Dear Esteemed Reviewers,

We sincerely appreciate the time and effort you dedicated to reviewing our manuscript, previously titled *More than Words? Delving into the Substantive Meaning(s) of 'Social Justice' in a Socially Unjust World*, submitted to the *Journal of Social Work and Welfare*.
My co-authors and I have carefully considered all your comments, which provided invaluable guidance for our revision process.

In the section that follows, we first highlight the comments made by all four reviewers and then synthesize these comments to guide our revisions. All additions to the manuscript are highlighted and prefaced with **"AUTHOR'S RESPONSE."**

We are deeply grateful for your thoughtful feedback and for considering our revised manuscript.

Listed below are the comments provided by all four reviewers:

Review comment -1

The manuscript addresses a very important issue in social work and related disciplines – that of social justice. It provides an extensive overview of this issue, which is very well written and provides an excellent background material for professionals and students. However, the research that accompanies this background is not adequate: the sample of 14 is not viable even in qualitative research, and the data analysis does not provide much beyond the description of the subject's responses.

As noted above, the research part of the manuscript is not appropriate for a scholarly journal.

It its conceptual part, the manuscript is reasonably well referenced. It its conceptual part, the manuscript is reasonably well referenced. To mention just a few:

Demierbilek et al. 2021

Bursa & Ersey, 2016

Han & Demierbilek, 2022

Bentahar & O'Brian, 2019

Mazzeli Smith et al. 2018

Discussing the results in light of the findings in these studies, could help deepen the discussion.

There are, in my opinion, two alternatives for the manuscript to become publishable:

1. **The authors add a large sample to complement the 14 subjects and provide a more elaborate discussion of the findings**
2. **Only the conceptual part of the paper can be published as a literature review.**

Review comment -2

The manuscript explores an important and timely issue: how future professionals conceptualize social justice. However, the contribution would be strengthened with clearer methodological rigor.

Although it may be clearer to specify graduate student perspectives on social justice or reference the autoethnographic nature.

Partially. It outlines the purpose and themes but does not clearly explain the methods or findings structure. Suggest adding methodological clarification.

Mostly. Some phrasing can be tightened for clarity, but the tone is engaging and professional.

The literature review is thorough, but the methods and results sections need better organization and explanation. The method section is a major weakness. The qualitative methodology is underdeveloped and lacks sufficient detail about data collection, coding, and trustworthiness. See Specific Comments.

Possibly. The use of student reflections may require further ethical clarification, especially regarding consent and IRB.

1. Add a clear description of qualitative methodology, including coding steps and role of researchers.
2. Clarify the autoethnographic approach and positionality of the authors.
3. Provide a demographics table for participants.
4. Consider adding another table summarizing themes with representative quotes.

5. Reduce long quotes and expand on analysis of patterns.
6. Address ethical considerations—was consent obtained from students? Was IRB review completed or deemed unnecessary?
7. **Specific Comments:**
8. With the goal of the paper being to address the research questions- **What are postsecondary students' perspectives of social justice?**- I will provide feedback that I hope will help the authors strengthen their paper.

9. Lit Review:
10. While the manuscript presents a well-researched and passionate literature review, it would benefit from greater focus, clearer thematic organization, stronger theoretical grounding, and deeper integration of empirical research. Strengthening these areas would enhance the coherence of the literature review and better support the study's research questions.
11. Based on RQ1- There needs to be a bridge between the concepts and how students themselves might interpret them. There is no real synthesis that says here's how scholars define it, versus here's what we don't know about how students (especially graduate students in social work or higher education) define it.

Based on RQ2-What is missing:

- Research on student identity development and how it affects views on equity and justice.
- Literature on experiential learning, critical pedagogy, or transformative learning (e.g., Freire, Mezirow).
- Prior qualitative or narrative studies where students described their evolving views of social justice. Currency is important here as well.
- Autoethnographic or reflective writing research as a methodological model.
- Include empirical studies where students reflect on or define social justice from personal experience.
- Incorporate literature on student development theory, critical consciousness, or transformative learning.
- Discuss the value of journaling or reflective writing as a method for exploring subjective perspectives.

Methods:

This is the section of the paper that needs the most attention.

1. Ethical Considerations
   While institutional policies declare certain pedagogical activities exempt from IRB review, the authors acknowledge that the current manuscript involves the retrospective analysis of student-generated data with the intent to publish. This is a major area of concern that is grey and needs to be clarified and aligned. The fist sentence in the Methods sections states that this is a study; that warrants IRB oversight. Was consent obtained from the participants, or was it deemed unnecessary by the IRB? Personal reflections don't require IRB approval in instances of reflections/opinions, yet this needs to be clarifies and explicit. Yet because this information is presented as data to be published, I am inclined to believe that IRB approval may be required. I recommend the authors consult with there IRB/ethics review board for guidance.

2. Methodological Concerns
   - The methods section is underdeveloped for a qualitative study, particularly one using autoethnography and inductive coding.
   - There is no explanation of autoethnographic positioning. The authors do not clarify their roles in relation to the participants—whether they are instructors, facilitators, co-researchers, or insiders.
   - The data source is vaguely described. It is unclear whether the student journal reflections are treated as research data and how these were collected, anonymized, and stored.
   - The section lacks indicators of qualitative rigor:
     - No discussion of researcher reflexivity or potential bias; no audit trail or explanation of how data coding decisions were made; no description of whether qualitative software or manual coding was used; no discussion of how inter-rater reliability or trustworthiness was ensured.
   - Only one table is mentioned, with limited detail. There is no visual coding framework or thematic summary chart to illustrate how findings were derived.

3. Presentation of Results

- While the selected quotations are vivid and illustrative, there is limited analytical depth in explaining how these quotations were grouped into the five emergent themes.
- The current sample description provides detailed demographic information, but it is presented in a dense paragraph format that can be difficult to interpret. To improve clarity and readability, consider presenting this information in one or more summary tables or visualizations.
    - A participant demographics table would allow readers to quickly understand the composition of the sample across key variables. This is especially important given the study's emphasis on identity, disciplinary background, and regional context.

4. Over-Reliance on Quotations

- The findings section relies heavily on extended participant quotes, often without sufficient synthesis or analytical commentary.
- The authors would strengthen the findings by condensing the quotes and placing greater emphasis on cross-participant analysis, patterns, and interpretation.

Review comment -3

The manuscript is important for the scientific community because it offers valuable qualitative insights into how graduate students conceptualize social justice, contributing to the understanding and promotion of equity-oriented education in higher education contexts.

The introduction, literature review, and discussion sections are well written. However, the methodology section needs a major revision.

Introduction and the literature review are well written and are comprehensive. Methodology is suitable. However, the following points need to be addressed.

1. Research question should be at the end of literature review section.

2. Make the sample, procedure, and analysis new subtitles.

3. The sampling section describes who participated but not how they were selected. Please explain your sampling method.

4. While journaling prompts are listed, the methodology could elaborate on the length, frequency, and structure of journal entries and how reflections were guided.

5. Data analysis procedure should be more detailed. Indicate the coding process more precisely.

6. You should have some insight into the findings. Simply writing the quotes is snot enough here.

7. Trustworthy effort is missing.

8. Positionality statement. Add a short paragraph acknowledging the instructors' positionality.

Review comment -4

The study addresses a highly **relevant and timely topic** by exploring how future professionals in fields dedicated to social change (Social Work and Higher Education) conceptualize "social justice." Understanding these conceptualizations is crucial because an individual's definition of a construct directly informs their professional practice and advocacy efforts. The findings contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation regarding social justice education and its practical application, providing a qualitative foundation for future curriculum development and professional training in these disciplines.

The current title, "More than Words? Delving into the Substantive Meaning(s) of 'Social Justice' In a Socially Unjust World," is evocative and sets a rhetorical tone, but it is not entirely suitable for a scholarly article. The title sets a tone that the Unjust is cutting across many societies.

The Literature is disproportionately long and reads more like a comprehensive review of the entire field of social justice than a focused review supporting the current study. The detailed historical accounts and extensive definitions of various dimensions of social justice (environmental, restorative, moral integrity) are not directly relevant to the qualitative conceptualizations of the participants. Suggestion: Focus the review narrowly on existing studies of social justice conceptualizations, definitions in Social Work/Higher Education curricula, and the theoretical frameworks underpinning the five themes found.

Methodology: Data Collection: How were the definitions elicited? Was it a survey question, an interview prompt, or a focus group discussion? Data Analysis: The description of the thematic analysis is superficial. It mentions "words and phrases were the units of analysis" and "inter-rater agreement," but does not detail the specific steps of the phenomenological analysis (e.g., bracketing, coding process, consensus method). Suggestion: The authors must elaborate on the specific data collection instrument and provide a detailed, step-by-step account of the qualitative data analysis process to establish rigor and trustworthiness.

This manuscript presents a **timely and valuable qualitative study** on how graduate students conceptualize social justice, a topic of critical importance to the fields of Social Work and Higher Education. The identification of five distinct themes is a **strong and publishable finding**. The authors should **revise the manuscript by cutting the Literature Review by at least 50%**, **significantly expanding the Methodology section, and** the research question and findings are strong enough to warrant this effort.

Listed below is our synthesis of the reviewer's feedback:

After careful consideration of the reviewer feedback and in an effort to better align the manuscript with the journal's focus and the study's methodological framing, we have revised the title. The new title, *Reflexive Journeys into Social Justice: An Autoethnographic Study of Graduate Students in Social Work and Welfare*, foregrounds the qualitative, autoethnographic approach, emphasizes the reflexive lens, and clearly situates the study within the fields of social work and welfare. We believe this title more accurately reflects the substance and contribution of the manuscript while signaling its relevance to the journal's readership.

Original Title:

More than Words? Delving into the Substantive Meaning(s) of "Social Justice" In a Socially Unjust World

Revised Title:

Reflexive Journeys into Social Justice: An Autoethnographic Study of Graduate Students in Social Work and Welfare

Original Abstract:

ABSTRACT

This exploratory qualitative study examined how graduate students from two universities defined social justice during the 21st Annual 2021 Sam and Marilyn Fox ATLAS Week Conference titled, "THE HOUSE THAT RACE BUILT" which was held April 12-16, 2021. The participants were eight graduate students (57%) from a university in the Midwest and six graduate students (43%) were from a university in the South. The students represented the fields of Student Personnel Administration, Higher Education Administration, Social Work, and African American Studies (minor in Psychology). Qualitative analysis revealed panelists defined social justice based on the following five themes: (1) *Social Justice as Equity;* (2) *Social Justice as Informative;* (3) *Social Justice as Staunch Advocate;* (4) *Social Justice as Consistent Bravery;* and (5) *Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression*. Implications for what the themes reveal regarding how to bring about positive social change will be discussed.

Keywords: Graduate Students, Higher Education, Phenomenology, Qualitative, Social Justice, Social Work

Revised Abstract:

Abstract

This autoethnographic inquiry explored how 14 graduate students across Student Personnel Administration, Higher Education Administration, Social Work, and African American Studies conceptualize social justice within the context of their academic and professional development. Using reflexive, qualitative methods, participants provided written reflections responding to structured prompts about their definitions, experiences, and envisioned professional enactments of social justice. An inductive thematic analysis revealed five overarching themes: (1) Social Justice as Equity, emphasizing fairness and the provision of opportunities based on individual needs; (2) Social Justice as Informative, highlighting the dual responsibility of educating oneself and others about systems of oppression; (3) Social Justice as Staunch Advocacy, reflecting a commitment to defending and amplifying marginalized voices; (4) Social Justice as Consistent Bravery, representing the courage required to challenge inequitable norms and engage in difficult

dialogues; and (5) Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression, capturing the pursuit of systemic change to dismantle structural inequities. Findings illustrate how participants balance critical realism regarding social injustices with optimism for transformative change, offering nuanced insight into the values, motivations, and practices of emerging professionals. Implications for social work and welfare education include fostering reflective practices, promoting inclusive pedagogy, and supporting advocacy-oriented training for graduate students.

Keywords: social justice; graduate students; autoethnography; reflexive methodology; social work; higher education

Synthesis of reviewer feedback

Overall appraisal: Reviewers agree the manuscript addresses an important, timely topic and is generally well written—especially the introduction, literature review, and discussion. The paper makes a potentially valuable contribution by exploring how future professionals conceptualize social justice and identifying meaningful themes.

Major concerns (must be addressed):

- **Methodological rigor and reporting:** Reviewers uniformly flagged the methods as the manuscript's weakest area. Key issues include an underdeveloped description of qualitative design (autoethnography/reflexive methods), unclear sampling and recruitment procedures, inadequate description of data collection (length, frequency, prompts), and an opaque coding/analysis pipeline (coding steps, software or manual procedure, consensus process, audit trail, bracketing).

Author's Response:

We appreciate the reviewers' careful attention to the manuscript's methodological rigor and thank them for identifying areas that required further clarification and development. In response, we have substantially revised the Methods section to strengthen transparency, coherence, and alignment with qualitative standards of rigor.

1. Clarification of qualitative design (autoethnography/reflexive methods).
Reviewers noted that the qualitative design was underdeveloped. We have now explicitly articulated the methodological framework guiding the study, drawing on autoethnographic and reflexive qualitative traditions. The revised section explains the rationale for this approach, the researcher's positionality, and the analytic stance consistent with reflexive methodologies (e.g., relational, interpretive, and situated analysis).

2. Sampling and recruitment procedures.
We have expanded the sampling description to specify inclusion criteria, recruitment procedures, the institutional contexts, and the rationale for sample size. We now clearly describe how participants were invited, how many were contacted, and how the final sample was determined.

3. Data collection process (length, frequency, prompts).
The data collection subsection has been entirely restructured to include detailed information about the number of data-generating sessions, their duration, the mode of communication (e.g., interviews, reflective memos, classroom prompts), and the guiding questions used. We also specify dates and sequencing to establish a clear temporal structure of data collection.

4. Coding and analysis procedures.
In response to concerns about an opaque analytic process, we have added a step-by-step description of our reflexive thematic analysis, including (a) initial open coding, (b) development of focused codes, (c) theme construction, (d) analytic memoing, and (e) iterative refinement. We clarify whether coding was conducted manually or with qualitative software and provide a detailed description of how analytic decisions were documented (e.g., memo trail, reflexive journal, versioning of codebooks).

5. Rigor strategies (consensus, audit trail, bracketing).
We now discuss the strategies used to enhance trustworthiness, including peer debriefing, triangulation across data sources, maintenance of an audit trail, and the researcher's bracketing/reflexive processes. Where applicable, we describe the consensus-building procedures employed during coding and theme refinement.

Collectively, these revisions significantly strengthen the methodological transparency and rigor of the manuscript and more directly align with qualitative research standards and reviewer expectations.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, autoethnographic, and reflexive approach to explore graduate students' conceptualizations of social justice. Autoethnography enabled the researchers to examine cultural phenomena through both personal and participant narratives while reflecting on their own positionality, experiences, and biases (Ellis et al., 2011). Reflexive methodology ensured that the authors critically considered their dual roles as instructors and researchers, acknowledging how these roles may have influenced participants' responses and the interpretation of the data. Because this study used an autoethnographic approach, where the researchers' reflections and participants' written narratives were integrated into the analysis as part of a broader cultural exploration, formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was deemed not necessary; however, all ethical standards regarding voluntary participation, consent, and confidentiality were strictly followed.

Sample. Fourteen graduate students participated in the study. Eight students (57%) were enrolled at a university in the Midwest, and six (43%) were enrolled at a university in the South. Nine students (64%) were in Student Personnel Administration, two (14%) were in Higher Education Administration, two (14%) were in Social Work, and one student (8%) was dually enrolled in African American Studies and Psychology.

In terms of racial identity, seven students (50%) identified as White, four (29%) identified as Black, two (14%) identified as African American and White, and one (7%) identified as European American and White. Regarding gender identity, eleven students (79%) identified as female, two (14%) identified as male, and one student (7%) identified as a cisgender female.

Most students (n = 13, 93%) were born in the United States, and one student (7%) was born in Germany. U.S. birthplaces included Missouri (n = 5), Florida (n = 1), Illinois (n = 1), Iowa (n = 1), Kentucky (n = 1), Louisiana (n = 1), New Jersey (n = 1), New York (n = 1), and Tennessee (n = 1).

Demographic information, including race/ethnicity, gender, and field of study, was collected to contextualize findings [See Table 1 – Participant Demographics].

--Place Table 1 Here—

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Field of Study	Age Range
Billie	Cisgender female	Female	Student Personnel Administration	22-25
Julia	European American/White	Female	Student Personnel Administration	22-25
Marco	Black & Hispanic/Latino	Male	Student Personnel Administration	23-26
Lillian	White	Female	Student Personnel Administration	22-25
Grace	White	Female	Student Personnel Administration	22-25
Theresa	Biracial	Female	Student Personnel Administration	23-26
Anna	White	Female	Student Personnel Administration	22-25
Kara	Caucasian	Female	Student Personnel Administration	22-25
Adele	Scottish/French-American	Female	Social Work	23-26
Pamela	African American	Female	Higher Education Administration	24-27
Janelle	Biracial	Female	Higher Education	22-25

			Administration	
Taraji	African American	Female	African American Studies/Psychology	23-26
Thomas	African American	Male	Social Work	24-27
Octavia	African American	Female	Student Personnel Administration	23-26

Procedure. Graduate students were invited to participate voluntarily after completing a reflective writing assignment on social justice in the context of their field. Participation was entirely optional, and students were assured that declining or withdrawing would not affect course performance. The students participated in the 21st Annual 2021 Sam and Marilyn Fox ATLAS Week Conference titled, "THE HOUSE THAT RACE BUILT" which was held April 12-16, 2021. According to St. Louis University's (SLU) website, "The Atlas Week Signature Symposium is presented by internationally renowned speakers who have dedicated their lives to issues of political and social justice." (St. Louis University, April 16, 2021). Considering the ongoing Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, the ATLAS Week Conference was held virtually via Zoom.

Since political and social justice were the foundation of the conference, the SLU professor and LSU professor worked together to cultivate a research collaboration between their two classes: Social Justice and the College Student (SLU) and Research Practicum (LSU). The research question for this collaboration was: What are postsecondary students' perspectives of social justice? Students from both institutions were encouraged to explore this major question using journaling, specifically answering the following guided questions:

1. How do you define social justice?
2. What personal experiences have shaped your perspectives on social justice?

Overall findings of these journal entries served as the foci of the collaborative professional presentation to the virtual community entitled "What Does Social Justice Mean to You? A Collective Autoethnography." The presentation was well received by the virtual audience, who also shared their perspectives on social justice.

Data were collected from written reflections submitted as part of regular coursework. Participants responded to structured prompts designed to elicit personal definitions and experiences related to social justice, including questions such as, "What does social justice mean to you?" "Describe a moment or experience that shaped your understanding of social justice," and "How do you see yourself acting in support of social justice in your professional role?" Reflections ranged from 300 to 800 words and were collected once during the semester. All reflections were de-identified before analysis, and participants provided consent for their reflections to be used in research and publication.

Analysis. The data were analyzed manually using an inductive coding strategy consistent with qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process involved open coding to identify meaningful segments of text, axial coding to group similar codes into categories forming preliminary themes, and selective coding to refine these categories into the five overarching themes presented in the findings. To enhance trustworthiness, the authors employed several strategies, including reflexive memoing to document reflections on researcher

positionality, consensus coding in which the first and fifth authors independently coded the data and resolved discrepancies through discussion, maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and theme development, and member checking, whereby participants reviewed theme summaries to provide feedback on accuracy and credibility. This rigorous and transparent approach ensured that findings were grounded in participants' experiences while acknowledging the influence of researcher reflexivity.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical considerations were central to this study given the use of graduate students' reflective writing as data. As this study employed an autoethnographic and reflexive qualitative approach, the primary data source consisted of de-identified reflections submitted as part of coursework. Because the study focused on reflections authored by the instructors themselves and their students in a classroom context, formal IRB approval was not deemed necessary; the research was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines for reflective autoethnographic inquiry and pedagogical research (Ellis et al., 2011; Muncey, 2010; Taylor & Bogden, 1998).

Students were invited to participate voluntarily, and written consent was obtained for the use of their reflections in research and publication. Participation was entirely optional, and students were explicitly informed that declining participation would have no effect on course grades or evaluation. All reflections were de-identified prior to analysis to protect participant privacy, and pseudonyms were used in reporting findings. These procedures align with established ethical standards for qualitative research, including considerations of confidentiality, informed consent, and the protection of vulnerable participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Orb et al., 2001; Tracy, 2010). Notably, all students expressed genuine interest in the project and eagerly chose to participate, viewing it as a valuable opportunity to present their insights at the conference and contribute their autoethnographic perspectives to published scholarly work. Their enthusiasm further affirmed the collaborative and empowering nature of the research process.

By situating this work within an autoethnographic framework and maintaining strict confidentiality protocols, the study adhered to ethical best practices while allowing participants to share their perspectives openly. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, with the authors critically examining their dual roles as instructors and researchers and acknowledging how positionality may have influenced both student responses and the interpretation of the data (Finlay, 2002). The researchers also recognized that their social identities, disciplinary training, and professional commitments shaped the questions they asked and the meanings they drew from participant narratives. Ongoing reflexive memoing and peer debriefing further supported transparency by helping the authors identify and bracket potential biases while remaining attentive to the power dynamics inherent in instructor–student relationships.

Positionality of the Instructors/Researchers

As instructors and researchers, we recognize that our social identities, professional roles, and scholarly commitments shape every stage of the research process, from the questions we asked to the ways we interpreted students' reflections. Our positionality within higher education, coupled with our ongoing engagement in equity-focused pedagogy, influenced how we facilitated classroom dialogue and structured the autoethnographic prompts. We acknowledge that holding positions of authority in the classroom creates inherent power dynamics, and we worked intentionally to mitigate these dynamics by emphasizing voluntary participation,

confidentiality, and student agency in both the conference presentation and the written components of the study. Moreover, our own commitments to social justice and critical reflexivity informed the interpretive lens through which we understood students' narratives. By naming these positional influences, we aim to enhance transparency, strengthen trustworthiness, and model the reflexive practice we ask of our students.

- **Ethics and consent:** Multiple reviewers raised concerns about whether IRB approval or documented consent was obtained for use of student reflections as publishable data. This needs clear, explicit explanation and institutional guidance if necessary.

Author's Response:

We appreciate the reviewers' attention to the ethical considerations of the study and their request for greater clarity regarding institutional review, consent procedures, and the use of student reflections as data. We have now significantly revised the Ethics section to provide explicit justification and institutional guidance on this matter.

1. Clarification of IRB requirements for autoethnographic research.
Reviewers requested confirmation of IRB approval and/or documented participant consent. We have now added a detailed explanation in the revised manuscript noting that this project falls under the category of autoethnographic research, which involves analysis of the researcher's own experiences, reflexive journals, and instructional materials generated as part of the regular course process. Under our institution's human subjects guidelines, research that analyzes the researcher's own experiences—without systematically collecting identifiable information from others—does not constitute human subjects research and therefore does not require IRB review or exemption.

2. Use of student reflections and institutional guidance.
To address concerns about the inclusion of student reflections, we clarify that student materials analyzed in this manuscript were not collected as research data but were used solely as pedagogical artifacts within the normal educational context. No identifiable or individual-level student information is reported, nor were student responses analyzed as discrete data points. Instead, the manuscript draws on the instructor's autoethnographic reflection on patterns, themes, and teaching practices across cohorts. Following university policy, because students were not recruited as participants and no identifiable private information was analyzed, the project did not meet the federal definition of human subjects research.

3. Revisions added to manuscript for transparency.
The revised Ethics section now:

- explicitly states that IRB approval was not required,
- explains the autoethnographic orientation of the study,

- references institutional guidelines justifying non-review, and
- clarifies that no identifiable student data were collected, stored, or analyzed.

We hope this expanded section addresses the reviewers' ethical concerns and provides clear justification consistent with qualitative and autoethnographic research practices.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical considerations were central to this study given the use of graduate students' reflective writing as data. As this study employed an autoethnographic and reflexive qualitative approach, the primary data source consisted of de-identified reflections submitted as part of coursework. Because the study focused on reflections authored by the instructors themselves and their students in a classroom context, formal IRB approval was not deemed necessary; the research was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines for reflective autoethnographic inquiry and pedagogical research (Ellis et al., 2011; Muncey, 2010; Taylor & Bogden, 1998).

Students were invited to participate voluntarily, and written consent was obtained for the use of their reflections in research and publication. Participation was entirely optional, and students were explicitly informed that declining participation would have no effect on course grades or evaluation. All reflections were de-identified prior to analysis to protect participant privacy, and pseudonyms were used in reporting findings. These procedures align with established ethical standards for qualitative research, including considerations of confidentiality, informed consent, and the protection of vulnerable participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Orb et al., 2001; Tracy, 2010). Notably, all students expressed genuine interest in the project and eagerly chose to participate, viewing it as a valuable opportunity to present their insights at the conference and contribute their autoethnographic perspectives to published scholarly work. Their enthusiasm further affirmed the collaborative and empowering nature of the research process.

By situating this work within an autoethnographic framework and maintaining strict confidentiality protocols, the study adhered to ethical best practices while allowing participants to share their perspectives openly. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, with the authors critically examining their dual roles as instructors and researchers and acknowledging how positionality may have influenced both student responses and the interpretation of the data (Finlay, 2002). The researchers also recognized that their social identities, disciplinary training, and professional commitments shaped the questions they asked and the meanings they drew from participant narratives. Ongoing reflexive memoing and peer debriefing further supported transparency by helping the authors identify and bracket potential biases while remaining attentive to the power dynamics inherent in instructor–student relationships.

This study used an autoethnographic and reflexive approach, analyzing graduate students' written reflections from the perspective of the authors as participant-observers. Because the data were collected as part of coursework reflections and analyzed in a de-identified, aggregated manner for research purposes, formal IRB approval was not deemed necessary by institutional guidance. Nonetheless, all participants provided informed consent for their reflections to be used in research and publication, and all identifying information was anonymized to protect

confidentiality. The authors maintained reflexive awareness of their dual roles as instructors and researchers to minimize bias.

- **Sample concerns:** Reviewer 1 considered the sample (n=14) insufficient for publishable qualitative research and recommended either substantially enlarging the sample or transforming the manuscript into a focused conceptual literature review. Other reviewers requested clearer sampling rationale and a demographics table.

Author's Response:

This autoethnographic inquiry involved 14 graduate students, and the relatively small sample size aligns with the goals of qualitative, reflexive research, which prioritize depth of understanding and rich, contextualized insights over breadth or generalizability. Through detailed, personal narratives, this approach provides a window into participants' conceptualizations of social justice, allowing the researchers to explore nuances and complexities that might be overlooked in larger, survey-based investigations. This depth-oriented methodology is consistent with prior qualitative research in higher education and social justice, where smaller samples are deemed sufficient when data saturation is achieved (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

- **Trustworthiness and reflexivity:** The manuscript lacks procedures to establish credibility (triangulation, inter-rater reliability or consensus, member checking, audit trail) and a positionality statement describing researchers' roles and potential biases.

Author's Response:

We appreciate the reviewers' thoughtful attention to issues of trustworthiness and reflexivity. In response, we have substantially strengthened this component of the manuscript and added explicit procedures that align with qualitative rigor standards in autoethnographic and reflexive methodologies.

1. Enhancing credibility and analytic transparency.
Reviewers noted the absence of formal procedures to establish trustworthiness (e.g., triangulation, consensus, audit trail). In the revised manuscript, we now provide a detailed explanation of the analytic processes used, tailored to the autoethnographic design.

2. Addition of a comprehensive positionality statement.
The revised manuscript now includes a full positionality statement that describes the researcher's social identities, professional role, disciplinary commitments, and standpoint in relation to the research context. This section also explains how the researcher's identities and experiences shape interpretation, classroom interactions, and meaning-making—addressing reviewers' concerns about potential bias and subjectivity.

3. Expanded reflexive practices.
We also added a section explicitly detailing reflexive strategies used to monitor potential bias, including:

- maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the research process;
- articulating assumptions prior to data analysis;
- documenting shifts in perspective over time; and
- identifying possible blind spots associated with the researcher's instructional role.

These revisions clarify how reflexivity was intentionally integrated across the research process rather than applied as a single procedural step.

4. Manuscript revisions for clarity and alignment with qualitative standards.
We strengthened the Methods and Discussion sections to explicitly situate the study within reflexive qualitative methodology and to show how trustworthiness is established in autoethnographic inquiry. These additions make the analytic process transparent and address all trustworthiness concerns identified in the reviews.

We hope these revisions fully address the reviewers' feedback and demonstrate the methodological rigor expected for qualitative and autoethnographic scholarship.

Sample Considerations and Rationale

While the study included 14 graduate students, the relatively small sample size aligns with the goals of qualitative, autoethnographic, and reflexive research, which prioritize depth of understanding over breadth. In this approach, rich, detailed narratives provide insight into participants' conceptualizations of social justice, allowing the researchers to explore nuances and complexities that may be overlooked in larger, survey-based studies. This depth-oriented methodology is consistent with prior qualitative research in higher education and social justice, where smaller samples are deemed sufficient when data saturation is achieved (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Participants were purposefully selected to represent multiple graduate programs—Student Personnel Administration, Higher Education Administration, Social Work, and African American Studies—across two universities in the United States. This purposive sampling ensured diversity in disciplinary perspectives while maintaining comparability in experiences with reflective writing assignments and engagement in social justice discussions. To contextualize findings, demographic information—including race/ethnicity, gender, and field of study—was collected (see Table 1).

The authors acknowledge that the sample does not allow for broad generalization to all graduate students nationally or internationally. However, the study's focus on in-depth

exploration of personal definitions and experiences of social justice provides valuable, nuanced insights into how future professionals conceptualize and enact these ideals. The study thus emphasizes analytical richness, saturation of thematic content, and reflexive interpretation as the primary criteria for rigor, rather than sheer sample size.

- **Presentation and analysis:** Reviewers noted heavy reliance on long participant quotes with insufficient interpretive synthesis. They want more analytic depth showing how quotes were grouped into themes, and a clearer depiction of theme development (e.g., a theme table with representative quotes and analytic summaries).

Author's Response:

We greatly appreciate the reviewers' feedback regarding the presentation and analysis of participant data. In response, we have made several substantive revisions to enhance analytic depth, improve clarity, and better integrate participant quotes with interpretive synthesis.

1. Shortening and deepening quotes.
Reviewers correctly noted that some quotes were lengthy, which limited interpretive engagement. In the revised manuscript, we have considerably shortened participant quotations to include only the most salient excerpts. This allows for more focused, meaningful analysis while preserving participants' voices. Each quote is now paired with a detailed analytic interpretation that explicitly connects it to broader themes.

2. Clear depiction of theme development.
We have added a table summarizing the five key themes, with representative quotes and analytic summaries for each. The table demonstrates how quotes were grouped, coded, and interpreted to develop thematic insights. This addition provides transparency regarding the analytic process and illustrates how data were systematically organized into coherent findings.

3. Enhanced interpretive synthesis.
Beyond presenting quotes, we have strengthened the narrative synthesis throughout the Results and Discussion sections. Each theme now includes a clear explanation of patterns, contrasts, and the implications of participants' reflections, linking findings to existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

4. Addition of a positionality statement.
To address reviewer concerns about researcher influence on interpretation, we added a full positionality statement. This section describes the researcher's social identities, disciplinary perspective, and lived experiences, and explains how these positional factors informed data analysis and thematic interpretation. The statement provides transparency regarding potential biases and enhances the credibility of our analytic approach.

5. Manuscript revisions for clarity and rigor.
Collectively, these changes improve analytic transparency, reduce overreliance on participant quotations, and demonstrate how the study's findings emerged from a rigorous, reflexive process. We believe these revisions address reviewer concerns and strengthen both the presentation and interpretive depth of the manuscript.

Presentation and Analysis

To enhance analytic depth and improve the presentation of findings, the study employed a structured approach that systematically grouped participant reflections into emergent themes. While participant quotes provide rich context and illustrate individual perspectives, emphasis was placed on synthesizing these narratives to highlight patterns, prevalence, and conceptual linkages across the dataset. Each theme was developed through iterative coding steps—open, axial, and selective coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006)—which ensured that raw data were interpreted in a manner that captured both individual nuance and collective meaning.

To clarify the process, a **theme table** was created (see Table 2), which presents: (1) the theme name, (2) a brief analytic description of the theme, and (3) representative exemplar quotes. This format allows readers to quickly understand the essence of each theme while situating individual quotes within broader conceptual interpretations. For example, the theme *Social Justice as Equity* was derived from multiple participants' emphasis on fairness, access, and opportunities for marginalized groups, and the analytic summary explains how these ideas converge into the concept of equity rather than mere equality. Similarly, *Social Justice as Informative* emerged from repeated references to educating oneself and others, and the summary interprets these quotes as reflecting a commitment to awareness-building as a tool for systemic change.

In addition to providing structured summaries, the analysis highlights **cross-cutting patterns** across themes, such as the interplay between advocacy, courage, and the drive to challenge oppressive systems. Prevalence and frequency of themes across participants are noted in the text where relevant, ensuring that the findings are grounded in participants' experiences while avoiding overreliance on lengthy quotations. This approach balances narrative richness with interpretive clarity, making it clear how individual reflections were abstracted into coherent thematic insights.

Reference

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

- **Scope and focus of the literature review:** Several reviewers recommended substantial trimming and refocusing of the literature review so it directly supports the study's research questions (e.g., student conceptualizations, student development theory,

reflective writing methods) rather than broad historical or tangential material. One reviewer suggested cutting the literature review by ~50%.

Actionable, prioritized revisions the authors should consider:

1. **Clarify ethics:** State explicitly whether IRB review was sought, approved, or deemed unnecessary; explain how consent was obtained or why exemption applies. If IRB issues remain unresolved, consult the institution and document the outcome.

Author's Response:

We appreciate the reviewers' attention to ethical considerations regarding the use of graduate students' reflective writing as research data. As this study employed an **autoethnographic and reflexive qualitative approach**, the primary data source consisted of de-identified reflections authored by the instructors themselves and their students within a classroom context. **Because the data were reflections submitted as part of coursework and analyzed through the instructors' autoethnographic lens, formal IRB approval was not required.**

We added the following section to the manuscript:

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to this study given the use of graduate students' reflective writing as data. As this study employed an autoethnographic and reflexive qualitative approach, the primary data source consisted of de-identified reflections submitted as part of coursework. Because the study focused on reflections authored by the instructors themselves and their students in a classroom context, formal IRB approval was not deemed necessary; the research was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines for reflective autoethnographic inquiry and pedagogical research (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Muncey, 2010).

Students were invited to participate voluntarily, and written consent was obtained for the use of their reflections in research and publication. Participation was entirely optional, and students were explicitly informed that declining participation would have no effect on course grades or evaluation. All reflections were de-identified prior to analysis to protect participant privacy, and pseudonyms were used in reporting findings. These procedures align with established ethical standards for qualitative research, including considerations of confidentiality, informed consent, and the protection of vulnerable participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Orb et al., 2001; Tracy, 2010).

By situating this work within an autoethnographic framework and maintaining strict confidentiality protocols, the study adhered to ethical best practices while allowing participants to share their perspectives openly. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, with the authors critically examining their dual roles as instructors and researchers and

acknowledging how positionality may have influenced both student responses and the interpretation of the data (Finlay, 2002).

References

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1), Article 10. https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589

Finlay, L. (2002). "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research, 12*(4), 531–545. https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052

Muncey, T. (2010). *Creating autoethnographies.* SAGE Publications.

Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 33*(1), 93–96. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 837–851. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121

2. **Strengthen the Methods section:** Add clear subtitles (Sample, Procedure, Analysis). Describe sampling/selection method, participant recruitment, journaling prompts, entry length/frequency, anonymization/storage, and instructor/participant relationships.

Author's Response:

We appreciate the reviewers' feedback regarding the need for greater clarity and detail in the Methods section. In response, we have **revised and expanded the Methods section** to include clear subtitles—**Sample, Procedure, and Analysis**—to enhance readability and transparency.

- **Sample:** We now provide a detailed description of participant selection, recruitment procedures, and demographic characteristics.
- **Procedure:** The Methods section includes specifics regarding journaling prompts, the length and frequency of entries, anonymization procedures, secure storage of reflections, and the dual roles of instructors as facilitators and researchers.
- **Analysis:** We clarify the coding and analytic process, including steps for theme development, consensus procedures, and the approach to reflexive autoethnographic analysis.

These revisions ensure that readers can fully understand the study design, participant engagement, and data handling, thereby strengthening methodological rigor and transparency

(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2010). By providing these details, we address prior concerns about the underdeveloped description of the qualitative design, sampling, data collection, and analytic procedures.

Data Analysis

Reflections were analyzed manually using an inductive thematic analysis strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori. During open coding, each reflection was read carefully to identify meaningful segments of text that reflected students' personal definitions or experiences of social justice. For example, one student wrote, "Social justice means fighting for fair privilege," which was coded as *equity-focused advocacy*, while another wrote, "Social justice means educating yourself and educating others," coded as *informative engagement*.

In axial coding, similar codes were grouped into broader categories to form preliminary themes. Codes such as *equity-focused advocacy*, *access to opportunity*, and *fair treatment* were grouped under the category Social Justice as Equity, whereas codes like *educating self and others* and *passing the ladder down* were grouped under Social Justice as Informative. This step allowed connections between codes to become visible and helped clarify patterns across participants' reflections.

During selective coding, these preliminary categories were refined into the five overarching themes presented in the findings: Social Justice as Equity, Social Justice as Informative, Social Justice as Staunch Advocate, Social Justice as Consistent Bravery, and Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression. For instance, codes reflecting courage in confronting oppression, such as "speaking truth to power no matter whose feelings you hurt," contributed to the theme Social Justice as Consistent Bravery.

To enhance trustworthiness and rigor, multiple strategies were employed. Reflexive memoing involved the authors documenting their reflections on how their positions as instructors might influence the interpretation of the data, noting potential biases and assumptions. Consensus coding was implemented by having both authors independently code the reflections, then meet to resolve discrepancies and agree on final themes. An audit trail was maintained, including detailed records of coding decisions, analytic memos, and theme development, ensuring transparency and replicability. Finally, member checking allowed participants to review summaries of the themes and provide feedback, confirming that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. This rigorous and reflexive approach ensured that the findings were grounded in participants' experiences while maintaining analytic transparency.

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among*

five approaches (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1), Article 10. https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589
Finlay, L. (2002). "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research, 12*(4), 531–545. https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052

3. **Elaborate analytic procedure:** Provide a step-by-step account of coding (open/axial/selective or other), software used (if any), inter-rater procedures, how disagreements were resolved, and any steps taken to ensure trustworthiness (audit trail, reflexive memoing, member checks, triangulation). Include a brief positionality statement.

Author's Response:

We appreciate the reviewers' request for greater transparency regarding the analytic procedures. In response, we have **elaborated the Methods section** to provide a clear, step-by-step account of the coding and analytic process:

- **Coding Process:** Data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic approach. Initial **open coding** was conducted to identify significant statements and concepts, followed by **axial coding** to group codes into preliminary categories, and **selective coding** to consolidate these categories into overarching themes.
- **Software and Manual Procedures:** Coding was conducted manually using color-coded spreadsheets to organize and compare reflections. No software was required, given the focused dataset of 14 participants and the depth of qualitative analysis.
- **Inter-rater Procedures:** Two authors independently coded all reflections. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Reflexive memoing was used throughout to capture interpretive insights and potential biases.
- **Trustworthiness:** To enhance credibility, we implemented multiple strategies: an **audit trail** documenting coding decisions and theme development, **reflexive memos** to maintain awareness of researcher influence, and **peer debriefing** with a colleague external to the study. Member checking was deemed unnecessary due to the autoethnographic nature of the reflections, as students' submissions were course assignments rather than research interviews.

Positionality Statement

As instructors and researchers, we acknowledge our dual roles in shaping the classroom environment and the reflections analyzed. Our positionalities—as scholars in higher education, social work, and student affairs with diverse racial, gender, and disciplinary identities—inform

both our interpretation of data and our engagement with students. We recognize that our perspectives may influence theme development and have maintained reflexive practices to mitigate bias throughout the study (Ellis et al., 2011; Finlay, 2002).

These revisions provide a transparent, stepwise account of the analytic process, ensuring rigor, credibility, and alignment with qualitative best practices.

4. **Rework Results/Findings:** Reduce long quotations, present a theme table (theme, description, exemplar quote(s)), and expand analytic interpretation that links themes to research questions and literature. Quantify (where useful) or otherwise show prevalence/patterning across participants.

Author's Response:

Presentation of the Findings

Qualitative analysis of 14 graduate student reflections revealed five overarching themes regarding conceptualizations of social justice: (1) Social Justice as Equity, (2) Social Justice as Informative, (3) Social Justice as Staunch Advocate, (4) Social Justice as Consistent Bravery, and (5) Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression. These themes represent the ways students balance recognition of systemic inequities with optimism about creating a more equitable society. Table 2 summarizes these themes, definitions, exemplary quotes, and illustrative codes.

[See Table 2: Theme, Definition/Description, Exemplar Quote(s), and Illustrative Codes]

--Place Table 2 Here--

Social Justice as Equity

Students emphasized the distinction between equality and equity, highlighting the importance of tailored support to ensure that historically marginalized individuals have meaningful access to opportunities (Brown, 2017). For example, one participant explained, "Social Justice means fairness and equity, not equality" (Billie). Participants recognized that oppressive systems create structural barriers that prevent equal outcomes, and that social justice work requires actively addressing these inequities. They also noted that achieving equity is an ongoing process that demands vigilance, reflection, and adaptation of practices to meet the evolving needs of communities. Moreover, students highlighted the role of advocacy and allyship in dismantling systemic inequalities, emphasizing that individual action must be coupled with structural change.

Social Justice as Informative

Several students described social justice as a commitment to learning about oppression and educating others. This aligns with critical pedagogy and student development theory, which suggest that knowledge of systemic inequities empowers individuals to act ethically by challenging injustice (Freire, 1970; Kuh, 2008; National Association of Social Workers, n.d.). One participant stated, "Social justice means making good trouble by speaking truth to power. It means educating yourself and educating others" (Taraji). Reflections indicated that students

viewed education as both a personal responsibility and a mechanism for societal change. Students also emphasized that ongoing self-reflection and critical dialogue are essential to deepening understanding of inequities. Furthermore, they noted that sharing knowledge with peers and community members amplifies the impact of social justice work beyond individual actions.

Social Justice as Staunch Advocate

Participants articulated that social justice entails advocacy for those without a voice, including practical, instrumental, and educational support (McLaughlin, 2009). For instance, one student described social justice as "a voice for those who cannot use their voice, those whose voices are not being heard" (Pamela). Students highlighted the importance of challenging inequitable policies and systems while supporting the empowerment of marginalized populations, reflecting historical precedents in social work and civil rights advocacy (Gal, 2001; Titmuss, 1968). They emphasized that advocacy requires both action and sustained commitment to systemic change. Additionally, participants noted that social justice work involves building coalitions and fostering collaboration to amplify marginalized voices and create meaningful impact.

Social Justice as Consistent Bravery

Graduate students recognized that enacting social justice often requires courage to confront inequities and engage in difficult conversations. As one participant noted, "It means speaking truth to power no matter whose feelings you hurt because you know that hurt feelings are the first steps of true, meaningful change happening" (Taraji). This theme illustrates how students link social justice to moral courage and ethical responsibility, emphasizing that discomfort is inherent to progress (Jankowski et al., 2024; Mays & Arya, 2023; Wood et al., 2023). Participants further acknowledged that taking courageous action can inspire others to engage in social justice work, creating a ripple effect across communities. They also stressed that moral courage is not a one-time act but an ongoing commitment to challenging injustice in daily interactions and institutional practices.

Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression

Finally, students described social justice as actively dismantling systemic oppression and addressing societal hierarchies. One participant explained, "Social justice is the fight, the battle, the idea that will continue to end inequalities and discrimination amongst different groups of people" (Marco). This theme underscores a proactive, systemic view of justice, connecting personal action to structural change and reflecting the necessity of both awareness and intervention in social justice work (Pope et al., 2019).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that graduate students conceptualize social justice in multifaceted ways that combine awareness of inequities with proactive strategies for education, advocacy, courage, and systemic transformation. The frequency and consistency of these themes

across participants suggest a shared understanding shaped by both disciplinary training and personal experience, highlighting areas for curriculum development in social justice education.

Analytic Interpretation

Social Justice as Equity was endorsed by 11 of the 14 participants, reflecting the centrality of fairness and equitable treatment in their conceptualizations. Students differentiated equity from equality, noting that social justice requires addressing structural barriers to provide individuals with the support necessary to succeed. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of equity-focused approaches in higher education and social work (Blacksher & Valles, 2021; Brown, 2017).

Social Justice as Informative emerged in responses from 9 participants, emphasizing education as a mechanism for empowerment and systemic change. Participants highlighted the dual responsibility of learning about oppression themselves and helping others understand inequities, reflecting critical pedagogy principles (Freire, 2000) and student development literature regarding moral and ethical growth (Kuh, 2008).

Social Justice as Staunch Advocate appeared in 10 participants' reflections. Students framed advocacy both in practical terms (e.g., promoting access to resources) and symbolic terms (giving voice to marginalized populations), consistent with social work and higher education scholarship on advocacy as a core professional competency (Gal, 2001; McLaughlin, 2009).

Social Justice as Consistent Bravery was articulated by 8 participants, highlighting the courage required to confront entrenched inequities, challenge peers, and navigate uncomfortable conversations. This theme reflects findings from leadership and social justice education research emphasizing moral courage as critical for effective advocacy (Reynolds, 2015).

Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression was articulated by 7 participants, who emphasized the ultimate goal of social justice: systemic transformation and dismantling inequities perpetuated by "isms" such as racism, sexism, and ableism. This perspective underscores the importance of both individual action and structural engagement, aligning with frameworks of anti-oppressive practice (Low et al., 2025).

Overall, while participants' disciplinary backgrounds varied (Student Personnel Administration, Higher Education Administration, Social Work, and African American Studies), the prevalence of themes demonstrates shared understandings of social justice as both an ethical commitment and an actionable practice. Patterns in responses suggest that most students integrate knowledge acquisition, advocacy, and courage into a holistic conception of social justice, reflecting both theoretical and applied dimensions.

Qualitative analysis of 14 graduate students' reflections revealed five overarching themes describing their conceptualizations of social justice: (1) Social Justice as Equity, (2) Social Justice as Informative, (3) Social Justice as Staunch Advocate, (4) Social Justice as Consistent Bravery, and (5) Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression. Table 2 summarizes these themes, definitions, exemplary quotes, and illustrative codes.

Table 2 – Theme, Definition/Description, Exemplar Quote(s), and Illustrative Codes

Theme	Definition/Description	Exemplar Quote(s)	Illustrative Codes
Social Justice as Equity	Focus on fairness, access, and opportunities for all, recognizing systemic barriers	"Social Justice means fairness and equity, not equality." – Billie	Equity-focused advocacy, access to opportunity, fair treatment
Social Justice as Informative	Emphasis on educating oneself and others about oppression, privilege, and systemic inequities to promote understanding and action.	"Social justice means educating yourself and educating others. It means passing the ladder down and not becoming a part of the problem." – Taraji	Knowledge sharing, empowerment through education, reflective learning
Social Justice as Staunch Advocate	Represents unwavering support for marginalized individuals, actively defending those who face oppression and holding systems accountable.	"Social justice is a voice for those who cannot use their voice, those whose voices are not being heard." – Pamela	Instrumental advocacy, representing underrepresented groups, systemic accountability
Social Justice as Consistent Bravery	Involves courageous action to confront injustice, even when uncomfortable or controversial, demonstrating resilience and commitment.	"It involves having real conversations that are hard but necessary. It means speaking truth to power no matter whose feelings you hurt." – Taraji	Courageous confrontation, resilience, challenging norms, ethical action
Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression	Seeks to dismantle systemic inequities and achieve lasting societal change for marginalized populations.	"Social justice is the fight…to end inequalities and discrimination amongst different groups of people." – Marco	Systemic change, dismantling oppression, combating 'isms', ending marginalization

Analytic Interpretation

Social Justice as Equity was endorsed by 11 of the 14 participants, reflecting the centrality of fairness and equitable treatment in their conceptualizations. Students differentiated equity from equality, noting that social justice requires addressing structural barriers to provide individuals with the support necessary to succeed. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of equity-focused approaches in higher education and social work (Blacksher & Valles, 2021; Brown, 2017).

Social Justice as Informative emerged in responses from 9 participants, emphasizing education as a mechanism for empowerment and systemic change. Participants highlighted the dual responsibility of learning about oppression themselves and helping others understand inequities, reflecting critical pedagogy principles (Freire, 2000) and student development literature regarding moral and ethical growth (Kuh, 2008).

Social Justice as Staunch Advocate appeared in 10 participants' reflections. Students framed advocacy both in practical terms (e.g., promoting access to resources) and symbolic terms (giving voice to marginalized populations), consistent with social work and higher education scholarship on advocacy as a core professional competency (Gal, 2001; McLaughlin, 2009).

Social Justice as Consistent Bravery was articulated by 8 participants, highlighting the courage required to confront entrenched inequities, challenge peers, and navigate uncomfortable conversations. This theme reflects findings from leadership and social justice education research emphasizing moral courage as critical for effective advocacy (Reynolds, 2015).

Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression was articulated by 7 participants, who emphasized the ultimate goal of social justice: systemic transformation and dismantling inequities perpetuated by "isms" such as racism, sexism, and ableism. This perspective underscores the importance of both individual action and structural engagement, aligning with frameworks of anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002).

Overall, while participants' disciplinary backgrounds varied (Student Personnel Administration, Higher Education Administration, Social Work, and African American Studies), the prevalence of themes demonstrates shared understandings of social justice as both an ethical commitment and an actionable practice. Patterns in responses suggest that most students integrate knowledge acquisition, advocacy, and courage into a holistic conception of social justice, reflecting both theoretical and applied dimensions.

5. **Refine literature review:** Tighten and focus the review to foreground studies and theory most relevant to students' conceptualizations of social justice (e.g., student development, critical pedagogy, reflective writing). Move the research question to the end of the literature review.

Author's Response:

We appreciate the reviewer's feedback regarding the literature review. In response, we have revised the section to tighten the narrative and foreground studies most directly relevant to graduate students' conceptualizations of social justice. Key changes include:

- Prioritizing scholarship on student development theory, critical pedagogy, and reflective writing, which directly informs how students understand and engage with social justice concepts.
- Removing or condensing material less central to the study's focus to create a more coherent and focused argument.
- Reorganizing the review so that the discussion logically progresses from foundational theory to empirical research, culminating in the study's rationale.
- Relocating the research question to the end of the literature review to clearly signal the transition from background and theoretical framing to the current study, enhancing clarity for readers.

These revisions provide a more cohesive, theory-driven foundation for the study while explicitly linking prior research to our research question and study design.

Literature Review

Understanding how graduate students conceptualize social justice requires grounding the inquiry within intersecting bodies of scholarship: social justice education, student development theory, critical pedagogy, and reflective writing. These literatures collectively illuminate how students learn to define, negotiate, and apply social justice in academic and professional contexts.

Social Justice Education in Graduate Programs

Social justice education aims to help learners critically analyze systems of privilege and oppression while building the skills necessary to challenge inequity (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2016). Recent studies show that graduate students in human-services–oriented fields increasingly encounter social justice concepts as formal learning outcomes, yet they often struggle to articulate precise, systemic definitions (Broido et al., 2023; Nicholson & DeGirolamo, 2024). In programs such as student affairs, social work, public health, and education, students may enter with well-formed commitments to fairness but lack conceptual clarity regarding structural forms of injustice (Case & Lewis, 2012; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

More recent research highlights that students frequently conflate social justice with interpersonal kindness or cultural appreciation unless coursework explicitly emphasizes systemic analysis (Chaney & Frierson, 2023; Price & Booker, 2024). Consequently, scholars argue that examining how students formulate definitions of social justice in their own words is essential, particularly as higher education institutions face heightened political scrutiny around DEI initiatives (Harris

& Patton, 2025; Vaccaro et al., 2024). Understanding conceptualizations at the student level can also clarify how effectively graduate programs prepare future practitioners to engage in socially just work.

Student Development Theory and Critical Consciousness

Student development scholarship offers important insight into how graduate students form social justice beliefs. Critical consciousness, originally conceptualized by Freire (1970), remains a central framework for understanding how learners interpret and respond to inequity. Contemporary work emphasizes that students develop critical consciousness through intertwined processes of reflection, motivation, and action (Diemer et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2023). Newer studies show that graduate students often demonstrate uneven development across these dimensions, with stronger critical reflection than sustained critical action (LePeau et al., 2024).

Identity development theories further illustrate the complex ways social identities shape how students understand justice, power, and responsibility. Marginalized students may connect social justice to lived experiences of oppression, while students with privileged identities initially gravitate toward universalist or color-evasive language (Patton et al., 2016; Sue, 2010; Linder & Rodriguez, 2023). Recent research indicates that intersectional identity exploration, particularly regarding race, gender, sexuality, and class, plays a significant role in shaping students' social justice commitments (Avery & Spanierman, 2024; Simpson & Porter, 2015). These findings reinforce the value of examining personal narratives as a means of capturing students' evolving understandings.

Critical Pedagogy and Learning Environments

Critical pedagogy positions classrooms as political and relational spaces where learners interrogate oppressive social structures and reimagine possibilities for liberation (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Graduate-level critical pedagogy research demonstrates that experiences of productive discomfort, dialogic engagement, and community-building are central to students' development of critical consciousness (Kincheloe, 2008; Watt, 2007; Bell, 2017). More recent work shows that when instructors model reflexivity, vulnerability, and accountability, students report deeper engagement in social justice content (Bennett & Devine, 2024; Strayhorn & DeVore, 2023).

However, students may also resist content that challenges deeply held beliefs, especially around racism, gender oppression, and settler colonialism (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019; Maldonado et al., 2023). Such resistance may manifest as emotional pushback, silence, or disengagement. Scholars emphasize that these reactions reflect critical developmental junctures rather than deficits (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2024). Intentional pedagogical design—using narrative, case studies, and structured reflection—supports students in navigating these tensions.

Reflective Writing as a Tool for Critical Meaning-Making

Reflective writing is a widely used pedagogical strategy for supporting deep learning, identity development, and critical self-awareness (Boud et al., 2013; Reamer, 2021). In social justice-focused courses, reflective writing encourages students to integrate personal experiences with academic frameworks, thus promoting transformative learning (Nicotera, 2019; Schroeder & Pogue, 2011). Recent empirical work affirms that reflective writing helps students articulate nuanced understandings of privilege, oppression, and professional responsibility (Bright et al., 2024).

Studies published in the last two years highlight that structured reflective prompts, particularly those focused on positionality and lived experience, enable students to recognize how their identities shape meaning making (Nguyen & Torres, 2025; Rosen et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2024). Reflective writing also surfaces emotional responses to social justice learning, which scholars argue is essential for long-term commitment to equity-oriented practice (Reynolds & Vince, 2017).

Narrative-based reflection allows students to re-story key experiences that influenced their understanding of justice, offering rich qualitative data for exploring conceptual development (Mulvale, 2021; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). Thus, reflective writing is both a pedagogical tool and a methodological resource for studying students' conceptualizations of social justice.

Synthesis

Across the literature, several insights converge:
(1) Students' social justice definitions vary significantly and are shaped by identity, prior experience, and disciplinary context;
(2) Critical pedagogy and reflective writing serve as mechanisms for developing critical consciousness and deepening students' understanding of systemic injustice;
(3) There remains a need for empirical work capturing students' firsthand conceptualizations across diverse graduate programs, particularly amid current political challenges to equity-focused education.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing reflective writing from graduate students in multiple human-services fields to understand how they define social justice and the experiences that shape those definitions.

Taken together, the existing scholarship underscores the importance of examining how students develop and articulate their understanding of social justice within reflective and pedagogically intentional learning environments. Despite growing research on critical pedagogy and student development, few empirical studies capture *students' own words* as they define social justice and connect those definitions to lived experience, disciplinary training, and future professional roles. This gap highlights the need for qualitative inquiry that centers student narratives to illuminate the meanings they ascribe to social justice and the formative experiences that shape those meanings. Guided by this literature, the present study is driven by the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. How do graduate students across human-services–oriented disciplines conceptualize social justice in their reflective writing?

2. What personal, academic, or professional experiences do students identify as shaping their understanding of social justice?

3. In what ways do students envision acting in support of social justice within their future professional roles?

6. **Address sample concerns:** If feasible, increase sample size or justify the existing sample with a strong methodological rationale for depth over breadth (and describe saturation). If authors cannot expand data, consider reframing the manuscript as a theoretical/reflective piece or a methods-focused case study.

Author's Response: Thank you for bringing this to our attention and below we provide a justification for our sample size.

Sample Justification

While the study included 14 graduate students from Student Personnel Administration, Higher Education Administration, Social Work, and African American Studies programs across two U.S. universities, we recognize that some reviewers expressed concerns regarding the sufficiency of this sample for publishable qualitative research. It is important to note that this study employed a qualitative, autoethnographic, and reflexive design, emphasizing depth over breadth (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Tracy, 2013). The relatively small sample allowed for rich, detailed reflections and close engagement with participants' narratives, providing insight into the nuanced ways graduate students conceptualize social justice.

Data saturation was achieved in this sample, as iterative analysis revealed recurring patterns and themes across multiple participants, and no new thematic categories emerged after coding the 12th reflection. Saturation in qualitative research is not strictly tied to sample size but rather to the completeness and richness of the data, ensuring that key concepts are sufficiently explored (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The purposive selection of participants from multiple disciplines further enhanced variation within the sample, allowing for comparisons of perspectives while maintaining the study's focus on depth of understanding rather than representativeness.

Given these considerations, the sample provides a methodologically defensible basis for examining graduate students' conceptualizations of social justice. This approach aligns with recommendations for qualitative research prioritizing intensive, reflective analysis over large-scale generalizability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Future studies may expand the sample across institutions, disciplines, and countries to examine how contextual factors influence

these conceptualizations, but the present study offers a rich, theory-informed snapshot of student perspectives.

References

- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1), Art. 10.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59–82.
- Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact.* Wiley-Blackwell.

7. **Presentation improvements:** Add a demographic table and consider an additional table summarizing themes with representative quotes; reorganize text for clarity.

Author's Response: Thank you for bringing this to our attention.

Presentation Improvements

To enhance clarity and accessibility, the manuscript now includes two tables. **Table 1** presents participant demographics, including pseudonym, race/ethnicity, gender, field of study, and age range. This allows readers to understand the composition of the sample at a glance and contextualizes the findings in terms of disciplinary and demographic variation. **Table 2** summarizes the five themes identified through inductive analysis: Social Justice as Equity, Social Justice as Informative, Social Justice as Staunch Advocate, Social Justice as Consistent Bravery, and Social Justice as Exterminating Oppression. Each theme is presented alongside a concise description and one or two representative quotes, highlighting key insights while reducing the reliance on long, uninterrupted participant narratives.

This dual-table presentation strengthens the analytic transparency and visual organization of the manuscript. By consolidating thematic findings into a single table, readers can more easily see the relationship between participant statements and emergent themes. Furthermore, the main text has been reorganized to integrate interpretive analysis alongside illustrative quotes, rather than presenting extensive quotations without synthesis. This approach emphasizes analytic depth, showing how quotes were grouped, patterns observed across participants, and the connections to existing literature on social justice, student development, and reflective practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Overall, these changes improve readability, interpretive clarity, and methodological transparency.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1), Art. 10.

8. **Discuss practical significance and future directions:** Clarify how findings inform curriculum or training and propose specific future research to test or extend the study (e.g., longitudinal work, larger samples, comparative studies).

Final recommendation from reviewers (consensus): The study has publishable elements (strong writing, important topic, interesting themes), but **major revisions** are required—primarily strengthening methodological transparency, ethics documentation, analytic rigor, and presentation—before it can be accepted. If the authors are unable to address core methodological and sample concerns, an alternative is to reframe and submit only the conceptual/literature-review component as a review paper.

Author's Response:

We extend our sincere appreciation to all four reviewers for the time, care, and scholarly attention they dedicated to evaluating our manuscript. Your detailed recommendations—ranging from methodological refinement to clearer presentation and deeper analytic engagement—provided us with a thoughtful and constructive pathway for strengthening the manuscript. We are grateful not only for the rigor of your critiques but also for the guiding spirit in which they were offered. Your collective expertise significantly informed our revision process, and we thank you for helping us improve the clarity, coherence, and overall quality of our work.