

# Social Justice Identity Development for International Counseling Psychology Students

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Kayi Hui-Spears<sup>1</sup>  and Jeeseon Park-Saltzman<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Despite the inclusion of social justice and international issues in counseling psychology, there are no conceptual models or research to date that focus on social justice identity development and training issues for international counseling psychology students. The unique cross-cultural experiences and systemic injustices facing many international counseling psychology students may inform their social justice identity development in a distinctive manner. Thus, by incorporating biculturalism and transformative learning theories, this article proposes a theoretical model to illustrate the psychological processes and outcomes of social justice identity development for international counseling psychology students with the following four phases: (a) cultural and social awareness of privilege and oppression, (b) critical analysis of systemic oppression across cultures, (c) synergistic development of social justice competence and bicultural competence, and (d) integration of social justice identity and competence across cultures. We provide recommendations for future practice, advocacy, education, training, and research.

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<sup>1</sup>Counseling Center, University of Maryland, College Park

<sup>2</sup>Park-Saltzman Psychological Services, LLC, Columbus, OH, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kayi Hui-Spears, Counseling Center, 4281 Chapel Ln., College Park, MD 20742, USA.

Email: [kayhui@umd.edu](mailto:kayhui@umd.edu)

**Keywords**

International students, teaching and learning, social justice, identity development, advocacy

**Significance of the Scholarship to the Public**

*Our model proposes a transformative process that international students in counseling psychology programs may undergo as they adopt social justice values and competencies in their training, while navigating through bicultural adjustment. This model offers a strength-based, growth-oriented, and culturally sensitive theoretical framework for researchers, clinicians, and educators working with international students in higher education settings.*

Social justice is deeply rooted in the core values of counseling psychology, dating back to its inception, which focused on increasing access to occupational and social resources for World War II veterans by providing assistance with postwar career transitions and adjustment (Fouad et al., 2006). Attention to societal and systematic injustice and oppression experienced by marginalized populations permeated the multicultural movement of the 1990s (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Fouad et al., 2006). The Houston 2001 National Counseling Psychology Conference marked an important turning point for the social justice movement, during which many counseling psychologists voiced the need to expand their roles to include being active agents of social change (see Fouad et al., 2004; Speight & Vera, 2004 for more details). Social justice work broadens the scope of cultural awareness and the appreciation for diversity emphasized in the multicultural movement, and highlights the implementation of actions that ensure equity and justice (Arredondo & Perez, 2003; Brady-Amoon, 2011; Ratts, 2009; Vera & Speight, 2003). Subsequently, social justice advocacy has become an integral part of graduate training in counseling psychology programs in the past two decades (Baranowski et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2018). A variety of training programs have been developed with their focus ranging from a population specific approach (e.g., Nilsson et al., 2011) to skill development and job training (e.g., Midgett & Dumas, 2016), and from a short-term immersion approach (e.g., Koch et al., 2014) to yearlong partnerships with community organizations (e.g., Goodman et al., 2004, 2018). Such trainings have shown they promote positive outcomes such as increased awareness of oppression, critical thinking skills, ability to build partnerships with stakeholders in the community, increased commitment to social justice advocacy, and

development of social justice identity (Baranowski et al., 2016; Dollarhide et al., 2016; Edwards, 2011).

Parallel to the social justice movement in the field, internationalization of counseling psychology has received strong support as a proactive response to globalization since the turn of the century (Nilsson et al., 2019). Several scholars have proposed a conceptual roadmap for internationalization of counseling psychology, advocating for (a) international collaborations and incorporation of international topics in the counseling psychology curriculum, research, and other professional initiatives (Leong & Ponterotto, 2003); (b) broadening theories and practice of counseling psychology beyond the U.S.-centric framework to avoid professional colonization (Leung et al., 2009; Nilsson et al., 2019; Norsworthy et al., 2009); and (c) contextual understanding of and respect for diversity existing in the field of counseling psychology in different countries around the world (Gerstein & Ægisdóttir, 2007; Ægisdóttir et al., 2019). Collective efforts toward the internationalization of counseling psychology have indeed expanded exposure of the U.S.-based counseling psychologists and trainees to a wide range of international research, training, and educational opportunities (Wang & Çiftçi, 2019; Wang & Heppner, 2015). Examples of the internationalization of counseling psychology include establishing the International Section in the Society of Counseling Psychologists (SCP); publishing special issues in the field's flagship journal, *The Counseling Psychologist* (TCP), featuring internationalization of counseling psychology; hosting the International Counseling Psychology Conference; developing theoretical models of international counseling competencies (e.g., Gerstein et al., 2015; Heppner et al., 2012); and changing SCP bylaws to add a vice president for International Affairs to the Executive Board. Furthermore, counseling psychology programs have attracted a growing number of international students over the years (Wang & Heppner, 2015). Based on data from the American Psychological Association (APA) Commission on Accreditation (APA, 2013), international student enrollment in counseling psychology programs was reported as 8.34%, whereas clinical psychology and school psychology was 4.29% and 4.58%, respectively. In addition, cultural-immersion and exchange programs, such as the master's dual degree program between University of Missouri and National Taiwan Normal University, were established to enhance cross-cultural competencies of counseling psychology faculty and students (Heppner et al., 2014). Other scholars and educators have further supported the integration of international competencies and social justice activism by creating cultural immersion service learning courses abroad (e.g., Koch et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2014).

Recently, scholars have started to identify components of international social justice competencies (e.g., Wang & Çiftçi, 2019). As noted by Goodman et al. (2018), in order for training programs to devise effective

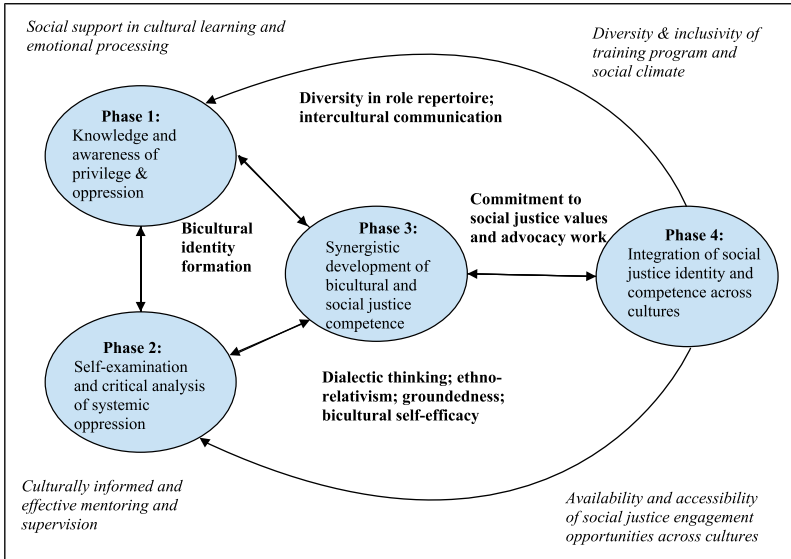
programs for social justice competencies development, it is important to explore the processes that counseling psychology trainees undergo in order to incorporate and formulate their social justice identity. However, existing models of social justice identity development focus only on domestic students (Dollarhide et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2018). Given their unique cultural socialization processes and experiences with injustice and oppression, we believe that the social justice identity development process of international counseling psychology students differs from that of domestic students.

Despite the convergence of the social justice movement and internationalization of counseling psychology, there is no conceptual model or empirical research on international counseling psychology students' social justice identity development. Therefore, we propose a conceptual map of social justice identity development for this population to (a) increase awareness of trainers on the unique needs of international students when undergoing social justice training, and (b) identify individual and contextual factors for future empirical investigation to enhance effectiveness of social justice training for international students. We first reviewed the existing models of social justice identity development and highlighted the unique positionality of international counseling psychology students in social justice engagement. We then proposed a culturally-relevant theoretical model of social justice identity development (Figure 1) for international counseling psychology students based on biculturalism theory and transformative learning theory. Finally, we discussed the models' applicability in practice, training, education, advocacy, and research .

## Social Justice Identity Development Models

Research on social justice identity grew out of empirical investigations that focused on the development of a social justice orientation. Studies on *social justice orientation*, defined as "the disposition of individuals who endorse social justice beliefs and are engaged in social justice advocacy" (Caldwell & Vera, 2010, p. 164), focused on identifying contributing factors that affect one's social justice orientation (e.g., Broido, 2000; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). For example, Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) found that political interest and a desire to be involved in social justice advocacy were the strongest predictors of social advocacy behaviors among participating graduate counseling psychology students.

The existing literature on social justice identity development is still in an exploratory stage, consisting of only a few qualitative studies (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Dollarhide, et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2018). Compared to studies on the development of a social justice orientation, studies on the development of a social justice identity focus more on the *process of social justice identity development*, defined as "a pervasive internalization of social



**Figure 1.** Social Justice Identity Model of International Counseling Psychology Students.

Note. Bold text highlights individual factors relevant to social justice identity development; italic text indicates context factors that may be important to social justice identity development.

justice values and the consistent demonstration of commitment to foster social justice in society” (Dollarhide et al., 2016, p. 627). There are some common processes of social justice identity development that emerged from the existing literature. The first involves an awakening process that ignites one’s awareness of social injustice, either through one’s own experiences with injustice or by witnessing or hearing about injustice inflicted on others (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Dollarhide et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2018). During this awakening process, individuals may experience what Goodman et al. (2018) described as *internal grappling*, characterized by a disequilibrium in one’s system and a range of intense emotions from frustration and anger to being moved and inspired. These results are consistent with prior research in training programs, which have shown that those who engaged in advocacy training are often confronted with privilege, oppression, and a variety of emotional reactions (e.g., Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Goodman et al., 2014; Toporek & Worthington, 2014).

The existing literature also illustrates how the awakening process leads to increased motivation and commitment to social justice advocacy and brings forth holistic changes in affect, cognition, and behavior (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Dollarhide et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2018). On an affective level,

individuals may experience affective growth in understanding the meanings of their professional activities within a social justice framework (Dollarhide et al., 2016) and develop empathy toward members of the oppressed group and respect for the goals of their community partners (Goodman et al., 2018). Cognitive changes may include internalization of social justice values (Caldwell & Vera, 2010) and increased knowledge in social justice principles and dynamics of oppression (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Dollarhide et al., 2016). Individuals may also experience cognitive humility through which they recognize the limits of their own understanding of the experiences of the oppressed (Dollarhide et al., 2016) and their privileged position when setting the agenda for the oppressed group (Goodman et al., 2018). Behaviorally, individuals may participate in social justice activism more actively (Dollarhide et al., 2016) and build collaborative relationships with community partners (Goodman et al., 2018). These activities may help individuals to develop social justice advocacy competence including assertiveness skills, relationship building skills, and the ability to balance instrumental support (e.g., mobilizing resources) with emotional support (Dollarhide et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2018).

The existing research has invariably reported changes in individuals' social justice identity, followed by the holistic changes in affect, cognition, and behaviors. Social justice identity is reinforced through a recursive feedback loop, such that all changes occurring through the social justice identity development process deepen one's commitment to and engagement in social justice, and further solidify their social justice identity (Dollarhide et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2018). For some participants of these studies, social justice identity transformed their way of life and became an integral part of their professional and personal lives (e.g., Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Dollarhide et al., 2016).

The extant literature also illuminates contextual factors that contribute to the shaping of social justice identity development. Most importantly, it is reported that mentors, family members, and peers play a significant role in increasing individuals' awareness on social justice issues (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Dollarhide et al., 2016) and provide crucial support that carry social justice advocates through the initial disequilibrium phase and other obstacles inherent in social justice work (Goodman et al., 2018). Other important contextual factors include educational, learning, and work experiences; religious and spiritual background (Dollarhide et al., 2016); and opportunities for developing community partnerships (Goodman et al., 2018).

Despite the significant implications for future research and training, prior research on social justice identity development primarily focuses on knowledge, skills, and competency building in addressing the oppression of the U.S. context, with samples of only U.S.-born graduate students. Both domestic and international students may undergo a similar transformation

process that follows an arc of awakening experience, affective, cognitive, behavioral, and identity changes in their social justice identity development. However, considering the unique experiences and positionality of international students in counseling psychology programs, the existing social justice identity development model based solely on domestic students' experiences may have limited applicability when understanding international students' social justice identity development.

## **Rationale and Purpose of the Paper**

It has been well documented that international students experience culture shock, language and cultural barriers, acculturative stress, and isolation upon arrival in the United States (see [Johnson & Sandhu, 2007](#)). Numerous scholars (e.g., [Nilsson & Anderson, 2004](#); [Park-Saltzman et al., 2012](#)) have also brought attention to the challenges and emotional toll faced by international counseling psychology students in relation to developing contextual understanding of the sociocultural systems and political climate in the United States. For example, in regard to racial injustices, most domestic students have learned about the historical contexts of slavery and racial tensions; some may also have personal experiences with navigating racial injustices and systemic oppression. Although some international students may have experienced injustice and systematic oppression on other dimensions of culture (e.g., gender, religion, socioeconomic status) in their home country, they may have to fill in gaps of knowledge in building their credibility and competence when engaging in social justice advocacy on racial issues in the U.S. context. International students who are not White, in particular, may experience double marginalization from the mainstream White community and from the U.S.-born People of Color when engaging in race-based social justice advocacy work.

We acknowledge the profound diversity and intersecting identities within the international student populations, yet there are common experiences of oppression and injustice based on this shared identity as foreign nationals. For example, in July 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced the potential consequence of deportation of F-1 international students who did not participate in in-person programming. Albeit rescinded, the negative psychological impact and threats to individuals' safety linger as immigration policies pertaining to international students continue to evolve. Further, recent amendments of the nonimmigration proclamation to restrict the entry of foreign nationals placed additional barriers for international scholars, faculty, and staff who held valid work visas (e.g., H1-B, J-1 visas) to qualify for an exemption from the suspension of entry. As such, the future employment and livelihood of current international students was jeopardized as the scrutiny and

difficulty of obtaining a work visa in the United States continued to rise. Under the current social and political climate, there is a greater need for international counseling psychology students to engage in self-advocacy and social justice activism.

When facing discrimination and injustice, research has shown that international counseling psychology students may have varied levels of social support due to a lack of role models and mixed levels of support from their programs (Knox et al., 2013). Meanwhile, they also struggle with the complexity of navigating through requirements of their clinical and academic training, as well as uncertainties of their future career development constrained by visa restrictions (Knox et al., 2013; Lee, 2013; Nilsson & Anderson, 2004; Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). Given the different exposure to and experiences with injustice, oppression, and privilege among international counseling psychology students and domestic students, we believe that these experiences may inform their development of a social justice identity in a distinctive manner. However, there is no research, to our knowledge, that examines international counseling psychology students' social justice interest, orientation, and/or identity formation.

Therefore, the main purpose of this article was to identify a theoretical model that incorporates the bicultural identity development process of international counseling psychology students in their formation of social justice identity. We conceptualize the bicultural identity development process through the biculturalism theory proposed by LaFromboise et al. (1993). This model was informed by prior studies (e.g., Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Dollarhide et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2018), that revealed a set of common themes of social justice identity development that follow an arc of mental and emotional disequilibrium, skills development, and integration of social justice advocacy identity development, similar to the learning process outlined by transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000). Thus, we juxtaposed transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) with biculturalism theory (LaFromboise et al., 1993) to identify the culture-specific psychological processes and outcomes of the social justice identity development of international counseling psychology students. Our goal was to illuminate the unique challenges and growth that international counseling psychology students experience as they receive social justice advocacy training, develop social justice identity, and navigate through the bicultural identity development process. In the next sections, we will first introduce transformative learning theory, then review biculturalism theory and our rationale for its applicability for international counseling psychology students. Finally, we will present our current theoretical model of social justice identity development, followed by recommendations for practice, advocacy, education, training, and research and discussions on limitations of the model.



## Theoretical Framework

### *Transformative Learning Theory*

Influenced by Thomas Kuhn's (1962, as cited in [Mezirow, 1991](#)) concept of paradigm, Paulo Freire's (1970, as cited in [Mezirow, 1991](#)) pedagogy of liberation, and Habermas' (1984, as cited in [Mezirow, 1991](#)) critical theory, transformative learning theory was initially developed as a theory of adult education in the 1970s ([Mezirow, 2000](#)). In this theory, learning entails one's existing frame of reference, used to make meaning out of new experiences and guide new actions ([Mezirow, 1996, 2000](#)). According to [Mezirow \(2000\)](#), transformative learning involves:

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 7–8)

Over time, an earlier version of the ten-phase model of transformative learning ([Mezirow, 1991, 1996, 2000](#)) has been pared down to the following four processes: (a) disorientation, (b) critical reflection, (c) dialogue or rational discourse, and (d) action on newly gained insight ([Stevens-Long et al., 2012](#)). Transformative learning begins with a disorienting dilemma that challenges one's pre-existing frame of reference (Phase 1) and precipitates a critical reflection that involves self-examination (Phase 2) and critical assessment of one's assumptions (Phase 3). Transformative learning theorists ([Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2000](#)) highlight the importance of dialogue or rational discourse through which individuals recognize their discontent and their shared experiences with others (Phase 4) and explore new roles, relationships, and behaviors through critical assessment of competing choices (Phase 5). Action on newly gained insight starts with planning a course of action (Phase 6), followed by acquisition of new knowledge and skills required for implementation of the plan (Phase 7) and trying out new roles, relationships, and behaviors (Phase 8). Successful outcomes of new roles, relationships, and behaviors become building blocks for competence and self-confidence (Phase 9), which in turn facilitate these new changes to be reintegrated into the learner's life (Phase 10) through a reiterative, recursive feedback loop.

We chose this theory as a conceptual framework of our model, as we are in agreement with [Goodman et al.'s \(2018\)](#) assertion that the transformative process outlined in this theory captures the overarching themes of other identity development models (e.g., ethnic identity, feminist identity). With its emphasis on increased control and self-agency through critical reflection of

assimilation to pre-existing societal and cultural beliefs, traditions, and systems, transformative learning theory provides a fitting conceptual foundation for our model that proposes a process of self-discovery and transformative growth for international counseling psychology students as they go through social justice training in a new country.

### *Biculturalism Theory*

In the literature on acculturation, biculturalism theory assumes that individuals could gain cultural competence in two cultures by adopting a new identity in the second culture while maintaining their identity from their culture-of-origin (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Berry, 1997; LaFromboise et al., 1993). Biculturalism models (Berry, 1997; LaFromboise et al., 1993) assert that individuals' cultural identities may vary depending on the nature and degree of exposure to as well as the level of acceptance received from the second culture, rather than the length of stay in the country and/or immigration status (Ryder et al., 2000). Furthermore, biculturalism models assume that individuals can have multiple cultural identities simultaneously as well as variations of growth in multiple dimensions (values, behaviors, identity) of their cultural identities during second-culture acquisition. LaFromboise et al.'s (1993) biculturalism model is similar to Berry's (1997) "integration" strategy in his four strategies and outcomes of acculturation, which are also found to be the most commonly used and adaptive strategies to individuals' psychological functioning during cross-cultural adjustment (Berry, 2007). As LaFromboise et al. (1993) noted, the degree of differences in worldviews and cultural values from the second culture may also influence individuals' bicultural identity development. To reconcile rather than internalize ambiguity and/or conflicts that arise from cross-cultural differences, a strong and stable sense of personal identity and belongingness in both cultures may buffer the impact on one's psychological well-being (LaFromboise et al., 1993). To effectively manage this developmental process, LaFromboise et al. (1993) outlined six components of bicultural competence including (a) positive attitudes toward both cultures, (b) knowledge of cultural beliefs and values, (c) bicultural efficacy, (d) communication ability, (e) role repertoire, and (f) groundedness. Specifically, LaFromboise et al. (1993) proposed that individuals may attend to the affective element of bicultural competence through developing and maintaining positive attitudes toward both their culture-of-origin and the second culture. Furthermore, individuals need to acquire knowledge of both cultures in order to develop bicultural efficacy, or the belief that they can be biculturally competent. Bicultural efficacy, along with positive attitudes in both cultures, is predictive of greater communication skills and role repertoire, which make up the behavioral aspects of the biculturalism model. Individuals who have acquired the affective, cognitive, and

behavioral dimensions of bicultural competence will likely develop effective social support systems in both cultures, which will foster feelings of groundedness and cognitive flexibility when facing challenges due to their bicultural existence. In fact, numerous studies have confirmed the benefits of biculturalism on psychosocial adjustment and mental health among ethnic minority and immigrant populations (e.g., [Ryder et al., 2000](#); [Wei et al., 2010](#)). Although few studies have examined bicultural competence and psychosocial adjustment among international students, findings generally suggest that an integrative approach to acculturation (i.e., biculturalism) may help to buffer the negative effects of acculturative stress ([Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015](#); [Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006](#)).

In summary, individuals' bicultural identity and bicultural competence are results of living in two cultures. We chose biculturalism theory ([LaFromboise et al., 1993](#)) as a theoretical framework for our model over [Berry's \(1997\)](#) model because it captures a more nuanced and fluid process of bicultural identity development in international students' cross-cultural experiences. Furthermore, [LaFromboise et al.'s \(1993\)](#) model of acculturation highlights the multidimensional bicultural competencies (i.e., affective, cognitive, and behavioral markers) required to foster bicultural integration, which mirrors the transformative learning process of social justice identity development. We also believe that the process of social justice identity development may coincide with individuals' acquisition of bicultural identity and competence over time.

## **The Current Theoretical Model**

Our proposed social justice identity model for international counseling psychology students consists of the following four phases: (a) cultural and social awareness of privilege and oppression; (b) critical analysis of systemic oppression across cultures; (c) synergistic development of social justice competence and bicultural competence; and (d) integration of social justice identity and competence across cultures.

### ***Phase 1: Cultural and Social Awareness of Privilege and Oppression***

As discussed in the existing models of social justice identity development ([Caldwell & Vera, 2010](#); [Dollarhide et al., 2016](#); [Goodman et al., 2018](#)), we believe that the process of social justice identity development begins with self-awareness of privilege and oppression, either through personal experiences of injustice or through vicarious learning by witnessing others' experiences, such as influence from family, friends, or peers. What sets the social justice identity development of international counseling psychology students apart from domestic students' is the larger context in which this awakening process takes

place. Most international counseling psychology students spend a significant part of their adult lives in their home countries, and migrate to the United States for their undergraduate and/or graduate studies. Over the course of their training, international counseling students who are not certain about their career decisions may wrestle with staying in the United States or returning to their home country after completing their degree.

Social injustice and oppression are prevalent in the global community. For example, LGBTQ individuals throughout the world continue to experience varying levels of oppression and discrimination (Harper & Schneider, 2003; International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association, 2015). In various Western European countries, there are increasing prejudices and oppressive acts against immigrant and religious minority groups, especially Muslims (Wang & Çiftçi, 2019). In Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, gender inequality and patriarchy continue to deprive women from their freedom and human rights (Wang & Çiftçi, 2019). Additionally, in the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted systemic injustice in healthcare access and disparities in infection and mortality rates for low socioeconomic status and racial minority groups (Hooper et al., 2020). International students are inevitably impacted by these incidents of oppression and injustice in both their home country and in the United States. In some cases, social injustice and oppression in their home countries may influence students' decision to leave their country and study counseling psychology in the United States, which historically has a strong emphasis on diversity, inclusion, and social justice advocacy (Wang & Heppner, 2015).

Regardless of their country-of-origin and prior experiences in their home countries, most international students are confronted by or “woke up” to various systemic oppressions within the history of anti-immigration policies and rising xenophobia in the United States. International counseling psychology students may experience various forms of overt and covert discrimination from faculty, peers, and university personnel (Kim & Kim, 2010; Knox et al., 2013; Lee, 2013), limited access to social and financial resources, discrimination as non-native speakers, and employment restrictions due to visa status (Lee, 2013; Mori, 2000). These experiences may trigger profound feelings of shock, anger, helplessness, grief, and loss—experiences similar to the disorienting dilemma identified as the first phase of the transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1996, 2000). This disorienting dilemma may challenge international students' pre-existing frame of reference regarding U.S. culture and prompt them to reflect on their own power and privilege in the past and present. The reciprocal nature of the individual and their environment at this beginning stage of social justice identity development is similar to the early process of bicultural identity development described in LaFromboise et al.'s (1993) biculturalism theory, in which individuals develop cultural knowledge and attitudes in regard to the second culture. The second-culture

acquisition process could be more intense for international counseling psychology students compared to international students in other programs, as they may be expected to gain cultural awareness and deep knowledge of the U.S. culture in order to provide effective clinical services in their clinical training (Park-Saltzman et al., 2012).

International counseling psychology students' level of cultural and social awareness may be influenced by individual differences in their prior experiences with privilege and oppression in their home countries as well as their intersecting identities including socioeconomic status, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and race and/or ethnicity. For example, international counseling psychology students who experienced oppression due to their marginalized gender identity and/or sexual orientation in their home country may find a more liberal and inclusive environment in the United States affirming. On the other hand, for non-White international students who were members of the ethnic majority in their country, salience of their ethnic identity in the U.S. context and exposure to racial biases, stereotypes, and racial profiling may complicate their adjustment to U.S. culture.

In addition to these individual factors, several contextual factors in the academic environment can facilitate international counseling psychology students' social justice identity development in Phase 1. For example, training programs may provide varied learning opportunities to expand international counseling psychology students' knowledge of U.S. cultures and systemic oppression through social justice and multicultural coursework, clinical practica and field work. As noted by Goodman et al. (2018), opportunities to have an open dialogue with teachers, supervisors, and peers are essential in this awareness phase, as they provide a support structure where students can process cognitive dissonance and intense feelings as well as build a sense of community with their trainers and peers in their social justice identity development.

## *Phase 2: Critical Analysis of Systemic Oppression Across Cultures*

In the second phase, the initial internal conflicts from cross-cultural differences provide opportunities for international counseling psychology students to reassess their previous understanding of the values, behavioral norms, and systems in both their country-of-origin and the U.S. system (Berry, 1997). Building from Phase 1, the disorienting dilemma that arises through experiences of oppression in the United States then serves to precipitate the self-examination and critical assessment of the assumptions or biases about certain majority and minority groups that they might have held in the past, for example, internalized racism, homophobia, or White supremacy from colonialism in global contexts. This process of self-reflection is also consistent with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1996, 2000) and other social

justice identity development models (e.g., [Dollarhide et al., 2016](#); [Goodman et al., 2018](#)).

As international counseling psychology students reflect on their personal identities, in addition to their identities as immigrants to a new country, they may begin to recognize that aspects of their own privilege and oppression are relative to their existing cultural contexts. Further, they may realize that their individual experiences of invalidation, microaggression, and discrimination may reflect larger societal issues with institutional injustices as well as cultural racism (or neo-racism), which is defined as prejudices and discrimination based on cultural differences, rather than biological markers between ethnic or racial groups ([Kim & Kim, 2010](#)). Such awareness may deepen their understanding of how systems and structures, both in the United States and their home country, operate to oppress those with marginalized identities. We believe that the reflective process of these direct and indirect exposures to injustices will help international counseling psychology students to foster greater understanding of how experiences of oppression may shape one's sense of self and well-being.

Over time, we believe that international counseling psychology students may develop greater empathy, more complex understanding of the self and others, and greater contextual awareness of privileges and injustices. However, the process of developing self-reflexivity and critical consciousness mentioned in Phase 2 may vary with bicultural identity development, which is largely affected by levels of bicultural competence such as positive attitudes in both cultures, bicultural efficacy, a sense of being grounded in emotional processing, and flexibility in shifting cognitive and behavioral frameworks in correspondence to different cultural contexts ([LaFromboise et al., 1993](#)). Additionally, contextual factors such as the diversity and inclusiveness of campuses and training programs, and the availability of culturally responsive mentoring and supervision that acknowledges the nuanced bicultural developmental process of international students will facilitate the self-examination of students' privileged and oppressed identities as well as the reflection of their roles in social justice advocacy.

### ***Phase 3: Synergistic Development of Social Justice Competence and Bicultural Competence***

Similar to pre-existing social justice identity models ([Caldwell & Vera, 2010](#); [Dollarhide et al., 2016](#); [Goodman et al., 2018](#)) and the bicultural competence model ([LaFromboise et al., 1993](#)), we propose that international counseling psychology students in this phase undergo significant changes in their cognition, affective attitude, and behavioral skills in regard to their social justice work and bicultural adjustment. We hypothesize that multidimensional changes related to social justice work facilitate the development of bicultural

competence and vice versa, creating synergistic growth and learning for international counseling psychology students. Parallel to the process of knowledge and skill development in transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1996, 2000), this phase entails critical assessment of different options for social justice work, and making and implementing plans for that work that leads to skills development.

On a cognitive level, the critical analysis of systemic oppression across cultures in Phase 2 enhances international counseling psychology students' awareness of commonalities as well as incompatible systematic differences across cultures. International counseling psychology students who have reached Phase 3 will have working knowledge of injustice, disparities, and systems of oppression across cultures and come to recognize that no system is perfect. We believe that adopting dialectic thinking, defined as an ability to consider opposing or multiple, often contrasting, interests of different parties (Wang & Çiftçi, 2019), is crucial for international counseling psychology students in this phase to resolve internal conflicts regarding incompatibilities between the U.S. culture and their culture-of-origin. In a similar vein, ethno-relativism (Gerstein et al., 2015; Wang & Çiftçi, 2019), an ability to evaluate cultural issues from the stance of honoring uniqueness and diversity of each culture, will be another essential hallmark of cognitive flexibility demonstrated in this phase.

We believe that such cognitive flexibility (Gerstein et al., 2015) allows international counseling psychology students to become more accepting of their mixed emotions toward both the U.S. culture and their culture-of-origin, that mitigates the cultural grief and emotional ambiguity experienced in previous phases of this model. Similar to the meaning-making process in the social justice identity development reported by Dollarhide et al. (2016), international counseling psychology students in this phase internalize social justice values imbued in their training and in their socialization to the field of counseling psychology, to find their own meaning in social justice work. Concurrently, international counseling psychology students may start to formulate their own culture by selectively choosing components of U.S. culture and their culture-of-origin congruent with their values, priorities, and goals. Equipped with cognitive flexibility and affective stability, they may also feel more motivated to engage in social justice work.

Increased engagement in social justice work, in return, provides international counseling psychology students with opportunities to further develop their competence in social justice work as well as their bicultural navigation. One of the main markers of competence in social justice and bicultural navigation is diversity in role repertoire and facility in assuming different roles depending on the context (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Dollarhide et al., 2016; Gerstein et al., 2015; Heppner et al., 2012; LaFromboise et al., 1993). International counseling psychology students who reach this state will



demonstrate social justice skills such as increased assertiveness (Dollarhide et al., 2016), culturally sensitive communication and interpersonal skills (e.g., Gerstein et al., 2015; Heppner et al., 2012) and the ability to balance instrumental and relational support (Goodman et al., 2018), mobilize resources for community partners (Goodman et al., 2018), and mobilize resources for social activism and community engagement (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Goodman et al., 2018).

Not all international counseling psychology students reach this level of social advocacy skills development and bicultural competence. One crucial factor that promotes the changes identified in this phase and carry international counseling psychology students forward is self-efficacy, or beliefs that one can perform a certain task or cope with a stressor (Bandura, 1978). In the existing literature, a high level of self-efficacy is likely to strengthen social justice commitment (e.g., Inman et al., 2015) and motivation for intercultural interactions (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Furthermore, availability and accessibility of social justice work engagement opportunities is a key contextual factor to facilitating social justice competence and efficacy (Goodman et al., 2004; Hurley et al., 2013). Other contextual factors such as feasibility of time commitment and availability of financial resources needed for social justice work, especially when these opportunities involve international collaboration (Wang & Çiftçi, 2019), may determine the level of change that can take place in this phase. As noted in transformative learning theory, different levels of access to resources and learning opportunities among participants may result in varied outcomes of transformative learning (Belenky & Stanton, 2000). The synergistic development of social justice development and bicultural competence, facilitated by self-efficacy, commitment, motivation, and access to appropriate learning opportunities, then creates a feedback loop for social justice identity integration that will be described in the final phase of this model.

#### ***Phase 4: Integration of Social Justice Advocacy Identity and Competence Across Cultures***

We hypothesize that international counseling psychology students who reach this phase will experience ongoing transformation and growth fueled by an interactive cycle of internal and external changes induced by (a) social justice work and bicultural navigation, (b) active commitment to social justice work across cultures, and (c) integration of changes into their social justice and bicultural identities. In other words, international counseling psychology students who reach this phase bring their social justice lens and bicultural perspectives to all professional activities. They are likely to be motivated and committed to expanding their social justice engagement across cultures by using their social justice advocacy and bicultural navigation skills. This



further solidifies their identity as social justice agents in a bicultural context. This process is analogous to a feedback loop described in Mezirow's (1996, 2000) transformative learning theory and Dollarhide et al.'s (2016) research, in which changes brought forth by social justice work and the solidification of social justice identity facilitate further integration of the social justice identity into one's overall professional and personal identity. Similar processes of identity integration were also noted in the final stages of other theories of identity development, for example, the Black American racial identity model (Cross, 1991); feminist identity development model (Erchull et al., 2009); White and People of Color racial identity model (Helms, 1995); and biracial identity development (Poston, 1990). We agree with other scholars (e.g., Dollarhide et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2018) that the transformative changes that occur in the integration stage of social justice identity development permeate one's personal as well as professional lives and become core values that are inseparable from one's way of being.

Throughout their training in the United States, international counseling psychology students strive to adopt professional behaviors and learn social advocacy skills appropriate to the U.S. context. However, depending on international students' individual factors (e.g., individual differences in acculturation level) and contextual factors (e.g., community partner's perception of racial identity of international students; community partner's level of xenophobia; international students' power as a student in the team of collaborators with faculty members), they may experience some barriers when implementing social advocacy skills when working with U.S. partners in their social justice work. Furthermore, international counseling psychology students may have to renew their social justice identity in a bicultural context and learn additional professional behaviors and social advocacy skills expected from early career professionals in the U.S. context if they decide to pursue a career in the United States.

On the other hand, some professional behaviors or social justice advocacy skills learned in the U.S. training context may or may not be transferable to their culture-of-origin (Hurley et al., 2013) if and when they engage with social justice work in their home country. For example, assertiveness skills learned in the U.S. context, characterized by a low-context communication style (i.e., direct communication style, emphasis on clear communication by speaker), may not be appropriate for work settings in cultures with high context communication styles (i.e., indirect communication, with emphasis on listener's ability to decipher the content of communication based on the context; Livermore, 2015). Also, egalitarian partnership building, emphasized in social justice work in the United States (Goodman et al., 2018), may need to be reconceptualized and adjusted when international counseling psychology students from a high power distance (i.e., individuals with limited power are more likely to accept unequal distribution of power; Hofstede et al., 2010;

Livermore, 2015) engage in social justice work in their home countries. Similarly, due to differences in sociopolitical systems, the status of the field of counseling psychology, and the public's perception of mental health issues across countries (Ægisdóttir et al., 2019), international counseling psychology students may have to relearn how sociopolitical and professional landscapes have changed in their home countries during their training in the United States. Thus, international students in this phase have to re-examine the social climate and contexts of injustices in their home countries and reprocess what they learned through their training in the United States in order to make their social justice work effective in their home countries.

## **Discussion**

In this section, implications for practice, advocacy, education, training, and research will be discussed. We will conclude the paper with discussions on limitations of our model.

### *Implications for Practice*

The current model (Figure 1) can provide a useful framework for international counseling psychology students to guide their clinical and social advocacy practice on both individual and system levels. Although international counseling psychology students may or may not achieve all development milestones described in the four phases of the model, we believe that having developed some levels of cultural knowledge and awareness of social injustices and oppression in Phase 1, as well as the critical analysis and self-examination of privilege and oppressed identities across cultures described in Phase 2 over the course of their doctoral program may help international counseling psychology students to develop a more nuanced understanding of clients' psychological distress. On a microlevel, we believe that having such critical consciousness may lay the foundation for international counseling psychology trainees to provide culturally sensitive interventions that validate and acknowledge the impact of historic and systemic oppression on the psychological well-being of their clients and help them to develop agency for change. Furthermore, the critical analysis described in Phase 2 may help international counseling psychology students recognize ways in which clinical interventions, diagnostic evaluation, policies and systems historically established by people in the majority group may fail to promote well-being and equity for marginalized groups (Constantine et al., 2007).

We strongly believe that the skills required for the integration of bicultural and social justice advocacy competence described in Phases 3 and 4 of our model, particularly dialectical thinking, bicultural efficacy, ethno-relativism, and intercultural communication skills obtained through social justice training

and cross-cultural experiences, could benefit international trainees in their cross-cultural interactions with clients in clinical settings. On a macrolevel intervention, having a system-focused lens may help international counseling psychology students be cognizant of the ways in which systemic oppression contributes to health disparities, such as limited access to mental healthcare for individuals with marginalized identities. As such, they may develop a stronger interest in social advocacy engagement, including outreach and prevention programming that addresses systemic barriers to mental health in marginalized communities both in the United States and their home country.

### *Implication for Advocacy*

As discussed in the model, international counseling psychology students' social justice identity development process is influenced by a myriad of contextual factors. In this section, we will discuss how training programs could facilitate social justice identity development by helping to remove contextual barriers and advocating for international students. A lack of support structure in processing the disorientation related to cultural and social justice awareness as well as limited knowledge of U.S. culture and history may stall international counseling psychology students' social justice identity development in its beginning phase and lead them to feel isolated. To address these issues, training programs could create more welcoming environments by acknowledging the unique experiences of international counseling psychology students in the new orientation process (Kim & Kim, 2010; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Faculty members and supervisors are encouraged to gather resources and guidelines to support international counseling psychology students and to learn more about tangible ways to support and advocate for them through publications from [APA Division 17 International Section \(2020\)](#). In addition, programs such as peer group supervision (Goodman et al., 2018) or buddy systems, with a focus on emotional, instrumental, and practical support, may facilitate safe spaces for both international and U.S.-born students to enhance the self-reflexivity of their cognitive dissonance and intense emotions related to the disorienting dilemma (Caldwell & Vera, 2010; Goodman et al., 2018; Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2000). Such programs may also facilitate students to share their experiences related to social injustice, acculturative stress, and/or other challenges associated with their social justice work and bicultural navigation.

As international counseling psychology students move on to Phases 2 and 3, a lack of exposure to diverse cultural perspectives and limited access to social justice work opportunities become major barriers for social justice identity development. To remove these barriers, training programs should challenge and dismantle the colonizing, Eurocentric practices in research, teaching, and clinical practice in the current system (Burnes & Christensen,

2020), and include discussions about social injustice around the world as well as the different definitions of social justice, human rights, and equality across cultures (Hurley et al., 2013). As for access to social justice work opportunities, faculty members are encouraged to gather information on funding resources for international students and visa issues (APA Division 17 International Section, 2020) and proactively initiate a discussion with international counseling psychology students about the implications of financial or visa issues when pursuing certain social justice work opportunities within the United States or abroad.

In the last phase of the social justice identity development process, manifestations of contextual barriers (e.g., community partner's perception of international counseling psychology students' identity, power dynamics in a social justice advocacy team, transferability of U.S.-based social justice training to the home country) could vary significantly from one student to another. To remove contextual barriers in this phase, it is important for faculty and supervisors to create a supportive and safe space for international counseling students to process layers of cultural and interpersonal nuances in their social justice work as well as implications of integrating social justice work in their future career.

### *Implications for Education and Training*

In addition to training-related issues discussed in the implications for advocacy section, this section will focus on training recommendations for individual faculty advisors and supervisors. If unchecked, faculty advisors and supervisors could be susceptible to implicit biases that focus on the deficiencies of international students, which are prevalent in higher education (Garrison et al., 2022; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004). We caution faculty advisors and supervisors to safeguard themselves against such biases that potentially lead them to underestimate international counseling psychology students' ability to achieve bicultural competence and social justice advocacy skills during their training, or to misinterpret their intention to return to their home countries after graduation as a lack of interest and/or motivation in second-culture acquisition and social justice training. An exploratory study conducted by Division 17 International Section (Garrison & Keum, 2019) that examined the training needs of international counseling psychology students showed that 63% of participants reported having a plan to pursue their career in the United States and 21% of participants reported considering multiple possibilities of finding a job in the United States and their home country. Furthermore, considering the scope of profession-wide competencies required in the areas of research, clinical service, assessment, supervision, and interdisciplinary consultation (APA Commission of Accreditation, 2015), international counseling

psychology students are under a lot of pressure to acquire bicultural competence as well as professional knowledge and skills during their graduate training.

As highlighted in the existing literature, support from faculty members and supervisors play an important role in social justice identity development (Goodman et al., 2018). In order to progress through the social justice identity development process, international counseling psychology students will need culturally sensitive mentoring from faculty members and supervisors that affirm the unique challenges and growth experienced by international students, as well as the individual differences identified in our model. For example, having different levels of prior exposure to social injustice in their home countries, acculturation experience, self-efficacy, commitment to social justice issues, bicultural competencies, and social justice competencies. Unfortunately, the international counseling psychology students in previous studies reported that they received a mixed level of support from faculty and supervisors (Knox et al., 2013) and voiced concerns about coping with microaggressions from faculty members and supervisors (Garrison & Keum, 2019). These results highlight a need for more continued education and professional development opportunities for faculty members and supervisors to increase their awareness on unique issues faced by international counseling psychology students and help them hone mentoring skills to facilitate the development of bicultural competence and social justice skills for their international mentees.

### *Implications for Research*

This model provides a theoretical foundation for future research to further explore how international counseling psychology students develop their social justice advocacy identity and competency within the model. For example, it may be useful to conduct a qualitative study to examine the phenomenological process of social justice identity development of international counseling psychology students. In addition, quantitative research is warranted to examine the correlation between bicultural identity integration (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005) and social justice identity development. Using the current model as a theoretical basis, future studies may also investigate the mediating and moderating roles of contextual (e.g., training environments, Goodman et al., 2004) and individual factors (e.g., personal moral imperative, Miller & Sendrowitz, 2011) in the development of social justice orientation and commitment among international counseling psychology students.

### Limitations of the Model

Our model should be applied with some limitations and caveats in mind. It should be noted that we presented different phases of the model to describe some marked characteristics of the transformative changes that take place throughout the process of social justice identity development of international counseling psychology students; it is not to indicate that these are discrete, chronological stages that all international students will move through. Instead, we conceptualize the social justice identity development of international counseling psychology students to be more of a nonlinear, dynamic process, that is unique and different depending on individual differences (e.g., acculturation level, overall coping self-efficacy, experiences of injustice prior to graduate studies) and contextual factors (e.g., cultural distance between home culture, availability of social justice training opportunities and resources). With these caveats in mind, we hope that our theoretical model will inspire international counseling psychology students to develop their social justice identity to address systemic oppression across cultures and borders, and provide a roadmap for faculty advisors, supervisors, and peers when supporting international counseling psychology students in their social justice identity development.

### Author Note

We have no conflict of interest to disclose. The two authors of this manuscript contributed equally to the manuscript.

### ORCID iD

Kayi Hui-Spears  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7808-5540>

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## Author Biographies

**Kayi Hui-Spears**, PhD, is a staff psychologist at the University of Maryland Counseling Center. Her clinical and research interests include bicultural identity and career development of ethnic minorities, cross-cultural

adjustment of international students and immigrants, multicultural training and supervision, and social justice advocacy.

**Jeeseon Park-Saltzman**, PhD, is a licensed psychologist and the owner of Park-Saltzman Psychological Services, LLC in Columbus, Ohio. Her interest areas include cultural adjustment issues of immigrants and international students, mental health issues of Asian and Asian Americans, culturally sensitive mentoring and supervision, grief and loss issues, and career development.