with social justice work. To give context to the difficult moments that are both challenging and potentially developmental, I provide a framework to understand these moments as critical incidents.

Critical Incidents

This study pivots on the notion that there are difficult moments that individuals encounter as they engage in social justice work. Social justice work is steeped in difficult

moments, some of which turn into what can be described as “critical incidents.” Critical incidents are “significant learning moments, turning points, or moments of realization that were identified by [an individual] as making a significant contribution to their professional growth” (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006, p. 88). Howard and colleagues consider the way salient moments transform into growth opportunities; however, critical incidents can also be turning points that lead to disengagement or developmental regression, either temporarily or more permanently (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Extending this work and for the purposes of this research, critical incidents can be singular or cumulative experiences. Thus, I define critical incidents as personally salient moments or turning points that engender developmental change. Critical incidents have two major components. First, individuals can perceive critical incident as positive or negative experiences; and second, the experience(s) composing a critical incident can cause developmental change either towards or away from an individual’s social justice (re)commitment.

Within the social justice literature in education, there are few empirical studies or theoretical conceptions about critical incidents. Instead, some scholars have looked at factors of social justice orientation development, which have included factors such as women’s studies classes, cross-racial interaction, and diversity workshops (e.g., Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, & Landreman, 2002). Such factors can be understood as a series of moments that have particular significance for individuals. For this reason, studies have suggested that individuals experience critical incidents of development towards a social justice orientation; however, only a few studies have focused on those critical incidents to identify what they are or how individuals negotiate them. Moreover, there is little

understanding about how individuals negotiate critical incidents once they have committed to a social justice orientation or social justice identity. Here, I briefly cover a few of the notable findings from social justice studies that look at critical incidents.

Furr and Carroll (2003) conducted a study to identify the typology of critical incidents for counseling psychology trainees. They classified the critical incidents into the following categories: “(a) existential issues/value conflicts; (b) cognitive development; (c) beliefs about competency; (d) professional development; (e) perceived support; (f) perceived obstacles; (g) personal growth (in the counseling program); (h) personal growth (outside the counseling program); and (i) skill development” (p. 486). They then grouped their model into four larger clusters according to Beck’s (1993) model, which helps to identify beliefs, cognitions, affect, and behavior and clarifies the relationships among them. Furr and Carroll found that the affective cluster was the largest and most important part of the critical incidents, because emotions and feelings attached to the incident is what made the incident positive or negative. For those with negative affective responses, the individual’s emotions and feelings became the impetus for creating an obstacle for growth and development, while positive affective responses helped support growth and development. Parsing out the affective domain within critical incidents provides additional understanding about how and why emotions and feelings can cause an individual to change and the potential impact on development.

Caldwell and Vera (2010) conducted a mixed methods study, which articulated several major types of critical incidents for social justice orientation development among counseling psychology trainees. They found that critical incidents occurred with significant and influential people, exposure to injustice, education or learning, work

experience, and religion and spirituality. Over 75% of their participants stated that at least one of their critical incidents helped to solidify their commitment to social justice. Further, participants identified cognitive and behavioral growth and development. More than half the participants noted that they began to identify with social justice through these critical incidents, which shaped their development as social justice-oriented individuals. Whereas these findings illustrate that critical incidents can prompt significant developmental growth, Caldwell and Vera only focus on positive outcomes and do not ask whether difficult or painful incidents can spark disengagement or impede growth.

Beer, Spanierman, Greene, and Todd (2012) conducted a mixed methods study, where one of the research questions addressed activists' social justice commitment. The participants who identified as activists noted that there are many moments that are challenging. Some of those incidents included confronting family and friends about unjust language or behavior. This can leave an individual feeling ostracized from family, friends, and peer groups (Reason & Broido, 2005). This might also lead towards critical incidents that are particularly painful and tied to the emotions of fear and rejection. Beer and colleagues (2012) also found that several activists mentioned that engaging in social justice work every day can lead to burn out. Burn out might blur the lines of a critical incident, because it cannot be identified as a single targeted moment, but instead a build up of smaller and less salient incidents over time.

Summary of Critical Incidents

The goal of understanding critical incidents for this study is to understand which experiences are particularly difficult, as well as which incidents trigger an individual to

question their (re)commitment. Moreover, while these incidents themselves are important, my primary question for this study considers how individuals negotiate difficult experiences. This is to say that critical incidents can be either singular or cumulative experiences that are salient and engender a developmental change or shift. The negotiation process is not limited to the time during or immediately after such incident, and includes the experience and reflection that occurs after the incident. For those incidents that spark a heightened emotional response, it is likely that their interpretation of and the meaning they make of the incident will be influenced by those emotions, whether positivity or negatively. Previous research suggests that these difficult moments may prompt positive development over the long term; however, how individuals come to process and negotiate these experiences remains to be understood.

Summary of the Literature Review

Given that social justice work can be difficult (Goodman, 2011), in this research I attempt to uncover a more complex understanding about why sustaining a commitment to social justice work might be particularly challenging. To contextualize this research, I draw on social justice literature to demonstrate the work that is associated with social justice and the practice of social justice that stems from its historical and philosophical roots. Individuals who develop a social justice orientation cycle through stages of becoming aware, gaining new information and skills, and committing to an issue or group. Simultaneously, developments within cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains are also occurring. Additionally, this process can be sparked or thwarted by critical incidents that individuals experience as they attempt to become (re)committed to social justice work.

The literature review sensitizes several major concepts, which influence the methodology of this research. With little literature that directly targets social justice commitment, emotions and feelings that influence social justice commitment, and the critical incidents that are challenging when engaging in social justice work, I provide six key points that summarize the major elements of the literature.

- Social justice work is about change and action that attempts to disrupt and remedy injustice.
- Social justice work requires a heightened level of consciousness about one's position in the world.
- Creating change and developing critical consciousness are tension filled spaces where individuals have salient experiences that turn can into critical incidents for development.
- Critical incidents can be positive or negative experiences, which can either promote or hinder development.
- How one interprets the incident as positive or negative, which influences how one might develop, is highly influenced by the affective response one has to the experience.
- The iterative stages of social justice orientation are filled with critical incidents, even within a (re)commitment stage.

With these elements, I argue that sustaining a commitment to social justice can be challenging, because critical incidents that spark negative emotions and feelings might cause individuals to disengage from social justice work either temporarily or more permanently.

As Charmaz (2014) stated, the literature review is a launching point from which to proceed with developing theory and not a place to reside. Thus, these sensitizing concepts are used as a way to shape the methodology of this study, with specific attention given to the selection of participants and interview protocol. As I discuss in the next chapter, finding individuals who are committed to social justice and who are able and ready to talk about some of their challenging experiences will be crucial. Additionally, questions that begin to understand the way individuals process and negotiate these critical incidents will help illuminate the emotions and feelings, the meaning making, and the knowledge and skills that are associated with experiencing critical incidents.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

This study is designed to understand why social justice can be difficult to sustain. Though multiple gaps in the literature exist, this research is geared towards understanding the following areas: (a) the developmental process of (re)commitment towards a social justice orientation, (b) identifying challenges when engaging in social justice work, and (c) the negotiation process individuals undergo as they address those challenges and relationship to social justice development. Thus the purpose of this study was to address the following research questions:

1. What are challenges that social justice oriented student affairs professionals find as they engage in social justice work?
2. How do these professionals process and negotiate those challenges?
3. Why might a commitment to social justice be difficult to sustain?

The structure of these questions is built off Charmaz's (2008a) extension of Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) argument that qualitative research can address "why" questions, "by considering the contingent relations between the *whats* and *hows* of social life" (p. 200). Charmaz (2008a) contends that a "constructivist approach to grounded theory allows [researchers] to address *why* questions, while preserving the complexity of social life" (p. 397). By identifying the critical incidents as challenging experiences, along with how individuals negotiate these challenges, the research can explicate the conscious and unconscious reasons why a social justice orientation might be difficult to sustain. The aim of this research is to move from descriptive analysis towards interpretive and explanatory analysis, in an effort to theorize about social justice

commitment and create practical models for assisting student affairs practitioners in their efforts to embody and enact social justice.

Rationale for Using Grounded Theory

To address these research questions, I employ a grounded theory approach for two reasons: first, grounded theory has significant utility for these research questions; and second, it is congruent with my own epistemological perspective. Grounded theory is a systematic and iterative method of collecting and analyzing data to construct new theory (Charmaz, 2014; Morse et al., 2009), focused on both the process and the product.

Because grounded theory aims to yield a theoretical understanding about a process and attempts to construct meaning from these processes, my research, which is specifically designed to understand and explain the process of remaining committed to social justice, fits nicely into this methodological and theoretical perspective (Charmaz, 2007; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). One of the imbedded strategies of grounded theory is the use of constant comparison, which allows for an ongoing, iterative process of interaction between the researcher and the data. Constant comparative analysis helps a researcher generate concepts that emerge from the data, which are used to identify relationships between and among concepts. Theory, in this context, is developed through an inductive process that results in a product that can help to understand a given process or action (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Creswell, 2013).

Although the nature of a research question guides the use of a methodology (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992), there are several additional benefits to using this approach. Due to an emphasis on the use of inductive logic, grounded theory does not require prior research in order to conduct research from this methodological perspective

(Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory is unique in this way because it does not attempt to confirm or validate existing theory or research, but instead constructs new theory grounded in the data. It is important to note that within grounded theory, the term “theory” itself refers to understanding human processes or actions (Charmaz, 2014). In the case of this research, the process I am exploring is about negotiating the challenging critical incidents that make it difficult to remain committed to social justice work. As a largely psychological phenomenon, the process one uses to negotiate challenging critical incidents in social justice work likely occurs both consciously and unconsciously. As Star (2007) explains, grounded theory is particularly well suited to exploring phenomena that are hidden or under the surface of consciousness.

Constructivist grounded theory resonates with my own epistemological leanings. As a constructivist, I hold the belief that processes and actions are never neutral nor interpreted in a neutral manner (Kincheloe, 2005). Because constructivism recognizes personal and political as being intertwined, it moves away from positivist ideas that there are single, discoverable truths. Instead, constructivism honors the current realities of one’s position in the world, historically, socially, culturally, economically, and politically. Social justice, as a context specific idea, is always bound to the current context, and thus is congruent with this epistemological paradigm. For that reason, Charmaz (2008b) argues that constructivist grounded theory can be fruitfully applied to social justice issues. Charmaz goes on to sum this up well: theoretical analysis is derived from “interpretive renderings of a reality, not objective reportings of it” (p. 206). In an attempt to embody these ideas, I intend to incorporate these perspectives throughout this research and give

special attention to my position as a researcher, which I consider near the end of this chapter in the reflexivity section.

Foundation of Grounded Theory Methodology

The origin of grounded theory, along with its trajectory into modern use, is useful and important for any study that utilizes the methodology because it informs the process and product of the research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) are the progenitors of grounded theory; in their study on death and dying Glaser and Strauss developed a methodology that broke from the sterile and positivistic methodologies of their time (Charmaz, 2007; Star, 2007). Their goal was to combine some of the strengths of quantitative work, such as a rigorous procedure and the ability to use data to predict future processes or actions, with the strengths of qualitative methods, which elicit stories and requires creativity, while blurring the lines between research and theory (Charmaz, 2007). Although Glaser and Strauss are ardent critics of positivism, grounded theory has often been positioned as a reified version of the post-positivist paradigm. Scholars who first began to use grounded theory often did so with the prescriptive lens that was laid out by Glaser and Strauss (1967); however, in more recent years, both men have attempted to clarify their early writing by offering that grounded theory is adaptive and fluid, not bound to a solely prescriptive method (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In part because Glaser and Strauss' (1967) initial work was prescriptive, many researchers began to adopt the grounded theory methodology because of its ease and utility; however, many researchers had not yet moved away from post-positivist paradigms and instead reasserted truth-seeking outcomes. For Glaser these tensions were negligible. His perspective focused less on one's own paradigms and more on the data as

an emergent process of discovery. Strauss on the other hand, believed that the researcher is always in interaction with the data. For that reason, Strauss argued that grounded theory is an interpretive process built on a researcher's epistemological perspective. Their graduate school mentors influenced both men in profound ways (Charmaz, 2014). Two well-known quantitative researchers, Lazarsfeld and Merton, influenced Glaser's post-positivist paradigm. Strauss worked closely with Blumer, who developed symbolic interactionism, which influenced Strauss' trajectory towards constructivism (Bryant & Charmaz, 2013). Herein lie the well-known divergent perspectives between Glaser (1992), who leans towards positivism, and Strauss and Corbin (1990), who use a more constructivist approach. Although these two perspectives are often seen as divergent, Melia (1996) argues that both perspectives are different ways of expressing the same idea, which is in essence the development of theory through rigorous qualitative inquiry.

Moving into the 21th century, Charmaz (2000, 2007) has been one of the most influential voices in continuing the work of grounded theory as a methodology, and her work has taken the approach of adopting components of both paradigms and merging them into a more cohesive, flexible, and constructivist methodology. By using the foundation of Strauss' (Fisher & Strauss, 1979a, 1979b; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) paradigm of symbolic interactionism and Glaser's (1992) work on allowing new ideas to emerge without force, Charmaz (2014) reunites grounded theory into an umbrella term (Haig, 1995) that can be employed in various contexts and that is adaptable to the needs of the scholar, research questions, and sources of data.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

As the title of her book *Constructing Grounded Theory* implicates, Charmaz (2014) advances a constructivist paradigm for grounded theory methodology. Her work, along with other constructivists, shapes this project significantly. To begin, a constructivist paradigm holds that all individuals co-construct local and specific realities (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). In other words, individuals construct their own reality by making meaning from their experiences. In using such a paradigm, constructivist grounded theory moves towards hermeneutical and dialectical approaches. Bruning, Schraw, and Ronning, (1999) note that “in the constructivist view, [individuals] arrive at meaning by selecting information and constructing what they know” (p. 215), which leads towards knowledge construction that is based on the interactions between the individuals and their environments.

As Fisher and Strauss (1979a, 1979b), and later Strauss and Corbin (1998), posit, grounded theory is about understanding process and action, in terms of the way people construct that action or process. Blumer (1969) notes the following three things: that people act and respond to things and events based on the meanings they have, meaning is derived from social interaction with others, and meanings are handled in an interpretive process used when dealing with things that they encounter. “By adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach, the research can move grounded theory methods further into the realm of the interpretive social science consistent with a Blumarian (1969) emphasis on meaning, without assuming the existence of a unidimensional external reality” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 521). Thus, constructivist grounded theory is about discovering how

individuals process and make meaning from their experience without the need to declare findings as “Truth.”

This is a way of seeing how the world looks from the participant’s perspective, but it also showcases the interaction between the researcher and the participant. Researchers, much like any other individuals, are inescapably connected to their own lived experience, which influences, guides, and shapes the way in which they see the world and interact with others. This filters into the role of a researcher, especially through the act of interviewing participants. Positivist notions of research attempt to rely on objectivity, whereas constructivism leans into the subjective world. Near the end of this chapter, I will elaborate my own position through a reflexive section. By using a constructivist paradigm, this research becomes highly interpretive, which can result in an artistic and political understanding about a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Methods

Building off of the precepts of grounded theory methodology, I employed methods that can address the research questions. A critical component to this research begins with identifying “excellent” (Morse, 2007) participants by using a purposeful intensity sample. In order to set up intensive interviews, this study is broken down into three distinct steps. The first two steps include interviewing participants from two different sites, allowing time between sites to employ constant comparison of data. The final step includes following up with a third of the participants, based on a theoretical sampling of current participants. By breaking the process into three distinct steps, adjustments could be made in order to “follow the data” (Glaser, 1992). Below are details of this process.

Sampling Procedures

Participant sampling is often broken up into two unique stages within grounded theory methodology: purposeful sampling and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). Purposeful intensity sampling is when participants are sought and selected based on the belief that the participant has experienced a specific phenomenon and can meet the criteria of being an “excellent” participant. In his discussion of sampling procedures, Patton (1990) argues that heuristic research uses intensity sampling, because it draws on intense personal experiences. Although this research is not steeped in the heuristic tradition often associated with phenomenology, this study’s purpose is to “search for the discovery of meaning and essence in significant human experience” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40). Patton (1990) adds that researchers “may select cases that manifest sufficient intensity to illuminate the nature of success or failure” (p.172).

Purposeful sampling methods have been contested as biased; however, Morse (2006) argues that all qualitative inquiry is biased, and by biased Morse (2007) means that the participants have “been deliberately sought out and selected” (p. 234). Such bias is not problematic for constructivists, because as Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, a researcher’s epistemological paradigm may not always seek or desire objectivity. Similarly, Johnson, Buehring, Cassell, and Symon (2006) extend Lincoln and Guba’s work by noting that the epistemological lens of the researcher always guides research, and research should be assessed with regard to the criteria specified within a specific epistemological framework. The standards of constructivist grounded theory allow for purposeful sampling, especially theoretical sampling, which may not be proper for other types of research. Thus, for this study, I am seeking those participants who have a wealth

of experience in managing challenging moments and can process their own development, as they remain committed to their social justice work.

The second stage of sampling is employing a theoretical sampling. Here, a researcher looks for data that can “illuminate and define the boundaries and relevance of categories” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 611). Glaser and Strauss (1967) define theoretical sampling as the process by which a researcher “decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop [the] theory as it emerges” (p. 45). A theoretical sample is used especially in grounded theory as a constant comparison method where a researcher begins after initial relationships between themes, codes and concepts emerge. By using data as it is collected, the researcher can delve into those relationships by targeting participants that can add depth and complexity to the current initial findings.

Defining Excellent Participants

Due to the nature of this study, I begin with acknowledging that my research intends to uncover the often unspoken emotions and feelings that can exist for student affairs practitioners as they attempt to sustain a commitment to social justice (Bishop, 2002; Broido & Reason, 2005; Goodman, D. J., 2011). There is no doubt that these stories have the potential to conjure up some of the original negative feelings, like anger, sadness, fear, and rejection. In an effort to employ a great deal of care and justice as I ask participants to share and be vulnerable, I am seeking participants that are mentally and emotionally ready and willing to engage in this reflective process. Such a participant exemplifies what Morse (2007), who cites and expounds on Spradley’s (1979) work, calls an “excellent” participant. Morse defines an “excellent” grounded theory participant as “one who has been through, or observed, the experience under investigation... [and]

must be willing to participate, and... be reflective, willing, and able to speak articulately about the experience” (p.231). Extending Morse, I believe excellent participants should also be emotionally and mentally ready to share their stories.

In order to leverage and utilize the assets of purposeful sampling, I clarify who would qualify as being an “excellent” participant for this study. I sought to understand the critical incidents that challenge an individual’s engagement in social justice work. In order to identify participants, I asked participants to self-select as being “excellent” participants by reviewing the following criteria and determining if they generally felt they met these criteria. Because social justice is learned in a variety of ways and through a variety of experiences, the criteria were meant to be guidelines and not rigidly followed. The goal of these criteria was to remain flexible enough to allow for multiple perspectives to be shared; however, after the initial stage of interviewing criteria were shifted, in order to get more depth within interviews. The first level of criteria asked participants to self-select as:

- being a social justice advocate, ally, activist, educator, or other similar identity;
- having significant experience in engaging in social justice work;
- having several challenging critical incidents when enacting or embodying social justice;
- being able to reflect on and articulate those experiences and expound the way they have made meaning from those experiences; and
- feeling emotionally and mentally able and ready to share their stories.

After the first level of interviews, I shifted the participant criteria. Using a theoretical sampling, I narrowed the criteria to recruit participants who had more full time experiences and whom graduated from student affairs programs. Thus, two criteria were added to the previous list. First, participants should have a minimum of three years of full-time work experience in student affairs, and second, participants must hold at least a graduate degree in student affairs, higher education, or closely related field. This was because some of the participants in the first level of interviewing were unable to discuss how long-term engagement was challenging or to place their work in the context of student affairs more broadly.

By seeking participants who self-identify as social justice oriented individuals and moving towards those with a plethora of social justice, I gained an in-depth and complex understanding about this process by directly asking them to make meaning of and interpret their experiences. Seeking multiple ways in which an individual has negotiated these experiences, I could understand what strategies and processes participants have developed over time. Additionally, I want to be explicit that these participants are still engaged in and continuing to practice social justice work, and thus, I was able to understand the ways individuals have successfully managed and made positive meaning from their experiences. Even though participants remained engaged, I sought out experiences where they felt particularly challenged or times when participants feel as though they did not manage an incident well or still struggle with the experience itself. These self-identified unsuccessful stories are helpful in understanding some of the obstacles the participants may have encountered, and how they have learned from or

adjusted their strategies for the future. Both sets of stories are valuable to understand how individuals sustain their commitment to social justice.

Recruitment of Participants

The recruitment process for this study occurred in two stages. The first stage consisted of recruiting participants at the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) Commission for Social Justice Educators Institute on Social Justice (ISJ). This initial stage garnered seven participants whom I interviewed either at ISJ or shortly after the conference via video conferencing services (e.g. Skype, FaceTime, Google Hangout). The second stage of the recruitment process consisted of eliciting participants through ACPA's Commission for Social Justice Educators Listserv. As noted above, the criteria change slightly, in order to combine the utility of theoretical sampling. The result was interviewing an additional eight participants. The total number of participants totaled 15.

Institute on Social Justice recruitment. The 2014 Institute on Social Justice (ISJ) is unique in that the theme was "Vulnerability in Social Justice Education." ISJ, which has been held every other year, is designed for social justice educators within student affairs to learn more about infusing social justice into their campus work, increase their personal understanding of social justice, develop a more complex theoretical understanding, and network and dialogue with other professionals (ACPA, n.d.). The institute has a variety of different activities that engage participants in multiple ways, including plenary sessions, keynote addresses, round tables, and group dialogues.

In order to gain access to the Institute on Social Justice, I worked with one of the co-chairs of the Institute. During several conversations at the ACPA Annual Convention in the spring of 2014 and follow up calls shortly after, we discussed the possibility of

collecting data for this research on site of the institute. The co-chair then brought the issue to the full planning committee for discussion and reached the conclusion that they would allow me to interview participants. Because the institute is highly structured for participants, the co-chairs wanted to be sure that a participant did not have to choose between going to one of their predetermined meetings and attending an interview for the study. In order to accommodate this request, we decided that I would interview individuals at specific times outside of planned sessions, including at the start and end of each day. Due to the intense schedule, I was only able to interview three participants while at the conference, and I conducted four additional interviews the next few days after the conference.

ISJ was a perfect site for this research for numerous reasons, even with the constraint of scheduling. With almost 100 participants, most individuals had already self-selected to attend this conference because of their interest in and commitment to social justice (Tran, Blockett, Curington, & routenberg, 2014). By attending this conference, participants sought out developing their own personal and professional skills around social justice work. This is beneficial because participants were primed for the interview, meaning they were already engaged in similarly difficult conversations. Moreover, many of the participants noted some of their challenges while at ISJ.

To identify specific participants, the conference organizers allowed me to send out a call for participants prior to the conference and an additional call for participants at the opening session. Participants who were interested were directed to a link that provided details of the study, the time slots they could sign up for, and a notice that I will be observing some of the larger sessions (see Appendix A). All on-site interviews were

conducted in conference rooms for privacy purposes. For all post ISJ interviews, I conducted video conference calls. Through the formal email and announcement and informal connections, I identified and interviewed seven participants from the Institute on Social Justice.

Participants who were interested in the study were required to fill out an initial participation information form (Appendix B). I used the form as a means to collect basic information, questions indicating if they meet the qualifications as an excellent participant, and demographic information. To ensure that participants meet the requirement of being an excellent participant, I used the form to determine if a person fit the qualifications. Of 14 participants who showed interest, three did not meet the criteria and four did not follow up by scheduling an interview time. For this stage of the recruitment process, individuals did not need to meet all qualifications perfectly; however, their responses were reviewed with specific attention to their experience level and responses about having challenging experiences and being ready and willing to share those experiences. All participants whom I selected to be interviewed were required to fill out a consent form (Appendix C).

Once I interviewed individuals at ISJ and I began to compare and analyze the data and determined I needed to find additional participants. Because of the flexible criteria used in the first stage, I determined that future participants needed to meet two additional criteria. First, they needed to have additional years of experience to show long-term commitment; and second, they needed a graduate degree in student affairs or related field to demonstrate more consistency in a participant's training and background. Thus, I used theoretical sampling to enhance the current data and clarify relationships among codes

and categories (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz explains using a theoretical sample helps when there are conflicting relationships, variation in the data, or because multiple theories still exist that can explain the data.

Listserv participants. After conducting interviews with the first round of participants, I sought out additional participants through the use of the Commission on Social Justice Educators (CSJE) Listserv. As a member of the CSJE, I was able to send out the recruitment email without the needing a gateway person to gain access to the group. The participant recruitment email used for ISJ was only slightly revised, for new criteria and with the name of the group changed. All individuals who were interested in participating went through the same process as the Institute on Social Justice participants. In brief, I used a solicitation email asking for participants, I asked individuals to fill out an initial information form (Appendix B), and if asked to participate, individuals filled out a consent form (Appendix C).

A total of 15 individuals showed interest in this stage of the interview process. Of the 15 individuals who filled out the initial information form, one did not meet the minimum criteria, four did not respond to follow up emails, and two followed up after I concluded the interviewing process. I conducted video conferencing interviews with the eight remaining participants.

Participant Demographics

Participants represented a variety of backgrounds, identity groups, and regions of the country. As part of the interest form, participants were asked to complete demographic questions about salient identities. All identities and the location where individuals were recruited are listed in Table 1. Although no selection process was used

to diversify the participants, the overall demographic profile of participants is very diverse. The goal was to find a wide range of perspectives among participants, but all hold a social justice identity and are committed to social justice work.

Identity based questions were all open ended, which provided participants to indicate their most salient identities. To provide an overview of Table 1, I attempt to provide an a brief breakdown of identities that honors and recognizes individual identities, but which also can show the ways participants embodied dominant or marginalized identities. To begin, the level of experience among participants ranged greatly, being between one and 19 years. Eight of the participants fell between three and eight years of experience, with five having more than nine years of experience. In terms of educational attainment, 13 participants had earned Master's degrees, while one was currently a graduate student and another had completed his undergraduate degree several years prior. Although not captured in the interest form, three participants worked in social-justice oriented positions, while the other twelve participants held positions in other functional areas.

In an effort to fully capture individual identities and yet aggregate identities, I provide some general categorization and list all individual identities that are represented among participants. In terms of race and ethnicity, nine participants identified as white, while six identified as people of color (e.g., Latino, Black, Asian American, Cambodian, biracial/multiethnic). When asked about gender, eight individuals identified as either women or females, four identified as males, and one person identified in each of the following ways: male/queer, cisgender male, and genderqueer. When asked about sexual

orientation, eight of the participants identified as straight, and seven participants identified their sexual orientations as straight+, bisexual, gay, or queer.

Thirteen individuals identified that their current ability status is temporarily able bodied, or a variation of that identity, and a participant identified as having a learning difference and another as having an invisible physical and mental disabilities. Socio-economic status received a wide range of responses. Three identified as lower class, five said they have been in lower or middle class, six identified as being mostly in the middle class, and one was upper class. Participants' responses varied the most in terms of self-identified spirituality or religion. Some participants noted not having any religion or spirituality, others exploring spirituality or are spiritual, and some identified as atheist or agnostic. Religions represented among participants are Universal Unitarianism, Christianity, Catholicism, and Buddhism. Finally, participants were asked if they have other salient identities, responses included: son of an undocumented Latino immigrant; feminist and educator; Asian American; Black, male, urban, Southern American, bald, overweight, in his 30s; and sexual assault survivor; first generation college student; and, interracially married.

When looking at individuals' identities, experiences, and background, few characteristics appear to affect on the challenges one experiences, how one negotiates such challenges, or perceptions of why social justice is challenging. There are two characteristics that are significant within this study, though. First, a participant's total years of experience and educational background do appear to influence the types of challenges one faces. Second, white participants note that negotiating their whiteness as a challenge. Both of these findings will be discussed later in this chapter. Overall, the wide

range of identities, experiences, and level of education show give some universalizability to the challenges that social justice oriented student affairs practitioners face within their work.

Data Collection and Analysis

Initial Interviewing

Intensive interviews are a form of data collection that attempts to elicit a participant's interpretation of a given experience (Charmaz, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Seidman (1998) makes the case that, "the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). For this study, interviews are particularly helpful, in that they are the best means by which to hear first-hand the difficult experiences and the meaning individuals construct based on these situations. Returning to the belief that grounded theory can help understand why a process occurs by understanding the interactions between the what and the how (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997), I moved the interviews from identifying challenges towards their process for negotiating the challenges.

Charmaz (2014) recommends using reflective interview questions that are developed to build trust with each participant, allow for individuals to make meaning from their experiences, and help individuals to understand processes and actions that they have experienced. In order to create a reflective interview process, I used open-ended interview questions, which Charmaz (2014) recommends. Charmaz (2014) appropriately argues that interviewing is different from a conversation, in that a researcher can and should ask uncomfortable questions, shift the conversation based on hunches, and attempt to dig under the surface of an issue. In slight contrast, Seidman (1998) uses open-ended

questions to explore with a participant. Seidman encourages participants to move towards increasing complexity and depth; however, he is quick to point out that participants should always have the control over what they share. The nuanced difference and tension point are the depth and persistence to which a researcher can and should probe. In the case of this study, participants shared some difficult and challenging experiences, but appeared to be comfortable in sharing their experiences.

In an effort to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation, I followed Seidman's (1998) recommendation to allow participants to decide which stories to tell and how to tell them. I used Charmaz's (2014) guide for interviewing as one set of tools in designing the interview protocol because it sets up a relationship-building protocol that increases the depth of questions and probes and ends on a positive note. Additionally, Baxter Magolda and King (as cited in Dreschler Sharp, 2012) developed a reflective interview process that helps participants expound on the substance and interpretation of an experience. This constructivist-leaning interview process moved from rapport building to substantive questions and then moved on to interpretive questions (see Appendix D and Appendix F). The arc of the interview protocol is intended to build trust, ask about the phenomenon directly, allow participants to interpret their stories, and conclude with summary responses.

Follow-Up Interviews

After conducting the first level of interviews, I followed up with five of the fifteen participants. Although my initial findings appeared consistent throughout the interviews and little clarification was needed, I wanted to follow up with some participants in order to see if the initial findings represented their experiences and resonated with them. I sent

a follow up email asking each person to be part of a second level interview. All five participants agreed to a second interview. I identified five individuals by looking for varied identities, experiences, regions of the country, and site of solicitation. Additionally, I was seeking out participants who I thought could provide additional thoughts and ideas. The five participants I followed up with were: Bill, Jess, Kyle, Lauren, and Robert.

Within the initial email asking them to participate in a follow up interview, I included an abridged version of the findings (Appendix F). By giving participants an opportunity to view the initial findings, I used the second interview as a means to ask them if the findings seemed to capture their experiences, if there were parts missing or could be better articulated, and if the model represents their experiences. I asked each participant similar questions (Appendix G); however, the interview was only semi structured, in order to move in the direction the participant wanted to go. The interviews added nuance, depth, and complexity to the findings. The overall response though was that the findings captured their challenges, the challenges they have seen in others, and the process of negotiating those challenges.

Transcription and Member Checking

In order to capture the richness of the interviews, I recorded each interview. A reputable transcription service provider transcribed all interviews. After receiving transcriptions back, I cleaned all the data to reduce any typos, errors, or inaudible sections in the transcription. Finally, I sent each participant their transcriptions within one week of their interview to verify that the transcripts were accurate.

Data Coding

Using grounded theory, I engaged in constant comparative analysis in order to code data. Constant comparison is an approach where the researcher is constantly engaged in coding and recoding. This somewhat messy process (Charmaz, 2014) helps the researcher move towards identifying common themes as data emerge, shifting future interviews to gain more insight about themes, and focusing on the most salient categories in the research. Grounded theorists Glaser (1992) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) have distinctly different data coding procedures, however, “both versions adhere to the same basic research process: gather data, code, compare, categorize, theoretically sample, develop a core category, and generate a theory” (Walker & Myrick, 2006, pg. 550). Due to the more constructivist leanings of Charmaz (2014), I used a similar coding process to the one she has developed, which combines both strategies to construct a simpler and yet more effective coding process.

Coding within grounded theory moves from the small units of analysis towards larger units, while building complexity. Using Nvivo software, I used a modified in vivo coding process in order to capture the language participants. Because the relationship among codes were valuable, I abridged basic ideas, concepts, and sentences into unique codes for each person. For example, two codes that were created for Ryan and Lauren, respectively: “Maintaining hope is hard, because social justice work hurts” and “Talking with mom helps me through challenging situations.” Because each code was unique to the participant and to that portion of the text, I created 1746 unique codes. Those codes were then consolidated into 50 general categories.

To explicate this process, I began coding line-by-line, in order to get initial codes. The goal here was to preserve the nature of the data, while breaking up the data into small

pieces. For the first few interviews, I created over 200 codes from each transcript. The open coding, or as Charmaz (2014) refers to it as initial coding, helps the researcher understand the meaning of small amounts of data, by retaining meaning and actions. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define open coding as the “analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data” (p. 101). Upon completing the first seven interviews (those from the Institute on Social Justice), I began to review codes and move them into axial codes.

Creswell (2013) notes that axial coding helps to sort, synthesize, and organize the initial codes and rearrange them to develop an emergent model. The term axial comes from the process of understanding the axis or direction that an emerging category takes. In order to begin to see the direction and the process of social justice commitment, I began to categorize the initial codes by placing like codes with each other. For instance, a code such as “talking to mom helped me through the challenge” and “venting with my partner about a challenge” were moved under an umbrella axial code called “relying on relationships for challenges.” The axis shows that when difficulties emerge, one strategy individuals employed was using their relationships as a means to navigate and process the challenges. Thus, the initial coding fractures the data, while axial coding reconstructs the data into a more coherent whole (Charmaz, 2014).

I used the emergent axial codes to begin building the core components of the model. To use the example above, the axial code of “relying on relationships for challenges” shows the process of an individual moving from a challenge towards relying on a motivator. Thus, within the model described in Chapter 4, I identified the relationship between challenges and motivators. This was one of the first connections

within the emergent model; however, this process repeated as I began to create a complete theoretical model (Charmaz, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using the emergent codes and core components, I created several visual graphics with major categories and their relationships. Through an iterative process between analyzing that data and constructing models, I was able to refine an emergent model captured within the data.

Memos

An integral part of the coding process is memoing (Glaser, 1992). Memoing is “the *core stage* in the process of generating theory, the bedrock of theory generation” (Glaser, 1978, p. 83). Glaser famously said that “all is data” (1998, pg. 8), meaning everything one finds, whether through research, observation, interviews, or conversations, is another part of the overall data. In order to refine the data that are collected, researchers must use memos as a means to negotiate and interpret the data. Memoing should advance ideas and codes, develop naturally, and are centrally stored and sortable (Glaser, 1978).

Whereas Glaser’s goal of memoing is associated with discovering what is occurring in the data, Charmaz (2014) sees memos as being a reflective process. The process of constant comparison and intentional reflection can create a set of data that can illuminate the constructivist process of reconstructing stories and developing theory from the data. The abstraction from the concrete data to theory requires a significant amount of reflection, re-examining the data, and searching for additional data that help to build theory. Concurrent data collection and analysis, with the use of detailed memos, allow the researcher to become theoretically sensitive to the data and move towards building

theory. As noted earlier, theoretical sensitivity is a recurring issue within the grounded theory framework because it helps a researcher move between the data, current literature, and emergent theoretical ideas.

Lastly, memos give room for multiple theories to be explored (Charmaz, 2014). Part of a grounded theory study is to develop different theoretical notions that emerge from the data; instead of attempting to make the data fit a theory (Glaser, 1992), a researcher must see if there are any other possible explanations for the arrangement of the data. In an effort to eliminate or reduce multiple theoretical representations of the data, a researcher moves between theory construction and the data to determine if the data fits within the theory. Charmaz (2014) posits that only one theory should remain that explains the entirety of the data, thus creating a theoretical understanding that can be substantively applied to the area of study.

Throughout this research project, I wrote and revisited memos, as a means to reflect on the topic, the stories that are shared, and my own mental and emotional processing of the research. Integrating memos is difficult; however, I coded my memos in order to find trends and assisting additional codes, categories, and ideas within the transcripts to emerge along with the relationship among them (Lempert, 2007). In the early stages, memos were particularly helpful in acknowledging and identifying my own assumptions, biases, and ideas, so that as data is collected, I could explore those ideas within interviews and observations. Moving further into the research, I memoed as a means to explore possible explanations among relationships. Doing so assisted with the theoretical sampling and interviews, because the goal of grounded theory is to gather

enough data to ensure a single theoretical explanation for the data, which allows for the final theoretical model to emerge.

Trustworthiness

One of the primary concerns of qualitative researchers is to ensure that there is a high level of trustworthiness in the data and analysis (Creswell, 2013; Lincon & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). There are several ways a researcher is able to create trustworthiness in a study. I used three strategies in an effort to ensure confidence in the research findings. I engaged in member checking, used reflexive memoing, and worked with a peer debriefer.

Engaging in member checking is one of the most important ways to ensure trustworthiness. Member checking can consist of having participants review and check transcripts for mistakes and for the member to clarify statements. Beyond this more simplistic approach, I sent participants an initial analysis by providing summaries of initial findings along with emergent themes. In doing so, I wanted to ensure that participants could “see themselves” in the data (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) and provide feedback about whether or not the analysis captured their experiences. Member checking is useful in that it can also assist in identifying gaps, conflicting data, and areas for further development (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). I used the feedback to assist in determining the theoretical sample and follow-up interview protocol to clarify the emergent categories and themes.

Throughout the processes of writing, data gathering, and analysis, I wrote memos that continually check my own assumptions and biases. As Glaser (1990) notes, memos help to process anything that gets between the data and the researcher, and which

ultimately becomes part of the data. Charmaz (2006) argues, “Without engaging in reflexivity, researchers may elevate their own tacit assumptions and interpretations to 'objective' status. Our assumptions, interactions-and interpretations-affect the social processes constituting each stage of inquiry” (p. 132). I worked diligently to sustain my own reflexive memoing process, in an effort to challenge my own assumptions, perspectives, and interpretations.

Additionally, I identified and worked with a peer debriefer. This research project is not only an intellectually intense process, but also an emotionally intense one. By employing a peer review process throughout, I gained the support to persist and the challenge to fully explore the depth and complexity within this research, while helping to keep the analysis and process open and honest (Lincon & Guba, 1985). I identified a peer debriefer who was familiar with my research, but whom was willing and ready to challenge my work (Shenton, 2004). Some of the conversations between the peer debriefer and I were recorded in order to go back and track the evolution of the work. By sharing summaries of the research, emergent themes, and memos, I gained significant help from the peer debriefer. The debriefer offered alternative conceptualizations, provided process-oriented enhancements, and assisted to resolve potential inconsistencies.

Boundaries and Limitations

As with all research, there are boundaries and limitations. First, I want to explore the boundaries of this project. For this research, I have made many decisions, as all researchers must do, which are directed towards a specific goal. For my research, I specifically attempted to understand why social justice might be difficult to sustain, by understanding how challenges might be difficult to negotiate among student affairs

professionals. To be clear, there are many gaps and areas I have chosen not to explore. I have limited this research to this relatively narrow aspect, with the acknowledgment that not all social justice educators may experience challenges and some who do may disengage from social justice all together. My research, though, specifically targets those who do have these experiences and those who have felt as though they are successful in navigating these issues. The reason I focus here is because social justice must be understood as being a goal and a process that is littered with challenging moments that can enhance development or hinder growth. As educators, we must help individuals become aware about these potential issues, so that they can go into this work informed and with tools that may help them move through the difficulties they experience.

In terms of the limitations of this study, I want to briefly explore two potential limitations. First, there are limitations associated with the site selection; and second, the potential limitations involving the participants. Although the benefits are numerous, the issue with selecting an institute on vulnerability on social justice is that the participants' experiences might not represent the broader experiences of other student affairs professionals. First, as with any institute, there is a cost associated with attending, along with time away from family and work. The "luxury" of attending a conference or institute may leave out the following individuals: those with lower socioeconomic status, those who have positions that do not give time off for conferences, those who do not have access to professional development funds, and those for whom it is not a priority due to other obligations, such as family. Second, both sites from which I selected participants, those from the Institute on Social Justice and those from the Commission for Social Justice Educators, are part of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA).

ACPA is but one organization among many professional organizations in student affairs, and one that is known for being social justice oriented. Thus, those participants who are involved in ACPA may not represent the larger community of student affairs practitioners.

Another potential limitation could be around participants' interactivity at the conference. As with any conference, the participants will be learning, reflecting, and growing as I collect data. This has two potential implications, the number of which may increase as the institute progresses. First, participants are learning about new concepts and ideas, and they may apply these new concepts onto their past experiences. This could generate false similarities among participants that may not have existed outside of the conference or prior to the conference. Second, as participants engage in the conference, they will be telling their own stories during sessions and informal conversations; this creates the potential for participants to gloss over the details of their stories because they have been "practicing" telling those stories very recently. Although this may limit the study, the institute provides the benefit of providing spaces to explore incidents in a more rich and complex way, which in turn may provide more rich data for this research.

Reflexivity and Positionality

At the core of this study, there is a vein of vulnerability that I have to acknowledge, both for the participants of this study and for me, as a researcher. In terms of the participants, I will be asking them to share challenging, difficult, and/or painful experiences, in order to shed light onto the way that individuals interpret, making meaning, and learn from those experiences. Moreover, I situate this research within the holistic human experience; meaning that I am asking individuals to move from their

cognitive and behavioral responses, to the emotional response and process as well. The explicit targeting of emotions within research, at least within higher education and student affairs literature, appears to be unexplored. I think, in part, this is because emotions and feeling are difficult to measure, hard for participants to articulate, and/or are rarely valued in the positivist leaning of academic work that targets rational decision making. Whatever the reason for the affective domain to be relatively ignored, I feel as though I must be willing and able to engage in my own challenging self-work through this journey.

In beginning to solidify this research topic, I found myself at a unique juncture where reflection, emotions, and critical incidents came colliding together. I found myself reading countless journal articles, books, and online discussions where individuals consistently state that social justice work can be challenging. I quickly found that individuals would state this seemingly obvious conclusion; however, few if any authors noted where the difficulty stems from, why the incident is understood as difficult, and how an individual processes such an incident. As I continued my own journey through these readings, I found myself running into moments of discomfort and visceral emotional reactions when challenged. Thus, the birthplace of this research study is just as much an intervention for myself as I hope it is an intervention for the way we, in student affairs, conceptualize and practice social justice work.

In coming to this research, I have a propensity towards constructivist epistemologies, where we each construct the world as we interact with it; and in turn, the world recreates us (Blumer, 1969). This relationship is iterative and complex, but ultimately it is a process whereby we can and do change the world when we interact with

it. In his book *The Decline of Pleasure*, Walter Kerr (1962) speaks about how beauty can transform us. He states, “We cannot ourselves create what recreates us. We can only lay ourselves open to friendly invasion... aware that the visitations come from without, touching the within of its own volition” (Kerr, 1962, p. 220). For me, the very act of listening to stories is the “friendly invasion” that awakens my humanity, both intellectually and emotionally. In other words, when I listen to the experiences of others, I am transformed. My goal for this project is to illuminate a greater range of humanity that lies in the act of engaging in social justice work, by acknowledging the difficulties and providing a means by which to understand ourselves and others in a more holistic manner.

In this vein, this research is about me and those friends and colleagues that I have come to know who do social justice work. As Guba and Lincoln (2005) point out, the tradition of post-positivism in research might exclude doing research about our own experiences due to an inability to be objective. However, newer paradigms, like constructivism and critical theories, seek to understand the world with the researcher included and value the position of the researcher as a core component of research. As noted throughout, I, as a researcher, must not try to remain objective, but instead live in the tension-filled space that allows me to be open to ideas beyond or outside of my own experience, while also leaning into my experience as a space of insight. These tension filled spaces are the grounds from which for personal development can grow.

As long as I can remember, I have had the belief that the educational and growing process is painful. From elementary school through graduate school, I have experienced many pains associated with growth, having marginalized identities, and attempts to stand

up and stand together for ideas and issues. We all have experienced pain from our institutions of educations or in our institutions of education. The issue, in terms of this research, is how do we, myself included, navigate, manage, and negotiate these challenges, and more specifically the pains associated with attempting to create positive social change. I have many stories and experiences that have been enormously painful and/or uncomfortable, and while I will not go into those stories specifically here, I have created memos for many of the most salient social justice moments. As a commitment to lean into this space and to build on it, I write this reflective section and will continue to engage in reflection so as to be transparent about my own position within this research.

Summary of Methodology

By employing a grounded theory methodology, I sought to understand the process by which student affairs practitioners process and negotiate challenging critical incidents as they embody and enact social justice. Through a purposeful sample with participants from a conference on social justice and vulnerability, I used intensive interviews to collect data. Through a constant comparative method, I analyzed the data through a constructivist lens. By coding the data and creating relationships among codes and categories, I captured the process that individuals undergo. The result include a substantive theory that can begin to explain the process, while aiming towards filling the gaps in the literature around affective social justice development and helping future practitioners develop the tools to successfully navigate challenging moments in their social justice work.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Overview of Findings

This study focuses on the challenges that student affairs practitioners experience as they engage in social justice work. Chapter 4 presents the major findings of this inquiry, starting with a description of each participant. With their wide-ranging backgrounds, identities, and relationships with social justice work, participants provided many stories that allowed me to conduct a comprehensive analysis that led to a number of unique insights. After the participant descriptions, I explore the ways that respondents became committed to social justice and discuss their individual definitions of social justice. These data shed light on how one's background and understanding of social justice can influence one's social justice work and, conversely, the challenges one experiences.

I structure the major findings to follow the grounded theory that I propose within this study. I begin with a presentation of the emergent Social Justice Commitment Model. The model is comprised of several major components, including: moving into commitment, internal and external engagement, challenges, motivators, times of pause, and hope. This study was built on the extension of Gubrium and Holstiens (1997) argument that grounded theory is able to respond to the what, how, and why of a phenomenon. The emergent model integrates these three components, which are further explored in Chapter 5.

Research Participants

As noted in Chapter 3, I interviewed 15 participants from a wide array of backgrounds, experiences, and expertise in the field. To begin, I asked participants to complete a demographic

questionnaire (see Appendix H). The brief biographies that follow provide a summary of the most salient characteristics that participants shared about themselves and illuminate some of the multifaceted aspects of each respondent's background. I listed the participants in the order in which I interviewed them.

Lauren- Lauren worked in residential life at a major four-year university in the southwest. Growing up in a financially stable home, Lauren was able to pursue a college education, but she had some difficulties in college due to her invisible physical and mental disabilities. At the time of the study, she had developed an interest in LGBT issues and identified as bisexual.

Nicholas- Nicholas was the son of an undocumented father, who had been deported several times throughout Nicholas' childhood. Nicholas developed an interest in social justice issues early in life because of the challenges that his father faced. As a self-identified Latino, Nicholas engaged heavily in social justice work involving race. At the time of the study, he was completing his doctoral degree and worked at a university in the Pacific Northwest.

Buffy- Buffy grew up in a low-income home, where her family needed significant governmental assistance. Buffy is a White woman, and her service learning work focused primarily on eradicating the "White savior syndrome" often demonstrated by well-off White students as they engaged with residents in economically disadvantaged communities.

Leah- Leah had been working in counseling and student affairs for over 20 years when this study took place. She earned her doctoral degree in psychology and worked for a social justice agency. Growing up with a parent in the military, she recalled seeing racial integration early in her life, and her experiences made her want to engage in work

around diversity and multiculturalism. As she moved along in her career, she also developed an interest in social justice issues around age and disability status.

Jess- Jess worked in a highly selective private four-year institution, where she focused on social justice and community advocacy. Jess self-identified as Asian American, and worked closely with Asian American and Latino communities. Her graduate degree is in non-profit management, but she had been working in student affairs for several years.

Josh- Josh grew up in a conservative Christian home in the Midwest. Josh obtained his undergraduate degree in theater, and used his passion for performance in his social justice work. Josh self-identified as a White, gay male and has done service work helping gay youth prior to his work at a university.

TC- At the time of the study, TC was working on a master's degree in student affairs and worked in residential life. TC had engaged in social justice work in college, prior to starting graduate school. TC was ethnically Cambodian and self-identified as Asian American.

Will- Will worked as an administrator, with a focus on student conduct. He explained that he was highly affected by his experience growing up as a Black male in the South. When this study took place, Will had been in the field for over 10 years, and had completed his doctorate in higher education. Will engaged in social justice work by using a strategic lens to change institutional policies and practices.

Lee- At the time of the study, Lee was working on his doctoral degree in student affairs. Growing up, Lee's mother taught her to become actively involved in her community, and as an

adult, Lee pursued a career in civic engagement. Lee self-identified as a White, cis-gender female and worked to become a strong advocate and ally to people in marginalized communities.

Bill- Bill worked in residential life and housing where he attempted to bring social justice into his work. Because he lived in a gay-friendly place, Bill, who self-identified as a White, gay male, often felt like he did not have to think about his identities; but he had a deep desire to engage in social justice work at a higher level.

Essa- Essa began thinking about and engaging in social justice work around the age of 23 or 24. She believed that she learned about it later than did most other people, but through mentors, conferences, and readings, she continued to learn and grow her knowledge and skills. Essa self-identified as a White woman, who had about 10 years of experience.

Robert- Robert, who had earned a master's degree in student affairs, primarily worked with low-income students of color. Robert had worked at a both religiously affiliated universities and large, flagship institutions. Robert self-identified as a Black queer individual.

Margot- Margot had a background is in student affairs; however, much of her work focused on research and assessment. Margot's work often involved the aggregation of demographics data, and she struggled to find ways to incorporate social justice into practices designed to be objective and scientific. Margot self-identified as a White, middle class woman.

Kyle- Kyle grew up on the West Coast with interracial parents. Self-identifying as bi-racial and a gay/queer cis-gender male, Kyle learned about racism at an early age from his parents. Kyle was a first-generation college student, and had worked to advance social justice, in part, because of his own experiences and identities.

Ryan- Ryan had worked in higher education for almost 20 years, Ryan currently works in an office of diversity and inclusion at a mostly White and male institution. Ryan self-identifies as queer and as genderqueer. Ryan was also in an interracial relationship. Ryan has focused on social justice of much of Ryan's career, with extensive theoretical and practical experience.

Learning about Social Justice

Participants described social justice as a concept that they learned in both an unconscious and conscious manner. Most participants tracked their social justice awareness and interest back to their childhoods. When asked when she began learning about social justice, Lee described a scene from her childhood, when her mom wanted her to learn about justice. She explained, "I have a really distinct memory of my mom when I was a child, rolling me through a construction site in protest of this forest near our house that they were destructing in order to put up a shopping mall." Looking back on those memories from childhood, Lee stated, "I don't think [my mom] would ever say that it was social justice, but what she taught me was the importance of self-interest...that it's not all self-less acts." In most cases, these early lessons about social justice values were strong catalysts for later social justice work. These values often came from both the actions of parents, like in the case of Lee, or through childhood experiencing with marginalization.

All of the participants in this study held at least one marginalized identity, and that identity was important in their social justice development. They knew that being a person of color, having a disability, or being of a low socio-economic background meant that they experienced the world differently than others with dominant identities. Buffy recalled her

parents teaching her that the government and the rich did not care about the lives of poor people. They explicitly taught her that her experience was not only different, but was marginalized and oppressed. Conversely, Nicholas learned about social (in)justice early. He explained, “I think it's very indirect... and being the son of an undocumented Latino Mexican father and a White mother, I think, inherently, there was social justice... as my father's been deported three times from the United States.” Like both Buffy and Nicholas, Kyle was explicitly aware of his identity growing up. He recalled that his parents, an interracial couple, were forthright about issues of race and racism. Whether these lessons of injustice developed from direct experience or from watching injustice occur, these defining moments, in part, catalyzed the respondents for later social justice work.

Not all participants learned about social justice as children, but all participants could trace some of their interest in social justice to early lessons and experiences that occurred during their childhoods. Childhood experiences can serve as a strong foundation for the development of the values and principles often involved social justice work; however, participants noted that their commitment deepened as they adopted the language of social justice. For Ryan, active and intentional social justice work developed in parallel with an understanding of developing the language around oppression and justice. Ryan recalled, “I started to get some of this language and these concepts and knowing what I wanted to do. I wanted to be in education, where I help students see the world operate as it is, if you will...with systemic inequalities.”

Several of the older participants in the study noted that their understanding of and interest in social justice developed after they completed graduate school. Ryan first learned social justice language while working in the non-profit arena as an adult, while Essa learned about it shortly after starting her career. Essa developed her learning of

social justice through her close connections with social justice oriented colleagues and supervisors.

Conversely, respondents who were a bit younger appeared to learn about social justice and the language around it at an earlier age. As the youngest person involved in this study, TC recalled learning about social justice as a teenager. In high school, TC belonged to a student group focused on social justice, where she began to learn more about identify, power, and privilege. Despite this initial introduction to social justice issues, she did not fully develop her conceptualization of social justice until college, where she started a student organization focused on social justice.

Kyle learned about social justice a bit further into his career at his undergraduate institution. Kyle, who went to an institution known for its liberalism, described his first encounter with social justice:

One of my first classes that I needed to take was a class essentially on diversity and social justice issues in the United States. It was really the first time that I had been challenged to really think more broadly outside of race to include a wider range of social identity groups and a wider range of ‘isms’ in my considerations.

Most early and mid-career participants⁷ identified graduate preparation programs as the primary site where they learned directly and actively about social justice. Bill went to a predominantly White university right out of high school, but took a “multi-cultural counseling course in graduate school and was introduced to this idea of whiteness... For [him] it was like one crack

⁷ Six of the eight individuals, who had between two and eight years of experience, learned about social justice in graduate school.

and then really [his] worldview sort of opened up.” Will, who had engaged in this work for a long time, noted that his graduate program was a place of growth for him. He explained that having the space to reflect was important for the emergence of his social justice identity:

In graduate school, I did a lot of reflection on who I am...on who I was becoming...and on how my experiences influenced who I can be—the best advocate, ally, educator... I can be in the settings that I'm working in. Graduate school...through the coursework, through some of the decisions I made...and my practical experiences that carried forth in my career path in working in community engagement and my first job...

According to each participant, spaces that allowed them to be reflective, to think about their identities, and challenged them to think about injustice beyond their own identities were critical for social justice development. From the stories that participants' shared, spaces that fostered the values of reflection around identity and injustice appeared to be ripe for social justice development.

Defining Social Justice

Regardless of where and when respondents learned about social justice, their individual definitions of the concept contained little substantive variation. Within this study, participants' definitions converged on issues of equity, multidimensional approaches to injustice, and the process and outcomes of social justice work. Unlike prior scholarship, which found a wide spectrum of definitions among counseling practitioners (Singh et al., 2010); this study revealed that participants held closely aligned definitions of social justice, although they often used slightly different wording to describe the concept.

Singh et al. looked at counseling students within a single program, and found that even with common experiences, individuals still had many different understandings of social justice. Within this study, the participants belonged to the same professional organization, but had relatively similar definitions of social justice. For example, Jess stated that social justice involved “equal outcomes/access and equitable inputs.” She explained that the goal was to bring about equality, and one must create equitable systems and processes to reach that goal. Similarly, Josh explained, “Social justice is the continued work, conversations, learning, understanding, and redefining toward and of a world where equity thrives and no social barriers prevent any person from opportunity and involvement.” Like Jess, Josh saw social justice as both a process of continued engagement and an outcome of a better world.

Kyle cited Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) in his definition of social justice, stating that it involved the goals of equity, inclusion, and well-being. Bill captured this notion well in a similar definition:

Social Justice is both a product and a process.... Social justice work is the process of continually engaging and reflecting and actively dismantling systems that benefit certain individuals over others in hopes of working toward a lived experience where individuals have equity of access to certain experiences.

Together, all but two participants provided a definition predicated on the ideas of equity and inclusion by focusing on both the process and the goal of social justice work.

Although the definitions study participants provided had little variance, the verbs that the respondents used to describe the social justice process differed slightly. For example, three individuals used the verb “dismantle” within their definition. The term *dismantle*, as used it,

referred to a process whereby one deconstructed the institutions or systems that hold onto oppression. To dismantle a system, an individual must necessarily oppose the actions of the system. For instance, one of the participants mentioned the difficulties of “fighting the system” several times throughout his interview. Throughout the interview, the participant discussed an animosity between himself and the institution, as part of a system of injustice. The three participants who used this term identified as activists and understood their work as a battle, a fight, and a struggle. One of the respondents used this language throughout the interview, as a way of making meaning from his experiences and providing direction for his work. Conversely, another participant defined social justice in terms of strategies designed to create equitable access. He linked his actions and challenges to his efforts to make small shifts in campus policies, cultures, and practices. This attempt, as he described it, was to bring about small “amendments” to make the institution more socially just.

Participants’ language remained remarkably consistent throughout the interviews; the way they framed their definitions seemed to converge with the way they made meaning from their experiences. With these slight variations in verb choice, participants named the challenges that correlated to the ways that they perceived their work. In other words, if a participant identified the system within their definition or view of social justice, they tended to have more salient challenges with the system. On the other hand, if a respondent identified social justice in relationship to others, they eventually tended to discuss the challenges of feeling resistance from others or isolation when doing social justice work. Since the purpose of this study was not to focus solely on definitions, I did not delve deeper into this phenomenon; however, I am noting it to show that one’s

conception of social justice may be reflected in or influence the challenges one identifies as salient.

A Model of Social Justice Commitment

Prior research (Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Miller et al., 2009) has shown that social justice is a developmental process; a process whereby individuals become aware of injustice, followed by an iterative cycle of interest and engagement followed by commitment. This model is useful for scholars and practitioners to understand the general ways individuals develop towards a social justice orientation and commitment.

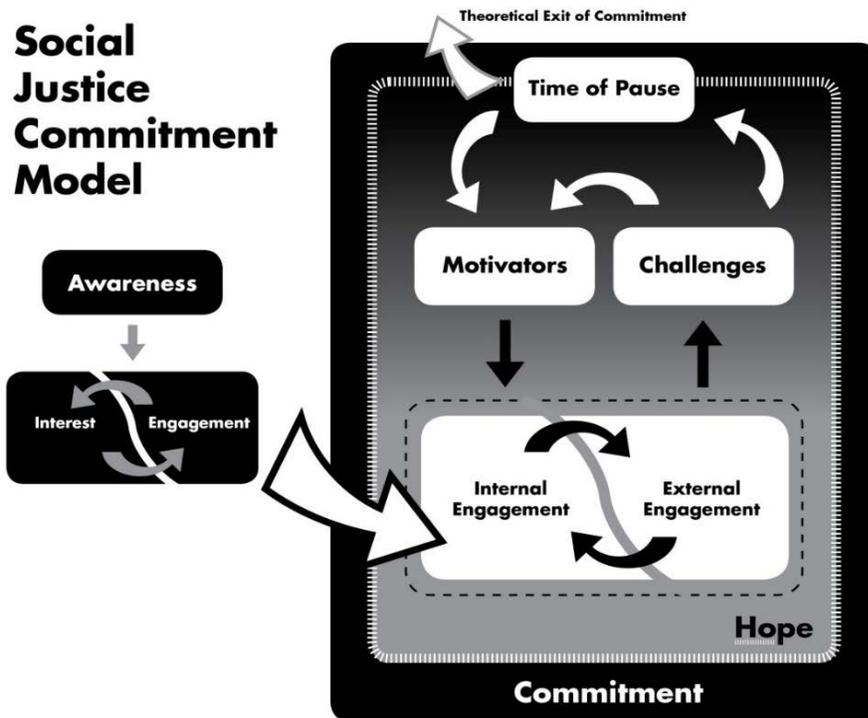


Figure 1. Social justice commitment model. The theoretical model for how individuals move within a stage of social justice commitment.

Social justice commitment is an iterative and developmental process. Building upon prior research (Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2005; Miller et

al., 2009), social justice begins with awareness of social (in)justice (see Figure 1). Once individuals have developed this initial awareness, they move into an iterative cycle of interest and engagement around social justice. These three components represent the pre-commitment stage.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the border represents the movement into commitment from pre-commitment. The large arrow represents the movement into commitment, through hope, and leads to an iterative cycle of internal and external engagement. Internal engagement involves taking in and processing information, using reflection, and making meaning of knowledge and skills. External engagement involves the actions and behaviors an individual employs to increase justice. Social justice professionals often interrupted face a number of challenges as they engage in the work. Once challenged, individuals typically find the motivation to move through those challenges. If the motivators are not sufficient to help workers overcome the challenge, individuals move into a time of pause.

During the present study, hope emerged as an integral component that lay firmly within commitment. In Figure 1, hope is present near the bottom of the model as one engages in social justice work; however, as an individual faces challenges and needs time for pause, hope dissipates. Finally, the arrow at the top of the model represents a theoretical exit from commitment, a phenomenon that was not present within the current study, but may exist in the experiences of other social justice professionals. The following sections will provide greater detail about the model of social commitment, briefly covering the pre-commitment stage and the movement into commitment. The section on the commitment stage will include a discussion of each individual component of the model.

Moving through Pre-Commitment to Commitment

The current study does not specifically focus on the components of social justice development prior to commitment; however, it does appear to support current pre-commitment theories (Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2005; Miller et al., 2009). As individuals move towards a social justice orientation, they begin with an awareness of (in)justice and become interested in learning more about issues of social justice. Interest and engagement are an iterative dyad, as individuals can become increasingly interested in new components of social justice and repeatedly reengage in those issues. From there, most individuals in the present study articulated that their movement from pre-commitment to commitment developed when they began to develop the language to name, conceptualize, and understand principles and aspects of social justice. Many, though not all, of the participants developed this understanding in graduate school, when they engaged in coursework that focused on diversity, multiculturalism, or social justice.

Participants found it difficult to identify a specific time or incident that facilitated their transition into the commitment stage; however, most identified a general time period. During this period, they began to move from simply being interested and engaged in the work to the adoption of an intentional determination to engage in learning, dialogue, reflection, and action on an ongoing basis. As individuals moved into a stage of commitment, they unconsciously and simultaneously moved into hope. According to participants, this reflexive move into hope was profound, because hope thrived when two conditions were present: positive change was possible and the participant felt as though

they were capable of creating positive change. This belief was critical throughout the respondents' social justice work, and I will discuss it in more depth in the section on hope.

Internal and External Engagement

Once individuals enter into commitment, they move into a cycle of internal and external engagement. Prior research (Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2005; Miller et al., 2009) has suggested that individuals move between interest and engagement before their commitment. After commitment, individuals move beyond simple interest to pursue self-reflection, dialogues, and educational experiences that form their social justice growth and development. As noted before, internal and external engagement are critical components of social justice commitment. The external components include actions that propel individuals towards stronger and better-developed knowledge, skills, and abilities around social justice.

Conversely, internal engagement involves reflection, meaning making, and processing new and old information and experiences. Committed individuals appear to have a deep level of personal reflection around their own marginalized and dominant identities and the process of balancing their own intentions with the impacts of their actions. Moreover, as they engage outwardly, they constantly attempt to be strategic in their use of language and intentional around their actions, as they frame social justice in a way that helps others learn and grow. There is an immense amount of psychological engagement involved in attempting to embody and enact social justice work.

For this component of social justice to be most effective, internal and external engagement should occur in tandem. For instance, without reflection and meaning making, action and change can be problematic, while reflection without action cannot change the system of injustice. Internal and external engagement comprises a duality

needed for commitment. In this vein, I asked Essa what advice she would give her younger self. She reflected that, “I’m still trying to [learn] and just see other experiences. I just would have given myself a good shake and a good motivating talk hopefully to work harder, do more, learn more, don’t stop, check myself over and over and over again.” One must learn (internal engagement) and do (external engagement) simultaneously to develop necessary skills, knowledge, and talents. At times, it appeared that the participants became stuck in a place of inaction and reflection, without any external engagement. Kyle explained, “I can feel myself getting stuck in just being furious, that then I no longer really have the ability to really effectively figure out, “How am I going to meaningfully engage someone if I’ve chosen to be a social-justice educator specifically?” Moreover, when individuals engage externally, they may not properly reflect on or be intentional about their actions. In either case, an individual’s engagement can be problematic, and can lead a person to feel challenged; although, individuals who are adept in both forms of engagement may still encounter challenges.

Social Justice Challenges

One of the goals of this study was to identify the challenges student affairs practitioners face as they engage in social justice work. The data indicated that while professionals are engaged in the iterative interaction between internal and external engagement with social justice, they often experienced an interruption that challenged them. By identifying these challenges, I sought to illuminate and honor the struggles student affairs professionals may experience as they attempt to engage in social justice efforts and create social change. Overall, eight unique challenges emerged within this study: *Feeling Isolated, Navigating Whiteness, Resistance to Social Justice, Social*

Justice Ethos, Extended Workload, Institutional Position, Campus Culture, and Fighting the System. I ordered these themes by beginning with intrapersonal challenges and moving outwards towards institutional and systematic issues.

Loneliness and isolation. One of the first discernable challenges that individuals identified was the feeling of loneliness and isolation that they experienced as they engaged in social justice work. Social justice is an relatively new field within the academy, and most participants in this study felt as though they were the only one, or one of a few, on their campus engaged in this work. Social justice is difficult, and without someone to share the challenges and the wins, the work could feel lonely and isolating.

Margot, who had recently taken a position at a new institution, felt that she was the only person who was concerned about social justice as administrators developed new institutional policies. She reflected on how her institution was looking at differential housing rates, seeking to charge more for newer halls or halls with more amenities. Her first concern was that if the policy made some halls were more expensive than were others, it would essentially divide the residents within the respective halls by socio-economic status. When she brought up this concern, her colleagues decided not to look at such outcomes. In that moment, and in others, Margot realized that she was the only one in her department who examined issues through a social justice lens. She and other participants in the study often felt that they had no support as they advocated for the issues about which few people cared.

Lauren had also attempted to bring social justice perspectives to her daily work, but she shared a similar concern, “It's very isolated and lonely work. I feel like I'm doing it by myself.” For Lauren, the effect of this isolation was cumulative,

The hardest thing, again, going back to feeling isolated...It's hard to sustain a level of energy around doing social justice and diversity work; where you feel you're getting shut down, and no one else is interested in helping you with that.

Every corner you turn, it's just someone else saying, "No, thank you."

Ryan echoed a similar sentiment, "I'm the first person to ever do diversity work on the campus I'm on. It's very lonely." For some, the lack of support from others who share similar interests can be difficult. Each of the practitioners in this study sought out conversations and support, but often found such support lacking when it came to issues of social justice.

Navigating Whiteness. Identities were continuously present and salient for individuals as they negotiated social justice work and their position within the work. For all individuals in this study, race was the primary identity associated with their social justice efforts. Racial identity, racism, or racial issues were the prominent social concerns that participants encountered, regardless of their race or other marginalized identities. For White individuals, race played a significant role in determining the degree to which they could authentically and fully engage in social justice work. Bill noted this phenomenon when he stated, "I think my struggle is I really want to engage around Whiteness." Bill was particularly concerned with the court system's failure to indict the police officers in Ferguson and Staten Island. In attempting to reconcile his Whiteness and figure out his role in working for racial justice, he asked,

Am I doing enough? Am I doing the right things?... [I'll read] you should go to protest, but you shouldn't put your hands up; or you shouldn't go to protest, and you should let folks of color lead it. I have really struggled with this because I

think now in an age of so many opinions and so many sources of...There's so much rhetoric around social justice, which I think is great. The more voices that are present at the table, however...Every voice that gets added adds to a cacophony of confusion, and maybe our job is to sit and listen and work through it. Bills words captured the internal conflict and tension he experienced between his desire to engage in social justice work and his own identity. In this way, simply engaging became difficult. Bill had access to a multitude of perspectives, but was unsure of how to navigate his identity in relationship to his work.

Leah, who also addressed her own struggles with Whiteness, shared, “Here's the biggest piece of White privilege that I worry about, and there are many...[it] is that, if I wanted to, I could step away. That horrifies me.” This perspective proved to be a common one. Many White participants worried that their Whiteness provided them with the privilege to walk away. Whiteness became a challenge in and of itself, especially when respondents engaged with people of color who were also engaged in social justice work. Ryan recalled, “Having a conversation with a dear friend, who is a woman of color, and I said jokingly, ‘I want to quit. I don't want diversity work anymore.’...That's what I said, and she was like, ‘That's a little bit of Whiteness there.’” For Ryan, this encounter became a salient moment, one where Whiteness was called out and challenged. I asked Ryan to elaborate about why this experienced was an issue of Whiteness, instead of one about gender, class, ability status, or another identity. Ryan responded,

That's the question. I think we, as White people, did a wonderful job of ignoring everything, walking away from everything. That's just the history of oppression. I just feel like...I don't know. That's a really good question. Why is it Whiteness?...

It's so embedded in the fabric...in history of the United States... race, racism, race issues...I don't know. It's huge, and we still suck at it. We totally suck at it. That was a great question, though, because I don't know.

Here, Ryan and Leah perceived their Whiteness as an identity that gave them the ability to disengage from social justice work. This option did not necessarily present itself with other dominant identities. For instance, Nicholas argued, “I think that by being a heterosexual male, I've been given some privileges associated with that; but it doesn't mean that because of those privileges that I'm unable to continue to advocate on those issues.” In essence, his identity as a male or a heterosexual individual did not preclude him from advocating for other groups. Although Nicholas did not argue that White people were not able to do this work, several participants note that Whiteness did impact their ability to stay engaged in social justice work. The juxtaposition between Whiteness and other majority identities appeared to be that Whiteness provided the option to disengage, unlike any other majority identities. This phenomenon set up an apparent conflict within social justice work.

During several interviews, participants noted their desire to avoid “Oppression Olympics,” an apparent competition focusing on whether one social identity is more privileged or more oppressed than is another. While most participants believed that all oppression was bad, and that there was no way to hold one group's experiences as more important or more oppressed than that of another; most participants equated social justice work to racial justice work. Whiteness is identified as the single identity that may prevent or preclude a person from being able to fully engage in social justice work. Buffy, in particular, felt that her Whiteness hindered her ability to engage in service learning work because she wanted to avoid the perception of a

“White savior syndrome.” Additionally, like many White educators, Bill noted that he questioned his ability to bring dialogues about race to the forefront because he feared he would misstep. To navigate such beliefs about social justice work are extremely challenging for many of the White individuals within this study.

Resistance to social justice. Student affairs professionals often face resistance as they attempt to enact, teach, or advocate for social justice. In such roles, they engage with individuals who may have little to no understanding of social justice issues. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, social justice is a complex concept that incorporates principles of inclusion, distribution of goods and services, and the recognition and celebration of many voices. As Kyle noted in his interview, “[In student affairs, we] expect that folks are going to cultivate competency around equity, diversity, and inclusion. It's in the competencies. There's a lot of consensus around that.” Even with this consensus, there is a lack of deep understanding of social justice and injustice. Thus, when social-justice-oriented professionals attempt to engage in naming injustice, advocating for marginalized communities, or asking critical questions, students, colleagues, and administrators may display a wide arrange of resistant behaviors.

Participants noted that students, in particular, tended to resist the naming of injustice. When Josh addressed issues of racism, sexism, or homophobia, for instance, he found that some of his students responded by saying, “Yeah, well, I still think it's bullshit.” This blatant resistance to understanding injustice proved frustrating for Josh, but he expressed a determination to continue challenging his students, even in the face of their resistance: “I continue to engage in conversations; but at a certain point, it kind of feels like, ‘God, White guys fuckin' suck.’” It is common for individuals with the most privileged identities to be

resistant to hearing about their privilege, or that a system that has rewarded them could possibly be unfair (Applebaum, 2010).

At an institutional level, Lauren struggled to advocate for gender inclusive housing, and encountered several types of resistance. Although some colleagues in Lauren's department sought gender-inclusive housing options, Lauren identified a serious conflict of values. From her perspective, gender inclusive housing was a necessary option for many students; however, the institution had gotten resistance from parents who threatened that they would remove their children from residence halls if such a policy went into effect. She explained the result of the conflicts between just policies and revenue:

[What] we're hearing and seeing in terms of revenue generation is that, at best, it's not going to generate more revenue for us, and at worst, it could cause us to lose revenue. From the financial side of things, it's not something that people are interested in.

In Lauren's case, the resistance to social justice was multi-faceted. First, parents were resistant to new policies that they viewed unfavorably. Second, the institution's resistance involved concerns about financial losses. Lauren found that such resistance was difficult to overcome, with the school's financial interests trumping those related to equity.

The resistance to social justice or recognizing injustice can come from individuals, like the case of Josh and Lauren, but it can also be institutional (as Lauren's case also showed). Working for several years at one institution, Nicholas realized that his efforts to change the system, bring about social justice conversations, and build a movement were never actualized. While at the institution, he had a supervisor who also

served as a mentor and provided significant support to him. Nicholas expressed his disappointment about the fruitlessness of his efforts:

The institution that [I've] invested so much in trying to build this movement doesn't want it. [I] realize that ultimately, this is an [assistant vice president] telling [me] that the institute doesn't want it... I would say [I am] very disappointed, and the four years that I put into this institution had been...I don't know what the word is, but it had been “for naught,” so to speak.

Nicholas went on to state that the institution was “just going to operate the way it wants to operate and it's going to give off it's own persona. You have an inability to change that. It's a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.” The changes Nicholas was making never gained traction at the institution. He felt as though he continued to put himself out there, fight for fairness, but the institution and its leaders did not have the same agenda.

This challenge also appeared throughout other participants' narratives. Whether it was a single person or the values of the institution, participants identified that the institutions in question were not open to change. Like Nicholas, Lauren found herself the only one within her office who asked critical questions about social justice issues. She lamented, “Every time I bring up topics of social justice and diversity, my co-workers just roll their eyes, and they're like, ‘Oh, here she goes again.’” For both of these participants, the institutions do not foster a culture that valued social justice, which made it difficult for individuals within those institutions to change.

Bill also shared his attempts to engage his campus around issues of justice. He asserted that his “struggle always [had] been where to start... the conversation on this campus. I tried. I even started on a smaller level, and I [met] resistance, and I think, like,

‘Aw crap.’” For participants, this perception of resistance, no matter what the reasoning for such it, was difficult. The toll of constant and unrelenting resistance seemed to take an emotional, mental, and intellectual toll as the respondents attempted to navigate such unyielding spaces to enact change.

Social justice ethos. In addition to individual and institutional resistance, participants encountered a different set of challenges that emerged from working with other like-minded social justice educators. Perhaps because I collected data at a conference site, the challenge of a social justice ethos emerged as a salient concern for many of the respondents that I interviewed at the Institute on Social Justice, while it was less of an issue for other participants. I asked several of the participants from the Commission on Social Justice Educators if there was an ethos of social justice educators, but that challenge was less salient or pronounced.

The social justice ethos is extraordinarily complicated, and involves a complex negotiation of identities, behaviors, and vulnerability. For this study, the term *social justice ethos* refers to spaces composed of a critical mass of social justice educators, where certain norms and standards are often unconsciously present. For example, a space like a conference, workshop, or gathering around social justice is likely to create a broader social justice ethos. Moreover, the ethos appears within departments, offices, or programs in which several individuals espouse a social justice orientation.

Although this study does not explicitly define this social justice ethos or its components, participants noted that there are high expectations among other social justice educators that one could not make a mistake, that some marginalized identities took precedence over others, and that any missteps will be strictly and unforgivingly addressed. Additionally, only female

participants described social justice spaces as particularly challenging; however, during follow up interviews, several of the male participants affirmed the finding that there is an unforgiving component within these spaces. Identifying the social justice ethos appeared to be a priority only for those who had engaged in social justice work for some time.

Leah discussed, in detail, the identities that are often at play in social justice spaces. Leah, as an older White woman, found herself struggling to navigate these identities, and shared a very salient experience she encountered while at the institute:

One of the incidents that really still bothers me a great deal, is... One of the members of one of the groups I was in was also over 50. We were in a big, echoey, cavernous space, and there were a lot of people... It was loud...it was really loud. There was a lot of ambient noise. [My group member] raised her hand and asked the facilitators, "Do you mind if our group moves into the hallway so that I can hear better?" A Black person in a different group raised a hand and said, "I feel really triggered by that because I think you're calling Black people loud." Immediately, everyone rushed to support the person who was feeling triggered, and nobody, except me...later...and me a little bit at this time, but not as much as I should have, said, "Hey, it's not about race, it's about the biology of the ageing ear." Instead, everyone ignored her, jumped on her, and supported the person that said, "Well you're just calling Black people loud." I thought, "Come on, I know this is a race immersion workshop, but let's be fucking real." She wasn't saying anything about Black people. It's that kind of ignoring of the intersections of stuff that I think happens in some of those spaces.

This anecdote is similar to several other stories I heard from participants, and which I have heard in my own experiences. Navigating a space where two individuals feel

marginalized and silenced, can be difficult. However, the challenge for Leah lay with the expectations and unforgiving nature that appeared to exist in such spaces. She noted that social justice educators “pay lots of lip service to not doing Oppression Olympics, yet they still do it.” For her and some others, the social justice ethos was challenging because its unspoken rules and unforgiving nature fostered a fear of speaking up.

Jess discussed the ethos she experienced in social justice spaces when navigating others’ expectations of her. She recounted, “[We’re] constantly trying to battle the expectations of others...of what people think we should be doing as social justice workers or even as educators.” Specifically, Jess was referring to the expectation that social justice educators should never take a break, should be perfect and never mess up, and should always be willing to take on injustice. Jess continued to discuss these high expectations:

[That’s] not possible; you are a human being. At some point or another, this is a sense of bitterness that happens. It's the culture of expectation... the worst part about the culture surrounding social justice work and social justice folks in general is that you're not allowed to burn out.

Many individuals wear themselves thin from an external pressure to remain engaged, even when engaging is not personally healthy, or from the internalization of that expectation.

During her interview, Lee appeared to judge her own development, and I asked her to respond to this perception. She provided the following explanation, “I have this mentality right now, and I don't know how long it's been going on.... I'm self-shaming right now. I need to dig deep to ask why. I'm not really sure why.... Sometimes I go to the shaming place because I'm trying to move forward, but in order to move forward, I need to reconcile my past.” The

pressure that respondents experienced from other social justice educators pushed them to want to accomplish more in a shorter period of time. When I asked Essa about what she might do differently, she said “‘Silly Essa. You waited so long.’ I think I would have pushed myself and challenged myself in different ways and in different ongoing learning experiences...something that I really kicked myself for [not] doing.” It seemed that Essa was dealing with some internalized pressure to develop more quickly. In some ways, the ethos that respondents perceived seemed to be a product of both the high expectations of others and of themselves.

The expectation that it is not acceptable to make mistakes or to want to step away from the social justice work (regardless of one’s identity) impedes opportunities for the expression of vulnerability and for taking risks. Risk and vulnerability are vital to social justice work (Goodman et al., 2011); however, individuals often experience judgment and retaliation when they take risks and express their vulnerability. Buffy shared an anecdote about a time when she felt particularly vulnerable admitting a misstep to a social justice colleague. In the scenario, Buffy, a White person, unknowingly demonstrated microaggression towards another person around race, and she explained how she grew and learned from that moment:

To be honest, I wiped that memory from my mind for a really long time, and I never really talked about it until last week with that one girl; because she was trying to figure out how to do good programs, and she does the same kind of work that I do...service learning. Again, social justice is key, and I don't know why I thought to share; but it was funny that she had shaming eyes when I told her that story. There's a part of me that was defensive at that. I was like, “What the fuck? What are you looking at me [like] that for?” ... It's interesting that defensiveness and a little bit of anger right there too. I think that's why we don't share those

stories; but those stories are also important to share because it shows that we're not perfect, and you can start off being a horrible person. You can get better.

Buffy and others found a “lack of compassion” (Buffy) in social justice spaces. Whether it manifested in Leah’s story about someone who was hard of hearing, in Jess’s experiences with derision at the idea of taking a break, or Buffy’s experience with feeling shamed, several respondents experienced a general lack of compassion within social justice spaces. Buffy noted that all social justice educators have “messed up” and struggled; however, sharing such moments is challenging when the ethos and culture of the social justice educator space was characterized by judgment or a lack compassion.

Extended workload. Student affairs work often stretches far beyond a nine to five job, and requires significant amounts of time and energy. However, for these social-justice-oriented professionals, the amount of time and energy extends even further. Bill noted that he had attempted to find ways to incorporate social justice into his role, but explained that, “after a long day, sometimes the last thing I want to do is stay on campus to go to a town hall; or I do this intergroup dialogue program, but it happens at night.... [Along with other responsibilities], balancing justice work can be time consuming.” Buffy reflected on her own struggle to remain balanced when she shared, “I try to keep it balanced, but it is difficult; because if you really care about something, you're committed to making sure it happens, but [you’re also] committed to making sure that you're okay, too.”

Jess also shared that her social justice work did not stop when she left the office. She explained, “[I] would go to immigration forums on the weekends. I'd go to rallies; and it was tied to my work, because part of my job is to also educate my students that I directly supervise...so my student leaders...around immigration issues.” Because her role focused on

community and civic engagement, a lot of her work took place on weekends, as that was when the community she worked with was available. For many participants, the work that came with being a social justice educator dictated that they had to do the diversity trainings for their offices, serve as the liaison on diversity-related committees, and engage the community in discussions about social identities and social issues. For many respondents, their workload had grown beyond their already taxed student affairs duties to include social justice work. The participants shared that their colleagues rarely recognized the additional time and energy these efforts required, a common phenomenon that often leads to burnout and a need to withdraw from the work. As Jess explained, her workload extended far beyond what was healthy: “I burned out really badly; and for a week after I quit, I didn't get out of bed. I was out of bed maybe an hour a day. I didn't speak to anybody. I barely ate.”

The respondents acknowledged that social justice work could be emotionally and mentally taxing. For Jess and others, the exhaustion they experienced often moved beyond the average workday and could be difficult to manage. Ryan spoke of the energy drain that resulted from the amount of time and effort that one must invest into social justice work:

I think of it as energy. The way my current job is...and this has not been at all my jobs...I am constantly putting out all this energy. It... sucks my soul out of me, and I'm not replenishing that enough. I think maybe that's a breaking point where I was giving too much...giving too much.

The participants explained that the extended workload, which leads to burnout, lead to feelings that one's personal life was out of balance. Ryan stated, “I don't want to come home from work with nothing left for my partner, my wife. I want to come home with

something for her, finding a way as I'm putting back in." The lack of balance and replenishing energy can lead one to feel challenged.

Institutional position. According to the respondents, attempting to create change can be difficult, especially for individuals in entry-level or midlevel positions. Participants earlier in their careers seemed to struggle more when advocating for policies and trying to effect change. They expressed feeling disheartened because although they had the motivation and passion to do the work, they found themselves ultimately ineffective or unable to make substantive change beyond their discrete area. Lauren, for example, who was in an entry-level position but served as the social justice expert in her area, explained that she "[did not] have a seat at the table when a lot of decisions [were] made." Bill, who held a midlevel position, mentioned that on several occasions, he had attempted to bring a social justice conversation to his institution; however, he felt that he was only able to do that work in the small pockets that he had the power to change.

Buffy addressed the benefit of being in a position of power when trying to advance social justice agendas: "[You] can be as socially-just-minded as you want, but to make changes you have to be in positions of power." She also touched on the challenges of having such power: "I think it's very, very difficult, no matter what institution you're at, to be in positions of power and not give in to injustice or not let injustice happen." According to Buffy, as individuals move into positions of power, they must also have a larger perspective to do the work of the institution, which may require compromise.

Several participants noted that to operate effectively in an institution, one must "pick their battles." Ryan, who has engaged in the work for over 20 years, explained the following:

I'm at a director level, and I'm the only person [who does this work at the institution]. Yes, I can make change. Yes, I could do good programming; however, if you don't really change the institutional systemic stuff, you got to do both, basically. I think the big barrier is how do we make it important on a higher accolade, which I hate saying because that perpetuates systems.

Individuals in positions of power, like Ryan or Will, who are both upper-level administrators, must be strategic if they are going to make changes palatable to their colleagues who may or may not understand or support a social justice agenda. Will conceptualized social justice work as a series of small moments that one can use to impact the larger culture over time. He explained that his mantra was, "Never try to change a whole culture that is there longer than you. The only thing you can hope to do is amend it for the simple fact that one small amendment can lead to the largest change." He shared that administrators often must take the long-term path, because "you are not meant to be a martyr." These administrators demonstrated the desire and positional power to create positive institutional change; but participants without such power continued to struggle in their attempts to make institutional changes.

Campus culture. According to the participants, their work environment often made engaging in social justice challenging. As the participants indicated, every institution has its own culture, demographics, and campus leaders, each of which influences an individual's ability to create or engage in social justice work and conversations. Ryan's institution, for example, was fairly homogenous. Ryan explained the institutional context:

I'm at a school that most of its history... it's a school that's been a [men's college], which has evolved to an institute of technology; but never had the conversation

about what that meant and what that meant to admit women.... What's our masculinity? What's our Whiteness? It's 80% male. It's 85% White. The administration is very White...not all male, but very much are White male boy's club, if you will. I don't fault people for lack of knowledge, because that's a product of our history.

Although Ryan did not blame the history or current state of the college for its lack of awareness about social justice, Ryan did note that to change such a culture, or to create a conversation about change, was extremely difficult.

Nicholas echoed this sentiment when he spoke about previously working on a campus that was very White and male. He explained that, as with Ryan's institution, it was systemically impossible to create a social justice agenda. His last campus "[operated] as a corporation, and that corporation [was] color blind. It [lumped] everything that [related] to diversity, whether it's women's issues, diversity race issues, religion, LGBT into one area." The issue with such a corporate culture is that it values money, efficiency, and return on investment, instead of the process of learning, the desire for a rich culture of diversity, or the individual needs of marginalized groups. Campuses that lack institutional diversity and lack campus leaders who care about social justice make it challenging for a social justice educator to move forward a social justice agenda.

For Lauren, the issue was not her institution was not diverse, but that she was unable to find or tap into a larger conversation about social justice on campus. Lauren was relatively new to the university, but expected that there would be some conversations around social justice, multiculturalism, or diversity on campus. She acknowledged, "I am not a part of a campus conversation either, and I can't identify whether that's because there's not a campus

conversation going on or whether it's because I'm not invited to be a part of that.” Conversely, Leah, who worked in a social-justice-oriented office, found it difficult to create such a conversation at her more conservative campus:

I'm still finding an ongoing challenge on this campus of getting people's attention, but it's a huge campus.... Getting an audience, finding an audience, that's a challenge. I don't think that's going to be affected by anything that's happened recently; that's just an ongoing part of [the challenge].

For professionals located both outside and inside of a social justice center, the campus culture and environment can make it challenging to engage in any kind of conversation around important justice issues.

The system. Although each respondent had a slightly different relationship with this challenge, individuals they are fighting against, attempting to change, or naming and disrupting the system. The specific battle participants waged against the system depended largely on their individual position within said system. Almost all participants agreed that simply acknowledging the problem and attempting to change the system was one of the most difficult aspects of doing social justice work. Social justice, by definition, is about creating a more just society by changing existing systems and cultures of oppression in which we all live. Buffy argued, “In some ways, no matter how much work we do, [oppressions is] still going to be there unless we're working to destroy the system.” Buffy went on to explain that she tried to work towards educating and helping individuals, but she had found that unless she addressed systemic issues, the work was not complete.

Throughout interviews, I found that participants struggled between the desire to affect local or individual change and the need to face the larger systems of oppression.

Bill, for example, expressed his anger and frustration at the systemic inequality demonstrated by the incident in Ferguson: “I am clearly upset that the system is failing, but I am not surprised that the system is failing.” Bill, along with others respondents, believed that the system failed to treat all people equally. Regardless of the type of discrimination on which they focused, the social justice educators questioned whether the system could ever really change. Kyle asked this very question, “[How] do I continue to be a part of this process of breaking down these systems that are so old and keep evolving and changing every time we try to take it apart to figure out a way to keep itself alive?”

The respondents continued their work to solve these issues, but they became frustrated in their efforts when they perceived that the system was adapting and continuously developing new manifestations of old problems. They explained that no matter how much work they accomplished, it was still emotionally and mentally exhausting to watch institutions overtly harm or oppress individuals. Eric shared his experience with this frustration and emotional and mental taxation:

One of the biggest challenges is sometimes trying to figure out, “OK, how do I continue to be a part of this process of breaking down these systems that are so old and keep evolving and changing every time we try to take it apart to figure out a way to keep itself alive?” When we're in moments like these, where I think for me, it's more my consciousness... that this really is life or death.

Eric’s words expressed his ability to look beyond his mental and emotional state to grasp the scope and scale of the work in which he engages. For Eric, the work was about the lives of the people who suffer when unjust systems prevail.

Both Robert and Nicholas argued that the system was difficult to change. Robert asserted that the system brainwashed individuals, or as Buffy stated, programmed people to turn a blind eye to the system, which allowed injustice to be normalized. Robert believed that the system was so difficult to change that he focused instead on helping individuals. He stated that the systematic oppression was “the thing that keeps me going and driving because I know if I touch five people, that's five people that will be better.”

Nicholas contended that the system could not be broken, and that one could only attempt to bend the system to be more just. As Robert explained, “[The] challenges are so hard [to fight] because they're historically rooted.... You have a group of people that have been historically oppressed, regardless.” Robert’s solution was to continue to change the system, but to help individuals who experienced oppression on an individual basis. Participants concluded that the challenge was to remain engaged, even in the face of a system that never seemed to make meaningful changes.

Summary of challenges. Based upon the participants’ responses, the challenges they faced manifested in two distinct ways within this study. First, challenges arose as significant events in which individuals experienced salient and singular difficulties. Originally, this research focused on salient challenges as critical incidents and developmental moments; however, significant events may not always be developmentally important. Second, accumulative challenges emerged as the buildup of smaller, often less identifiable, difficulties. These challenges lead individuals to feel emotionally exhausted and burned out.

While the concepts of significant events and accumulative challenges helped to frame the way participants perceived the challenges they faced, they specifically

identified a number of specific challenges that they experienced. The following list includes short conceptualizations of the eight challenges revealed within this study:

- *Feeling isolated* – feeling like the only one in a department or institution caused individuals to feel lonely and unsupported
- *Navigating Whiteness* – a particular challenge for White participants trying to balance their level of engagement on racial issues, which did not appear to exist for other dominant identities
- *Resistance to social justice* – when attempting to enact or teach social justice, professionals often faced resistance from students and colleagues who did not have a social justice orientation.
- *Social justice ethos* – among other social-justice-oriented professionals, there was an ethos that created high expectations of an individual's work and could be unforgiving of perceived mistakes.
- *Extended workload* – student affairs work often went beyond the typical 9 to 5 hours, and engaging in social justice work tended to add additional responsibilities that extended those hours.
- *Institutional position* – the ability to make change related to participants' position within an area or institution, and individuals not in positions of power felt that they were unable to have significant impact.
- *Fighting the system* – within the structures, respondents found changing or positively impacting policies and procedures difficult.

- *Campus culture* – some participants perceived their campus cultures and work environments as toxic or lacking the critical mass of diversity necessary to make changes or to sustain a conversation around social justice.

In some cases, these challenges manifested as a significant moment, such as a supervisor telling an employee to stop bringing up race in meetings. In other instances, these same incidents served as accumulative challenges. For instance, within a matter of a week, an individual may find that the institution is making decisions that seem unjust, his supervisor is not supporting his efforts to engage in a critical conversation about the issue, and his position does not allow him the power to make the changes he believes must occur. The respondents explained that together, these smaller challenges, which often did not individually feel salient, could build up to make them feel overwhelmed and burned out. The participants also noted, though, that while the challenges were difficult at times, they had identified key strategies and tools that helped them to negotiate and overcome the obstacles they faced.

Motivators

As a challenge unfolds, participants had two potential outcomes of such a challenges. First and most commonly within the data, individuals moved through the challenges by utilizing motivators. The other potential path for practitioners was that they would be unable to use motivators to move back into engagement, and thus would enter a time of pause. I begin with focusing on the motivators, and then I will move into times of pause.

Individuals in this study appeared to have an immediate sense of whether they had the proper tools and skills to navigate the obstacle and whether they could readily rely on potential motivators. Social justice educators face myriad challenges in the work that they do, and many

have developed several methods for negotiating these challenges. This section provides an overview the helpful motivators that the respondents employed as they engaged in social justice work. Herein, I use the term motivators because for many participants, challenges often kept them from fully engaging in social justice efforts; and to reengage in such work, they needed the proper motivation. Thus, in this context, the term motivators refers to strategies that helped the respondents move from a space of challenge towards reengagement. To be clear, motivators are unlike a moderator or mediator, in that the motivators do not lessen the intensity or difficulty of a particular challenge, nor do they mediate the effects or internalization of a challenge. Thus, for this study, these strategies seem best understood as motivators for reengagement. As stated above, the three motivators found in this study are (a) reconnecting to passion and initial motivation, (b) identifying and acknowledging successes, and (c) seeking supportive relationships.

Reconnecting to passion and initial motivation. Participants shared several reasons for their initial interest and passion for social justice. Some had personally experienced injustice; they wanted the world to be fairer, and they had seen injustices happen to people about whom they cared. Will was unable to identify the exact catalyst that moved him to become connected to social justice work, but he recalled, “Originally, when I was drawn to it without even knowing I was being drawn to it, it was just something that felt right.” Will also noted that his own identity as a Black man meant that he was often aware of injustice, and that it moved him towards engaging in social justice work more actively. As he continued this work and faced new challenges, he believed that he and others had to keep “[reassessing], reevaluating, what the next move ought to be, because as long as you're moving forward, that's all that really counts for me. You're still out doing the work; you've actually lost some passion

somewhere along the line.... Passion doesn't necessarily die unless there's a reason for it to die.” This demise of one’s initial enthusiasm for the work was common, and spoke to the need for individuals to reconnect to their foundational passion and motivation.

Like Will, others shared their deep, intrinsic motivation for doing this work. Nicholas provided the following explanation, “[Social justice] is deep within who I am as an individual, knowing the struggles of my own family through our own socioeconomic background of being extremely low income. Being a son of an undocumented immigrant...and a Mexican immigrant at that, being a first-generation college student...all of these things build you into that person you are.” He went on to state that “knowing that there are still [many people who are] not treated fairly and justly, and knowing that I have these privileges and they don't” kept him motivated to continue the work. His passion radiated throughout his story, and he reminded himself of the reasons he engaged in social justice efforts, even in the face of tough circumstances. Like Will and Nicholas, many participants indicated that their motivation came from a connection to their own personal experience with marginalization and oppression.

Although I will discuss emotions and the role they play in this process in greater detail later, Buffy’s words are palpable and worthy of note here:

Anger is a lot of what gives me that motivation to keep going. It's kind of like an energy boost. I channel that into those nights when I just say, “Fuck it, I'm just going to stay here, and I'm going to do a bunch of things and we're going to make this better.” And it gives me more focus on time.

One of Buffy’s motivators was her desire to help eliminate what she referred to as “White savior syndrome.” She explained, “White savior syndrome [is a problem] so many of our

students have as [they] swoop in to save the poor communities.” Her own personal experience growing up in a low-income household, with a family that needed significant governmental assistance, sparked her passion for her life’s work. For Buffy, social justice efforts represented an incredible challenge as she faced resistance or ignorance, but she was able to reengage by harnessing her original motivation for engaging in the work.

In the face of difficulties, Lauren was able to reconnect to her passion by going to the Internet and finding stories that helped to motivate her. She explained,

I do have a real passion for it.... [I] see a really great video on Upworthy or something, and I get really excited. And I really get passionate, I mean, when I do the work, and I want to make the difference... [that] initial passion and excitement and sort of indignation about the unfairness of the world powered me through some of that really hard work at the beginning that I had to do.

For all participants, motivation and passion were critical in overcoming obstacles. Throughout participants’ interviews, I found that reigniting one’s passion helped respondents tap into their emotional selves by recalling their own marginalization or that of people about whom they cared. These experiences and challenges triggered emotional responses that helped them to reconnect to their motivation for doing the work.

Identifying and acknowledging successes. According to the respondents, identifying and acknowledging the wins, whether big or small, was critical to their ability to navigate the challenges of social justice work. Some participants, however, found it difficult to see the wins during times of incredible difficulty. In follow-up interviews, two participants noted that they wished they valued their successes more, because they could

use those wins to maintain hope. The respondents often saw this type of motivation as a reminder of the fact that social justice work was “worth it.” Lauren noted,

Every once in a while, I'll have a conversation with someone, or I'll do a presentation, or a training or something, and a student will come up to me afterwards and ask to talk a little bit more. You see them having that light bulb moment, and that's a really cool experience, and that's the point where I really feel like I'm making a difference...and where it's worth it.

Participants can use these moments as catalysts to reengage in the work with increased passion and excitement. To identify and acknowledge these wins is to believe that change is possible. Believing that change is possible helps build hope and leads to reengagement.

Jess recalled a story about a student leader within her office. She shared how the organizational environment was fairly toxic, in part, because several student leaders were harsh and overly critical of others. One woman, in particular, had previously yelled at Jess and had instigated some of the issues in the office. After building her relationship with this student, Jess noticed a subtle, yet distinct, transformation in the young woman. Jess shared one moment where, instead of displaying a hostile attitude towards her peers and bosses, the student stated, “[Our] job is to find ways to support our [student employees] better so they can do a good job.” Jess went on to say, “I was like, ‘Oh my God! My world has just flipped over.’ Inside I was jumping up and down, ‘I did my job! I did my job!’” Jess discussed observing a shift in this student’s interactions with other individuals in the office, as the student transformed her negative attitude to a more positive one and began to grow and mature.

Jess acknowledged that this moment exhilarated her. It helped her remember that even in the face of incredible challenges, small wins were possible, and it was possible to change people and institutions. Jess explained, “This whole semester is so very different from the last... [We] changed up our leadership structure, our organizational structure with the staff, and they pushed back so much last year, even at the beginning of this semester; but now, suddenly, they're all in agreement with me. They're where I want them to be, and it's amazing.” She ushered in incredible, hard-won changes that allowed her to accomplish her goals and help students develop and grow.

One motivator that helped Robert move through some challenges was his ability to effect institutional change. He admitted that there were days that felt particularly hard for him, but shared,

“[The] flip side of that [was] I have watched when those good ol' boy clubs have put their money where their mouth is. For example, my program...I've watched how we have supported students and done things across this institution... that are miraculous and groundbreaking.”

Robert advocated, often to rooms full of White men, for simple increases in resources for both low-income students and students of color. As Robert noted in the preceding excerpt, such institutional shifts felt groundbreaking and inspired him to continue the work. Interestingly, many of the wins that the participants shared evolved from moments of challenge; but when reflecting on these positive outcomes, many participants found solace and felt reinvigorated to continue their work.

Seeking supportive relationships. Of all the identified motivators, the respondents noted most frequently the importance of seeking support and relying on support networks. Their responses indicated that support could come in a variety of forms,

including social media outlets, like Facebook, Twitter, or blogs; conferences and workshops around social justice; and dialogues with trusted colleagues, friends, or family. Participants often noted that although they had access to these kinds of networks, in the middle of a challenge, they did not always rely on these networks to support them.

Bill appeared to be the participant most involved with social media outlets. Bill had established a well-crafted and intentional news feed on his Facebook account that allowed him to see posts from friends and colleagues who he knew would post thoughtful ideas, inspiring stories, and helpful resources, as well as stories that might be difficult or painful to read. He explained,

I think I've been able to craft my [Facebook] newsfeed to a point where it is an enriching thing for me... [It] has been an ability to connect with bloggers and with folks who engage in social media and in Twitter around social justice work. What I've really appreciated in the past year, year and a half, as I've gotten more engaged in the social media world...I do more Meetups and Tweetups and things like that...is that I'm pushed to think about these things in new ways, and that is amplified by how many more voices I'm exposed to.

Other participants mentioned Facebook, Twitter, and blogs as positive influences that motivated them to continue their work. Lauren noted that UpWorthy, a largely video-based news site that shared only positive and inspiring news and stories, had helped to keep her engaged in the work. The Internet appeared to be a great means of building community, connecting with others all over the world, and finding people with similar interests and passions. For such networks to be helpful, though, individuals must seek them out, cultivate them, and rely on them in moments of need.

Although social media was helpful, Kyle asserted that trusted colleagues were a better source of motivation during times of challenge, although he acknowledged his need to become better at using this strategy. He shared one example of the support that these relationships provided:

Afterward, it was one of the first times I felt a sense of relief. I feel like, “OK, I’m not feeling that by myself.” I really got to beyond a computer screen; I got to feel like right there’s someone else who can reflect that back...I needed that in order to be able to move through to the place of, “OK, so now what?” Because absent that, I think it would have been really easy to not just look over the edge of hopelessness, but perhaps to just go there.”

The participants’ responses indicated that these types of support helped them to maintain hope and continue to move forward in their work. Ryan offered sage advice for student affairs professionals, and especially for social justice educators. She recommended:

Surround yourself with good people. By that, I don’t mean...it doesn’t have to be close proximity. Some of my dearest friends are across the country, but they’re all a phone call away. I know that my community is spread out. I can’t do the work without a community. Like I said, they don’t have to be at your job, but they have to be your cheerleaders and your support and your truth tellers.

Sometimes, campuses are small or disconnected, and finding other professionals who understand social justice and can provide inspiration in the face of a challenge comes from those across the country. For many participants, relying on those networks was difficult, but necessary.

Time of Pause and Hope

As I developed the model, I found that the negotiation process was relatively intuitive and logical. However, as individuals became overwhelmed by challenges and felt unable to rely on motivators, they moved into a space that I referred to as *a time of pause*. Some of the participants needed to take a time of pause to a separate space that allowed them to reflect and process the challenges they faced. This space did not serve as a break in or an end to their commitment. Instead, these are moments of respite. As is depicted within the Social Justice Commitment Model, a moment of pause is located on the edge of hope. Within this study, times of pause and hope cannot be disentangled, because hope, which is entered unconsciously, becomes most palpable during a time of pause. In fact, there is a direct relationship between the loss of hope and the movement into a time of pause. Times of pause are often prompted due to extraordinarily challenging moments. For instance, Ryan noted,

I think that challenge is the sense of hope, right? I'm still called to do this work....

I know that I want to have an impact with my work. I am emotionally attached to this. I have personal experience with it. My close community of friends and colleagues...it's a diverse group who all of us have been hurt based on our identities.

In this mental, emotional, and sometimes physical space, individuals began to question themselves and their work with queries like, "Can I do social justice work?" "What is my role?" "Is it worth it to engage in this today?" "Am I able to change the system?" These questions existed on the precarious edge of hope and hopelessness, where hopelessness felt very tangible. For example, Kyle felt particularly challenged with the way that the students on his campus resisted notions of racism. He explained, "I'd say especially in the

last couple of weeks, [I keep thinking], ‘I don't have what it takes to keep doing this.’” He went on to say, “The things that I am doing or have done feel insignificant.”

At first, I thought that these moments would lead one of the respondents to move over the edge and into hopelessness. I asked participants to talk about what it meant to have hope or to feel hopeless. They quickly asserted that they never truly lost hope. They shared that hopelessness often felt close, but they never fully gave into it. Buffy explained that the enormity of the system of injustice, and the way that people could be absorbed into the system, is “where I think the loss of hope begins. As well as, I think, maybe the commitment.” Buffy quickly changed directions after that response, though, noting that,

At least for me personally, [these challenges] kind of [strengthen me], because there's more to be done and it's not just about us protesting and raising money and having meetings with the provost. It's about [the fact that] we need to work on widespread education.

The very loss of hope appeared in this case to reengage one’s motivations and passions. Similarly, Ryan mentioned that after a night of rest, the next day began and the work continued, because it was his purpose and passion to continue on in this work.

As shown in Figure 1, hope is a fundamental component within commitment. Within the figure, hope fades (represented by the shaded coloring dissipating vertically) as one moves from engagement to challenge to a time of pause. Hope is the belief that positive change is possible and that a person can make such a change occur. Within the Social Justice Commitment Model, hope decreases as challenges increase. In a challenge, hope may fade only slightly, as an individual wonders how they can do better, or what ways they can make a positive change.

However, in a time of pause, it is clear that the belief in change and one's ability to create that change comes into question. And, for that reason, hope becomes inextricably bound to times of pause.

Summary of Findings

This research focuses squarely on the commitment stage of social justice development, with attention to challenges associated with engaging in social justice work. The participants within this study note that as they learn about and develop language around social justice, they found their commitment to social justice deepen. Moreover, as they develop a complex understanding of social justice, the participants in this study appeared to have fairly similar definitions of social justice. Participant definitions seem to be convergent on basic principles of equity and inclusion; however, their choice in verb use seems to be related to the way that person makes meaning out of their social justice experiences.

As commitment solidifies, individuals engage in social justice work, through both an internal process and external process of engagement. Participants who are actively engaged in social justice work face tremendous challenges. Those challenges range from resistance from colleagues to trying to change an institution's culture. Whatever the challenge, participants used motivators to assist them through the challenge and allow them to move back into their engagement. This movement among engagement, challenges, and motivators appeared to be fairly common; however, there are situations when the challenges are so great that individuals may move into a time of pause. Times of pause are critical moments, because hope is in jeopardy. In these moments, some participants noted as though they felt like they were at the edge of hope. Although these moments can last a few hours or sometimes a few months, for all the participants in this study, their hope rebounded through the use of motivators, which helped

them move back into their engagement. Thus, hope arose in this study as a fundamental component to the long term engagement of social justice work, and must be present in order to sustain one's work.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview of the Study

Near the turn of the 21st century, the concept of social justice emerged within the educational literature as an evolution from previous terms like diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion (Blackmore, 2009; North, 2008). Social justice is fundamentally rooted in a project of democracy, whereby individuals are able to participate in the institutions that govern their lives as fully included persons, and receive an equitable share of resources (Fraser, 1997; Howe, 1997; Young, 1990). For educators, social justice is a political act that creates conditions for individuals to thrive and change oppressive systems and barriers. The inclusion of social justice within educational literature, its addition into student affairs and higher education programs, and its adoption by national educational associations necessitates a deeper understanding about the implications for doing such complex work.

Previous studies have provided a dense understanding about social justice development. Broido (2000), who conducted one of the first studies about justice development, examined the ways that students developed an awareness of, engaged in, and committed to social justice. Additional research has explored how individuals move towards allyship (Bishop, 2002; Edwards, 2006; Goodman, 2001, 2011; Reasons, Scales, & Millar, 2005) and develop social justice awareness, knowledge, and skills (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Hackman, 2005; Nilsson, et al., 2011). These studies, and many others like them, have advanced social justice significantly, but as with any area of research, significant gaps remain.

Three major gaps provide the context for this project. First, researchers have paid little attention to the commitment stage of social justice development, and few have asked

the question, “What does social justice commitment look like?” Second, social justice is challenging work, but few inquiries have explored these challenges. Third, many of these scholars acknowledge the need to focus on the affective, cognitive, and behavioral domains of development; however, only a small number of studies have given direct attention to the affective domain. All together, these gaps provide room for this study to examine the challenges of commitment to social justice work, with a focus on the emotions and feelings that affect individuals’ ability to negotiate said challenges.

Practically, student affairs is responsible for making college campuses inclusive spaces, creating opportunities for access and success, and ensuring that students are well-prepared to live and work in a diverse world. Student affairs practitioners who engage in social justice efforts can help the field and their institutions to make progress in such areas. However, if student affairs practitioners are to engage in this challenging work, then it is important to identify strategies to help them sustain their efforts, maintain their hope, and remain engaged. The problem here is that we must move beyond the magical thinking that individuals will somehow miraculously develop the readiness to move through extraordinarily difficult experiences. Thus, the goal of this study was to understand (a) the challenges that existed for social justice-oriented student affairs professionals as they engaged in social justice efforts and (b) the ways that individuals have navigated, overcome, or moved through those challenges and to remain engaged and committed to the work.

This research also went beyond simply identifying those challenges to explore how individuals who were committed to social justice processed these challenges. To understand this process of negotiation, I employed a grounded theory methodology.

Grounded theory is useful for understanding processes, particularly those that take place subconsciously (Star, 2007). Using a constant comparison approach, I interviewed a diverse group of 15 participants recruited at the Institute on Social Justice and through ACPA's Commission for Social Justice Educators.

Briefly, the findings of this study showed that the selected student affairs professionals experienced a multitude of challenges as they engaged in social justice work. The respondents identified eight specific challenges that they faced in their daily work, including (a) resistance to social justice, (b) social justice ethos, (c) feelings of isolation, (d) fighting the system, (e) institutional position, (f) campus culture, (g) extended workload, and (h) the navigation of Whiteness. These challenges do not capture every difficulty that each individual encountered, but they do comprise the most salient, recurring challenges that appeared during this study.

Commitment is a continual developmental process that involves internal and external engagement, challenges, motivators, and times of pause. When participants engaged in social justice work, both internally and externally, they often faced challenges that they could overcome by relying on motivators that helped them to reengage in the work. The respondents identified three major motivators, which included (a) reconnecting to passion and initial motivation, (b) identifying and acknowledging successes, and (c) seeking supportive relationships. These motivators served as the primary strategies by which individuals moved back towards engagement. If an individual could leverage their motivators, then they moved into a time of pause.

As Figure 1 shows, times of pause are located on the edge of hope. As challenges increase, hope decreases, and individuals often need time and space to reflect, to disengage, and to rejuvenate from the challenge(s). A time of pause is identified by a

marked period of time where individuals question hope. This hope, which is usually unconscious, has two conditions. First, one must believe that positive change can occur, and second, that one must trust in their own ability to create such change. During the time of pause, individuals tend to ask themselves: What is my role? Can change actually happen? Is it worth engaging in this work today? Is what I am doing creating change? It is during this time that hope(lessness) becomes salient for individuals, because the edge of hope become palpable.

This study revealed that not all social justice workers lose their commitment. Instead, participants in this inquiry simply questioned the hope that was necessary for engaging in the work in the long-term. Times of pause are developmentally necessary moments, because they allow individuals to reflect, grow, and rejuvenate. In the interviews, all participants discussed the need for and use of times of pause, regardless of their identities, their experience, or their skill level. Finally, to move beyond a time of pause, individuals harness the motivators discussed before to move back towards engagement.

Finally, to understand why social justice can be such a challenging field, I focused specifically on the affective psychological domain. Participants in this study tended not to experience difficulties with the cognitive work around social justice, nor specifically with doing the action oriented work. Instead, the respondents identified the visceral connection between their work and their emotions as the most challenging aspect of social justice work. For instance, while an individual may have found it hard to change an unjust policy, the challenge actually manifested in the frustration, anger, isolation, or fear they felt when doing the work. One cannot understand challenges without focusing on the deeply

emotional process that occurs throughout social justice work. Altogether, the emotional process of taking part in social justice efforts and navigating challenges can cause burn out, lead one to question hope, or make it difficult for individuals to engage fully and completely in the work.

Discussion of Findings

Here, I refocus on the initial research questions. This study was built to understand what challenges exist, how individuals navigate those challenges, and why social justice is difficult to sustain. These three abridged versions of the research questions, are directly and indirectly addressed in Chapter 4; however, here I explore more decisive answers to these questions than the Social Justice Commitment Model may provide. For this section, I want to start with talking about some of the fundamental shifts in the evolution of this study.

Moving more definitively into the research questions, I build off the identified challenges from the previous chapter and discuss the typology of challenges that exist in our work. By understanding more about what challenges exist, I move then into how individuals navigate those challenges. How we each navigate those challenges may differ in part; however, the data suggests that as we experience challenges, our relationship to those challenges shifts and develops. Finally, I argue that social justice is not difficult to sustain in terms of commitment, but that it is difficult to sustain in terms of engagement. The reason, or to answer the “why” question, is because social justice is part of our lives and it appears we cannot leave the work; and because of that, social justice work is a deeply emotional process that challenges hope, which is our deepest belief that change is possible and able to be accomplished.

Evolution of the Study

As I briefly noted in Chapter 4, the study naturally evolved to its original focus towards an important, albeit similar, outcome. Due, in part, to the constant comparative nature of grounded theory methodology and the recommendation to go where participants take the research (Charmaz, 2014), I shifted away from the initial overarching question about the reason that social justice commitment is difficult to sustain. With that question in mind, I used critical incidents, as developmental moments, to understand how individuals moved in and out of commitment or recommit to social justice. Although I probed this issue of commitment with many participants, it became increasingly clear with each interview that wavering in commitment or struggling to remain committed simply was not an issue with the selected sample of respondents. Instead, for these participants, remaining engaged and maintaining hope were recurrent issues.

According to researchers, social justice development comprises of three primary components: awareness, engagement, and commitment (Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Miller et al., 2009). During the commitment stage, individuals have a strong sense of intentionality and action towards the process and goal of engaging in social justice work (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Miller et al., 2009). Thus, I based my assumption on the framing of social justice commitment that continued engagement, paired with intentionality of actions, equated to commitment. Whether by mistake or because of imprecise language within the literature, engagement and commitment are easily conflated terms.

According to the Social Justice Commitment Model, engagement is a component of social justice commitment; but engagement does not need to be present for an

individual to sustain their level of commitment. The key here is that when someone challenges engagement, individuals may move into disengagement; and at times, that disengagement may be intentional. Within this study, temporary disengagement was not a psychological divestment of social justice commitment. In fact, a time of pause existed as a psychologically necessary space—one that often proved difficult because it involved a reduction of hope. With the help of participants, I collected data to provide greater clarity about the relationship between challenges, motivators, hope, and times of pause. The result was a clearer distinction between engagement and commitment, and a novel understanding about the phases within each stage of commitment.

Critical incidents were also a primary focus of this study at the onset. These incidents were present within the study; however, they did not capture the complete nature of challenges experienced among participants. Critical incidents involve major challenges that become developmental turning points, meaning that they are necessarily developmental and often singular events. Instead, this study found that there were isolated developmental and non-developmental incidents throughout the participants' work. Challenge was not always a developmental action, but often manifested as a simple challenge moment or an accumulation of moments. It was difficult to identify the individual incidents that comprised cumulative challenges, as they tended to more nebulous and undefined. Most often, the emotions participants expressed involved feelings burnt out from the emotional and mental toll of sustaining engagement in the face of these micro-challenges. Thus, participants used different responses to mediate the effects of and navigate their way through different types of challenges.

What are the Challenges

Initially, this inquiry focused on critical incidents, defined as personally salient experiences that engender developmental change. However, the concept of *critical incidents* did not fully capture the challenges participants expressed, because many of their experiences were not developmental in nature. Instead, two important types of challenges emerged. First, participants noted many challenges that were individual, isolated events (referred to here as “significant events” that may or may not have been critical incidents). Second, accumulative challenges emerged as an important type of challenge. Accumulative challenges build up over time, and often result in burn out. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that both significant events and accumulative challenges occurred regularly for these student affairs practitioners. These types of challenges can manifest from any of the eight identified challenges within this study: *Feeling Isolated, Navigating Whiteness, Resistance to Social Justice, Social Justice Ethos, Extended Workload, Institutional Position, Campus Culture, and Fighting the System*. The section below presents the distinctions between these two types of challenge.

Significant events. Significant events are salient and individual challenges that, like critical incidents, can engender developmental change. However, critical incidents encompass only those incidents that impact cognitive, affective, or behavioral development. Not all significant events that the participants shared led to developmental changes. As a result, I have used the term “significant events” to capture both developmental and non-developmental challenges. These significant events can range from frustration with changing an institutional policy that is unjust to receiving uncomfortable feedback.

Lee shared one story that exemplifies a significant event that aligns with the original framing of critical incidents. Lee was a cis-gender woman who was working on her doctoral degree. As she began a new year within her living-learning community, Lee went to meet with the new staff and encountered a resident assistant (RA) who identified as trans*. Lee recalled having a conversation about the gender pronouns the student used; however, she recounted that she made a mistake in an email to the community:

I sent out an e-mail to the whole community, welcoming everyone to the living-learning community, and I misused a pronoun. It was horrific. This is not the way to start a community. This is not the way I wanted to start a relationship with this RA that I'd hoped to build a relationship with over the years. The student had to sit down with me, express their frustration, express why this was harmful to their work with this new community, express what that had meant, and what I had done.

Lee agonized over her role in causing pain and anguish to a student under her care within her community. For Lee, this significant event was a turning point in her development. She wanted to do better, learn more, and educate herself on the lives of trans* people and the issues they may face. Because this significant event was developmental, it also is a critical incident. In their early work, most participants pointed to these salient and developmental moments that shifted their thinking, their behavior, and their emotions. Thus, significant events that were also critical incidents appeared to be common among early social justice adopters.

The participants' responses revealed a pattern in the moments during which significant events entered the individuals' consciousness and became salient. First,

significant events tended to be occur when participants were in graduate school, at conferences, or starting a new position. Interestingly, these spaces tended to be highly reflective spaces where individuals were building new knowledge and ideas. It is in these kinds of spaces that opportunities for social justice development are ripe. For instance, TC, who was in graduate school when our interview took place, experienced many developmental moments that helped her to learn and grow. She shared a story about her first semester as a new hall director, when she worked with a student who was diagnosed with schizophrenia. She described some of the challenges she faced:

I mean they have the right to be a student on campus; but at the same time, the behavior of the individual was encroaching on other people's rights to their space. In that case, it's hard to say, like, you have the right to be here, but what about the whole campus community? From my responsibility as a hall director, addressing the behaviors rather than the person...so, it was a learning experience for me to do that; but at the same time, it was really murky, because I was like, "This is my first year as a hall director."

What is clear from this portion of her interview is that TC was experiencing a high learning curve in response to new issues. She was attempting to reconcile differing interests while trying to be true to her social justice values.

It appeared that younger participants, or new social justice practitioners like TC, Josh, and Lauren, tended to recount significant events more often than did individuals who had engaged in the work for a longer period of time. Long-term practitioners of social justice work recounted significant events as well, but interestingly, most of those events took place in educational spaces earlier in their careers. Lee, for example, provided an example of a

significant event that occurred during her time as a new resident hall advisor. She was still in the midst of learning more about trans* issues and had made a critical mistake that caused her to reflect, learn, and grow. While some significant events also served as critical incidents, most were not developmental. Instead, participants experienced significant events that posed challenges, but did not result in tangible learning or development.

During my data collection process for this study, two national events were raging throughout the United States. Halfway through the interviews, two grand juries decided not to indict the police officers involved in the deaths of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York.⁸ These two cases became quite significant for study participants, and they noted that the verdicts caused incredible challenge and pain. Unlike Lee's story above, this significant event, though challenging, did not appear to be developmental, in terms of cognitive complexity or new behaviors; however, it was deeply agonizing for many participants. The respondents provided the following insights about these national events:

I've just been so, again, enraged about the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, about the non-indictment in the Eric Garner case.... There's this whole huge pattern of this happening specifically to Black and Brown men in our society that has just stretched back.... Let's think about how all the other ways that Black and Brown men have been targeted unfairly by police and treated unfairly in our

⁸ Michael Brown and Eric Garner were two unarmed Black men killed by White police officers. These two events spurred ongoing protests and widespread media coverage about police brutality on Black and Brown bodies. Many individuals compared these incidents to the assault against Rodney King in the early 1990s to show that little progress had been made around racism and the use of police force.

criminal justice system. Sometimes, just reflecting on that has been enough to just put me in this place of rage. (Kyle)

This last week with Ferguson, I sat and cried for a night. I have been constantly debriefing with folks and going to protests and calling our police station...calling for more money dedicated toward cultural humility for our police officers. (Lee)

You have a situation like this one, where the police in an area start to act as the military...willing to gun down or stop those that they're charged to protect...A day before a verdict comes out, you start seeing barricades being put up and protective barrels and those types of things, almost in preparation for bad news.... Regardless of how you look at it, I think that there is a lot of inequity that happens as a result. People don't heal as a result of those types of things. (Will)

Throughout the interviews conducted after the decisions not to indict the officers, participants displayed emotions ranging from disbelief to anger. Ultimately, they feared that the work so many people had put into changing the system had been for naught. The decisions seemed to affirm the long history of police brutality towards Black and Brown men. This challenge was extreme in that it represented a rare glimpse into the depth of emotion, pain, and struggle individuals often feel as they engage in social justice work. However, it also showed that challenges do not always produce developmental shifts, at least not right away. Instead, they can simply serve as significant events that are challenging and profoundly painful.

These two national proceedings had a profound impact on this study; however, other significant, non-developmental moments occurred throughout the interview. For instance, Robert recounted a situation in which he received an invitation to explain the needs of low-income students of color. He recalled his experience of being the sole Black man walking into a

room of White male administrators who had been at the institution for many years. He explained his mental process as he entered the room:

Here it is. I feel the oppression.... We got the head researchers, the head IR people, the president [in the room], and I'm like, "Why are we even here?... Why am I here talking to you? I don't need to tell you that Black students don't feel comfortable. You know why. The literature hasn't changed. You can pick up a book. We got more books about it these days."

The discomfort was palpable, as he processed their request to talk about others like him, even though it was his role to do so on campus. He wanted to advocate to these administrators, who would be setting policy and financial decisions; however, he also felt the isolation of being the only one advocating for the needs of these students.

Accumulative events. For individuals who have engaged in social justice work for more than a few years, the accumulation of challenges tended to be more prominent and salient. It was my interview with Buffy, in particular, that prompted my shift from solely seeking critical incidents to acknowledging the impact of accumulative events. Buffy commented, "As people get a little further along, [significant events] seems to decrease and it seems to be more about... the systemic piece. There's no individual one trigger that happens, instead it's maybe a buildup." When analyzing the data, I found that the often slow and unconscious buildup of events became a type of challenge itself.

As individuals persisted in their commitment and developed new awareness, knowledge, and skills, their ability to handle single incidents seemed to increase. The individuals who had engaged in this work for a long period of time had developed the resilience to handle many single challenges. For that reason, significant events seemed to

decrease, while the cumulative effects of smaller and less salient individual incidents grew.

The respondents indicated that they felt equipped to handle these individual challenges relatively easily. However, when such events occurred together or over a short period of time, participants reported the need to expend significant amounts of energy, which led to an often-cited issue of burnout. Isolated challenges were less impactful, while recurring challenges created stress that became a challenge of in its own right. Kyle discussed his experience dealing with the accumulative effect of these incidents:

Today, I think some of the techniques or strategies that I use would not be the same [as when I was younger] ... [before] there was a lot more crying and "What the hell is wrong with me?" kinds of things. Whereas now, I think it's... more like, "Gosh, this really is a lifelong process. It's super frustrating." The move turns from the singular episodes and issues slowly into the challenges that build up over the journey.

The accumulative challenges were a byproduct of participants talking about burn out, feeling worn down, or feeling overwhelmed. Using capitalist terms, several participants equated their use of energy to a bank account, which they needed to replenish once that they had depleted their funds. Lauren spoke to this idea when she stated, "But to actually do the work and to make the difference, there's a level of sustained energy that you need, and I feel like [challenges] leech that energy. It takes the energy away from me." Ryan made a similar observation, "This work takes a lot out of you. Make sure you find what puts it back in, whether it be family, hobbies...whatever. Be conscious of that. There's plenty of times in my life where I haven't had enough of that."

Ryan and Lauren spoke of the aspects of the work that involved constantly facing resistance to attempting to create meaningful change. They stated that the work is inherently challenging. Buffy summarized the effects of such challenges when she stated, “For me the [challenges] sort of just kind of tear you down a little bit each day.” Whether it drains one’s energy or builds up frustration, accumulative challenges are especially tough to navigate, precisely because they are an amalgamation of multiple smaller and less identifiable challenges.

This notion was difficult to capture during this study, because individuals could only point to a general feeling and an overall sense of challenge. When conducting follow-up interviews, I asked some of the participants to tell me more about instances when they felt “worn down.” Several participants explained that this feeling developed in response to a buildup of a number of challenges that I discuss in the following section. The general sense was that participants were able to work through many of the challenges on their own; but after a while, they felt burned out or emotionally exhausted because of the energy, time, and thought that went into working towards social justice. T

How to Navigate the Challenges

To understand how individuals process and negotiate challenges, I asked the participants whether the challenges they encountered changed from the time they entered into social justice work to roles in which they were engaged at the time of the study. Interestingly, participants noted that while the challenges themselves did not change, their relationship to the challenges did evolve. One participant noted that the cycle of commitment was similar to a spiral staircase; individuals may encounter the same challenges repeatedly, but their position on the staircase provided a different perspective and relationship to the challenge. Using this spiral staircase analogy, which one can apply

to most developmental models, individuals do not stay stationary on the staircase, but instead oscillate up and down, depending on their mental well-being, support networks, and other motivators.

Over time, individuals begin to build the tools, skills, knowledge, and resources to mediate challenges effectively. With each experience, individuals have the chance to learn how to rely on support networks, remember the wins, or find their passion a little more easily than before. By using these motivators, individuals can overcome new challenges. Conversely, some individuals may lose some of their motivating strategies and be less able to overcome a challenge. For instance, several participants noted that changing institutions was difficult because when faced with a challenge, they no longer had the same support network on which they could previously rely. Thus, individuals seemed to be in a constant state of developmental flux, whereby the same challenge may present differing capabilities to navigate reoccurring challenges.

As noted earlier, the participants never experienced a moment when their social justice commitment was truly in jeopardy. Instead, social justice commitment, once entered, appeared to be fairly stable, filled with developmental phases and conditions. The data indicated, however, that although their commitment was stable, individuals had to work to sustain engagement and maintain hope. The model of social justice commitment developed here denotes that individuals left engagement temporarily to attend to specific challenge. Nevertheless, when challenges outweighed motivators, individuals entered into a time of pause. Times of pause involved a moment disconnection from engagement for very real and needed reasons.

There are multiple reasons why individuals need to have a time of pause. A time of pause can provide individuals the space to reflect, withdraw, or rejuvenate. Some

participants also commented that their privileged identities helped them to disengage for a short amount of time; however, all respondents remarked on the need to take time to remove themselves from a situation or a challenge. For each individual and each situations, a time of pause appears to be slightly different in terms of the length and effect on a person's work.

The length of time for each person is different. For some, a time of pause may last for moments, whereby an individual might retreat for a few hours to recuperate from a challenge and reengages after some time to reflect and draw on their own motivators. For others, the time could last for days or weeks. Potentially, the time could last longer, and may even transcend into a de-commitment altogether; however, the movement out of commitment was not found within this study. As the length of a time of pause may change based on the person and situation, the effects it has on a person also varies.

One interesting note came from Leah. Leah noted that she needed to take time away from doing social justice, specifically race based work, at the more national level. She began to be worn down from doing the work, being challenged based on her identities, and from the social justice ethos that felt more destructive than constructive. So, in this case, Leah disengaged from the national scene, and instead focused her work on her campus. This time of pause was only in one arena of her life, and not all. Other participants echoed similar times of pause, where they might disengage from work around gender or race or sexuality, but would continue to do social justice work around other identities or issues.

In this study, the reason for a time of pause always stems from a form of challenge. All participants noted some reason or another for their need to disengage

because of challenges. Remarkably, several participants believed that even though all individuals need a time of pause, the ethos of social justice work did not honor or recognize the need for time, healing, and withdrawal. Irrespective of their identities, individuals in this study identified times when taking time away was necessary for their own development and growth. The level of self-reflection, vulnerability, and authenticity that participants demonstrated in relationship to taking time was quite profound.

Throughout the stories that they shared, the participants attempted to navigate challenges authentically and directly. Although some respondents noted how their privilege clouded their ability to recognize some injustices, they actively sought out feedback to develop new understanding and grow. In doing so, they occasionally experienced intense challenges; during which, many participants noted a lack of support for their need to take time away and pause. Instead of understanding this time as a moment for healing, self-reflection, or to regain energy, respondents appeared to feel shame for having the “privilege” to be able to take time away from the work.

There seemed to be two primary reasons that the practitioners experienced shame when they took a time of pause. First, social justice literature often conflates engagement with commitment. If most people in the field see commitment and engagement as the same thing, then individuals who need to disengage may believe they are giving up on the cause. Second, a time of pause is distinct from taking a break. The reason I do not use the term *break* is that the situation from which individuals desire to take a break is unclear. In reality, as the respondents indicated, taking time for pause does not always indicate a break in commitment. In the case of this study’s participants, this pause served as a retreat from active engagement. Although I often agree with bell hooks, I disagree with a

statement she made in an online interview, where she stated "When we work for freedom, we cannot rest, because it's a constant struggle." All participants in this study, no matter their marginalized or privileged identities, needed time to disengage from the real struggles of social justice work. Rest is necessary for one to rejuvenate and develop one's commitment. In many ways, it appears that the idea of rest, times of pause, or breaks contribute to self-shaming, which results in a social justice ethos that instills a high expectation that workers will remain constantly engaged, even when it is personally harmful to do so.

Such an ethos appears to draw from the presumption that individuals are needlessly taking time away, or that they lack a proper commitment to social justice work. Instead, this study suggests that, at least in the case of this study's participants, neither belief holds true. In fact, these social justice educators did not appear to leave a social justice commitment. It is for that reason that people involved in social justice work must be willing and ready to recognize, honor, and support their peers when they need to take a time of pause.

Why Social Justice is Challenging

Within the original three research questions, which include what are the challenges, how do individuals navigate those challenges, and why might be social justice work difficult, the final question is a bit more abstract than the first two. Let me begin to answer this question by using analogy. Our social world, which is full of injustice and oppression, is an immense and boundless ocean in which we all swim. We often grow up in the water, unable to identify its systemic effects on us; however, as we begin to relearn the environment we are in and the issues we face, some of us take an interest in understanding the waters, their conditions, and how they

affect us. We also begin to take aim at the dangers in the water to reduce their presence and their effects. In essence, we become aware of, interested in, and engaged with social (in)justice.

As we continue on our journey through the ocean, we come across a great ship that calls out to us. We find out that the ship is a destination for those who have started their journey toward social justice work. We then call out to the people on the boat for a helping hand and climb aboard. The ship immediately feels like home, we receive warm greetings, and we learn the basics of running the ship. The ship carries each of us through the waters, providing a safer haven than the liquid depths, but we still experience rough seas. As we become acclimated to our new environment, we take on the language and develop the skills and knowledge necessary to identify the dangers that await in the open ocean.

Just as we begin to become acclimated to the ship, we make a huge mistake, which ends up hurting several of the members aboard the vessel. Our individual privilege shades us from the issues that still plague our shipmates. The reaction among those who experience the hurt is visceral. The pain turns to anger, and the anger turns into a confrontation. The shipmates call out our privilege, and they accuse us of bringing some of the dangers of the ocean onto the boat, whether consciously or unconsciously. We feel terrible, unable to reengage in our duties, and are fearful of messing up again. Our whole aim of joining the ship was to be part of a community, which actively sought to end those dangers in the ocean, but somehow we inadvertently brought them aboard the ship.

Switching to the shipmates perspective, a newcomer is on board who promised to be part of the solution. While on the ship, we expect that we will not become targets of oppression and injustice among our allies. For that reason, we have taken off some of the armor that

protects us in the ocean, and we are far more vulnerable. Thus, when attacked, the pain is deeper and we feel wounded in an unexpected way. In response, we chastise the person and punish them for their attack. While the attacker endures the chastisement, an unintended result occurs: The other members, who were not the targets of the attack, observe the subsequent critique on the attacker and feel fearful that they too might accidentally perpetrate a similarly problematic attack. The fear is debilitating for the onlookers, and it keeps them from taking risks or opening themselves up to vulnerabilities. In the end, the situation resulted in a group of individuals feeling wounded, an un-intending attacker feeling shamed, and the onlookers experiencing the fear of accidentally doing the wrong thing in the future.

Each of us has likely been in all three positions at some point in time. As I shared this analogy with some of the participants and with my colleagues, they each recalled how familiar the story was for them, and they could vividly recall times when such incidents had occurred. However, less common were clear, proven strategies for healing the pain, reconciling the shame, and allaying the fear that each individual felt. Social justice is challenging because no matter one's relationship to injustice, oppression, and privilege, these issues affect our hearts and our minds. We rationally want to resolve injustice, while we simultaneously work to alleviate pain. The work, no matter how carefully done, will always trigger pain, because there is no way to enter peace without going through pain (Nhất Hạnh, 2006).

Before I go further, let me be clear: Social justice work is not futile or hopeless. It is simply challenging because of the negative emotions of fear, isolation, anger, and frustration that often accompany it. We can combat these emotions by employing complimentary positive emotions, such as love, compassion, hope, and grace. The use of such emotions is necessary for the advancement of social justice efforts, whether we do it

for ourselves or for others. Bishop (2002) echoed this notion, stating that positive emotions can help individuals navigate the difficulties they face. This complex and thorny issue is one of many that rear up within social justice work, and it may provide a means for tackling some of the implication for practice.

As Bishop (2002) noted, social justice educators must maintain hope to sustain social justice work. McInerey (2007) also argued that robust hope could help educators sustain their commitment to social justice work. The conclusions of these scholars and others, who only marginally addressed social justice commitment, led me to believe that social justice commitment was difficult to sustain. However, this assumption proved false in the present study, as sustaining a commitment did not seem to be an issue for respondents. On the contrary, it appears that engagement and commitment are conflated terms. For example, when Robert stated, “I’m done. I quit. I’m done today. I don’t want to do this,” he was not referring to a wavering of commitment; he was indicating that he needed to take what I have referred to as a time of pause. As noted in the section above, Buffy and Ryan both were also firmly rooted to their commitment. They were unable and unwilling to leave the work, and although they palpably felt the twinges of hopelessness, and some admitted that quitting would be easier, they asserted that abandoning their work was simply not an option.

As I collected interviews and compared data, I realized that while the participants’ commitment was not in jeopardy, they often struggled to sustain their engagement with social justice work. As a result, I revised the last research question so that it focused on the factors that made social justice work challenging. During the interviews, I asked participants to share their perceptions about this topic. Their responses indicated that social justice efforts were

challenging because of their deep emotional connection to the work. From the beginning of one's career, social justice work is a struggle. As Ryan simply and concisely stated, social justice work was difficult "because it hurts." Ryan explained further,

I think that challenge is the sense of hope, right? I'm still called to do this work...I know that I want to have an impact with my work. I am emotionally attached to this. I have personal experience with it. My close community of friends and colleagues, it's a diverse group who all of us have been hurt.

Ryan's words were particularly interesting, because they captured the pain and hurt that often went unnamed by the participants, even though they conveyed the notion throughout their interviews.

To understand this underlying pain, I attempted to drill down in the data to obtain greater clarity about what made this work so demanding. Additional reviews of participant responses revealed that for the participants, there was an intricate connection between their social justice commitment and their lives, their relationships, and their world. The connection went beyond a cognitive notion of right and wrong, a function of justice, or a belief that all people are connected; it appeared to be a deeply emotional process.

Participants, both unconsciously and consciously, referred to the complex link between their social justice work and their personal lives. They shared the immense pain they had experienced themselves, and the hurt they had seen inflicted upon family members and friends; in essence, saying, "This is our life. This is our pain. This is our people's pain." Ryan exemplified this notion when he stated, "My close community of friends and colleagues, it's a diverse group who all of us have been hurt based on our

identities.” Robert shared that when he was party to instances of injustice, he responded by saying, “Look, that’s just not okay, and that hurts.” He explained, [Either] I possess that identity [that was hurt] or I don’t, and I’ve just really summed it up into ‘That hurts.’” For this reason, the affective domain, where anger, pain, and hope reside, and which have gone largely unaddressed in prior research, are absolutely critical in understanding why social justice work is so challenging.

Emotions and feelings, which comprise the affective domain, can include: hope, fear, anger, pain, passion, rejection, and joy, to name some of the most salient within this study. Managing these emotions is was a central theme throughout participants’ experiences. Emotions, in contrast to identified challenges or motivators, appear to affect all areas of social justice development. At times emotions could act as a motivator or with a motivator; or emotions could act as a challenge. Thus, participants often talk about how their emotions could at time be helpful and other times be harmful. Separating out one emotion, fear and its relationship with vulnerability was salient within this study. Individuals feared taking risks and being vulnerable. Herein, I discuss how managing emotions and navigating fear end up being two crucial components to why social justice is challenging.

Managing Emotions. The participants revealed that managing emotions was one of the more pivotal and important components to social justice development and closely related to why social justice efforts could be so difficult. Managing emotions emerged as a category in these findings in an effort to address codes and categories that encompassed anger, emotional drain, and hurt and pain. These original codes and categories hid the fact that, at times, these seemingly negative emotions actually propelled participants to continue with their work and development. Emotions played a crucial role in the ways

that participants perceived, handled, and moved through challenges. At first, I began to classify the management of one's emotions as a motivator, a strategy for overcoming challenges; however, I quickly realized that emotions undergirded the entire social justice commitment process. Emotions were tied to engagement, perceived challenges, the use of motivators, and the need for a time of pause. Thus, understanding how participants managed their emotions, both positive and negative, proved central to gaining clarity about why social justice work was so difficult. According to the data, one's affective responses are a critical component of social justice commitment and engagement.

Throughout the interview process, participants noted that emotions could negatively affect their ability to navigate challenges. For many respondents, simply engaging in social justice work tugged on their proverbial heartstrings. Because social justice commitment is bound to hope, participants expressed having an emotional stake in their social justice work. For instance, Kyle noted,

One of the biggest challenges is really figuring out how to move through those moments...figuring out how to not become hopeless... For me, where I can feel myself getting stuck is just in being furious, that then I no longer really have the ability to really effectively figure out, "How am I going to meaningfully engage someone, if I've chosen to be a social-justice educator specifically?"

This response illustrated how, during times of pause, individuals questioned their work. The statement also demonstrated the connection between one's emotions and one's experiences with hope and hopelessness. Participants seemed to be approaching the fine line between hope and hopelessness when they began questioning their position, role, and ability to engage in social justice work. In this case, Kyle's anger intensified these

thoughts. Individual who could manage the intensity and direction of their feelings were able to use these emotions to their benefit during times of challenge.

Buffy talked in depth about how she harnessed the power of her emotions. She explained the strategies she used when she felt that she was moving towards her breaking point: Before I get to the breaking point, my anger is a lot of what gives me that motivation to keep going. It's kind of like an energy boost. I channel that into those nights when I just say, "Fuck it! I'm just going to stay here, and I'm going to do a bunch of things, and we're going to make this better." And it gives me more focus on time.

Similarly, Jess shared something another social justice professional had said to her: There was a saying that somebody said, 'I do this work not because I'm angry, but because of my love for my community.' Sometimes, I'm like, "You're full of shit. Come on. There is a level of you that is so angry about what has happened and what you've experienced yourself that you're in this for that reason as much as you love your community." Throughout the interviews, participants directly and indirectly shared how they used their emotions to keep going, even in the toughest challenges or during their time of pause.

Most of the participants also shared that their emotions often made them seek out support. Robert noted that it was easier to handle his emotions when he had the support of others:

When I'm pushing the university to move in a different direction, and they say, "No," and I go cry; I sometimes am like, "Who do I cry to? Where is my support? ... All my people are gone, or some people don't get it." I had to sit and cry by myself.

Similarly, in his times of anger, Kyle realized, "I don't think anybody else is as angry as I am, and I don't know what to do about that; because I really feel like I just need to be around some

folks who are pissed off, because otherwise, where does this go?" The intensity of these emotions helped to propel participants to rely on mediators to move through the challenge; however, their difficulty finding those people spoke to the challenge of feeling isolated or lonely in their work.

According to these responses, emotions can push people towards or away from a healthy and active process of engagement with social justice work. Although emotions often seemed to be both a challenge and a motivator for respondents, they actually proved to be the foundation of the participants' social justice work. Kyle noted this well when he reflected on his own emotions,

In some ways, that's been a continuous, lifelong thing, is figuring out how to be with your emotions, positive and negative, but also not have them prevent you from doing the things that you feel like you need to do. In some ways, that's just this evolving process in life.

For most of the participants, emotions came through in direct ways, as a means of navigating the emotional world that is social justice work.

Fear of Vulnerability and Risk. As the participants recounted their experiences with social justice, it seemed that an element of fear undergirded many of the challenges that they identified. This fear manifested itself in discussions of the risks of authentically engaging in social justice work and the vulnerability such risk requires. Vulnerability and risk seemed to pervade the entire commitment process, and presumably was present even prior to commitment. As the participants noted, social justice is about action, and to act, one must take risks. Bill provided the following explanation:

At some point, there is the action piece of justice. I often catch myself sitting in a place of inaction because I don't want to put the wrong post on Facebook... I think with all my dominant identities...I have all those systems working on the underside, and I'm definitely going to say something stupid or say something offensive or oppressive. Sometimes, it's easier to be quiet, but I think that can be just as oppressive.

In every case, participants were highly aware of their dominant identities, their privilege, and the ways that privilege could blind them when acting. As noted before, Whiteness is particularly salient when it comes to risk and vulnerability. Many respondents worried about saying the wrong thing, doing something offensive, or experiencing ridicule from others for their actions. I was particularly impressed with Bill who demonstrated remarkable insight and care with language. He was quite self-aware, and he felt that, at times, the risk was too great to do anything, even when he knew the right thing to do.

Bill was not alone in this fear that he might say or do something offensive. Risk and vulnerability are areas with which Josh was very familiar. He took part in a performance at his institution where he shared his story about growing up White, and talked about his background, identity, and family. A local news group picked up his story. Soon his family and friends heard about it, and they were upset that he had spoken about his White privilege. He recounted the impact of that difficult encounter with his family:

When we did a similar presentation for another group, I actually changed my story to allow more anonymity, to be less about my parents, and to be more about me today rather me and my journey, which I felt like took away some of the heart of the story. So, there was the reality that I was starting to censor myself as a result of that.

He aptly explained that, “it definitely put a pretty heavy weight on my, kind of...like, spiritual willingness to be vulnerable in this space.” For Josh, being vulnerable and taking risks impacted his family and friends, and so he became more careful about his decisions to demonstrate that vulnerability and transparency. Vulnerability and risk are challenging, but the fear of rejection, of pain, and of hurting others seemed to be profound for these social justice educators.

Finally, with vulnerability and risk can come shame when one “messes up.” Although it was subtle, several participants demonstrated hints of self-shame as they allowed themselves to be vulnerable and shared their stories with me. With Lee, the self-shame was far more apparent, and I asked her about it. She gave the following response,

I have this mentality right now, and I don't know how long it's been going on. It's a self-shame...this self-shame mentality. The more you see, and the more you know, you can't un-know it and you can't un-see it, right? You see it throughout as a pattern of your experiences... You pointed out something very astute. I'm self-shaming right now. I need to dig deep to ask why. I'm not really sure why...

Sometimes, I go to the shaming place because I'm trying to move forward; but in order to move forward, I need to reconcile my past. Sometimes, if I bring that shaming attitude intentionally or unintentionally into rooms, it does shut down conversations, because it sets the stage that other people should be self-shaming.

As Lee became vulnerable and shared her own challenges, she began to self-shame her knowledge, abilities, and reactions to challenges. Even when challenges were not present, it appeared that she still engaged in self-shaming as she opened up and became vulnerable during her own social justice development. Similarly, there were times when Essa also judged her own experiences. At one point, she shared the advice she would give herself, ““Silly Essa. You

waited so long.”... I just would have given myself a good shake and a good motivating talk, hopefully to work harder, do more, learn more, don't stop, check myself over and over and over again.” Many participants recalled not doing enough, not being good enough, or not saying enough throughout their experiences. They wanted to do more and do it faster, without regard for their own developmental needs.

Summary of Discussion

Social justice is simply a way of life for many educators who work in the field. So many of these professionals have either experienced injustice personally or seen it perpetrated against individuals for whom they care. Moreover participants shared that social justice work involves self-discovery, moving against societal norms, and educating others. For these reason, there is a visceral connection between the work to make the world more just and the lives, thoughts, and emotions of social justice workers. Their emotions tie directly to their moral compass of what is right and wrong, their lived experiences with injustice, and a fundamental belief that the world can be better. This belief is what gives them hope. Hope is the belief that the world can change and that each person can work together to make that change. Hope feeds them, it comforts them, and it empowers them; however, it also is what makes social justice work enormously challenging.

Each of the identified challenges, within this study, tugs on the strings that keep social justice workers hopeful. Each challenge, even if it is easily maneuverable, can shake one's firm footing within hope. This rift manifests itself in the questioning of hope. One might wonder, “Can the world change and are my efforts making any change?” When a supervisor states that an individual is being overly passionate, they might wonder if that passion is doing more harm than good. When individuals feel isolated, they may

wonder if it is possible to make any meaningful change. When people who are resistant to social justice ignore injustice or actively shut down difficult discussions, one might wonder if people really can change.

Certainly, the long-term buildup of strategies helps social justice workers navigate those challenges more quickly and efficiently. However, when the motivators to stay engaged cannot overcome the challenge, they drift towards the edge of hope. Consequently, they may pause on the edge of hope, asking themselves profound questions about self-worth, the possibility of living in a more just world, and their own role in this work. During a time of pause, they may precariously perch on the edge between hope and hopelessness. Being in such a liminal place can also be emotionally and mentally exhausting. The very process of questioning one's beliefs and actions requires a deep level of motivation to continue to do the work.

Implications for Practice

One reason for developing a grounded theory is to harness theoretical work and apply it to a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). When using grounded theory, a researcher attempts to understand a process, practice, or action, and establish a related theoretical model. In the case of the present study, the theoretical model can inform and guide practice. Even though this research involved social justice educators within student affairs, I argue that the applications extend beyond this community of practitioners and encompass our work with students and our work with communities. This section makes both specific recommendations for practitioners and recommendations that may apply more broadly.

For the practice-oriented fields of education and social justice, the following implications focus on behaviors and actions; however, I also fold the affective and cognitive domains into these suggested applications. To be clear, I use the term applications to refer to a mixture of implications for practice, applications of the emergent model, and recommendations for advancement of social justice. To begin I follow the lead of social justice theorists who have suggested that social justice work must begin with ourselves before extending outward to the social and institutional realms (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). In honoring that tradition, the implications move from the individual and interpersonal to the institutional sphere.

Personal and Interpersonal Implications

Acknowledging the challenges. Prior to this research, the challenges faced by individuals engaged in social justice work were largely anecdotal. Through this inquiry, I sought to understand some of the most prevalent and reoccurring challenges individuals experienced. This understanding is critical to the development and growth of social justice workers. First, identifying challenges allows us to comprehend the triggers within each of us and some of the triggers for others. Second, this new insight helps individuals identify some of the experiences they in common with other professionals in the field. Third, this awareness opens up new dialogue about how to prevent or mediate such difficulties from occurring.

The challenges noted in this study represent the issues that occurred most frequently for respondents, and are not a full list of issues that all individuals face. To be better social justice educators, individuals must be open and honest with themselves so that they can address these difficulties. By understanding our own challenges and limitations, we can more readily identify

challenges as they occur, seek out motivation to move through them, and recognize when we must retreat into a time of pause.

When I followed up with participants, several of them noted that they were surprised that other individuals had experiences similar to their own. Identifying and acknowledging the challenges may allow a greater sense of connection among our collective work, facilitate more vulnerability, and pave the way for individuals to share some of the common issues that they all face at some point or another. When individuals realize that other people have encountered similar struggles, that others have made their mistakes, and that others have felt their pain and anger, they might be more likely to become vulnerable and share their experiences. This act of vulnerability, as Brown (2010) suggested, allows individuals to connect with others and build authentic relationships of trust and respect. Vulnerability also allows people to reflect on their experiences, while making meaning and learning from them. In this way, they can fully connect to their emotions, thoughts, and actions moving forward.

More concretely, there are steps that we all can take to move towards the goal of fostering vulnerability. Vulnerability is a relationship between oneself and with others, and for that reason the individuals must be willing and ready to move towards vulnerability. In order to cultivate vulnerability, Brown (2012) recommended ten guideposts that can create wholehearted living. The components that apply to student affairs work center on being authentic and letting go of the critical expectations individuals have for themselves and for others (Brown, 2012). Instead, we each must honor and recognize our own faults and imperfection, which can translate into empathy for others when they make mistakes (Brown, 2012).

As we understand our own challenges and discover our shared relationship with challenges, we can begin to reduce or mediate those difficulties in an intentional way. For example, the challenges surrounding a social justice ethos are of our own making, and we can negate those issues before they occur. By naming this challenge, we can begin to deconstruct the issues and reconstruct an ethos that better lives into the values of our profession and of social justice, generally. When we are unable to prevent such challenges, we can actively work to mediate them. When challenges occur for others, we must be willing to rush in and provide active support, embracing compassion and extending grace and love to those experiencing challenges. In addition, by identifying our own challenges, we are more able to connect and be connected with others who are enduring trying times.

The application of this notion to social justice education requires that we revisit and update models, texts, and theories to address the emotional aspects of social justice work. We must begin to acknowledge our own struggles, have empathy for others, and be compassionate with those who are doing this work with us. People often understand social justice work as an individual and cognitive process; however, this research speaks to the fact that the work is an emotional and deeply social process. We are in constant interaction with our own feelings and emotions while we attempt to work and be in relationship with others. By acknowledging the challenges we face, we can start on the journey towards accepting that we all have struggles and challenges, and that we must be willing and ready to support our social justice-oriented colleagues and friends through these challenges.

Relying on motivators. The motivators found in this study, (re)connecting to passions, identifying wins, and seeking support, emerged almost universally in the interviews, and

appeared to be very influential in helping respondents reengage in their social justice work. Individuals must be open and willing to rely on such motivators, because whether a person is experiencing a challenge or taking a time of pause, they must use motivators to help them move away from the edge of hopelessness and back into active engagement. Additional motivators exist beyond the three discussed in this study; however, those indicated in this research are the most commonly used among participants. All other motivators that were discussed were only discussed by a single participants. The specific motivator that one chooses to employ is less important than making sure that one engages in the process of identifying what works and then uses the identified motivators when one is capable and ready.

When social justice oriented professionals are able to rely on motivators, and have the knowledge and skills to mediate the challenges, they can take on the responsibility of naming and facing oppressive actions in the educational arena. Most study participants identified as social justice educators; however, when challenges were extraordinarily challenging, participants noted that it became difficult to sustain their educative lens. When individuals approach their work as educators, they intrinsically hope that people can develop, grow, and change, else their work would be for naught. However, when that hope begins to fade, so does their ability to believe that any educational efforts are worthwhile; and they may find that their internal energy level becomes depleted. Thus, to sustain engagement, it is crucial to build, over time, a strong relationship with one's motivators, whatever they may be.

Moving back to hope. Hope is the bedrock of one's successful navigation of complex and taxing work. At times, individuals may find themselves on the edge of hope, where hopelessness feels ever-present, and traversing that space of hopelessness may

even be inevitable for some time. No matter one's relationship with hope at a given moment, this research would suggest that a time of pause, which rests within the liminal space of hope and hopelessness, is a vital part of one's development. Times of pause provide space for reflection, to rejuvenate, to regain energy, and to grow. In many ways, a time of pause is like a winter season, during which the challenge of the cold requires that life retreat and waits for warmer temperatures before it reenters the world. After such a season, growth and development are inevitable. The parallel is not perfect, but I believe it may help individuals view their need for a time of pause without the self-judgment or self-shame that was apparent in many interviews.

Thus, when challenges are great, we must honor our own need for time, regardless of what pressures exist beyond ourselves. One of the reasons that a time of pause is helpful, especially when one begins questioning hope, is that an individual often cannot reenter a well-balanced level of engagement without it. Kyle, for example, astutely made note of this point when he noticed that internal and external engagement are two sides of the same coin, as both must exist if one is to engage in social justice work. Without the internal process of reflection, balanced with the external actions and behaviors, one is in jeopardy of doing more harm than good. Thus, for some, a time of pause provides the space outside of engagement to question, reflect, and prepare for the hard work ahead.

Lastly, for the participants, there was some tension related to their need for a time of pause. For those with privileged identities, especially White identity, one may have more access to times of pause that may not be available to individuals whose identities do not allow for a break from oppression or injustice. Despite this truth, the reality is that everyone can benefit from such time. Thus, to move back towards hope, individuals involved in social justice work

must have times of pause; and when they take those moments, it is important that they be free from internal or external judgment. Instead of critiquing the possible privilege one may have in taking time, we must be willing to engage in constructive conversations that can motivate individuals back into hope.

It is actually morally dangerous to continue to engage in the work when one is lacking hope. The belief that change is possible is a prerequisite for justice and care to thrive. If, for instance, people do not believe that individuals can change, they are far more likely to respond punitively to missteps. Similarly, if individuals do not believe in their own ability to create change, then they cannot engage internally and externally. To be clear, one should not have a false sense of hope. A naïve presumption that ideals are easily reachable, or that one's skills are better than they are in reality, is equally as problematic. Thus, individuals must maintain a deeply reflective internal engagement paired with a thoughtful external engagement. After challenges, motivators or times of pause help individuals move back into hope and into a more holistic approach to engagement.

Extending grace. Extending grace is a function of maintaining hope, and relies upon the belief that people can change. It provides room and space for disagreement, mistakes, and explanations of intent and impact. Throughout the interviews, the challenge of a social justice ethos that carried with it high expectations and unforgiving spaces appeared destructive and caused fear and isolation. While self-critique and dissent are important characteristics of social justice work, compassion and love must be equally valued. Too often, people are triggered, rightfully so, and react from a place of pain. Such a reaction is understandable, but if a response is solely a function of pain, then it has the potential to produce more pain. Social justice work can be difficult, at best, because those

involved must take responsibility for their triggers, their pain, and their responses. Even when hurt or oppressed, it is important to pull from one's reservoir of resistance, hope, and courage to fight a reaction that might cause more pain.

Extending grace, as described here, is a multilevel process. It begins with stopping and reflecting on one's own position of power, privilege, and oppression. Second, extending grace requires one to understand another person's perspective, and recognize that person's humanity in a particular space. Finally, to extend grace, one must be willing and ready to have empathy for another person. Brown (2007) argued that empathy was the only means of reducing shame and increasing feelings of hope and belonging. Extending grace, then, is about reflecting on one's position, recognizing other individuals' positions, and having empathy for others.

As a researcher and social justice educator, I realize that extending grace to a perceived attacker is not only hard, but may feel like we are allowing an individual to get away with unacceptable or oppressive behavior. However, I think there is a difficult balance that we must acknowledge exists. There can never be a universal balancing test, but we each have a responsibility for checking in with our intuition, emotions, and experiences to determine if there can be space for a person to share their intentions and vulnerabilities. Extending grace, as used here, is simply about suspending judgment long enough for dialogue to occur.

In moving from internalized hope to the extension of grace to others, it is important to identify the perceived shortcomings of others with a level of care and empathy. Several study participants often spoke about experiences where individuals' perceptions of another's faults led to responses steeped in aggression, hostility, and shame. No one benefits in the long term when individuals are shamed or hurt, even when they are at fault. Instead of approaching unjust

actions with punitive responses, such as isolation and shaming, it may be more helpful to approach the conversation from a developmental perspective. This approach will be most effective when individuals have strong motivators to help them overcome challenges and find a firm footing in hope.

Being vulnerable and taking risk. Vulnerability and risk are fundamental for growth and development. Many participants noted that vulnerability and risk were missing in conversations around social justice. Individuals do not want to say the wrong thing, mess up, or show weakness. This fact is particularly poignant in social justice spaces, where the expectation is that individuals do not make major personal mistakes. Buffy, for example, shared an example where she allowed herself to become vulnerable story as she shared a personal mistake with a colleague, and she felt shamed from the listener because she should have known better than to have made such a mistake.

Everyone has made mistakes, and sharing stories that show our weaknesses, our limitations, or our mistakes can be helpful in the process of building trust and having authentic dialogues about our common struggles. The participants demonstrated the importance of sharing common challenges when, as I shared that other respondents had shared similar difficulties; they were surprised and felt relieved that they were not the only ones with such experiences. Sharing our challenges is important, as is providing judgment-free spaces where individuals can share their experiences. These spaces may not work in every context; however, they must become more commonplace. Identifying common challenges can help professionals involved in social justice work to find solidarity in shared experiences, and this solidarity can be a motivator that leads one back to hope and reengagement in the work. With renewed hope, individuals may be better

prepared to extend grace to themselves and to others, which, in turn, may increase opportunities for people to become vulnerable and take risks. These safe spaces may then provide an ideal environment for the development of strategies that will lead to real and lasting institutional change.

Individual interventions and applications. Finally, the social justice commitment model and the associated findings can prove useful in helping individuals become more intentional about their own personal development and the development of others. Because the model illustrates a developmental pattern, we can begin to develop the tools to identify where an individual might be within the model and intervene, when necessary, to assist the individual with their development. Any intervention or attempt to assist individuals comes with some risk. We must go into any such relationship with humility, clarity, and authenticity; and even then, we may have ill-intended effects. However, as educators, we are uniquely trained to have the sense and intuition to do this kind of work, and it is our responsibility to take up such risks.

The model provides a framework for mapping some of the potentially challenging experiences an individual may face. By identifying these possible challenges and potential motivators, we can intervene and assist individuals who may find themselves losing hope. For instance, if we encounter a person challenged by resistant students, then we can provide support to the individual, remind them of some of the wins, and help that person reconnect with their passion.

Although we can intervene and help individuals negotiate challenges, some challenges are beyond any motivator. As I talked with individuals about the Michael Brown case, many participants actively needed to take a time to pause. In some circumstances, times of pause are marked by a clear need for withdrawal, but in other cases, the need may be less obvious. The

test for educators is to use their senses and intuition to provide support without pushing support onto a person. Most people need moments of seclusion, physically or mentally, from injustice, and that time can be developmentally helpful. In such cases, it may simply be enough to let an individual know that there is support available should they desire it.

The goal of producing a social justice commitment model is to provide language and process for identifying how individuals move through the phases of commitment. The result is a core intentional application of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses that help to maintain hope, or at the very least, help individuals move back into hope when they have moved to the edge of or fully into hopelessness. Individual strategies and localized decisions are paramount when working to help individuals maintain hope. However, in using these individual and interpersonal strategies, we can also make our institutions better at fostering a hope and a complex understanding of social justice and social justice commitment.

Student affairs practitioners should be intentional about building reflective spaces should into their lives and into the structures of organizations. One way of creating such space is through a modification of the Jesuit's "Examen." The Examen, which one can easily convert to a secular practice, is a daily exercise whereby individuals follow five steps:

1. Become mindful in the present moment;
2. Review the day with gratitude;
3. Focus on one's emotions;
4. Choose one moment from the day to reflect on it; and
5. Determine how tomorrow will be better (Manney, 2011).

The use of such practices has wide-ranging benefits, one of which is the ability to recognize and resolve challenges by creating a vision of hope for tomorrow. These kinds of practices should become an integral part of professional preparation programs, departmental meetings, and conferences. The practice of acknowledging the challenges we experience helps us to be intentional about utilizing motivating forces to move us back into a space of hope.

How, then, do individuals rely on motivators? Beyond the aforementioned strategy of reflecting on and acknowledging one's challenges, practitioners must seek out or start professional networks that can support them during difficult times. The most supportive spaces will be those founded on principles of non-judgment and the extension of grace. By creating such spaces, individuals can get the help they need to move back towards hope; and with hope, they will be better able to extend grace. One strategy is to stop and take a metaphorical breath when we are triggered, and dig into our emotions. We must ask ourselves to embrace tough emotions, such as anger, pain, and isolation, while also asking ourselves whether we can choose to hope for something better in that moment. Stopping and reflecting is the single greatest step we have in our ability to effect positive change around us.

Institutional Implications

Advancing preparation programs. This inquiry revealed that preparation programs were one of the major spaces where participants deepened their understanding of social justice. Within the past decade, student affairs programs throughout the United States have adopted language around social justice on their websites, in their values, and throughout their curricula (Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009). Unfortunately, at the time of this study, the two national associations for student affairs, the American College

Personnel Association (ACPA) and the national Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) had yet to adopt formal social justice competencies for professionals. Even without the active support of the two large associations, the relatively quick infusion of social justice into curricula is a positive step. With a precipitous adoption of social justice, many limitations have occurred. To meet the goal of preparing current and future professionals, preparation programs must ensure a more complete conception of social justice.

Much of the existing literature conceptualized social justice as a primarily cognitive and behavioral process and goal. Researchers have paid little attention to the affective domain. As noted previously, social justice must add emotional elements of hope, grace, compassion, and love into its literature, teaching, and practice. Preparation programs, as a site for enculturation, are vitally important for developing such new conceptions. Without such institutional means, the field of student affairs will be unable to build a critical mass of individuals who can advance these concepts and principles.

Existing diversity-based courses, if they exist at individual institutions, must help students move through a more nuanced and multidimensional approach to the issues of social justice. I use the terms *diversity*, *multiculturalism*, and *social justice* to represent the multiple and needed perspectives that help build towards a complexity of engaging in social justice work. Diversity, as a numerical understanding of representation and achievement, must be accompanied by the awareness, knowledge, and skills associated with multiculturalism and multicultural competencies. Social justice adds a systemic dimension of institutional and social oppression and injustice. Each of these dimensions builds towards a complete understanding of the evolution of the literature within the field,

and provides a composite understanding that can lead towards action. For instance, individuals must build skills and tools to navigate their identity, build community, and face institutional and individual resistance.

Each dimension is critical for the advancement of social justice, but taken individually, they lack a holistic approach. Courses designed to teach practitioners about the concept of social justice must pay particular attention to diversity and representation, address the care and recognition embodied in multiculturalism, and help students utilize a systemic lens that can produce institutional and cultural changes. Within this study, participants noted that they deepened their commitment while in graduate school, but many felt as though they were not prepared to tackle issues of injustice or create institutional change. Participants seemed to have learned how to recognize demographic issues and had an appreciation for other cultural backgrounds, but they did not feel prepared to enter institutions where injustices were evident and where the culture and support to make meaningful changes were lacking. These findings aligned with those of Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, and Molina (2009), who also discovered that respondents did not feel prepared for their first position out of graduate school.

Using these findings, preparation programs may want to reimagine the current diversity-related courses offered within most student affairs programs. First, programs that have not already done so should move towards incorporating social justice discussions into their curriculum. Programs should focus on defining social justice, analyzing and evaluating social justice principles, and fostering and balancing the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of social justice development. The latter component is a fundamental shift for most programs that have traditionally relied on knowledge and skills, and rarely have incorporated the very real and quite challenging emotional aspects of social justice work.

By incorporating the social justice commitment model into class discussion, programs should also address the challenges that individuals may face when engaging in social justice work. This provides opportunities for individuals to be challenged, identify and rely on motivators, and utilize times of pause for reflection and meaning making. Faculty should be willing and ready to engage in tough conversations around competing interests inherent in social justice work. Fraser (1997) argued that social justice and identity work might be at odds with one another. Faculty must encourage students to dig into the complex issues of competing interests, the multiple meanings of social justice, and the contradictions among social justice theorists and educators. By doing so, preparation programs can help students acquire new knowledge, identify skills for navigating complex issues, and manage the emotional issues that will likely arise from challenging dialogues. Students should become well-versed in answering the following question about challenging experiences: Why was it challenging? What helped me move through the challenge? How can I use times of pause as moments to reflect and navigate back towards hope? Simply allowing students time to reflect and process are the most vital aspects for social justice development. The focus of such reflection should intentionally demark the divergent and convergent ways one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors may help or hinder one's development.

Creating such a comprehensive course may be a lofty goal for an introductory class that needs to meet students where they are developmentally. Many preparation programs, especially master's programs, may not be ready to take on such challenging ideas within a single class. Thus, it may be necessary for a program to offer a more focused course specifically on social justice, which can tackle these issues and move into

the complexities of social justice work and development. For a master's program to build in another required course or even would likely be difficult for master's programs that have little flexibility due to the outcomes a program must have. However, programs can use these principles within their current diversity-based course offerings, or they can set up an elective course that would focus specifically on social justice causes, issues, and development.

Enhancing workshops and conferences. Workshops and conferences are vital spaces for personal and professional development. In their current form, conferences and workshops tend to help attendees work towards understanding privilege and oppression. Some conferences, such as the Social Justice Training Institute, also help individuals develop language, build skills, and use self-reflection to deconstruct oppression. Often these spaces for development focus on a single identity, and many stop short of helping professionals develop more advanced skills. To build more advanced and complex social justice theory, research, and action, we must infuse advanced level social justice workshops into larger student affairs conferences and programs.

One of many ways to increase social justice knowledge through professional development is to provide tracks for advanced social justice development. In our interview, Bill shared that he wanted to learn from experts who had been engaged in this work, especially those who were skilled in facilitating difficult conversations and teaching social justice. There are many great scholars, researchers, and professionals who have respected backgrounds in social justice work. Relying on area experts may help deepen general conceptions and practices of social justice. For instance, this research study demonstrated that we should theorize the complexity of social justice, research the nuances of social development, infuse social justice into institutional practices, and facilitate challenging social justice dialogues. Each of these

areas may need to have very different individuals leading the charge. The knowledge, skills, and talents required for differing tracks draw from common social justice principles, but delve into complexities that we must address.

To use a multidimensional approach, we should begin to tailor conferences and workshops to specific outcomes and move away from generalized social justice events. Whatever form they ultimately take, these trainings must provide an opportunity for attendees to engage in a deep analysis of theory, research, or practice. Generalized training around social justice is still important for individuals interested in and newly committed to the work; however, for professionals who have been engaged with social justice work, there must also be robust training that focuses on deeper-level content and more complex applications.

Directions for Future Research

Entering and Exiting Commitment

Future research can and should look more closely at the transitions into and potentially out of commitment. This inquiry focused solely on individuals who were committed and who self-identified with a social justice identity (e.g., advocate, educator, activist); however, within this study, questions emerged for me, as the researcher, and for participants about the process through which individuals move from pre-commitment to commitment. To date, there appears to be little empirical data about this process. Although Edwards (2006) proposed a spectrum of allyship development, which one could equate with commitment, he and other scholars have not yet explored the triggers that move individuals into a long-term psychological intention and action towards social justice work. The present study found that the learning and adoption of social justice

language deepened social justice commitment, and graduate preparation programs appeared to be one of the most common sites for developing commitment. However, two new questions emerged during the study for which we do not yet have answers: How long does one iteratively process interest and engagement before moving into commitment? What factors are most associated with movement into commitment?

One of the limitations of this study is that it sought out individuals who were actively committed to social justice. This study found that individuals did not waver between commitment and non-commitment at any point throughout their development. It would seem as though once committed, the individuals either chose not to leave commitment or were unable to leave. Specifically, participants noted that they stayed with the work because social justice was a fundamental component of their lives, and that they would never choose to leave, even if the work became difficult. Despite the experiences of these participants, leaving commitment is theoretically possible. Moreover, it is likely that some individuals have left the work altogether and moved from simply a pause in engagement to a long-term psychological de-commitment. Questions here would include the following: Do individuals depart from social justice commitment? Why do some individuals leave when others stay? Are there personal characteristics or external factors that lead one to move out of commitment?

Understanding Hope and Hopelessness

The central finding in this study is that hope, and the emotions and feelings that orbit the duality of hope and hopelessness, is fundamental for social justice educators to engage in the work. This study attempted to bring attention to the affective domain; however, I, as a researcher, was limited in my ability to develop a complex and rich understanding about how individuals managed their emotions as they experienced

challenges, recognized the need for a time of pause, and made the decision to reengage. This research extends current empirical work by proposing that affect, especially hope, is not only important in social justice; it is critical to individuals' development, growth, and well-being as they navigate the difficult terrain of social and political issues, struggles, and opportunities.

One must accompany an understanding of hope with other emotions, namely, fear, grace, forgiveness, compassion, love, and isolation. Without such an interwoven affective understanding, we will have little space for risk and vulnerability. To understand these relationships, we must conduct more research to examine those spaces that exemplify or greatest values. However, also understand how and why those spaces are difficult to create. This research begins to move in this direction; however, it stops short of explicating the relationships between hope and other emotions and the conditions we find ourselves occupying.

Theorizing and Researching Social Justice

As North (2008) and other scholars argue, social justice is under-theorized. After conducting this research inquiry, I am even more certain that this statement is true. Researchers have invested significant time and resources to develop theories related to distribution, recognition, systemic oppression, and other components of social justice. However, they have failed to move from a solely justice-oriented perspective to consider a care-oriented viewpoint. One of the great moral development debates within student affairs literature occurred between Lawrence Kohlberg's (1969) notion of *justice* and Carol Gilligan's (1982) conception of *care*. Gilligan argued that there were dualities between "reason and compassion, fairness and forgiveness, justice and mercy...thought

and feeling” (as cited in Nunner-Winkler, 1990, p. 115). The present study found that relationships, emotions, vulnerability, and risk fall outside of traditional concepts of justice, which have been argued to be rational. In moving beyond the conceptualization of justice as a solely cognitive and behavioral process, researchers must begin to focus on the affective and social processes involved with care.

In *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Martha Nussbaum (2013) argued that emotions were fundamental to support the political principle that required the sacrifice of self-interest and the treatment of all people in a humane and inclusive manner. Her work fused normative political philosophy on justice with a philosophy theory of emotions. Her work began an important, albeit educationally removed, step towards emotion-based social justice work. Similarly, to how social justice moved through disciplines, largely from philosophy into fields like education, we must theoretically and empirically translate the emotions-oriented conception of social justice into educational settings.

By restructuring the concept of social justice to include care, practitioners would not simply be agents who cared; they would consider those who are cared-for (Noddings, 1999). This idea, as Nodding conceptualized it, required educators to make differentiated curriculums, programs, and actions, which took into account the needs, values, and interests of the people being served. Moreover, we, as practitioners, must be intentional about engaging in self-care and extend this concern to our social-justice-oriented colleagues, while always considering the issues and needs of marginalized individuals and communities. The Rawlsian (1999) perspective has argued that social justice is a normalizing theory, best used for systems, outcomes, and processes; however, balancing care with justice allows individuals who are

within those systems and processes to receive care, as well as allowing individuals to work towards human thriving and cultivating relationships and communities.

Conclusion

At the outset, this project focused on democracy, but the findings illuminate a critical component of social justice development. Although the research shifted away from its original broad focus on sustaining a social justice commitment, the study remained firmly rooted in the challenges social-justice-oriented student affairs professionals face. This inquiry finds that challenges moved these professionals away from hope, especially when motivating factors did not help them to overcome a challenge. This finding is a critical step towards helping student affairs professionals to mediate challenges and maintain hope.

Hope binds our emotions and thoughts together, encourages us to imagine the possible, and moves us towards positive social action. In her analysis of an emerging crisis of hope, Amsler (2008) argued that “it is becoming increasingly difficult to undertake transformative social action because contemporary cultural practices not only disable the critical imagination of alternatives and the organization of collective action, but also produce types of human beings for whom these practices are subjectively meaningless” (p. 1). Amsler postulated that hope was in danger within society, because hope is a wasted utopic project. However, for social justice educators, there is an underlying belief that the world can change for the better. Unfortunately, current cultural practices and ideologies do not support this belief, which makes hope more difficult to maintain.

Finally, we must begin to embrace the fact that we need hope for social justice. Hope extends our work both towards justice, as a rational ideal, and care, as a relational ideal. We must embrace the emotional work that comes along with the well-documented cognitive and behavioral work if we are to make the world a more just and humane place. This project moves us towards a more complete understanding of social justice development, a process where challenges and motivation exist; but also where hope is in flux and times of pause are critical spaces for reflection. There is a visceral connection between the challenges we each face and our emotions, our spirit, and our lives; and for that reason, social justice is, simply and complexly, a difficult field of work in which to engage.

APPENDIX A: SOLICITATION EMAIL TO INSTITUTE PARTICIPANTS

Hello Institute on Social Justice Participant,

I am excited to be launching a study entitled: *Negotiating the Challenges of Social Justice Work Among Student Affairs Professionals*. In an attempt to recruit individuals who have a wealth of experiences with social justice and who are ready and willing to share their experiences, I am working with the planning team to interview individuals at the ACPA Institute on Social Justice (outside of the formal institute meeting times).

The aim of this research is to understand the process by which student affairs practitioners negotiate challenging critical incidents within their social justice work. By better understanding this process, I hope to extend the current understanding about how individuals maintain long-term commitment to social justice work. Thus, the end goal is to provide researchers, practitioners, and students with better tools to sustain their engagement and commitment while facing challenging situations.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary and not part of the formal Institute. If you are interested in participating, individuals should self identify as being a social justice advocate, ally, activist, educator, or other similar identity; having a significant experience in engaging in social justice work; being able to identify several challenging experiences when attempting to enact social justice and articulate those experiences; and being emotionally and mentally ready to share those stories. If you are interested in participating in the study, or unsure if you would qualify, please feel free to contact me at pepin@umd.edu.

I am looking for between 12-15 participants from the Institute. If you are interested in being a participant in this study, please fill out the following interest form, which contains some demographic information and additional information about the interview process. ([link here](#)).

This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects (Reference #634260-1). If you have questions about the IRB approval, please contact the Institutional Review Board Office at University of Maryland, College Park via email irb@umd.edu or by phone 301-405-0678.

Thank you,

Sean Pepin
Ph.D. Candidate
University of Maryland, College Park
pepin@umd.edu

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Thank you for being willing to be part of the study on Social Justice Experiences among Student Affairs Practitioners. All individuals will be contacted by email to inform them if they meet the selection criteria and will be invited to be a participant in this study.

By completing this form you are indicating that you are at least 18 and agree to voluntarily provide this information. You may be contacted by phone or email for a follow-up interview if you are eligible.

Sean Pepin
Ph.D. Candidate
University of Maryland, College Park
pepin@umd.edu

Please fill out the information below. Note: information shared will be kept strictly confidential.

Name: _____

Pseudonym: _____

Email: _____

Phone: _____

What is your preferred form of communication? Email Phone

If by phone, can I leave a general voice mail to contact me back? yes no

Years of Full-Time Student Affairs Experience: _____

Highest Degree completed: _____

For the questions below, please rate how closely you identify with the following statements. Please rate between a 1 (disagreeing with the statement) and 5 (agreeing with the statement).

I am a social justice advocate, ally, activist, educator, or other similar identity

I have significant experiences in engaging in social justice work

I have had several challenging experiences when enacting social justice

I am ready and willing to share some of the challenging experiences I have had.

For the following questions, your responses are optional. However, because the nature of this research is based on social justice, personal identities and the way we identify are critical. One of the expectations I have of this research is to preserve those identities you hold important within the research.

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Gender: _____

Sexual Orientation: _____

(Dis)Ability Status: _____

Religion/Spirituality: _____

Preferred Pronouns:

She/Her/Hers He/Him/His They/Them/Theirs

Ze/Hir/Hirs Not listed: _____

Are there other salient identities you would like to share?

In terms of how you identify with embodying and enacting social justice, which of those following would you most identify with (check all that apply).

Social Justice Educator Social Justice Ally Social Justice Advocate

Social Justice Activist No Social Justice Identity Not Listed:

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.

If you agree to participate, please type your name below.

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

<p>Project Title</p>	<p>Negotiating the Challenges of Social Justice Work Among Student Affairs Practitioners</p>
<p>Purpose of the Study</p>	<p><i>This research is being conducted by Sean Pepin (in conjunction with faculty member Kimberly Griffin) at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because of your participation at the Institute on Social Justice and your commitment to social justice. The purpose of this research project is to understand how individuals negotiate the challenges inherent in social justice work and sustain their social justice commitment.</i></p>
<p>Procedures</p>	<p><i>The procedures involve semi-structured, individual interviews. Each interview will be conducted using a set of open-ended questions, which will take approximately 60-70 minutes. Interviews will be conducted either in person or via phone or conference call, depending on what the participant is most comfortable with. These interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and will be sent to the participant to review upon completion of the transcription.</i></p> <p><i>Some individuals may be contacted again, to request a follow up interview. The second interview will follow the same steps as the first; however, the questions will be changed to gain additional information.</i></p>
<p>Potential Risks and Discomforts</p>	<p><i>This study poses only minimal risk that would reasonably occur in an individual's daily life. This study is attempting to investigate how individuals negotiate challenging social justice experiences. Thus, individuals will be asked to recall an experience or two that may still be painful or uncomfortable to talk about.</i></p>
<p>Potential Benefits</p>	<p><i>There are no direct benefits from participation in this research. However, possible benefits include assisting the investigator to learn more about how individuals negotiate challenging experiences and sustain a commitment to social justice. In the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the process of sustaining social justice commitment.</i></p>

<p>Confidentiality</p>	<p><i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by ensuring all transcriptions are kept on a password-protected computer and transcripts will be edited to include only pseudonyms.</i></p> <p>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</p>
<p>Right to Withdraw and Questions</p>	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sean Pepin The University of Maryland, College Park, Cole Field House BK0100, College Park, MD. or email: pepin@umd.edu</p> <p>If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</p> <p>Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) irb@umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678</p> <p>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects (Reference #634260-1).</p>
<p>Statement of Consent</p>	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>

Signature and Date	NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please Print]	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	

APPENDIX D: INITIAL INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Before beginning, I want to go over several important aspects about this research and our interview.

- Any information you provide that may identify you, will be removed from the transcript (i.e. city name, university name, your name, etc.)
- This interview will be recorded. Do I have your permission to record this interview?
- If at any point you have questions feel free to ask.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

From here, the interview will be fairly casual and conversational. I do have a few questions for you, but largely I expect that the conversation will be free flowing.

Rapport Building Questions:

I would like to talk with you about your experiences around social justice. I would be interested to hear a little about how you became involved in social justice work.

Probes: Who if anyone influenced your work in this area?
Were there events, spaces, workshops, people who influenced you most, and if so who or what were the key influences for you?

In the interest form to be in this study, you define social justice as: "...[insert their definition]..." Can you tell me a little about how you came to that definition?

Probes: What were major influencers in your definition?
Based on what you are sharing, what do you think is the hardest part about embodying and enacting social justice?

Encouraging Reflection about Social Justice Work

To start off a broadly, do you think that engaging in social justice work is difficult or challenging? If so, what makes it challenging? (If not, do you think it could be hard for some individuals? Why might it be hard for some, but not for you?)

Probes: The literature points to social justice being difficult, why do you think that it might be hard for you or for others?
What do you think are the hardest parts of the work?
Although there might be general challenges, do you also think there are roadblocks or obstacles that prevent you from doing the work (in the way you want)?

Encouraging Reflection about Important Experiences

The goal of this study is to understand how individuals negotiate the challenging moments when they attempt to enact social justice. Do you have an experience like this that you could share? If so, could you take me back to that moment, and describe in detail what happened?

Probes: What were you feeling at that moment?
Were those kind of feelings or emotions fairly typical for you?
What were you thinking at that moment?
What was the hardest or more difficult thing about the situation?
How did you process the moment after it happened?
What was helpful to you as you were processing the situation?
What obstacles did you face as you moved through making meaning from the experience?
How do you think you handled it?
How is this similar to or different from how you handle other challenges?

Can you tell me about another experience like the one before, but this time where you handled it differently? [Depending on how they believe they handled the previous incident]

Probes: What were you feeling at that moment?
Were those kind of feelings or emotions fairly typical for you?
What were you thinking at that moment?
What was the hardest or more difficult thing about the situation?
How did you process the moment after it happened?
What was helpful to you as you were processing the situation?
What obstacles did you face as you moved through making meaning from the experience?
How do you think you handled it?
How is this similar to or different from how you handle other challenges?

Encouraging Reflection of Interpretation

How do you think these experiences have shaped the work you do today?

Probes: What do you think was the most important thing you learned from these experiences?
Would you handle things differently now? Why or Why not?
When you get difficult feedback, how do you move through that experience?
What are some of the positive take-aways from this experience?
Are there negative consequences of these experiences that remain with you?

What meaning have you made out of these experiences that will help you deal with future situations?

Probes: How did you come to this meaning?
 What most helped you?

What do these experiences mean for your future social justice work or work in general?

Probes: What will you do next?
 How have these events shaped your decisions about the future?
 What made you want to persist through these challenges to continue
going?

Wrap Up Thoughts and Questions

Thank you for sharing your story with me. (Affirm stories)

What advice would you give yourself about how to negotiate these situations?

In looking back on this interview, if you had to give this interview a title like you would a chapter to a book, what would you title it?

I learned a great deal today about your story. May I follow up with you if I have further questions or if it seems like a second interview might help with some of the findings?

APPENDIX E: POST INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT CHECK AND FOLLOW UP

Hello NAME,

I want to follow up and thank you for your time at the Institute on Social Justice. I am so glad we could connect and you were willing to take part in this study.

I am emailing you for two reasons. First, I am attaching the transcript from our interview. Would you please review the transcript and let me know if there are any areas that you would like to clarify or any additions you have. If you do, feel free to mark it with track changes – or provide comments in an email message – and then you can send it back to me. If there are no edits, then you can let me know that too.

Second, I would like to talk with you about a few things from your interview. I think that you had some excellent insights, I would like to ask you a few questions based on some initial analysis I have done with the interviews so far. Please let me know if you are willing to be part of a select group of participants for a follow-up interview; I anticipate that our second interview would last 60-90 minutes. [I would also offer some days or periods of time and indicate how much time you would like the person to allow for a second interview]

Thank you again and I look forward to hearing from you soon,

Sean Pepin

Ph.D. Candidate

Higher Education, Student Affairs, and International Education Policy

University of Maryland, College Park

pepin@umd.edu

APPENDIX F: ABRIDGED INITIAL FINDINGS

Abridged Initial Findings: Understanding Social Justice Commitment

By Sean C. Pepin

The Challenges of Engaging in Social Justice

The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges that exist when doing social justice work and how individuals negotiate such challenges. Below are the two types of challenges, the identified challenges, and the means to motivate individuals back into engagement. The second page includes the emergent model that shows the process that occurs within a stage of commitment. The components of the model are briefly described.

Types of Challenges

- *Significant Event* – a salient and individual challenge. These tend to be prominent when individuals are in highly reflective spaces (in graduate school, at conferences, etc).
- *Burn Out* - the accumulation of challenging events over time. These are pronounced when individuals have been engaged in the work over a longer period of time.

Identified Challenges

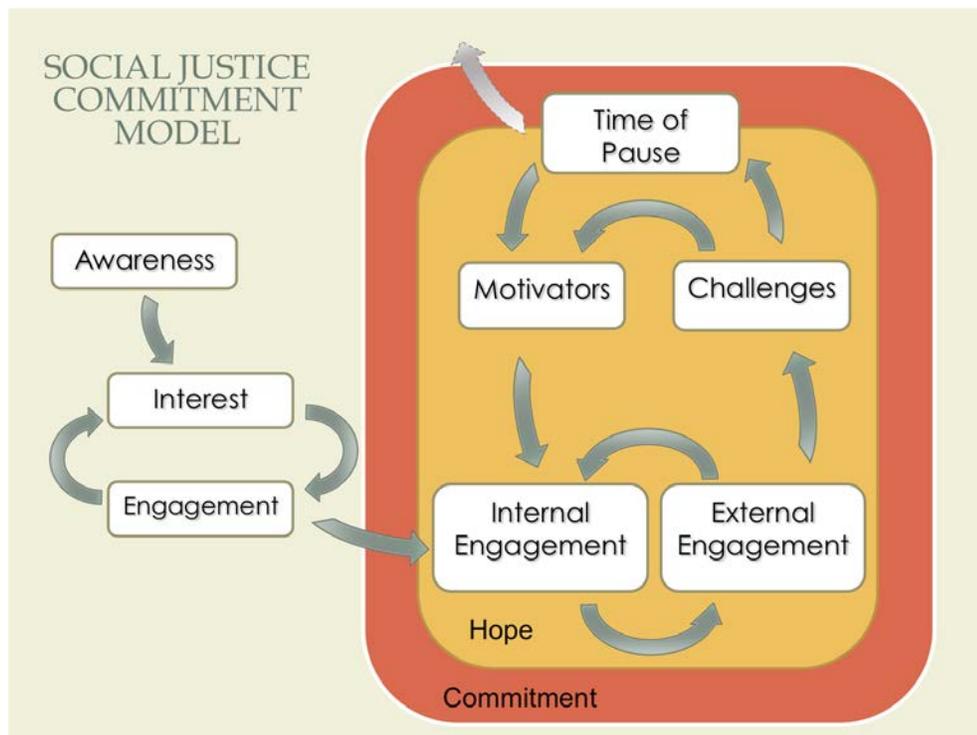
- *Resistance to Social Justice* – when attempting to enact or teach social justice, professionals often face resistance among students and colleagues who are not social justice oriented
- *Social Justice Ethos* – among other social justice oriented professionals, there is an ethos that creates high expectations of an individuals work and can be unforgiving of perceived mistakes
- *Feeling Isolated* – feeling like the only one in a department or institution can cause individuals to feel lonely and potentially unsupported
- *Fighting the System* – within the structures, individuals find changing or positively impacting policies and procedures difficult
- *Institutional Position* – the ability to make change is related to one's position within an area or institution and individuals feel like they are unable to have significant impact
- *Campus Culture* – some campus cultures and work environments are perceived as toxic or lacking a critical mass of diversity to make changes or to sustain a conversation around social justice

- *Extended Workload* – student affairs work often spans beyond a 9-5 job, but doing social justice work tends to add additional responsibilities that extend those hours
- *Navigating Whiteness* – a particular challenge for white folks trying to balance their level of engagement on racial issues, which does not appear to exist for other dominant identities

Identified Motivators

Motivators help to mediate the challenges and motivate individuals to reengage.

- *(Re)Connecting to Passion and Motivation* – harnessing the original passion and motivation that led to social justice commitment helps to reinvigorate engagement in social justice work
- *Identifying the Wins* – small and large wins must be identified and acknowledged in order to see that change is possible and that individuals are able to create change
- *Seeking Support* – finding others who are at a similar level of development or who are mentors is important to help move through challenges and reengage in the work



Social Justice Commitment Model

Pre-Commitment

- Awareness of (in)justice leads to an iterative process of interest and engagement. For many, upon developing the language around social justice, individuals enter into a commitment stage.

Commitment

- Commitment is a psychological process, whereby individuals move towards a goal or idea in a deliberate and constant manner.

Hope

- When entering commitment, individuals unconsciously enter into a space of hope, which can be understood as the perception that positive change is possible and that one can affect such change.

Internal and External Engagement

- Professionals note a constant interaction between self-reflection, meaning making, and learning from experiences (internal engagement) and actions (external engagement). Thus, commitment is made largely of this cycle.

Challenges and Motivators

- When engaging with social justice, individuals face challenges, which are mediated by several motivating factors that lead to reengagement.

Time of Pause

- When motivators are unable to overcome the challenges faced, individuals enter into a time of pause. During this time, individuals might remove themselves from a situation, take time to recover or recuperate, or engross themselves in other work or issues.
- This period is marked by a series of reflective questions, such as: Can I do social justice work? What is my role? Is it worth it to engage in this today? Am I able to create change?
- Additionally, this period of time exists on the edge of hope. Hopelessness, which may not be conscious prior, is now palpable; however, it appears uncommon for individuals to fall into hopelessness and instead use motivators to move back into engagement.

APPENDIX G: SAMPLE SECONDARY INTERVIEW SCRIPT

To begin, thank you for your initial interview. I wanted to talk further with you because your interview was very helpful. I have a few follow-up questions and some questions related to my preliminary data analysis

Briefly, I want to go over some important information that we reviewed when we met last time.

- Any information you provide that may identify you will be removed from the transcript (i.e., city name, university name, your name, etc.)
- This interview will be recorded. Do I have your permission to record this interview?
- If at any point you have questions feel free to ask.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Sample questions

1. In our first interview, you talked about some of the challenging moments you have had in your work towards embodying and enacting social justice. Since we talked, what thoughts and reflection have you had about the experiences you shared with me?
2. In the first interview, you talked about (insert topic), can you tell me more about that?
3. I have heard from other participants about (insert topic and description), have you had any similar experiences? If so, tell me more about [topic]. If not, what thoughts or reflections do you have about why you might not have experienced that?
4. So far, (insert theme/ category) has seemed to come up in many of the interviews. I would be interested to hear what your thoughts are about that, why you think it keeps coming up, and what that might mean about your work in social justice.

APPENDIX H: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Pseudonym	Lauren	Nicholas	Buffy	Leah
Recruited	ISJ	ISJ	ISJ	ISJ
Years of Experience	2	8	2.5 (Student Affairs), 3 (Nonprofit)	7 (Diversity Education), 20 (Teaching)
Highest Degree	Master's	ABD	Master's	Doctorate
Race/Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	Latino	White	White/ Jewish
Gender	Female	Male	Woman	Female
Sexual Orientation	Bisexual	Straight	Straight+	Straight
(Dis)Ability Status	Invisible physical and mental disabilities	None	Temporarily Able-Bodied	Temporarily abled
Socio-Economic Status	Upper Class	Low- Income	Low-income, significant governmental assistance	Middle
Religion/Spirituality	Unitarian Universalist/ Atheist	None	Christian/exploring	Atheist/Agnostic
Preferred Pronouns	She/her/hers	He/his/him	Female Pronouns	She/her/hers
Additional Salient Identities		Son of an undocumented Latino Immigrant		

Note: All responses are in the language of the participant.

Pseudonym	Jess	Josh	TC	Will
Recruited	ISJ	ISJ	ISJ	CSJE
Years of Experience	4	3.5	1	11
Highest Degree	Graduate	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	Doctorate
Race/Ethnicity	Asian American	White	Cambodian	Black
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	Gay	Straight	Heterosexual
(Dis)Ability Status	Able-bodied	No disability	n/a	n/a
Socio-Economic Status	Low/Middle income	Lower Middle Class/Middle Class	Lower middle	Lower-class/middle class
Religion/Spirituality	Catholic, practicing spiritual	Spiritual, non-religious	Buddhism	Christian
Preferred Pronouns	She/Her/Hers/They/Them/Theirs	He/Him/His They/Them/Theirs	She/Her/Hers	n/a
Additional Salient Identities	Feminist, Educator		Asian American	Black/Male/Urban/Southern American/Bald/Overweight/ 30's

Pseudonym	Lee	Bill	Essa	Robert
Recruited	CSJE	CSJE	CSJE	CSJE
Years of Experience	4	8	10	9
Highest Degree	Master's	Master's	Master's	Master's
Race/Ethnicity	White	White	White	Black/African American
Gender	Cis-Gender Female	Male	Woman	Male/Queer
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	Gay	Heterosexual	Queer
(Dis)Ability Status	Able-bodied	None	Learning difference	Able-bodied
Socio-Economic Status	Upper middle class growing up	Lower Middle Class/Middle Class	Middle	Middle Class
Religion/Spirituality	Atheist	Christian	Spiritually ambiguous	Catholic
Preferred Pronouns	She/Her/Hers	He/Him/His	She/Her/Hers	All
Additional Salient Identities	Sexual Assault Survivor			

Pseudonym	Margot	Kyle	Ryan
Recruited	CSJE	CSJE	CSJE
Years of Experience	4	12	19
Highest Degree	Master's	Master's	Master's
Race/Ethnicity	White	Biracial/ multiethnic	White
Gender	Female	Cisgender male	Genderqueer
Sexual Orientation	Straight	Gay/queer	Queer
(Dis)Ability Status	Able	Currently non-disabled	Temporarily able bodied
Socio-Economic Status	Middle-class ish - Received the Pell Grant	Middle Class	Middle class with working class roots
Religion/Spirituality	Still Searching	Agnostic	Spiritual
Preferred Pronouns	She/Her/Hers	He/Him/His	Ryan
Additional Salient Identities		First Generation College Student	Interracially married

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