

The Future of Social Justice in Counseling Psychology: A Delphi Study^Ψ

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Abstract

Twenty-six social justice scholars evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of counseling psychology's contributions to social justice over the past 20 years. Using a Delphi method, they made predictions about the future of social justice in counseling psychology. Strengths included influencing the field of psychology to adopt social justice values and ethics; emphasizing structural influences on well-being; elevating voices of diverse scholars; expanding practice skills to include advocacy; and adopting liberatory practice frameworks. Weaknesses included politicizing social justice dialogue; taking too few risks; omitting international perspectives; being too self-reflexive; failing to work across disciplines; allowing social justice to be jargonized; not fully modifying training models; and allowing social justice to replace traditional content areas. Predictions were a mix of positive expectations (e.g., continuing to push the American Psychological Association [APA] to change training models,

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participating in more advocacy and activism) and pessimistic visions (e.g., political resistance). Implications for training and leadership are discussed.

Keywords

social justice, counseling psychology, training, advocacy, diversity

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Significance of the Scholarship to the Public

This study asked experts to critique and predict how social justice has been advanced by counseling psychologists. Although the field is credited with advancing a commitment to social justice in the larger discipline of psychology, concerns were raised about whether there is sufficient consensus on how social justice is integrated into training as well as how our field is collaborating with other disciplines in responding to injustices.

The discipline of psychology has evolved, from once prioritizing the search for universal models to embracing the importance of individual and group differences. Within that evolution, waves of conceptual influence further shaped the field, all of which have been documented (e.g., behaviorism, humanism), including notably, the so-called “fourth force of multiculturalism” (Pederson, 2013). The multiculturalism movement urged the field to reconsider its assumptions of universality and instead, promoted the importance of cultural differences and the adaptation of its methods to accommodate the needs of diverse constituencies. The influence of multiculturalism seeded the emergence of social justice, namely focusing on the implications of injustices for mental health. Although arguably, multiculturalism was focused on understanding how our professional activities could be more responsive to diverse client or participant needs, social justice principles are more directly focused on how we change the underlying systems and structures that protect the status quo and enable oppression. According to Bell (1997), the term social justice encapsulates “a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable, and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (p. 3). Hence when injustice exists, it has consequences for individual as well as group safety and security. This framework has inspired an important collection of scholarship within the field of psychology that has advanced clinical, scientific, and public policy goals as a discipline within the social sciences.

For the past 20 years, counseling psychology has been at the forefront of producing scholarship on social justice and championing social justice as a guiding principle for research, practice, training, and advocacy within the field (DeBlaere et al., 2019). Undoubtedly, this has been a result of counseling psychology's mission, which includes a commitment to advocacy and social justice, specifying, counseling psychologists are bold in our efforts to dismantle mechanisms, systems, and structures of injustice as we engage in advocacy and social justice praxis that addresses anti-Black racism and other interlocking oppressions embedded within our own profession (including within the education and training of counseling psychologists). Counseling psychologists' advocacy is direct and occurs across the individual, institutional, and structural levels, including local, state, and federal policy (Society of Counseling Psychology, 2025).

This is further reinforced in the Counseling Psychology Model Training Program by Scheel et al. (2018), which states, "programs are directed to advocate and work for social justice to prevent societal oppression (p.11)."

Seminal works by Vera and Speight (2003), Fouad et al. (2006), and more recently, DeBlaere et al. (2019) sought to engage counseling psychologists in conversations about centering social justice, offering critiques of the field's models of research, training, and service delivery, while also providing concrete guidance on how structures of oppression, systemic change, and a wider variety of intervention strategies should be integrated into the field. There have also been important contributions to how we train future counseling psychologists guided by social justice values (Burnes & Singh, 2010; Goodman et al., 2004; Hage et al., 2020; Miller & Sendrowitz, 2011; Motulsky et al., 2014), and these models, as well as the Counseling Psychology Model Training Program (Scheel et al., 2018), have been influential for a critical mass of students trained within the 20 years.

Yet, for all the progress that has been made in the field of psychology and in particular, within the counseling psychology cannon, it is important to take stock of where we might be heading in the future, especially in a future that is witnessing a political backlash against efforts to eradicate oppression and injustice (Elias, 2024; Ng et al., 2025). The current study is an attempt to evaluate what progress has been made integrating social justice into research, practice, training, and advocacy within the field of counseling psychology over the past 20 years, and to identify predictions of where the field is heading as it moves into the future.

Taking Stock of Where We Have Been: Social Justice in Counseling Psychology

Various scholars have presented content analyses of how social justice issues have emerged within the fields of counseling and counseling psychology over the past 20 years. For example, in 2008, Smith et al. completed an analysis of 17 years of social justice articles that appeared in the journal, *Counselor Education and Supervision*. In searching for articles that identified keywords such as “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” and “social advocacy,” the qualifying 78 articles that were included in their content analysis represented only 17% of all the articles published within the past 17 years. The vast majority of these articles focused more generally on topics of diversity or multiculturalism as opposed to social advocacy or social justice per se. In fact, the authors found only eight published articles that focused on advocacy, and none of the articles focused on applications of social advocacy.

Miller et al. (2018) conducted a content analysis on a specific aspect of social justice scholarship, addressing racism. They searched for articles that addressed racism in the entire collection of journal articles (up to 2015) from three sources: *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *The Counseling Psychologist*, and *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*. The researchers examined a total of 73 articles that met their inclusion criteria which were published in the three flagship counseling psychology journals. They included both empirical and conceptual articles in their content analysis. The body of literature they examined was categorized into general and variant themes. Among the most common (general) themes were studies with findings intended to help clients cope with racism, studies that examined the value of validating the effects of racism, others that helped clinicians be more aware of the impact of racism, many of which had practice recommendations focused on psychoeducation. Interestingly, only six of the 73 papers offered the reader recommendations for addressing racism at the structural and institutional level (e.g., advocacy and public policy work).

Clark et al. (2022) conducted an analysis of social justice counseling outcomes contained in articles that were published in 22 American Counseling Association journals over a span of 11 years. In their review of the 35 articles that ultimately met inclusion criteria, they concluded that social justice research was increasing in popularity, evidenced by the growing proportion of articles over time. For example, social justice outcomes were discussed in less than 3% of articles in 2010 and by 2020, the topic represented almost 23% of published articles. The authors also concluded that few articles during this time span (i.e., 15%), measured systemic data in their outcomes, despite the fact that most conceptualizations of social justice

within counseling emphasize the importance of changing systemic and structural factors that impact client well-being.

Hence, from the various published reviews that have summarized primary themes and characteristics of scholarship appearing in the counseling or counseling psychology literature with respect to social justice, a disappointing proportion have offered concrete findings or recommendations for how social justice frameworks impact our training, research, or clinical outcomes. Rather, it would appear that scholars have written about the importance of using interventions to address social injustices, while fewer studies have gathered compelling evidence of how to do so effectively, or how to do so outside of traditional counseling contexts.

In 2019, DeBlaere et al. described both the important contributions that counseling psychology has made to the larger conversation about social justice within psychology, but also criticized its professional organization (i.e., the American Psychological Association [APA]) for being one of the only mental health allied organizations that fails to specifically state a commitment to social responsibility in its ethical codes (to date), or to have language that includes advocacy within its ethical principles. Importantly, they urged the field to develop and adopt a social justice and advocacy model that guides training and practice, to better collaborate with communities and community organizers on social justice initiatives, and to intentionally train its students in the theoretical foundations of macrosystem issues and systems change. They reiterated the importance of using research as a tool of social change and to develop meaningful relationships with communities in order to pose and solve socially relevant research questions. They also urged readers to consider the power of nontraditional public discourse and public scholarship that is delivered through op-eds and social media contexts. In other words, these authors argued that we need to utilize tools that allow scholarship to be of benefit to the communities they serve, not just of value to other professionals.

The Future of Social Justice in Counseling Psychology: The Potential of Delphi Studies

Although the aforementioned articles have been useful in cataloguing where we have been as a field with respect to social justice in counseling psychology, as well as critiquing where we should be, it is important to examine what the future might entail. A common methodology in the social and health sciences that is used to forecast the future of a particular phenomenon (or set of interventions) is the Delphi method. The Delphi method is a widely used method of gathering group consensus from a panel of knowledgeable persons

(Linstone & Turoff, 1975). The general procedure for a Delphi study is an initial inquiry with a group of experts where a phenomenon is examined, or a research question is asked. Experts weigh in on the issue typically by responding to a survey. The data from their responses to the questions are summarized and then presented back to the same group of experts in subsequent rounds of data collection. In subsequent rounds, the experts then comment on the responses from the larger sample and are often asked to rate or rank the data with respect to their degree of agreement. The subsequent rounds of data collection allow for consensus to be reached by the group (e.g., the most important or agreed upon predictions for the field).

To illustrate, Norcross et al. (2021) used a Delphi method to predict the future of psychotherapy in the field of psychology. They asked a panel of experts to forecast what they believed the psychotherapy field would entail in the 2030's. The researchers' 56 expert panelists opined about what models and platforms of psychotherapy they thought would increase and decrease in use in the future. The response rate of experts who were invited to participate was 52%. The consensus reached through the two-part Delphi method yielded the following results: (a) multicultural, mindfulness, and cognitive-behavioral approaches were predicted to increase in popularity; and (b) psychoanalysis, reality therapy, and Gestalt approaches were predicted to decrease in popularity. Furthermore, the experts expected (c) videoconferencing and technology-assisted therapies to become more common; (d) masters'-level clinicians to become more plentiful as providers; (e) psychiatrists to become less common as providers of psychotherapy; and (f) short-term therapy and crisis interventions were predicted to increase in frequency. Finally, the experts predicted that (g) treatment of health problems, (h) requirement of evidence-based practices for insurance reimbursement, and (i) integration of psychotherapy into primary care would characterize psychotherapy in the 2030's. It is important to note that the experts were asked what they expected to happen, not what they hoped would happen.

To provide another example that is closer to the topic at hand, an older Delphi study illustrated relevant findings from this methodology. In 1995, Speight et al. used a Delphi method to have experts operationalize what constituted "multicultural training" in doctoral programs and internships within the field. Their experts were individuals who had published scholarship in the area of multicultural training (either first authors or secondary authors who had multiple publications on the topic). In their study, they reached out to 91 professionals to participate and ultimately 45 participated in both rounds of data collection (49%). In general, they found expert consensus that an academic program considering itself to be focused on multicultural

training should have: (a) a philosophy and curriculum that included multicultural values and content, (b) faculty with expertise in multiculturalism, (c) a diverse faculty, (d) a diverse student body, and (e) an openness to diverse perspectives and theories. For internships, the experts reached consensus that the criteria included most of the aforementioned features but also, that trainees had opportunities (f) to work with diverse clients and (g) to receive supervision on multicultural components of counseling. Hence, Delphi studies harness the power of experts' deep knowledge on an issue to help guide the field on what trends are most likely to impact the profession, as well as where future scholarship or training should focus to advance the field.

Delphi studies have been used with such sufficient frequency that scholars have also developed guidance on how to design and implement such studies. Nasa et al. (2021) presented an evaluation of Delphi studies in healthcare to recommend best practices for researchers using this approach. Among their recommendations were the benefits of seeking homogeneity versus heterogeneity in the panel of experts. They recommended that for narrow research questions (e.g., the efficacy of a particular healthcare intervention), that homogeneous panels were considered a best practice, but for broader questions (e.g., the impact of mental illness on adolescent development), heterogenous panelists would reveal more diverse perspectives. With respect to selecting panelists, Nasa et al. noted "the expert can be defined as someone with knowledge and experience on a particular subject matter; however, it is practically difficult to measure experience quantitatively" (p. 118). Thus, they recommended being explicit about one's criteria for selecting panelists, providing readers as much transparency as possible. The authors also noted that there is not a standard size for a panel, and studies that use a Delphi method can range from 10 to 100 panelists.

In terms of consensus building, Delphi methods typically use either ranked or rated data. Nasa et al. (2021) noted "the consensus definition used commonly is the percentage of agreement based on a predefined cut-off, central tendency, or a combination of both. However, percentage agreement varies widely from 50%–97% and is selected arbitrarily" (p. 120). In terms of the number of iterations that should be used to reach consensus, they noted that there are some Delphi studies that use up to four rounds of data collection, but that most use a prefixed number most commonly involving two rounds, unless consensus is not reached at that point. They cautioned that it is difficult to assess the stability of consensus with only two rounds, but that researchers using this method should be transparent about their process and why they selected the number of rounds that they did. Bearing in mind these best practices, the current study was designed to harness the knowledge of experts in the field of social justice to evaluate the contributions from counseling psychologists and forecast the future of such contributions.

The Current Study

The authors' motivation to conduct the current study was seeded by our perception that in the 20 years since the publication of our initial social justice article (Vera & Speight, 2003), many advances had been made within social justice scholarship. However, we also perceived a significant stagnation with respect to how much integration of social justice actions has occurred within training and service environments. We wanted to solicit the opinions of other social justice scholars on these matters and felt that the Delphi methodology would best serve this function.

From a larger contextual perspective, it is important to note that we designed and began data collection in a different political environment, in which the Biden administration was in its final year and Donald Trump was the Republican candidate running for reelection. In the timespan between collecting data and publishing this article, the United States has experienced a profound set of changes in federal policies signaling hostile political sentiment toward social justice principles and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. This sentiment is also evident in new mandates and the removal of funding from universities that do not comply with the Trump administration's mandates on these issues (Hughes, 2025). These changes, in combination with the removal of rights for LGBTQ+ and immigrant communities, among other federal actions that have fostered fear and disenfranchisement, represent a very different and troubling political context. This context was not present when our experts shared their viewpoints, but undoubtedly shapes the interpretation of these findings.

The current study's goals were to ask experts to identify strengths and offer critiques of the contributions of counseling psychologists to social justice scholarship, practice, and training to date and to forecast the future of such efforts using a Delphi method. Our three research questions were:

- (1) What strengths exist in counseling psychology's contributions to social justice over the past 20 years?
- (2) What shortcomings exist in counseling psychology's contributions to social justice over the past 20 years?
- (3) What can be expected with respect to the future of social justice in counseling psychology?

Methodology

Procedure

For the current investigation a survey methodology to implement the Delphi process was used. The first step in the process was identifying experts who

could serve as potential panelists. To identify experts, 20 years of studies (2004–2024) were examined from two sources, both of which are flagship publications for the Society of Counseling Psychology: *Journal of Counseling Psychology* and *The Counseling Psychologist*. The table of contents, abstracts, and keywords from every study were searched and examined to identify manuscripts that referenced the term “social justice” in the papers’ titles, abstracts, or keywords (i.e., search words). From this list, the names of first authors, along with second authors who had published more than once in the area, were extracted into an Excel file (duplications of the same author were eliminated). This inclusion criteria mirrors the process used by [Speight et al. \(1995\)](#) in their multicultural training study. This list yielded 115 unique names. Each of these authors was contacted via email and invited to respond to an electronic survey that asked about strengths, weaknesses, and predictions. We updated the small number of emails that initially came back to us as being undeliverable, which was one indication of our ability to successfully invite potential panelists. However, we were ultimately unable to track how many potential participants opened and viewed our email invitations. We assume that all 115 potential participants had the opportunity to respond to the survey embedded in the invitation, but we did not have a system for monitoring how many individuals actually read the invitation.

We aimed to design a methodology that was as efficient as possible and would be respectful of our experts’ time and energy. To minimize demands, we planned to be able to complete the study with two rounds of data collection. Hence, to make the process as transparent and productive as possible, the invitation contained a link to a survey that presented three open-ended questions: (1) As you reflect on the contributions that counseling psychologists have made to social justice issues within psychology, what are the strengths of these contributions; (2) As you reflect on these contributions, what critique do you have of these contributions; (3) If you forecast into the future of counseling psychology as it pertains to social justice contributions, what do you expect will happen? We also asked people to share basic demographic information including gender, race, sexual orientation, professional position, time since their PhD, and type of training program.

Our initial data collection, Phase One, occurred in the summer of 2024. For the first round of data collection, after the initial solicitation and two reminders, 26 participants responded to the Phase One survey, yielding a response rate of 22%. We used the answers to Survey Question 3 to generate a list of future predictions. After the predictions were collated into a second survey, the same individuals were contacted to respond to each prediction and indicate their level of agreement with the response on a 7-point Likert-type

scale. The final number of participants was 26 in the second round of the Delphi method, indicating that all of the initial participants continued to be involved in the second and final round.

Participants

The twenty-six individuals who served as experts for this study represented a diverse representation of professionals. Eighteen of our participants identified as female, six as male, and two as nonbinary. Nine participants identified ethnically as White, seven as Black, four as Asian American, four as Latina/o/x, one as Native/Indigenous, and six as mixed (note: some participants reported multiple ethnic self-labels). In terms of sexual orientation, 22 participants identified as heterosexual or straight, whereas four identified as LGBTQ+. Professionally, all but two participants had terminal degrees in counseling psychology. Those two individuals were trained in clinical psychology.

Participants also represented a broad range of years of experience in the field. Based on their stated year of receiving their terminal degree, participants ranged between 2 and 47 years of experience in the field (i.e., the range of received degrees was as current as 2022 to one participant's degree conferral occurring in 1977). There was a distribution of years of experience that can be described as follows: five participants had 10 or less years in the field; nine had between 11 and 20 years, and 12 had 20 or more years in the field. In terms of careers, 18 of the experts self-identified as tenure-track professors (i.e., assistant, associate, professors, and emeriti), three identified as practicing clinicians, three identified as administrators in higher education settings, one identified as a postdoctoral fellow, and one identified as both an academic and a clinician.

Data Analysis

For research Questions 1 and 2, we downloaded narrative responses from our experts into an Excel spreadsheet. Each participant listed at least one perceived strength and one perceived critique of counseling psychology's contributions to social justice. Some participants listed more than one strength and critique. To inductively generate codes arising across the participant narratives, we used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). The authors read through all the data separately to identify the main concept or idea reflected in each narrative unit. These concepts became codes. We read through the entire database identifying codes before we began to look for similarities among the codes which then became themes.

In order to categorize the database from codes into themes, we examined the comprehensive list of codes and nominated potential areas of similarity as themes. To maintain the integrity of the data, our codes reflected the words of participants as closely as possible. To further support the trustworthiness of the coding process, we shared our coding scheme with a scholar who was not involved in the project, along with a sample of the narrative data, to gain feedback on its logic. The individual who gave us this feedback was a retired faculty member with decades of experience in qualitative research, who identified as a Black cisgender woman who had devoted her career to studying the well-being of African American communities. Once we received validation from this colleague and felt confident in how we described the themes that connected to the majority of the data, the authors went back through the data to place all coded data into themes and then to discern how often themes were represented in the dataset. In our count of how frequently a given theme surfaced, we used the total number of narrative contributions as the units of analysis.

For the Delphi consensus component of the study, we downloaded all responses to Question 3. All participants listed at least one prediction, and some offered two. Then we took the predictions, 32 in all, and listed them word for word on the survey used for the second round of data collection. In the second survey, participants indicated their level of agreement with each prediction on a 7-point Likert-type scale. We calculated means and standard deviations to determine the degree of consensus on each prediction.

Positionality of Researchers

The first author identifies as a cisgender woman, Mexican American, and heterosexual who has worked in higher education for over 30 years. The second author identifies as a cisgender woman, African American, heterosexual, who has worked in higher education for approximately 35 years. As noted in our motivation to engage in this project, we both have longstanding commitments to social justice and have conducted community-based research throughout our careers.

Results

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes in the stated strengths and weaknesses of the contributions thus far. There were five thematic strengths identified and eight thematic weaknesses identified. Thirty-four unique strengths were stated by participants and 28 unique weaknesses were offered in open-ended narrative data in response to the first two questions.

Strengths

The first theme in the strengths category is that counseling psychology was seen by our experts as having helped create a vocabulary and dialogue for social justice within the larger field of psychology. Twelve of our expert panelists noted that counseling psychologists “pushed” psychology to incorporate justice issues within practice, research, and training domains. One participant noted, “... so many counseling psychologists have been leaders in social justice in research, publications, academic leadership, and organizational leadership, in addition to community leadership.” As a result of these contributions to the larger field, participants noted that counseling psychology has increased its visibility within psychology as a discipline.

The second theme is that counseling psychology has shifted conceptualizations within psychology to be more focused on structures and systems through its focus on social justice. Six of our panelists noted that counseling psychology’s focus on social justice shifted conceptualizations to focus more on social determinants of health and “upstream” causes of suffering for both individuals and communities. One panelist noted,

And now there is a growing emphasis on structural competence as an extension of multicultural competence to ensure that psychologists, as led by counseling psychologists, move beyond the interpersonal to understanding how to dismantle structures that prevent equity and safety.

The third theme is that counseling psychology has emphasized the importance of skills such as advocacy within our training models and scope of practice. Six panelists noted that counseling psychology scholarship and training models have emphasized teaching students to apply skills that change systemic conditions, as well as using therapy, as vehicles for liberation from oppression. One panelist noted “... the number of programs that integrate social justice in their mission and in their training of doctoral-level psychologists has grown tremendously.” Another noted that a strength was “expanding the realm of the ‘work’ of counseling psychologists—doing advocacy work—expanding the possibilities and expectations of the nature and settings of work for counseling psychologists beyond the research lab, counseling office, or classroom.”

The fourth theme mentioned by five participants is that counseling psychology has elevated the voices of Black, Indigenous, and people of Color (BIPOC) scholars. In elevating these voices, panelists also noted that we have increased the number of BIPOC students interested in our field, as well as

providing important validation for the lived experiences of such individuals. One of our experts noted, “For psychologists/academics/students of Color and other disadvantaged groups in our field, seeing the focus on social justice is validating.”

The fifth theme is that counseling psychology has offered and affirmed models that challenge the status quo of traditional psychological practice such as radical healing and liberatory frameworks, decolonization, cultural humility, etc. Five panelists mentioned that such frameworks were important to moving the focus of our research and practice efforts away from individual change and symptom remission. One panelist noted that such a shift “has helped to transform models of healing and encourage counseling psychologists and other mental health professionals to adopt a strengths-based approach that affirms the humanity of people and works to transform sick and dehumanizing systems.”

Weaknesses

The first theme under the category of weaknesses or critiques is that counseling psychology created constraints around social justice dialogues. Specifically, it has failed to depoliticize social justice conversations, not allowed for critical debate, and may have marginalized people with majority identities. This theme was offered by six panelists. One colleague noted,

Much of the practices around social justice are not empirically or academically driven but sometimes seem politically driven. The focus on being inclusive sometimes seems to overcorrect to actually being exclusive, and not permitting for intellectual debate of the best ways to achieve social justice.

Furthermore, panelists worried that this has inadvertently polarized some of their colleagues in the field who felt left behind in these conversations. One panelist summarized their perceptions by saying,

In my view, one of the primary concerns regarding our field is that the values and norms are at odds with social justice and equity in a number of ways (e.g., whom we value and whom we center; whom we exclude and whom we silence).

The second theme is that counseling psychology has not adequately transformed its training and service models to deliver on skill-building in advocacy or activism. Five panelists noted this shortcoming. Some noted that this is a function of accreditation standards not changing. One panelist noted

that there is more rhetoric than skills represented in the literature, saying, “social justice is an intellectual practice, not a practice that has to be embodied and enacted in the real world to produce systemic change.” Another lamented, “I wish we were better trained in addressing upstream root causes, though. Our training models are still very individual focused, and consider placing the individual in context, but don’t help us address that context.”

The third theme is that counseling psychology has not “gone far enough.” Four panelists noted that they felt as though social justice was at risk of being (or had already been) co-opted into the mainstream. One panelist noted, “Some of what concerns me is that the constructs and language used around social justice can and have been used in ways that depoliticize it, make it common, and make it more palatable for white audiences and trainees.” Another noted, “Counseling psychologists need to dig even deeper to find ways to build on our expertise to address and transform the contexts that create the distress to begin with.”

The fourth theme is that counseling psychology has been guilty of watering down social justice to becoming a so-called buzz word and empty gesture. Four panelists shared this weakness. One mentioned that “folks feel compelled to include buzz words and jargon in their work, but they are not actually engaged in social justice scholarship.” Another panelist noted, “I think it’s time for a new paradigm. These earlier movements were radical for their respective sociohistorical contexts, but like all progressive movements, they eventually become outdated and/or co-opted into the status quo.”

The fifth theme is that counseling psychology has lacked sufficient attention to global injustices and perspectives. Three panelists noted that there are sometimes ahistorical and overly domestic focal points in the social justice scholarship. Several panelists specifically noted the omission of the needs of Palestinians, whereas others noted that the influences of Asian and African liberation frameworks were underacknowledged in most current scholarship. One panelist noted as a weakness, “our lack of attentiveness to global issues ... it is mind-blowing that there has been no recognition of 5,000+ years of medicine/science and indigenous practices in Asia.” The main issue identified in this theme is that our efforts have not embraced a more global consideration of justice and healing and our proposed solutions have been overly U.S.-centric.

The sixth theme is that counseling psychology has been too self-reflexive and resembles an echo chamber at times. Three experts made mention of this general theme. One panelist shared, “we have been a subfield of psychology more concerned with reflexivity and self-critique (all too evident in this project itself!).” Another noted, “we still need to push ourselves further to challenge preexisting understandings of our world and work—to look beyond

psychology and our discipline to challenge our understanding. This requires us to step outside our (at times) echo chamber.”

The seventh theme is that counseling psychology has lost focus on traditions such as counseling, vocational psychology, and health psychology. Three panelists mentioned that either in their own experience or that of colleagues they knew, they had heard concerns of this nature. One said,

I have seen other areas of counseling psychology take a back seat. I see this as necessary, but scholars and practitioners focusing on health psychology (e.g., cancer as opposed to systemic racism in healthcare), vocational psychology, clinical work, supervision, and others, have been less focused on. I have seen some non-BIPOC individuals who have expressed that their areas of interest have been neglected by counseling psychology.

The eighth and final theme is that counseling psychology has not been successful in interdisciplinary collaboration. Although only two experts specifically mentioned this theme, it is also alluded to in the prior theme of counseling psychology being an echo chamber on social justice matters. One expert noted, “The field has been and continues to be primarily siloed and it is very uncommon for there to be interdisciplinary and/or community partnerships in the work.”

Predictions and Consensus

A comprehensive list of all 32 predictions we received from panelists is included in [Appendix A](#). For the purposes of analysis, the top and bottom five predictions that had the most and least agreement, respectively, are listed in [Table 1](#). We used the mean and standard deviation to determine which predictions had the most agreement and consensus among the panelists.

The predictions that had the highest consensus were a mix of both expectations for positive contributions but also cautionary worries about what barriers will need to be overcome for our contributions to be meaningful. The most agreed upon prediction was that “counseling psychology’s contributions will continue to expand into the applied/practice arena.” However, there was also concern that the field will need to fundamentally change its training models (e.g., adopting scientist–practitioner–advocate models) for change to be sustainable. This was reflected in the second prediction with the most consensus, which was “future changes will be incremental unless our training models change.”

Additionally, panelists agreed that counseling psychology will continue to apply pressure to APA to adopt more social justice values and skills into their ethics and training models (i.e., “counseling psychology must push APA to be more focused on social justice.”) Also, the panelists reached consensus on the

Table 1. Highest and Lowest Rated Predictions

Prediction	Mean	SD
Counseling psychology's contributions will continue to expand into the applied/practice arena	6.36	.848
Future changes will be incremental unless our training models change	6.14	1.207
Counseling psychology will push APA To be more focused on social justice	5.91	1.306
There must be better efforts to avoid conflation of race, ethnicity, and victimization. There must be greater nuance in delineating these terms—not just for BIPOC communities, but for all communities, as we move forward	5.91	1.109
We will encounter pushback from those that want to study issues such as neuropsychology, or other clinical protocols aimed at treating “all” populations.	5.86	1.167
I imagine it will continue along as it has—good intentions, new language, but nothing groundbreaking	3.91	1.540
We will become less radical and less progressive	3.23	1.478
Our field's reputation as a rigorous and scholarly discipline will continue to deteriorate	3.09	1.777
Social justice will become less meaningful and impactful	2.14	1.390
Counseling psychology's future contributions will be limited to scholarship (vs. practice or training)	1.64	1.496

Note. APA = American Psychological Association, BIPOC = Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

need to avoid “conflation of race, ethnicity, and victimization... and greater nuance in delineating these terms.” Finally, the panelists reached consensus that “we will encounter pushback” in favor of focusing on issues that are applicable to “all” populations. In other words, the panelists predicted that we will experience sentiment echoing a desire to return to universality. Hence, there was consensus that the level of political pushback that we are witnessing is going to continue to be a serious hurdle to overcome.

Of note, some of the predictions that had the least amount of consensus (i.e., lowest agreement) described scenarios where counseling psychology's contributions were predicted to weaken, be more symbolic, or become stagnant (e.g., “Good intentions, new language, but nothing groundbreaking”). Additionally, the prediction that the field's reputation would suffer as a function of adopting social justice principles (e.g., “our field's reputation as a rigorous and scholarly discipline will continue to deteriorate”) was not widely agreed upon by our panelists.

Discussion

This investigation aimed to generate consensus among experts in social justice within the field of counseling psychology as to what the future might entail within this core element of science, practice, and advocacy within our field. As per the recommendations of [Nasa et al. \(2021\)](#), we were successful in recruiting a diverse group of professionals who likely represent various personal and professional perspectives, based on demographic group memberships, as well their wide range of professional experiences. In addition to articulating predictions, we also obtained opinions about the strengths and critiques regarding social justice contributions from counseling psychologists over the past 20 years.

Among the most notable results is the extent to which scholarly and service delivery contributions coming from counseling psychology were perceived as having benefitted the larger discipline of psychology, a perception that was previously echoed by scholars such as [DeBlaere et al. \(2019\)](#). The perception that the field of counseling psychology has been engaged in pushing APA to adopt ethical and training and accreditation standards that reflect the importance of social justice, along with the prediction that the field will continue these efforts, reflect an ongoing commitment among leadership in counseling psychology to live out the values and principles of its specialty. A related accomplishment is the perception that social justice scholarship has elevated the perspectives of BIPOC scholars and students, representing another commitment to social justice processes. Consistent with the Counseling Psychology Model Training Program's ([Scheel et al., 2018](#)) expectations, the perception that the field has expanded service delivery frameworks to include nontraditional intervention skills also suggests that the field is in alignment with its training aspirations.

In comparison to identified strengths of contributions over the past 20 years, panelists generated a wider array of critiques. A key emphasis in several themes centered on the narrowness of the scope with respect to conceptualizing social justice. According to our data, counseling psychology does not adequately incorporate the contributions of other disciplines, nor does it take a global perspective in its conceptualization of social justice, resulting in a narrow echo chamber effect. Although other scholars have reflected the importance of reading the social justice contributions in fields such as political science, education, theology, sociology, and legal studies ([DeBlaere et al., 2019](#); [Vera & Speight, 2003](#)), many may still be guilty of relying on convenience when it comes to efforts to consume scholarship.

Another overarching concern from the perceived weakness findings is that the field has allowed social justice to become commodified and watered down

within its literature, to the point where it is more willing to talk about “social justice” instead of specific injustices such as anti-Black racism. Related to this critique in the data may be the concern that the field has not yet fostered a sense of shared community around social justice, in that panelists revealed that it has allowed so-called “identity politics” to alienate people. Both these concerns suggest a failure to maintain ongoing conversations that allow for self-analysis of how social justice commitments are playing out in counseling psychology communities.

As a final critique, the data suggest that there has not yet been sufficient progress in changing training models to more closely adhere to the Counseling Psychology Model Training Program (Scheel et al., 2018). This slow progress may not necessarily be due to ambivalence about doing so, but perhaps because the standards for accreditation and licensure have not yet incorporated social justice competencies. The prediction that counseling psychology will continue to push the field toward a more holistic adoption of social justice values (i.e., accreditation standards, licensure requirements) suggests that we may see changes in the future. Yet, as long as students have to ultimately navigate traditional systems to become credentialled, supervisors will need to find creative and innovative ways to synthesize social justice skillsets within practicum and research training (Hage et al., 2020; Mallinckrodt et al., 2014).

Several scholars have already provided guidance on what such training might look like. It is worth noting that the articles that address these opportunities were published prior to the admonition of higher education programs’ diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, so it is possible that to continue such training, university training programs will have to modify or rebrand these educational experiences. Nonetheless, Hage et al. (2020) illustrated three APA-approved counseling psychology training programs’ social justice practica experiences that were created to allow for the development of students’ social justice identities and competencies. These scholars noted that to be optimally effective, training programs should require these experiences, provide opportunities for students to connect with marginalized communities, and receive supervision from individuals with experience in community collaborations. They also noted that the opportunity for students to process their experiences of oppression, as well as privilege, was critical to their developing social justice orientations.

Hage et al. (2020) also noted that social justice training experiences often must extend beyond the classroom, transcend the typical instructor–student dyadic interaction model, and may not conform to academic timelines (e.g., semester-long experiences). The practica they described in their manuscript varied in terms of the types of competencies that students developed but

typically centered on conducting community needs assessments, learning and practicing advocacy skills, designing psychoeducation, and helping community members navigate legal systems. In other words, the skills that students develop in a social justice practicum should be markedly different from those they develop in more traditional psychotherapy or assessment practica.

In a related vein, [Hewitt \(2025\)](#) offered training recommendations for professionals seeking advocacy skillsets. She noted that within training programs, policy analysis and communication skills can be integrated into existing courses on ethics, diversity, and health psychology. She also noted that mentoring and role modeling are critical to students forming identities as advocates, recommending that structured mentorship programs which connect trainees with psychologists who have served in advocacy or policy leadership roles can demystify the pathways that facilitate this type of influence. She also noted that learning equity and systems analysis frameworks are critical to being able to think as an advocate. Finally, Hewitt argued that learning social justice competencies such as advocacy skills should be available to all psychologists, not just trainees, and subsequently urged professional associations to expand their offerings on topics such as writing policy briefs, delivering testimony, and using data visualization for equity-oriented messaging. Thus, frameworks of social justice training opportunities have been delineated, independent of whether training programs have taken steps to modify their requirements.

However, one reason that training programs have not yet fully adapted their programs to contain social justice competency opportunities may be that the field as a whole has not yet fully reached consensus as to what is optimal for the profession. This ambivalence is contained in many of the panelists' perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of counseling psychology's social justice contributions, which contain several contradictions. For example, one thematic critique or weakness suggests that the field as a whole has not gone far enough with its commitment to social justice, while another theme suggests that it has perhaps gone too far and failed successfully depoliticize social justice agendas that would be more attractive to a wider audience.

In general, the data from both the strengths and weaknesses questions as well as the predictions reflect perceptions and predictions of a potentially divided future for social justice in the field. On the one hand, it appears that there is strong sentiment for the idea that counseling psychology will remain a major motivating force in the field, pushing against accreditation standard limitations, deepening its commitment to partnering on initiatives that change structural and systemic forces that stand in the way of justice for vulnerable communities. On the other hand, there is concern that the political backlash, which is playing out in

real time, will become a more formidable obstacle for counseling psychologists in being successful in these endeavors. The tension between this optimism and realism will need to be resolved.

Future Implications

These findings have action implications for leadership within the field, both at the national level and at the level of individual training programs. As stated in the Counseling Psychology Model Training Program by [Scheel et al. \(2018\)](#):

Programs are directed to advocate and work for social justice to prevent societal oppression. Embracing diversity and social justice can only happen when we work together with sensitivity and openness. (p.11)

Assuming that there is still room for social justice to be more consistently integrated into training frameworks, there will be a need for leaders to resolve the apparent tension that exists in the field over whether or not social justice replaces traditional focal points of counseling psychology or whether it compliments what is already done. According to our data, experts reported being aware of concerns that counseling psychology's traditions (e.g., psychotherapy, vocational psychology, health psychology) were in jeopardy because of the emphasis on social justice. Another possibility is that social justice values do not need to be exclusive from these traditional areas and there are effective ways to integrate social justice concerns into these areas (e.g., social determinants of health, radical healing frameworks, decent work scholarship).

With respect to the notion that "social justice can happen only when we work together" ([Scheel et al., 2018](#), p. 11), it is important to pay attention to the perceptions of some of our experts, who reported having colleagues who feel marginalized from the social justice movement in counseling psychology. If there exists an undercurrent that some people are more capable of contributing to this area than others (e.g., BIPOC communities), then perhaps this needs to be addressed head on, as it was addressed in the early multicultural movement ([Pedersen, 1993](#)). At that time, Petersen noted the difficulties of the field emphasizing diversity having led to "the polarization of cultures into opposing sides of White/non-White, minority/majority, and good/bad categories" (p. 229). It is possible that we are reexperiencing this tension again as the dialogue has evolved from multiculturalism to social justice, where people are assumed to represent either those who have been harmed by injustice or those who have perpetrated the harm. Hence, there will be a need to address the experiences of people who feel that they have been excluded from conversations about social justice to truly "walk the talk" of

this value of the profession, especially given that we are in a political climate that is pitting people against one another and blaming “wokeness” and “identity politics” for the need to reverse commitments to DEI.

With respect to the perceived narrowness of how we understand social justice within counseling psychology, it may behoove scholars, educators, and training directors to consider intentionally including contributions from outside of psychology, such as those contributions from allied professions such as public health but also from other social sciences such as political science, theology, or sociology (DeBlaere et al., 2019; Vera & Speight, 2003). It is also important that we acknowledge the history of these issues and give credit to counseling psychology’s professional ancestors (e.g., Fanon, 1967; Freire, 1996) who talked about justice and decoloniality in earlier, yet equally tumultuous times and settings. Related, it will be important for social justice experiences to be simultaneously local and more global in scope. There is no shortage of global injustices that impact people with whom trainees will work. The field as a whole is also likely missing out on lessons learned from countries that have pursued social justice (e.g., Canada, South Africa). The use of truth and reconciliation processes and other aspects of peace building may be of particular relevance to U.S. domestic issues (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

We also note the need to investigate in future research what has stopped programs from widening their training models to scientist–practitioner–advocate. Given how clearly committed to social justice and advocacy the Society of Counseling Psychology is and the Counseling Psychology Model Training Program was when it was published in 2018, it is reasonable to think that more programs would have already broadened their foci of training (Scheel et al., 2018). In addition to the barriers introduced by licensing laws and larger APA accreditation standards, it may also be that the 10-year accreditation cycles create barriers to changing models in the midst of those parameters. It is also alarming that the political sentiment toward social justice is to pathologize such efforts as being part of a “woke agenda.” Given that there are significant pressures from the federal government to eliminate anything that promotes DEI, including social justice language from educational standards (Trump, 2025), it is not clear what the path forward may entail to those of us committed to this cause.

However, the path forward will necessitate counseling psychology to stand firm in its values as a discipline and profession. The words of Frederick Douglass, “power concedes nothing without a demand,” seem particularly poignant at this moment in history. The historical context of the United States, including school desegregation, the Civil Rights Movement, and the legalization of same-sex marriage nationwide, are reminders that organized citizen activism can produce profound change. To stand firm in our values, we need to work collectively, using

whatever tools we have to demand change. The level of risk involved in demanding change varies greatly depending on where one lives and who they are, but voting, joining grassroots organizations, participating in peaceful protests, boycotts, and other forms of activism are important ways of shaping the future. We must remember that the current reality will not last forever.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study that need to be noted. First, although our experts were a diverse group with a wide range of expertise, which is recommended in Delphi research (Nasa et al., 2021), our experts represented only a percentage of those who could have participated in this study. Our return rate of 22% is respectable given stated minimums for response rates published in the literature (Murphy et al., 1998) and comparable to other well-regarded Delphi studies (Vogel et al., 2019). However, it is unknown if a larger group of experts would have validated these predictions or introduced new forecasts into the data. We also have data that were likely influenced by a specific historical context. Specifically, as mentioned, we collected these data at the end of the last presidential administration in 2024, and since the new administration has taken over in 2025, there have been numerous threats to the ability of educational programs in higher education to have any programs that address inequities, diversity, or justice needs. It is not possible to know if our expert predictions may have been altered by a new political context. For example, it is now widely known that the APA made the decision to suspend enforcing Domain D accreditation standards which hold programs accountable for diversity recruitment and retention, among other aspects of infusing diversity into their training programs (Barry, 2025, March 27). Given this context, our experts might not have predicted future success in integrating social justice into accreditation standards. Yet, it is also interesting that some of our participants anticipated a backlash without the benefit of knowing what our future political climate would be.

Conclusion

This study revealed a mostly positive, but mixed picture about experts' predictions for the future of social justice in counseling psychology. The findings of this study suggest that the field has made substantial contributions to moving the discipline of psychology closer to a commitment to social justice in its ethics and values. Our panelists also felt hopeful that this influence would continue into the future. Although the past 20 years have changed the emphasis of training, service, and research to be more systemic and inclusive of formerly less traditional approaches, there appears to be even

more transformations predicted for the future, including a move toward scientist–practitioner–advocate models. If true, leaders in counseling psychology will be charged with integrating social justice and advocacy values into its professional actions, but also ensuring that these changes do not replace traditions of the field, and that its commitments to justice are inclusive of all members of the field. The more successful these efforts are in acting as a unified front, the more powerful voices of counseling psychology will be.

Author's Note

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Speight, who passed away in the process of completing the study.

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Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the IRB at Loyola University Chicago (Approval #9208) on February 1, 2024. Participants consented electronically and a waiver of written consent was approved for this study.

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Author Contributions

Dr. Vera contributed to the design of the study, data collection, analysis of the entire dataset, and writing of the manuscript. Dr. Speight contributed to the design of the study, the first part of the data collection, and the first part of the data analysis.

Data Availability Statement

Data are available upon request from the first author.

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Author Biographies

Elizabeth M. Vera, PhD, received her doctorate in counseling psychology from The Ohio State University. She is a professor and co-Chair in the counseling psychology program at Loyola University Chicago. Her scholarship addresses social injustices in the lives of minoritized youth, systemic strategies for promoting well-being for communities of Color, and best practices for social justice training.

Suzette L. Speight, PhD, received her doctorate in counseling psychology from The Ohio State University. She was a professor in the Department of Psychology and Training Director of the counseling psychology program at the University of Akron. Dr. Speight's scholarship focused on best practices in social justice training, ethics, and fostering African American community well-being.

Appendix A

Predictions

1. CP's future contributions will be limited to scholarship (vs. practice or training).

2. CP contributions will continue to expand into practice/applied arena.
3. SJ will intertwine with our larger ecological issues (e.g., climate change, housing, food instability, environmental racism).
4. Shift will move to decolonizing training and mindsets.
5. We will infuse SJ into all aspects of training.
6. We will better include and listen to those with differing perspectives which will help us navigate resistance to SJ ideas.
7. We will move in more of an international direction (e.g., international humanitarian needs).
8. Scholarship and investment will continue but there will be more balance in thinking critically about these efforts. More diverse intellectual perspective will be considered.
9. Future changes will be incremental unless our training models change.
10. SJ practicum opportunities will expand.
11. CP will push APA to be more focused on SJ.
12. We will encounter pushback from those that want to study (and fund) issues such as neuropsychology, or other clinical protocols that are aimed at treating “all” populations.
13. SJ in CP will move toward sociopolitical contexts (e.g., capitalism; capture of identity politics).
14. SJ will become less meaningful and impactful.
15. More and more scholars and practitioners who are focused on social justice will leave academia.
16. Advocacy and outreach efforts will expand within our universities, within public and professional organizations, within our local communities and at state and national levels.
17. There will be an attempt to infuse social justice concepts into clinical practice as evidenced by the Structural Competencies movement.
18. I believe the social justice focus will continue to coalesce around identity markers (e.g., race, ethnicity, ability, gender, and sexuality), and the focus on economic aspects of social justice will remain sluggish — (e.g., poverty, increased wealth gap in our society).
19. There will be greater emphasis in training programs on service, advocacy, and activism.
20. Our field’s reputation as a rigorous and scholarly discipline will continue to deteriorate.
21. My “forecast” for the future will likely include the face of oppressive forces in the current national and global environments, being successful depends on the strengths and resilience of our concerted efforts toward these goals.

22. I imagine that it will continue along as it has – good intentions, new language, but nothing really groundbreaking.
23. We will need to dismantle the constraints of APA training guidelines, accreditation, licensure requirements, etc. in order to free up CPs to engage in radical activism.
24. Perhaps more of a backlash like we're seeing in the world....that is, universities succumbing to the pressures of anti-DEI legislation and BIPOC scholars being most harmed by continuing to do social justice work across their scholarship, service, etc.
25. There must be better efforts to avoid conflation of race, ethnicity and victimization. There must be greater nuance in delineating these terms– not just for BIPOC communities, but for all communities, as we move forward.
26. The direction we take will be more about liberation and building a new reality vs just dismantling oppression.
27. We will become less radical and less progressive.
28. Community focused approaches; better integration of academia and community relations.
29. Social justice efforts will grow with increased student and ECP interest in these areas.
30. Research norms will move to emphasize community contributions and sustainability instead of prioritizing high numbers of publications.
31. Program models will move toward expanding scope of supervised training to include social justice advocacy.
32. The field itself will begin to rethink its identity and mission to continue to formalize the ways in which social justice is central - one way would be to reconsider criteria for awards and Fellow status, which currently seem to center individual effort and not attend to the importance and role of community.

Note. CP = counseling psychology, SJ = social justice, APA = American Psychological Association, DEI = diversity equity and inclusion, BIPOC = Black, Indigenous, People of Color, ECP = early career professionals.